



Under
the
Midnight Cloak

S. Y. Thompson

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by

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Dedication

Dedicated to my friends for their encouragement to keep doing what I love best and to Kathryn Yates, who helped develop the original premise of this story six years ago.

Chapter One

LEE PUSHED A lock of sweat dampened blonde hair behind her ear and reached for another article of clothing. Four months ago she never would have expected to be moving out of her family home, but a lot had changed. Although she traveled frequently, often for months at a time, she always returned to this somewhat archaic mansion where she'd grown up. When she needed solace and familiarity, she thought of this place, and though she still considered the manor home, events had transpired to induce a necessary relocation.

Footsteps outside the open bedroom door reached her ears and she smiled, recognizing the high-heeled gait, as well as the fog of perfumed spice, preceding her visitor.

"Lee? You in here?"

Jasmine Yang walked into the room, heedless of an invitation. Her long black hair shimmered under the artificial lights as Lee looked down on her. She didn't consider herself a giant, but Jasmine barely reached her shoulder. The adage that appearances could be deceiving most definitely applied to this woman and she used all of her considerable talents as Lee's agent.

"What is it, Jazz?"

An aggravated expression crossed Jasmine's face, but settled quickly into a neutral facade. "Don't call me that. So, you're really going to do this?"

"You make it sound like I'm having a lobotomy instead of making a little move."

"Little? You're going to the Adirondack Mountains! Have you completely lost touch with reality? What are you going to do out there in the sticks?" Her ebony eyes narrowed, urging Lee to reconsider.

Ah, so this is an intervention.

Lee found the whole idea amusing and more than a little misguided. A large part of her occupation involved spending time alone with the natural world and there was never any problem finding something to do. Boredom wasn't part of her vocabulary since interesting and unplanned events always happened in the wild. She didn't need Jazz to protect her. She needed the woman to promote her photography, a part of the business Lee preferred to avoid since that meant dealing directly with the public.

"I'm a nature photographer, remember? Maybe I'll do something crazy like, I don't know--take pictures?"

"Funny. And when you have a showing?"

"And here I thought you cared. Don't worry, you won't lose any money. It's less than five hours if I take Adirondack Northway, so it's not like I'm moving to the moon."

Typically, Jasmine wasn't easily deterred. "Does this have anything to do with your father?"

Lee flinched. She hadn't seen that one coming. Douglas Grayson wasn't a subject she liked to talk about. They'd never been close, she considered him little more than a sperm donor. After her mother left them his political career seemed to be the only thing he cared about. She doubted he'd even notice she was gone.

"The Congressman?" she asked dryly. "Hardly. He stays out of my way and I stay out of his. Besides, this move will be good for him, too. Having an openly gay daughter around could hurt him at reelection time."

"You don't mean that."

"I don't?" She settled into the sarcasm like the arms of a familiar and supportive friend.

"This is New York. No one cares about your...orientation."

Lee snorted silently to herself. Was that why Jazz couldn't even say gay? "If you say so."

She reached down and plucked a photograph from her pillow. She hadn't seen the picture in years and had re-discovered it in her closet while pulling out supplies. The face was familiar, though the low quality Polaroid paper left the image grainy. It was her great aunt; the woman responsible for Lee's altered plans. Aunt Chris was in her twenties in the photo and holding a tawny jaguar cub with tiny black spots. It was one of Lee's favorites as a child and made her want to become a nature photographer in the first place.

It was so hard to believe she was gone.

Tears stung her eyes and she quietly blinked them away. She was still in shock over her aunt's sudden death. Last she'd heard, Chris was very healthy. When Lee was young, the woman had seemed invincible. It was a cliché that she had died falling down a set of stairs. Some unthinking coroner at the funeral home even had the audacity to give Lee the statistics; 12,800 annually. The problem was that she hadn't been very old, only sixty-seven. For some people that might be considered elderly, but not for a woman who'd been active her entire life.

The unexpected death was one of the reasons for Lee's move. The universe had thrown her a curve, shown her how fleeting all of this could be. She didn't want to spend another minute of her life surrounded by people who only wanted to be close to her because of who her father was, or how much money she had.

"Is that her?"

Lee jumped slightly. She'd all but forgotten Jasmine was still in the room. She held the photo up for Jasmine to see. Lee watched her almond shaped eyes as Jasmine looked at the picture.

"Yes. Christine Mafdet."

"Mafdet, what kind of name is that?"

"Egyptian...I think. She's my great aunt on my mother's side. I Googled the name once. Mafdet was an Egyptian goddess, supposedly half-cat. She was a panther and protected the king's chamber."

"Nice." From the dry tone, Lee didn't think Jazz meant what she said. "Cute kitty, though."

"It's a jaguar. Now, if there's nothing else? I'm in a hurry."

"Won't you miss New York?"

Lee had to admit she'd probably yearn for the diversity of restaurants and the comfort this house brought, but there were so many more things she wouldn't think twice about.

"Like what? The crowds, the traffic and constant noise? Muggings in Central Park?"

"You make it sound like New York is a terrible place to live. I just don't understand."

Jasmine shook her head slightly and frowned. "I love the excitement of this city and opportunities to show corporate America that a woman can make it in a man's world. Doesn't it just make your blood sing?"

"I know, but you're a city girl."

"So are you, or you were. What's changed?"

"Nothing. Can't you just accept that I need a break?"

"From what?"

Lee released a tired sigh. "Debbie."

Jasmine surprised her by snorting out loud. The woman was always so prim and proper that it was quite unexpected. "That bitch didn't deserve you. You can do so much better."

Lee reached down and picked up an old Hallmark Valentine's Day card from Debbie and held it up for Jasmine to see. It had the usual greeting card mush on the outside but was blank inside except for a hastily scrawled I love you.

Yeah right. Debbie couldn't even be bothered to pen something personal. That's how much she'd been in love.

Lee knew from the beginning, at least subconsciously, that Debbie Mason wasn't the one for her. She was a die-hard romantic and Debbie cared only for other peoples' perception of her, the word on the gossip mill, and the latest Paris fashions. They were polar opposites. How they'd ever gravitated into the same circles, she couldn't fathom.

"Did I ever tell you why I broke up with her?"

"No."

Jasmine frowned again and Lee realized it was out of character for her to open up to anyone in this way. No doubt Jasmine was thinking the same thing, but it was too late to clam up now, and for once she felt the need to share the incident with someone. Her full lips compressed into a tight line.

"Right after Aunt Chris' funeral, I was coming down the stairs." Lee tilted her chin to indicate the staircase outside her bedroom door. "I heard Debbie's voice and I knew she was on her cell. I tried to be quiet so as not to interrupt her call."

"I'm not going to like this, am I?"

Lee smiled, but there was no amusement in it. "She was telling someone that she hadn't managed to get the combination to the safe because I was in a state. Did she think I wouldn't be upset?"

"That bitch," Jasmine said. "I always thought she was a money hungry grub, but I didn't think she was an outright thief."

"How do you think I felt? Anyway, that's just the problem. Everyone I meet is always after the money. When they find out it belongs to my father, that none of it is mine until I inherit and that he's as healthy as a horse, things change. Then the focus shifts to the best way to marry into the family, get on his good side, or break into the safe."

"Human nature, honey." Although her expression showed compassion, Jasmine's verbal response just reinforced her decision.

"Well, I've had enough." Jasmine opened her mouth to speak, but Lee cut her off. "I'm going, so deal with it."

"I guess maybe you do need a break."

Davis, the butler, stepped into the doorway. "Anything else, ma'am?"

"Just this last box. I'll get the bag myself."

"Very good, ma'am."

Davis spoke like an old world servant, but was very much a part of the family. Just going gray at the temples, he'd been around since Lee could remember. She relinquished the cardboard box and shoved a few more articles of clothing into her leather satchel. The Hallmark stayed with the rest of the pile on her bed. Grabbing the bag, she walked out of the room. Jasmine trailed a perfumed cloud of cloves and oriental spice behind her.

"Cleo!" Lee shouted. "Where's that damned dog?"

"What's your hurry?"

"I want to miss rush hour."

Jasmine panted a little trying to keep up climbing down the large, spiral staircase on spiked heels. "It's not like you to be so impetuous."

Lee shot a dubious look over her shoulder. She'd flown all over the world to get some amazing shots, often on the spur of the moment and without bothering to notify anyone.

"Cleo! There you are."

Her beagle, Cleopatra, was following Davis around a beat-up old dirt-brown pickup. The truck bed was loaded with cardboard boxes. When she heard her master's voice, Cleo threw her head back and bayed at the top of her lungs.

"Are you really going to drive this thing?"

"My Mercedes can't handle the terrain," Lee said wryly. Besides, she was flying under the radar and didn't want anyone to know who she was. In a way, this move was her chance to start over. "I bought this from Hector yesterday."

"The gardener?"

Lee grinned at Jasmine's startled disbelief, but didn't answer. She tossed the leather satchel into the back and opened the door. "Let's go, Cleo."

The beagle came running, panting in her excitement. She stood up with her feet on the running board and cast a look over her shoulder toward her master. Lee bent down, picked up the vertically challenged dog and then sat her on the bench seat. Finally, she shifted to offer Jasmine a perfunctory hug.

"You're covered in dog hair."

"You're such a snob." Having taken offense to the implication that Cleo was dirty, Lee wasn't joking.

"I'm not a snob."

"Right."

Lee got into the truck and slammed the door. The smell of old tobacco assaulted her nose and a seat spring dug into her butt. Maybe she should have bought a new vehicle after all, but she wasn't going to give Jasmine the satisfaction of saying so. Resisting the urge to wrinkle her nose, she gave an off-hand wave through the open window.

"I'll give you a call." Without waiting for a response she drove away, her thoughts already on the future.

Getting out of the city seemed to take forever. First she had to navigate the Jersey Turnpike and then thread a maze of toll ways, but finally Interstate 87 opened up before her: the Adirondack Northway. The sun had already passed its apex and Lee pushed the truck's speed to reach the mountains before dark. The day was clear, temperature in the seventies, and she was excited about returning to her great aunt's forest home. She hadn't seen Aunt Chris since she was a child and wondered why her father didn't like going out there. For that matter, why hadn't she made the time when she became an adult? Was it old habit, a part of the family that seemed so far removed that she just didn't think about it?

Lee didn't know, but she did remember that she'd adored the old manor house where Aunt Chris had lived. At five years old she'd explored the residence and the grounds looking for secret passages, convinced that a knight had once lived there. It had been a favorite fantasy that she'd fallen asleep to many nights once back in the city. Over the years, fiction had given way to adulthood and she'd forgotten all about it. Now, the excitement of those old imaginings beckoned to her and she couldn't wait to see Mafdet Manor again.

Cleo helped keep her distracted by bouncing back and forth across the bench seat. At one point she stepped across Lee's lap and stood up to rest her paws on the doorframe and peer out the window.

"Move over, Cleo. You're going to get us both killed." She leaned to the side to see around her furry companion.

Fortunately, traffic was light. She wrapped one arm around Cleo's stubby body and heaved her back over to her own place. Eventually the dog grew bored and stretched out for a nap with a resigned huff, leaving Lee free to watch the landscape change. Concrete, traffic jams and high rises gave way to clean air, tall trees and beautiful landscapes.

Lee drove left onto County Road 73 to go around Hurricane Mountain's southern side and the elevation began to rise dramatically. By the time she drove around Lake Placid, she'd climbed over sixteen hundred feet in elevation from the I-87 turnoff. Mountains loomed around her and trees filled the sides of the road. Traffic here was almost non-existent on a mid-week evening. She smiled. The stress of the city already felt distant.

The town of Harmon, in Franksburg County, was her next stop. Harmon was a small town only twenty minutes from her aunt's house and would be a good place to pick up a few essentials.

It was dusk when Lee drove into Harmon. Few businesses were open, though people were still out here and there. Carefully manicured sidewalks lined the sides of the two-lane streets, illuminated by bright overhead street lamps. Lights burned cheerfully behind the windows of the few homes she could see and a late night grocery stood just off the main street. Lee gratefully pulled into an open parking spot and killed the engine. She'd only stopped once for gas on the trip up and looked forward to stretching her legs.

"You stay here and guard the truck."

Cleo looked at her with a raised brow and she could almost imagine the dog questioning her orders. Who in their right mind would want the hunk of junk?

Lee left the window down a few inches and locked the door before walking inside. She was aware of the irony of coming to a small town where neighbors could probably still leave their homes unlocked at night, and here she was locking her truck.

She shrugged. *Oh well, some habits die hard.*

Her mind on the few groceries she wanted to pick up, she didn't realize she was being stared at. She pulled out a shopping cart, noticing the front left tire wobbled dangerously, and started for the bread. She milled around picking out bread, mustard and some lunchmeat before she noticed the curious onlookers.

Men and women alike had stopped what they were doing to watch the stranger. Now that she bothered to notice, the inhabitants of Harmon were quite eye-catching. Not one of them could be described as ordinary. Some were very tall and well-muscled, some were not as tall and had more wiry builds. All of them were taller than Lee and they were gorgeous. Suddenly, she felt like an old frump.

"Stepford much?" she mumbled under her breath and headed for the checkout, picking up a six-pack of diet Pepsi on the way.

The clerk, a teenager with amazingly clear skin, stared at her for a second before slowly running her purchases through the scanner. The kid had wavy reddish-blond hair and the longest eyelashes she'd ever seen on a boy.

"Don't get a lot of visitors here?" Lee asked conversationally.

The young man flushed slightly and cast a look back toward the regulars. "Sorry. Most of the tourists stay around the Park. They don't mean to be rude. I guess we're just not used to strangers."

"I'm not really a stranger. My great aunt, Christine Mafdet, lived here. I'm moving into her house."

Lee normally wouldn't offer such personal information, but for some strange reason felt the instinctive need to be seen as nonthreatening. Apparently, it was the right decision. The young man's expression brightened with an unexpected smile.

"You're Aunt Chris' niece? Sorry, but that's what everyone called her...Aunt Chris. Um," he finished lamely, "I'm Denny."

"Denny, don't chew her ear off. Just ring up her groceries."

Lee looked over at the man who was obviously Denny's boss. He didn't seem as thrilled with her, no matter to whom she was related. Lee nodded and smiled, but the man just stared back at her. She paid for her purchases and quickly walked back out to the truck. She sat the groceries in the back while she opened the door and then transferred them onto the floorboard. Cleo acted like she hadn't seen her in six months, jumping all over her and generally getting in the way.

"Get back in there, you silly dog. Let's get out of here before I get lynched." Lee cast a quick look around into the gathering darkness and could almost imagine suspicious eyes watching her. "What a weird town."

Throwing the truck into reverse, she backed out of the parking lot and drove back onto the county road. In less than half an hour she'd be at her new home. Just the thought was enough to put the unusual inhabitants out of her mind. She had more pleasant things to concentrate on. Fifteen minutes later she came to a fork in the road and pulled as close to the edge as possible so she could stop and check her directions.

The motor of the pickup chugged a little as she put it in park.

Moths beat against the headlights and bounced off the windshield. The darkness suddenly felt like too much and she reached for the overhead switch that controlled the dome light. It refused to come on so Lee quickly cracked the door. As soon as the door opened far enough, the overhead light allowed her to breathe easier and to read her own hastily scrawled directions. Mrs. Horton, the realtor, had given them to her over the phone and she felt sure she was getting close. After a quick check, Lee slammed the door and drove forward slowly. Just up ahead she could make out the sign indicating the right turn onto a private road that said '*Mafdet Lane*'.

They had arrived.

"Finally, Cleo." Lee bit her lip anxiously, looking around at the dark forest. "I just wish we'd managed to get here while it was still daylight."

Lee was vaguely aware of the black wrought-iron fence that veered away to either side as she drove onto the property. The Mafdet crest overhead was invisible in the darkness, though she vaguely remembered it from years before. She headed slowly down the lane, cautious on the unfamiliar terrain. For all that she'd been here before, it had been quite a while, and driving the route herself made the previous experiences almost surreal.

Taking the opportunity to look around some, Lee noticed that the paved entrance was perfectly manicured but the forest still seemed to encroach. Was there something or someone out there in the trees, watching her approach? Then again, why would anyone do such a thing?

Maybe she was more of a city girl than she wanted to admit. All this darkness and solitude seemed to be setting her nerves on edge. The unusual behavior of the townspeople hadn't helped.

Attempting to shake off the irrational dread, Lee concentrated on the light drawing closer through the trees. One more curve in the extended driveway and Mafdet Manor sat before her in all its glory. The realtor had thoughtfully left the front entrance lights burning. The sight was so magnificent that she didn't realize she'd stopped completely.

"Wow. I'd forgotten how impressive this place is."

The circular drive caressed the front of the property, framing the three-story structure. The manor boasted four fireplaces. Great awnings draped the windows across the front of the house. They'd be bright and colorful in the daylight, but in the darkness looked gray and washed out. Broad wooden steps led up to an old-fashioned wrap-around porch. She remembered the front door had been carved from mahogany. Two large jungle cats crafted from solid marble sat sentry on either side. She couldn't really see them in the darkness, but seemed to recall they might be panthers or leopards. Even with the full moon it was difficult to tell and her fuzzy memory refused to supply the details.

From her perspective they were a warning to intruders or a welcome for those who called Mafdet home. Since Lee was now the rightful owner, she considered them her new guardians.

She shut off the engine and climbed out of the truck. She was aware that Cleo jumped out, but she couldn't tear her gaze off the manor. Goose bumps erupted on her arms, though she hardly felt the chill.

After several minutes the sounds of the forest slowly demanded her attention. Crickets chirped and somewhere an owl hooted. Lee looked away from the house and suddenly realized Mafdet was quite isolated. If something happened out here it would be a long time before help arrived, if at all. Rather than fill her with fear, the thought sent a thrill through her veins. The wilderness was in her blood. Lee had always preferred the truth of an animal's heart over the deceit of humans and the sweet, clean mountain air over the feculence of civilization.

She cast her gaze overhead and grinned at what seemed like millions of stars. "Come on, Cleo. It's time to start over."

Cleo had been busy relieving herself at the tree line, but came running as soon as Lee called. Her tail wagged so hard her rump moved in time. She showed no sign of concern, even though the forest was far from her usual haunts.

Lee climbed the stairs, taking in every detail she could from the planks under her feet, to the feline sentinels, and the thick wooden door. She pulled a key from her jeans pocket and slid it into the lock. Pins turned easily and the door swung silently inward on well-oiled hinges. The beagle happily entered Mafdet Manor before Lee could take a step, her claws clicking on the foyer tiles.

"First thing we're going to do is put in a dog door."

Chapter Two

"DO YOU REALLY think there was a bear in the campgrounds?"

"Maybe. I guess we're about to find out."

Jamison Kessler pulled into the entrance to the St. Regis Falls camp area. She didn't really believe it was likely for several reasons. It was just the beginning of summer and the animals would have plenty to eat in the surrounding wilderness, plus they didn't really like being around humans. Still, stranger things had happened. She'd know quickly enough if one had actually been here once she investigated the scene.

Her trainee, Brenda Thomas, grunted a little and held her Smokey the Bear hat, affectionately called a 'Smokey', to her head as the Jeep hit an unexpected bump. Personally, Jamison thought headwear tended to get in the way and she refused to wear one. "It's just that I've heard about these kinds of things, but I've never actually seen it. You know?"

She didn't attempt to respond. Thomas was new to being a Park Ranger. In addition, she was twenty-two and every fresh experience was electrifying. Jamison, on the other hand, had been involved with the park service all of her adult life and grown up in the Adirondacks.

She pulled up to the campsite in question while Brenda continued her monologue.

"This is just so exciting. Don't you think it's exciting, Ranger Kessler?"

Jamison grunted in response and got out of the Jeep, relieved to be away from the incessant chatter. A man and woman in their thirties stood waiting beside a spic-and-span dark blue SUV. Next to them a little boy around ten years old was playing on the ground. Everything about the family group spelled tourist.

"It's about time," the man said, stepping forward with a swagger as he inserted himself between his family and the rangers. He puffed out his chest as he spoke and tugged up on his belt.

Jamison smiled inwardly at his attempted display of dominance, even though she was a good six inches taller and at least thirty pounds heavier. Sun glinted off the man's black hair and she noticed a few strands of gray.

High-stress job, she reasoned. Probably thought he'd get away for the weekend with the wife and kid. Then she saw the expression in his mud-brown eyes--equal parts relief and fear.

Oh, I see. He probably didn't really want to come up here in the first place and a supposed animal attack is the perfect excuse to head back to civilization.

She was good at assessing people fairly quickly and these tourists weren't the usual weekend campers.

"I'm Ranger Kessler," she said, offering her hand. The man shook it in a flabby grip and released it quickly. She was grateful he'd let go so fast and shook off the cold, limp sensation. "What can I do for you?"

"Michael Wallace." He gave a curt nod. "We've just had a bear attack our campsite. I want that creature found and shot."

Jamison stared at him in amazement. He couldn't be serious. "Now, hold on a minute. How do you know it was a bear? Did you see it?"

Wallace flushed slightly but refused to back down. "I didn't need to. It destroyed our camp. It's clearly vicious."

Mrs. Wallace spoke for the first time, her voice soft and high. "We were down by the lake fishing. We came back and our things had been ransacked. All of Ricky's clothes are dirty now." She glanced toward the little boy. Ricky wore a pair of new jeans, Gucci shoes and a button-down shirt under a thick wool sweater.

Of course, Jamison thought. *We can't get dirty while we're out camping.*

"Do you mind if I take a look at the campsite?"

"I'd be disappointed if you didn't." Wallace grunted and led the way around the SUV.

The campsite was only twenty feet away with a large L. L. Bean tent dominating the center. It was much too close to the fire ring, but showed no evidence of having been disturbed. A red and white cooler lay on its side with various drinks and food wrappers scattered about. Next to it was a red-stained paper plate and a piece of aluminum foil that had been torn off. Clothing had been pawed out of backpacks, but overall there was no evidence of the destruction a rampaging bear would cause.

Jamison squatted down and picked up a child's sweatshirt. The material had been torn by claws. Her nostrils flared as she tasted the animal scent and raw meat lingering in the air.

"Was it a bear?"

Deep green eyes looked up into Brenda Thomas' anxious face. Jamison thought it was to her credit that the younger woman had been quiet for this long.

"No. Lynx." *This time.*

"Lynx?"

Jamison nodded. "They're protected. The government's been trying to repopulate them in this area."

"How do you know that's what did this?"

Brenda looked like she truly wanted to learn, but she hadn't seen any evidence to support the more experienced ranger's claim. Short of asking Thomas to believe she was psychic, Jamison needed tangible proof for her trainee.

She pointed over near the fire pit. "Paw tracks." The cat had stepped in the ash near the now cold fire.

"Good eye," Thomas said appreciatively.

"See?" Wallace stepped up next to them, having missed the entire conversation. "It's like I told you. That bear is a menace. What kind of place is this when the Park Service can't even keep us safe?"

Jamison stood slowly to her full height. Anger simmered along her veins and a warning growl fought to be released from her chest. Like most Panthera, she had little patience for tourists who came into the wilderness and demanded its denizens conform to their expectations. Jamison was more patient than most of her kind because she worked around people on a daily basis, but calling for the murder of an innocent animal tested her limits. It made her want to show him exactly how unsafe the forest could really be.

"Mr. Wallace, did you by any chance leave food out while you were off fishing?"

"I had some steaks thawing on top of the cooler, but they were wrapped up." He shrugged. "So what?"

"So this is a forest. Wild animals actually live here and they have a sense of smell a hundred times greater than a human. Aluminum foil is hardly a deterrent."

"Are you saying this is my fault?" His voice rose as his face flushed dark red. Jamison was concerned that a vein in his neck would pop and she'd be stuck doing a ton of paperwork. "A bear attacks our campsite in broad daylight--"

"Not a bear," Thomas mumbled.

Jamison was happy for the distraction that stopped Wallace before he could really get going.

"What?"

"It wasn't a bear."

"Mr. Wallace," Jamison smoothly took over in her best friendly forest ranger voice, even though all she wanted was to kick this man and his family out of her park. "A bear would have knocked over your tent, or at least damaged it in some way. There would have been a lot more chaos if there was one and it really had gone berserk."

"Then what do you think did this?"

"It was just a little lynx. He was probably attracted to the meat."

Wallace looked like he'd been slapped. "There are mountain lions around here? That wasn't in the brochure!"

There are worse things than that, Jamison thought, almost at the point of showing him. Fortunately, Thomas continued trying to calm the man down.

"It was harmless. He probably ate the meat and went through your belongings out of curiosity."

"Does that look like curiosity?" He pointed to the rent shirt Jamison was still holding. "It would have torn my son apart!"

Jamison held back her smile of disdain. "I'm sure he just got his claws stuck in the material."

"Claws! Stuck!" Michael fumed impotently for a few seconds and she could almost hear his blood pressure spike. "That's it! We're leaving, but don't think this is over!"

"Yes, sir," Jamison said dutifully, biting the inside of her cheek. Her anger disappeared as she was struck by how pathetic this little man really was.

"I intend to file a complaint with your superiors."

"Of course, sir." Thomas answered because Jamison was already walking toward the Jeep, shoulders shaking with silent laughter.

Jamison met the rookie's eyes over the hood when Thomas finally reached the car. She looked over at the angry businessman and couldn't help herself. "Oh, by the way. You have a fish hook in your collar."

Thomas laughed as they drove away, but the humor of the situation was already passed for Jamison. The incident with Wallace was minor really, but did serve to bring up a very troubling issue that was currently facing the Council.

People.

They were everywhere, breeding at ever increasing rates and destroying everything the Great Mother had set on the planet. Wallace was just a reminder they were also encroaching into the natural world. It was hard to transform into an alternate state in front of people and not expect to incite a riot. Throughout history, they had proven time and again that they preferred to demolish what they didn't understand. Cohabiting with them was out of the question. Panthera and others of their kind were pushed into shrinking areas of isolation and would eventually have no place left to go. When that happened, they'd have no choice but to reveal themselves.

Would they then be shot on sight, as Mr. Wallace wanted done with his non-existent bear?

"Where are we going now?"

Thomas had a concerned frown on her face and Jamison realized she understood they were returning to the visitor's center.

"Don't worry, you didn't do anything wrong. In fact, you did a good job. Keeping Wallace calm and just allowing him to vent was the right thing to do."

"In this case, I don't think I could have done anything else. It's not like I can just politely ask the animals to leave the campers' play toys alone."

"True." Jamison smiled, pulling into the Paul Smith's Visitor's Center. "Go ahead and take the Jeep. I've got some things I need to take care of."

"Alone?" Brenda couldn't hide the excitement and surprise, nor did she attempt to do so. "That's great! But what do I do?"

Enthusiasm had quickly given way to anxiety. Jamison chuckled and shut off the engine. She couldn't help but like this woman. "You'll be fine. You've been here a few weeks now and you know the routine. Just patrol out along Blue Mountain Road. It's pretty busy this time of year. At the most you'll have people running out of gas and that kind of thing."

She got out of the Jeep and Brenda came around to take the driver's seat. "If you have any trouble, call Dispatch. They'll send someone out to help you."

"Okay." She didn't sound very sure, but gamely started the vehicle and put it in drive.

"You'll be fine," Jamison repeated. She patted Brenda's shoulder reassuringly and walked away.

She headed for the office to speak to her boss, Hank Morgan. He was also an elder on the Panthera Council. Jamison didn't personally need to see him, but it was time for her daily check-in. Council issues were just as important as tourist concerns, and this was the time Jamison really looked forward to. They were also the only two of their kind on the Park's Service payroll, unbeknownst to the other employees. Since she was second in command at the Adirondack posting, no one questioned the meetings.

The wind gusted toward her and she froze. Her head turned toward the scent and she brushed a few strands of black hair from her face. Something smelled--wrong--about the forest. There were the usual scents of moist earth, growing things and various life forms, but there was more. The birds were quiet, waiting for something. Whatever it was, the odor teased at the edges of her senses, like decay on the wind. Her eyes morphed, the deep green irises narrowing as the pupils lengthened and allowed her vision to reach deeper into the shadowed vegetation.

She took a step toward the tree line.

Chapter Three

"KESSLER!"

HANK MORGAN stopped Jamison from walking off into the woods. He didn't know what had caught her attention, but it could wait. He had a meeting scheduled with the Panthera Council. Things were happening around Harmon that had the elders concerned. Things in which Jamison Kessler was about to become deeply involved. Looking at her now, he knew she had his full confidence.

She stood in the middle of the clearing in front of the Paul Smith's Visitor's Center. The sun shone off her short, thick hair, the color of a raven's wing. It shimmered like a living thing, locks sweeping gently across her forehead to frame intelligent green eyes that were caught in mid-shift.

Jamison's facial structure could have been carved from marble, her jaws strong and square. Broad shoulders tapered to a thin waist, but Hank knew appearances were deceptive. She was solid muscle. Jamison's weight could be considered a little high by human standards, but not by those of the Panthera. When she transformed, she became sleek, powerful and deadly.

Hank shivered in spite of the late-morning sun. As her boss and an elder, he was loathe for Jamison to witness such a reaction so he cleared his throat and issued a gruff command. "Get in here already. I don't have all day."

JAMISON LET THE minor irritation of being disturbed flow away from her and carefully avoided direct eye contact with Hank. She wasn't afraid of him and knew if it came down to it, she could take him easily. The avoidance was out of respect for her superior and a man she'd known all her life.

She followed him into his office and shut the door to keep from being overheard by the other employees. "Anything special on the agenda today, Elder?"

"Sit down." Hank indicated a chair in front of his desk with a tilt of his forehead. "There's been another killing."

Jamison took a slow, deep breath and settled her long frame into the chair. The leather squeaked slightly and she allowed the smell of warm calfskin to soothe her. Hank often blurted information out in ways meant to provoke a reaction, but Jamison wasn't a rookie.

"I thought we weren't even sure the first incident could be considered anything unusual." She settled her gaze just below his left eye.

"True." Hank nodded. "But that hog had been exposed to the elements for several days and other scavengers got to him. It's not like that this time."

"All right, tell me what we've got."

Hank sat up straight and retrieved a manila folder from his desk, which he passed across to Jamison. While she went through the report and attached photos, he began to explain.

"You remember Ray Mitchell?"

Jamison shook her head. The name didn't sound familiar.

"He's a farmer who owns a beef cattle ranch about ten miles west of here between Red Dot Trail and Blake Falls Reservoir. Anyway, he lost a bull yesterday."

"I'm assuming you don't mean it ran away?" she said, looking at the gory photos in the file.

"Not likely, unless it can haul its sixteen hundred pound carcass up a tree." Judging from his scowl, Hank didn't appreciate her attempt at humor.

"No, I guess not. Then you're saying it's one of us." Their eyes met briefly as Jamison realized the seriousness of the situation.

"I honestly don't know. Dragging a meal up a tree for later is something one of us could do, but why? I don't understand why someone would deliberately draw attention to themselves. Also, there's something...weird about these kills. The skulls aren't crushed and whatever did this started feeding around the abdominal area."

"That's not Panthera," Jamison said confidently. "We'd be more inclined to crush the skull and kill the prey instantly."

"And the heart and lungs would have been the first to go, but they were still intact."

"I take it someone has already checked out the animal first hand?"

Hank nodded. "Yeah, I did. Mr. Mitchell called me and I drove out late yesterday afternoon."

"If you've already investigated you should know if it's one of us. The scent alone would answer that question, so what's really going on?"

"Normally I'd agree, but the scent was inconclusive. I want you to take a look at the animal and tell me what you think."

Jamison waited a second, but Hank sat silently. "There's more to this. You could have asked me to take a look at the bull over the phone."

"Phones aren't secure." Hank stared at her a second, but when she didn't respond he finally said, "The Council is concerned someone's trying to expose the Panthera to the rest of the world."

Jamison was shocked at the idea. "And this is supposed to be our coming out party? That's hardly the way to gain trust."

"Agreed. If they find out about us this way it'll be a massacre.

We're outnumbered ten thousand to one."

"Then why do it? They'd be killed, too."

"Not if this killer isn't part of our community."

She realized they were finally getting down to why she was sitting here with him. "The Council thinks whoever did this is trying to expose our community in particular? In that case they'd probably be from another group, not related to the Panthera. What could the motive be, to take over our territory? I don't buy it. There's more to it than that."

"Maybe," Hank said, "but whatever it is we need to find out. Whether it's one of ours who's gone crazy or someone with a deeper purpose, the Council wants you to find out. As of today your sole assignment is to investigate this situation. The Elders will want regular updates, and that includes me as well."

"Let me get this straight," Jamison said, standing slowly as Hank did the same. "The Council wants me to patrol six point one million square miles of parkland by myself and stop an unknown killer who may or may not be one of our own?"

"No."

Jamison let out a relieved sigh.

"I also want you to keep an eye on the town of Harmon and the people who own property in the immediate area."

"Are you out of your mind?"

Hank instinctively bristled at her shouted question and a growl rumbled in his chest. His pupils elongated rapidly, the tawny brown irises all but disappearing. Hair stood up on his arms and he clenched his fists as he fought the urge to change and combat an opponent.

"My apologies, Elder." She lowered her eyes to the floor and waited a few seconds while Hank wrestled his anger under control. Normally he wasn't so quick to incense and Jamison gathered this situation was worse than it initially appeared.

"Don't worry," Hank said slowly, his voice still sounding a little like he had gargled with gravel. "You won't be alone and your orders are to stay in a twenty-mile radius around Harmon. The Council has assigned four packs of our best and most trusted hunters to back you. Two teams will be assigned to day duty and two to nights, but they will report directly to you."

"Understood. How many members are there per team?"

"The team lead and four hunters each."

"And who are the leads?"

Hank grimaced and started for the door. From his expression Jamison knew he wouldn't answer and she wouldn't like it if he did.

"They'll meet you at the coroner's office. That's where I had the carcass moved. You can get to know them there."

"Hank?"

"I need to go. I'm late and you will be, too. Be at the M.E.'s office by one o'clock."

Jamison didn't need to look at her watch to know it was already past noon.

Thanks for the head's up.

She retrieved the keys for the Range Rover from the lockbox behind the service counter and walked out of the building without a backward look. Hank had already driven away and she fumed as she slammed the vehicle door.

How was she supposed to find out what was doing this? The two killing fields were miles apart and seemed to have nothing in common. One attack had been on a wild hog and another on a domesticated Galloway bull. More importantly, why would any of their own people do such a thing? Was it possible that an actual jungle cat of some type had escaped transport to a zoo and was loose in the Adirondack Park? Wouldn't there have been a bulletin about such a thing?

It was inconceivable that someone with higher reasoning capabilities would revert to another form and allow his instincts unfettered expression.

Jamison pulled out of the visitor's center and drove north along Blue Mountain Road toward the CR 458 turn that would lead to Harmon. The town was considered small by today's standards, but it was still the Franksburg County Seat. The M.E.'s office was located in the basement of the Harmon Medical Center and the coroner was one of the Panthera.

At least she wouldn't have to sneak in to get a look at the kill.

Brenda Thomas passed going toward the main office and she waved. No doubt the rookie was headed back for lunch, something Jamison would miss. Her stomach complained, but she promised it a nice rare steak after she'd finished at the morgue.

Jamison turned right at the county road turn-off. She hadn't driven half a mile when she spotted a battered old brown pickup pulled to the side of the single-lane road. The rear driver's side was jacked up and a blonde haired woman was almost in the driving lane on her knees,

struggling to get a tire onto the lugs. Jamison braked slightly as she passed, a frown of indecision resting between her eyes. If she stopped she'd be late meeting the team leaders.

Yeah, and if I don't she'll get nailed by a passing car.

A split second later, Jamison turned the steering wheel and stopped on the narrow shoulder. She had her orders, but she couldn't just pass someone who needed help.

Chapter Four

DAMN TRUCK! THIS is exactly what I need, a flat. Someone please tell me why I just had to buy Hector's old piece of junk. What was I thinking?

Lee was not in a good mood. All she'd wanted to do was drive up to Santa Clara and get some shots of Long Pond in the canoe wilderness area. Santa Clara was supposedly home to fifty-eight ponds and breathtaking scenery. Now it was too late. Because of the flat she'd missed the lighting she wanted for some landscape shots and was still wrestling with the weight of the eighteen-inch tire.

It had taken her ten minutes just to figure out where the spare was and how to use the archaic equipment to lower it from under the truck. Then it took another fifteen to get all of the lug nuts off the flat, a feat managed only when she stood on the end of the tire iron and bounced on it while holding onto the edge of the bed. Once she loosened the nuts, getting the jack under the truck was no problem, but she felt exposed with her feet extending onto the blacktop.

She'd pulled over as far as possible, but the road was so narrow she had no choice. Finally, the damaged tire had been removed and she was valiantly trying to get the spare into place. Sweat ran down her face and she reached up to wipe it away, unknowingly leaving a large, black streak along one cheek. Just as Lee was trying to line up the holes in the wheel with the lugs, she heard a passing car slow and pull over to the side of the road.

Good timing, she thought sarcastically. *I'm almost finished.*

She'd have been happy to take advantage of the Good Samaritan half an hour ago, but she couldn't deny the sense of accomplishment she felt at having changed the tire herself. Normally it was a task her father's mechanic would have dealt with or she'd have just phoned AAA. Being isolated up in the Adirondack Mountains had left her no choice but to do the job personally.

"You shouldn't be out in the road like that. Someone might come along and hit you."

Gee, you think?

Lee couldn't keep the thought from forming in her mind, but bit the words back. She was surprised the voice belonged to a woman, but if all she'd stopped for was to impart some words of wisdom she could be on her way. Holding the top of the tire to keep it from sliding off, Lee had just turned her head to say as much when her eyes connected with deep, forest green.

Whoa, baby!

For a brief instant, she could only stare at the vision standing in front of her. Coal black hair framed verdant eyes. Tanned skin rested over flawless bone structure and flowed down into the brown and green uniform of a park ranger. The short-sleeved uniform did nothing to hide strong shoulders and muscled arms. A black belt encircled a narrow waist and Lee couldn't stop her gaze from sweeping down incredibly long legs to rest on highly polished black boots.

I'd love to photograph her.

"Are you okay?"

Lee jerked her gaze back up to the woman's concerned face. She flushed in embarrassment and redirected her attention to the tire.

"I'm fine."

There was a second of awkward silence before the ranger asked, "Do you need some help?"

"No," Lee answered shortly. "I've almost got it."

"All right. Well, I'm going to set up some cones so someone doesn't drive over the top of you while you're finishing up."

Lee grunted in response and screwed one of the nuts on to anchor the spare. Then she twisted her head to watch the woman walk back to her vehicle. What she saw made her hold her breath.

My God, it should be illegal to be that good looking. Then she mentally slapped herself. What's wrong with me, a gorgeous woman comes along and I can't take my eyes off her? Must be heat stroke. Yeah, that's it.

She watched the raven-haired woman remove some flares and a few orange cones from the rear of the Range Rover and was caught off guard a second later when their eyes met. The stranger smiled in a friendly gesture and Lee felt the urge to return it with a grin of her own. She stopped herself and quickly concentrated on the spare. It only took a few minutes to finger tighten the other lug nuts and when she looked up the flares and cones were already in place. The ranger was standing at the rear of the truck watching her.

"I'm Jamison Kessler, by the way. Sorry if I startled you."

"You didn't startle me," Lee said as she began jacking the truck back down. "I heard you pull over. Uh, thanks for stopping."

JAMISON SMILED SLIGHTLY. The last was added almost as an afterthought. She looked around while the blonde began tightening the nuts with the tire iron. The truck the woman drove was old and had definitely seen better days, but the driver was mismatched to the vehicle. Even with the smudge of dust across her face, she had an air of sophistication. Certainly not the type to be changing her own flats.

She glanced into the back of the pickup and noticed all of the high-end photography equipment; camera bags, cases and a Giotto lever-lock MTL 92 tripod, from the description on the cover. This kind of gear didn't come cheaply.

"So, what brings you up to the Adirondacks?" Jamison asked in what she hoped was a conversational tone.

The blonde met her gaze and glanced into the pickup bed. Instead of answering the question, she said, "I didn't steal the camera equipment if that's what you mean."

She'd tightened down the lug nuts as much as she could by hand and Jamison watched in amazement when she placed the tire iron onto a nut, grasped the edge of the truck bed and stood on the tool to finish cinching them down.

"I could do that for you, if you want?"

Jamison forgot to breathe when the woman smiled at her, the first genuine emotion she could remember seeing from her. As cliché as it sounded, she suddenly felt as though the sun shone just a little brighter off the stranger's blonde hair and had to blink the sight away.

"Thanks anyway." The woman shook her head and the light reflected off her hair again, threatening to distract Jamison once more.

While the stranger finished with the remaining lug nuts, Jamison bent over and pushed the damaged tire underneath the truck. She needed something to think about besides the lingering image of that smile, so she concentrated on sliding the chain through the flat. Then she cranked it

back into position where the spare would normally be stored. By the time she finished the woman had just stowed the tire iron inside the cab.

She held her dirty hand out and Jamison took it without thinking. "Thanks again for stopping."

"You're welcome."

The blonde hopped back into the pickup, offered an offhand wave through the open window and was gone.

Jamison was left standing on the side of the road wondering what had just happened. She'd expected another annoying tourist who would complain constantly while Jamison changed the flat. Instead she'd encountered a beautiful woman who was obviously fiercely independent and a contradiction in visual clues. The expensive equipment and her demeanor just didn't fit with a broken down old pickup. People were usually so easy for her to read, but not this time.

It was only then that she realized she hadn't even learned the stranger's name.

Shaking her head at her own behavior, Jamison retrieved the burned out flares and cones from the roadway and stowed them in the back of her vehicle. She climbed into the driver's side and sat for a moment staring at her dirty hand. In contrast to Michael Wallace's handshake earlier, the woman's grip was firm and dry.

Then she remembered the comment about not stealing the camera equipment. Something in Jamison's expression must have given her thoughts away. She'd erroneously judged the blonde out of hand simply on the basis of what kind of vehicle she drove and the stranger had been perceptive enough to pick up on it. Jamison was getting as bad as the people around her.

She reached down, started the Range Rover and drove away, the woman's dirt smudged face occupying her mind. Who was she? Why was she here? Was she just another tourist?

Ten minutes later Jamison pulled into the parking lot at Harmon Medical Center. She still had no answers concerning the stranger, but there were more important things to worry about at the moment. She'd actually managed to arrive a few minutes early. Locking the doors to the vehicle, she pocketed the keys and headed for the basement level.

The air conditioning caressed her skin as soon as Jamison entered the building and she resisted the urge to shiver. Like most of her species, she didn't care for being cold. It amazed her that Laura Paul, the Harmon County Chief Medical Examiner, could work down here every day.

She passed through the outer corridor and into the morgue offices.

Speak of the devil, Jamison thought as the medical practitioner came into view.

She saw the M. E. at the same time that Laura looked up at her. The doctor's eyes crinkled at the corners as she smiled and a predatory look came over her face. Her pheromones changed from her normal floral scent to unabashed desire. She practically flowed across the room toward her and Jamison, knowing what was about to happen, was happy they were alone. It was like this every time she ran into her and Laura had the opportunity to make a pass. Laura had never been shy about letting her interest in the dominant Panthera show.

"Hi, Jami. You're looking well." Laura purred in her rich, low tones. "Are you finally here to take me up on my offer?"

Doctor Paul was small in comparison to Jamison, her head just at chin level. The artificial lights gleamed off her red-gold hair and brown eyes twinkled as she invaded Jamison's personal space. Jamison could feel the heat from the body only inches from her own. Caught up in the moment and still affected by her response to the stranger on the road, she allowed the passion to sweep over her.

Red lips rose and Jamison lowered her head until Laura's mouth was only inches away, her own already parted. She raised a hand to brush Laura's face. Her thumb was millimeters from caressing a full lower lip when Laura caught her hand.

"Not that one, darling. It smells like asphalt. Try this one."

An image of shaking hands with the tire-changing woman went through her mind and out again as Laura grasped her left hand and pressed it against her tight frame. Heat skated over Jamison's senses as her fingers teased down Laura's stomach, headed for the arousal between the doctor's thighs.

Laura's teeth grabbed her bottom lip and she moaned low in her throat, her eyes half-closed. There was nothing wrong with having sex with the eager woman. For Jamison there would be no strings attached and it had been quite a while since she'd blown off a little steam.

Jamison's nipples hardened against the fabric of her shirt as Laura rubbed against her. Again, the stranger's sea-colored eyes blazed in her mind. Abruptly the arousal faded as though it had never been.

She pulled back a little and said breathlessly, "Actually, I'm here on business. Hank wanted me to look at the bull."

Laura chuckled. "Your sweet talk could use a little work."

"Stop fooling around, Kessler. We all have other things to do."

Jamison jumped when she heard the irritating male voice. Anger and hatred threaded through the words and she didn't need to see the person to know it was Aaron Dalton. Undoubtedly he was one of the team leads that had been assigned by the Council, and the one Hank hadn't wanted to tell her about. Her annoyance was quickly replaced with pleasure when the other three group commanders followed Dalton into the room. These people would be submissives to her and dominants to their own individual packs.

Travis Rooker was a blond Panthera in his mid-twenties. He wore a scruffy beard that he seemed to have trouble growing and his left ear was pierced with a small diamond stud. Although inexperienced, he was intelligent, a good tracker and always willing to listen. His older sister, Andy, owned one of the cafés in Harmon and served the best steak in town as far as Jamison was concerned. Travis smiled when he saw her and quickly directed his gaze to the floor out of respect.

Next was Hal Walker, and he couldn't have been more dissimilar to the younger hunter. His hair was salt and pepper with age and he walked with a limp. His left foot had been caught in a bear trap as a youth and he had never recovered. Jamison counted herself lucky to have the wise old hunter among the group. He wouldn't go off half-cocked and had the patience to deal with teaching Travis while at the same time ignoring Aaron's rude comments about his handicap.

Jamison nodded to him respectfully, but it was the fourth and final member of the betas that held her attention.

"Dinah." Jamison smiled and reached out to embrace her sister.

Though they were twins, they were as different as night and day. Dinah Kessler stood at a modest five and a half feet, her hair a dark auburn. Her skin was gently sun-kissed and she had a perpetual smile on her face. In contrast to her calm exterior, Dinah was a dynamo of activity. On any given day she could be found whitewater rafting at Hudson River Gorge or flying around in her helicopter just taking in the scenery.

"It figures the Council would pick you. They couldn't have made a better choice."

"Thanks," the redhead responded, stepping away after returning the brief embrace. "I'm not surprised they put you in charge of the whole detail, either."

"Yeah, yeah," Dalton interrupted. "Now that we're over the mutual admiration thing, can we get down to business?"

Jamison narrowed her eyes at the man. Muted gray met her gaze head-on and he showed no sign of bowing to her status as the dominant feline. Aaron had tried to pit himself against her since adolescence and usually came out on the losing end. Rather than admit she was faster, stronger and more capable, it just seemed to make him more determined than ever to best her. In their current situation, with an unknown killer running around the forest, she couldn't afford for him to undermine her authority. The whole idea made her hackles rise and she'd just opened her mouth to put him in his place when Dinah beat her to it.

"Stowe it, Aaron. With things like they are, the Council needs the best of us leading this investigation, and trust me, that's not you."

To Jamison's surprise, Aaron flushed and looked away rather than confront Dinah in his normal belligerent way. She caught the desire in his eyes as he glanced furtively at her sister and realized he wanted to be intimate with Dinah.

Eww.

Desperate to get that image out of her head, Jamison focused on the youngest member of her new crew.

"Hey, Travis," she said, making it clear that the incident was behind them and that speaking more to Dalton on the subject was beneath her. "Who'd you bribe to get on this little detail? Or did you have Andy promise the Council free steaks for the year?"

His pale eyebrows shot up, clearly horrified that she'd think he had try to influence the elders. "No, of course not, Pieta. I hope they picked me because they trust me."

She smiled and rested a friendly hand on his shoulder. Travis always addressed her with respect, using the old tongue word for leader. "I'm sure they do, and this will be a good learning experience. How is Andy, by the way?"

"She's great, for an overbearing, overprotective sibling." If she hadn't heard the affection in his voice she might have thought he was complaining.

"Anything good on the menu tonight?"

"She's got a great side of beef going right now. Andy had just put it in when I left and the scent is already starting to sweeten the east side of town."

"Sounds good. I think I'll stop in later. For now, let's get down to business. Laura?"

Laura had been silent throughout the incident with Dalton and Jamison greeting the rest of her troops but now it was her show.

"Follow me."

She walked out into the hallway and led the group four doors down from the morgue offices. Laura had the only code to the cipher lock on the wall outside the room. Her body blocked their view as she input the numerical string and the door opened with a hiss.

Jamison had always thought it odd that no one questioned such high security in a morgue. Did people just assume this was where Doctor Laura kept the dangerous zombie corpses?

They walked into the cold room and although the Belted Galloway was nowhere in sight, the scent of the bull was overwhelming. Jamison knew a human would never have noticed the smell over the hospital disinfectants, but they were Panthera. Their sense of smell was as acute as that of the animals they shifted into. Her mouth watered and her stomach chose that inopportune moment to grumble noisily.

"Jamison!" Dinah chuckled and slapped the back of her hand across her sister's stomach.

"Sorry, munchkin. I didn't have lunch," Jamison murmured, more enthralled by the smell of raw steak than was entirely appropriate.

Travis laughed along with Dinah and Hal grinned. Only Dalton remained silent and Jamison glanced at him curiously. His expression was oddly intent. She decided it would be best to get this over with as quickly as possible and see what clues they could decipher.

"Let's do it, Laura."

Doctor Paul walked toward the back of the room and opened a cold drawer easily four times the size of one that would be used for a person. Considering what they were, Jamison realized the Panthera colony had to be prepared for every contingency. In seconds the body of a black and white, sixteen hundred pound bull was pulled out on a slab.

The six of them quietly gathered around.

The animal smell pervaded the room and wasn't altogether pleasant. Blood had coagulated beneath the flesh and Jamison detected the scent of encroaching decay. It reminded her of the odor she'd picked up in the woods outside the Paul Smith's Center. She'd discovered more than one dead animal while patrolling the Adirondack Park forest and the stink of death was familiar, but there was also something here that didn't belong. It was the smell of a predator. Her nostrils flared and Jamison's lips parted slightly as she tasted the scent. After a minute she knew all that her senses could tell her about the carcass. She raised her eyes to look at the members of her investigative team. All of them had partially shifted, including herself.

Their pupils had narrowed to that of jungle cats. A light dusting of tawny fur covered everyone's arms except for Jamison's. Her pelt was midnight black. Just as with the more mundane jaguar species, she was part of the six percent with a melanistic mutation.

Dalton's mouth was open because his canine's had extended and his fingers were curled into claws as he fought the urge to completely assume his animal side.

"Well?" Jamison's voice was gruff, her changed vocal chords having difficulty forming words.

"Definitely cat," Aaron said.

Jamison was disgruntled by such an obvious statement. "Well, I didn't think a dog hauled him thirty feet into the air. If it had been that simple, Hank wouldn't have bothered to assign someone to look into the mystery."

Dalton raised his transformed eyes to meet her gaze in challenge. "Hank?" he rumbled furiously. "That toothless old buffalo is useless. He should be torn apart and used for fertilizer. Make room for someone more powerful."

It was too much. First he had treated Jamison with disrespect and cast nauseating looks toward Dinah. Now he had the nerve to make contemptuous remarks for someone she respected, an elder with the Council. Additionally, her body was still tight with unexpressed desire and the smell of the disemboweled animal had her beast riding close to the surface.

Her canines erupted in a flash and Jamison loosed a powerful growl as she leaped over the stainless steel gurney and the bull. Three-inch claws tore through her nail beds as she flew through the air, her knees catching him in the chest. She shoved him into the wall behind him so hard that a few of the tiles shattered. Dalton had been caught off guard and she had him by the throat before he knew what was happening.

Aaron struggled against the crushing weight, shoving back. He outweighed her considerably, but she had martial arts training that he didn't and easily countered. Using his weight against him, Jamison executed a standard hip throw and slammed him to the ground. Before he could move she was on him, one of his arms trapped beneath her body. Jamison grabbed the other wrist

in her free hand and held it on the floor. Tendons stood out in sharp relief as she readily held him down.

"*Masule*." Jamison growled the command for Dalton to yield and emphasized the order by squeezing his larynx until his eyes watered. Then she released her grip slightly to allow him to breathe and either give in, or die.

Killing another of her kind was not something to be taken lightly, but neither was his continued challenge of the natural order. Jamison was a more dominant cat, his better. Hank Morgan was an elder, and although it was true that he was passed his prime, Dalton had no right to treat him with so little regard. The sooner he submitted to that truth, the sooner they could get on with their task.

For a moment Dalton fixed defiant eyes on her, but slowly he seemed to understand that she'd never back down. He had no other choice if he wanted to live.

"*Ma...masule*."

"Jami, stop." Laura Paul knelt next to her. Her tones were deliberately quiet and gentle. She made no attempt to touch the enraged Panthera, only to reason. "There are humans everywhere in this building. We can't afford to expose ourselves."

Jamison released Dalton at once and stood without a backward glance. She faced the cadaver and grasped the steel gurney, taking slow measured breaths to calm herself. She needed only seconds to regain her composure.

"Anyone have anything?"

Hal spoke for the first time since the meeting began. "I've seen wounds like this before and the scent is slightly familiar, though it's not quite right. It reminds me of a lion."

"What would a lion shifter be doing up here?" Dinah asked.

Travis spoke at the same time. "They wouldn't dare."

Dalton was wisely silent, but Jamison's thoughts had leapt far ahead of Hal's suspicion. "The Felidae Coalition is over forty miles west of here and Frank Chiesel keeps a tight rein on his pride. He wouldn't allow this."

"Not if he knew about it." Dalton had carefully regulated his tone, for the moment.

Jamison bit her lip at his audacity for speaking so soon after being put in place by his pieta, but she couldn't dispute his logic.

"I'm not sure," she said. "It doesn't smell like pure lion. There's something else mixed with it."

"Maybe another kind of shape changer helped the killer?" Travis said.

That suggestion set everyone talking at once. The thought of such a possibility smacked of a conspiracy and was worse than anything that had been considered by the Council. Jamison stepped in quickly to quiet her betas.

"That's good thinking, Travis, but it's not likely. If there were two of these things running around there would be a lot more killing than there has been. Two or more suspects would have an agenda to create terror and watch us chase our tails trying to figure it out. I think it more likely that whoever is doing this is going to great lengths not to be caught and that tells me it's only one hunter."

Dinah said, "Dragging that bull up a tree and leaving it hanging there is subtle?"

"Think about it," Jamison said. "From our own instincts we know that predators don't look up into the trees. Feline shape changers hide quarry in them so they can come back later and feed, knowing the kill won't be disturbed."

"Yes, but the other half of our souls has higher reasoning than the beasts we become. That side would realize that such a tactic would be disastrous with humans running all around the woods."

"Not if the reasoning side of this killer has been altered," Jamison said.

Dalton looked at her like she'd lost it. "Are you saying this hunter is crazy?"

"Crazy? Injured? Damaged? I don't know, but something isn't right. If this creature were a normal shape changer, the scent wouldn't be so confusing. Until we find this thing, we're wasting our time guessing the motivations. For now, we can at least assume that it's dangerous."

"Perhaps you could have your mother speak to the Council of Elders," Laura suggested into the silence. "They can contact the Felidae Coalition and ask if any of their lions have gone rogue or been banished."

Travis cleared his throat and suggested shyly, "She could even call Chiesel herself, since she is a Council member."

"It's a good idea," Jamison agreed. "For now I want patrols going around the clock. Dinah have your team start this evening. Dusk and dawn are going to be favorite hunting times for any predator. Dalton, I'm assuming you have your usual gang as your hunters?"

"That's right." The challenge was back in his voice, but he carefully looked away.

He still hasn't learned anything.

"Your team will alternate tomorrow night. Hal will take the shift in the morning and Travis' team will follow up the next day. I want all teams to rotate every other day so we all stay fresh. Keep your cell phones close to you and call me if you find anything or hear any rumors that might help. Questions?"

There weren't any and everyone filed out. Jamison stood in quiet thought for a second before she realized Dinah was waiting for her. The siblings walked down the hall and Jamison noticed when Dinah looked into Laura's office to see what she was doing.

"What?"

Dinah's eyes held a mischievous twinkle. "When are you going to have your wicked way with her?"

"With the Queen of the Dead?"

"Please," Dinah snorted. "I saw the clinch you two were in when we arrived. You know she's always wanted you. Why not have some fun?"

"I might if all she wanted was a little cat and mouse."

"That's really cute. You've been hanging out with humans too long."

"Meaning?"

"Look, Jami," Dinah said in what Jamison thought was pure drama. "Shape changers aren't human. We don't put taboos and restrictions on something that's a normal biological process. Sex is healthy."

Jamison turned to her as they stepped into the sunlight. "All I'm saying is the kitty has some sharp teeth."

"And? When is a little biting out of the ordinary for jaguars? It's part of what we do when we grapple."

"Because she wants to sink her teeth in and not let go."

Dinah's eyebrows went up. "She wants to mate with you?"

"Yes. We're not talking about just a friendly encounter here. She wants to move in and have little cubs. I'm not ready for that with any female and I certainly don't feel that way about her."

"All right, fair enough. But you seriously need to consider romping with someone, because what just happened in there," Dinah gestured toward the secured room with her thumb. "As justified as it was and as much as the little prick had it coming, it's not like you to lose control like that."

Jamison released a frustrated breath. "I know. It's just all I can do to deal with him sometimes. I can't believe the elders assigned him to this, and then he has the nerve to talk about Hank like that in front of me?"

Dinah nodded. "One of the things I've always admired about you, Jamison, is your unwavering loyalty."

"But?"

"But, Dalton's not all that wrong about Hank. He is past his prime and you're next in line."

"So, what?" Jamison asked in outrage. "You think someone should just take him into the forest and put him out of his misery?"

"Don't be ridiculous. I think he should have the grace to step down, that's all. Also, the Council assigned Dalton to this because as much as he is an ass, he's also a good hunter."

"Since when did you become a fan of Aaron Dalton? Wait a minute." Her eyes narrowed suspiciously. "I saw the way he looked at you earlier. Don't tell me that you and him...?"

Dinah actually paled at the thought. "Ugh! Don't be absurd. I couldn't be less interested. I just recognize a good resource when I see one. Besides, I have my eye on someone else at the moment."

"Oh, really?" Jamison grinned. "Does this someone have a name?"

"Of course she has a name..."

"She?"

"You make it sound like I've never been interested in the female form."

"Please, Dinah, don't even try to sound indignant. No one cares about who you're fooling around with, but you do have to admit that you usually go for males. You know... if you're ever going to stop playing the field and settle down you should consider a female. Males have no interest in cub rearing."

"You're getting way ahead of yourself, Jami. I have no interest in cub rearing."

Jamison nodded. "So what's so special about this female who's caught your eye?"

Dinah flushed and Jamison was even more interested in the answer, but Dinah simply changed the subject. "Hey, did you hear that Christine Mafdet's great niece has moved into the old manor?"

"What? When?" Jamison forgot all about love connections. "How did you hear that?"

"Apparently she stopped at Fogerty's last week for a few groceries and mentioned it to Denny."

"Denny? The checkout boy?"

Dinah shrugged. "He rang her up."

"What did she look like?"

"I'm not sure." Dinah frowned. "Blonde, a little on the tall side? Denny said she seemed nice enough. He did say he got the impression that she wasn't one of us."

"If she's related to Chris she'd have to be, wouldn't she?"

"Her mother married a human. That would make the great niece only half and she might not even have the ability to change."

"Her mother," Jamison said. "That woman had no honor. Her aunt raised her as her own child and the Mafdet bloodline was pure until she had the nerve to muddy it by marrying an ordinary man."

"Does it matter? The Great Mother knows there are plenty of humans living in and around Harmon. What's one more?"

Jamison thought of the blonde, blue-eyed stranger she'd met earlier and suddenly had a sneaking suspicion about her identity. Still, Dinah had a point and the Panthera certainly shouldn't care if the woman she'd met on the highway was a human. It wasn't any of her business except for one thing.

"It depends on what Christine told her."

It was Dinah's turn to look shocked. "You think she'd tell this girl about the Panthera if she wasn't like us?"

"I think it's a little too coincidental. First, someone or something is making kills with the potential to expose our community and then Chris Mafdet's niece shows up with a truck-load of camera equipment."

"What are you talking about?"

"On the way here I saw a woman near Mafdet Manor changing a tire on the side of the road. She fit your general description, and the truck was loaded with photography gear. She wouldn't tell me her name and didn't seem to appreciate me asking questions."

"That's probably because you were being your usual charming self," Dinah said dryly. "Seriously, that's a pretty big leap, isn't it? You see some stranger on the road who happens to have a camera along and you just assume she's in league with whatever attacked that Beltie? You might as well accuse the entire tourist population because I'm sure they all have cameras."

Jamison grinned sheepishly. "You're probably right. I'm seeing conspiracies everywhere. But I'm still going to check out the newest resident of Mafdet Manor."

"Of course, you wouldn't be doing your job if you didn't."

"Do you mind letting Mother know what happened with the bull? She and the other Council members can decide how to contact the Felidae." Jamison mentally crossed her fingers that Dinah would agree. She had enough going on and if she spoke with her mother, the woman would insist on lunch and the day would be gone before she knew it.

"What? And just ask Chiesel if his pride is trying to get us all killed?"

"Not his pride, maybe just one rogue lion."

"And what are you planning to do in the meantime?"

"I'm going to have lunch and then welcome our newest member of the community," Jamison said as though it should be obvious.

Dinah wasn't so willing to let her out of her familial obligations. "Why don't you come with me? Mom's working pediatrics today and I'm sure she'd love to see you. You're already here."

Jamison started walking backward across the parking lot, attempting to end the conversation and escape as quickly as possible. "I can't think of anything I'd rather do, but I'm starving. Gotta go."

"Chicken."

Jamison laughed as she got into the Rover. She loved her mother, but Darlene Kessler could be kind of intense. She was a great medical doctor but would jump at the chance to grill her eldest about her non-existent love life. The last thing she needed was her mother playing shrink on the heels of Dinah trying to set her up with Laura Paul.

Chapter Five

THERE WAS A storm coming. Lee could smell it on the wind. The temperature had fallen at least ten degrees from the mid-seventies she'd enjoyed that morning. Deep, threatening thunderclouds roiled overhead, promising a great blow before it was over. It was only four in the afternoon, but with the sun obscured and the tempest pending, the day had the feel of early evening.

As a wildlife photographer who had traveled all over the world, she understood exactly how cold it could get in the mountains in a relatively short period of time. For that reason, she stood at the rear of Mafdet Manor wielding an ax like a lady Paul Bunyan, splitting her own wood.

Lee placed a short piece of timber upright on the chopping block and pushed her shirtsleeves further up her arms. In deference to the dropping temperatures, she'd donned a blue-checked flannel shirt, but she wore it more like a jacket. It was unbuttoned and she had a black tank top underneath.

Her flesh glistened with perspiration and a steady trickle slid down one side of her face. Lee's blonde hair was wet at the edges of her hairline, rendering it a dark brown and unknowingly setting off her fine chiseled features. Her muscles rippled as she held the tool in a two-handed grip and swung it up over her head. She didn't notice how the tank rode up to expose her midriff to the cooling breeze. Rather, she concentrated on how it felt to wield the ax. At the apex of the swing, Lee grunted slightly and reversed direction. The head of the implement glinted in the waning light and flew back along its axis. In one strike, the log split neatly in two and the head of the ax bit deeply into the chopping block.

Without pause, she pushed the pieces aside and replaced them with yet another short stump. Her body moved cleanly through the motions as she added to the growing pile of firewood, but her thoughts were elsewhere. Intense green eyes and coal-black hair swirled through the images in her head. She'd only seen Jamison Kessler for a few minutes on the highway, but thoughts of the woman refused to leave her alone.

Jamison probably wasn't even aware of the raw animal sexuality she radiated, but Lee had noticed. She'd already pictured how to photograph her, the technical settings, the lighting. She shivered and envisioned the woman wearing something more revealing than a park ranger's uniform; perhaps cutoff jeans, ragged around the thighs, and a white tank fully displaying those powerful arms that the duty attire attempted to conceal. Tanned flesh from so many hours in the sun would be set off like bronze against the snowy color of the shirt. Lee saw strong, alabaster teeth flash as Jamison smiled up at her and toward the camera. The concept was so real that she actually gasped from the reaction that flashed through her stomach.

How would she look chopping this wood? Lee suddenly wondered.

Muscles would flex, shifting over bone and sinew with the movements. Sweat would form on Jamison's brow and bead on her skin, a rivulet trailing down between her breasts...

Cleo unexpectedly rushed from where she'd been standing next to the tree line, barking furiously. Lee jumped and barely managed to keep from slicing her leg with the ax. "Oh, God! Cleo, you scared the shit out of me."

Lee stood for a second catching her breath and willing her heart to stop hammering. She was confused and without question, aroused. She could feel the dampness at her center when she shifted.

What the hell is wrong with me? I'm daydreaming about a woman who couldn't possibly be interested in me, and I shouldn't be interested in her either. Didn't I learn anything from Debbie?

On the heels of that thought, another woman invaded her mental landscape. Her own mother. It's only natural, she'd have informed Lee in her clinically detached way. *It's all right to be attracted to someone and even to act on that desire. Just don't delude yourself into thinking it will last forever. Enjoy it and move on.*

"Right." At least Cleo had stopped barking.

Lee swung the ax again, cleaving the log neatly in two.

"You're good at that."

Lee spun around in surprise and froze at the unexpected sight before her. Jamison Kessler knelt not quite five feet away with her hand extended toward Cleo. The beagle was stretched toward the stranger as far as her doggie body would go so she could sniff the outstretched fingers. Normally, Cleo would be all over someone new, taking full advantage of being adored for the wonderful creature she knew herself to be. Instead, she seemed wary, not quite sure of what to make of this woman. But Lee couldn't tear her eyes away from twin pools of forest green. Her heart pounded and her tongue cleaved to the roof of her mouth. Jamison's lips parted and dimples creased her cheeks and Lee was lost.

She was aware she was staring, but couldn't tear her gaze away from the smile she'd been daydreaming about moments before. For a thoughtless eternity, she mapped the beautiful face, only noticing now a thin band of tan around the inside of Jamison's green irises. The color of aged whiskey.

The mesmerizing smile faded and a frown grew between dark eyebrows before Lee realized her visitor had asked a question.

"Are you okay?"

"What?" Lee released one hand from the ax and pushed her bangs back from her forehead.

"Yeah, of course. I didn't hear you drive up."

Jamison stood and gestured to the woodpile. "It takes skill to split wood like that."

Lee grinned and released her pent up breath. "You should have seen me a few minutes ago. The ax looked more like an out-of-control weed-eater."

Jamison laughed with her and the tension evaporated.

"Are you going to tell me you ran my license plate earlier so you could track me down? I told you I didn't steal all that equipment." Lee made the comments in a lighthearted effort to break the ice, but was surprised when Jamison flushed slightly.

"No, I wasn't trying to track you down. At least, not for that. I heard a rumor that Mafdet Manor had a new resident and I wanted to come by and welcome you to the neighborhood."

"Well, thank you, although it's not much of a neighborhood. I don't think there's another house around for miles." Lee realized she'd been staring at Jamison the whole time. She set the ax against the side of the house and picked up some wood.

"Here, let me help you with that."

Lee was taken aback when Jamison suddenly invaded her personal space and bent down next to her. She leaned over to pick up a few logs, giving Lee an unobstructed view down her shirt at firm, rounded breasts unrestrained by a bra. When she lifted her head, her face was less than three inches away. Lee's eyes widened slightly and she held her breath. Her hands began to shake and one of the logs slipped from her grasp. She must have made some sound, an inarticulate signal of panic.

"Is something wrong?"

Lee couldn't speak. Her tongue refused to cooperate. She shook her head and stood to move toward the front of the house, aware that Jamison was only a few steps behind.

Jamison kept talking as if nothing unusual had happened. She didn't seem to notice that Lee was shivering uncontrollably and desperately trying to rally her shattered senses. Grateful that the other woman was behind her, Lee closed her eyes for a second and took a deep, calming breath.

"As far as neighbors go, I guess I'm your closest, Miss Mafdet. I live a few miles east of here if you cut directly through the woods."

Lee walked up the front steps and glanced at the jungle cat statues guarding her home. She fumbled with the knob of the heavy door and started across the entrance. She led the way into the library just off the foyer. Lee had been planning to build the fire in the first floor guest room, but this one would have to do for now. She'd just carry a few logs around to the room she'd made her own later. The library and the guest room shared a chimney and in times past would have helped to heat the home.

"Over by Meacham Lake?" Lee asked, thankful that her brain seemed to be functioning once again.

"Yes. You know the area?"

She shook her head. "I've been studying some of the park maps. I'm a photographer, as I'm sure you've probably already guessed. I used to come up here when I was younger, but it's been so long I don't really remember anything. And it's Grayson, by the way. Lee."

Jamison smiled again. "Lee, then. I've lived here my whole life. Maybe I could show you some of the more beautiful places in the forest."

Lee could tell Jamison had surprised herself by making the offer. She had a feeling the tall, imposing woman wasn't usually so impulsive around a virtual stranger. "That's really nice of you, but I can't ask you to do that."

She wasn't just trying to be polite and let Jamison off the hook. Lee had enough trouble standing here trying to speak coherently. With her hormones raging out of control every time she looked at Jamison, being around her over an extended period of time could be dangerous.

Resolve filled the green eyes. "I insist. Trust me, there are some of the most spectacular places on Earth around here and you won't find them on any map."

In spite of her previous decision, Lee found herself being charmed. Why not spend some time together? Jamison obviously knew this area and maybe she'd even consent to let herself be photographed somewhere along the way.

She smiled and gave in. "All right. You talked me into it."

"Great. Tomorrow's Saturday. Is seven o'clock too early? We could go over to the Madawaska Flow and then up to the top of St. Regis Mountain. There's a fantastic view from up there."

"Sounds interesting and no, it's not too early. When I'm shooting my schedule is all over the map so I can get the lighting I need."

Jamison nodded and they walked toward the front door. Now that they had a plan to meet the following day, Lee was feeling tongue tied again. She didn't quite know what to say, but then remembered something Jamison had told her.

"You said you've lived up here your whole life?" They stepped onto the front porch and Lee rested her hand on a chiseled feline head.

"Yes, that's right."

"You must have known my Aunt Chris."

Jamison started slightly and looked into her eyes. Her expression softened and Lee read sadness as well as a deeper emotion. Respect? Love?

Jamison nodded.

"I can barely remember her. What was she like?"

"She was..." Jamison's voice cracked and unexpected tears gathered in her eyes. She averted her head and tried to blink away the moisture.

Without thinking, Lee reached out and took a strong left hand between both of hers. "I'm sorry."

Jamison shook her head and spoke softly, her voice warm fondness. "It's all right. Chris was amazing. She always had time for a stranger and saw the beauty in everything. The people of Harmon were her family, and twice a year she would hold a huge party out here. The whole town was invited. Summer Solstice and Halloween were her two favorite times of the year."

"Summer Solstice? I thought that had to do with some kind of old religious rites." Lee smiled.

Jamison shrugged. "Maybe. I just know she loved celebrating the land...our home."

Goose bumps erupted on Lee's arms and she remembered she was holding the other woman's hand. She let go and stepped back a pace. Something about what Jamison said had struck a chord, but she couldn't quite figure out why.

"Well," Jamison said, "I'd better head out. The storm will be here soon and it looks like it's going to be a good one."

"Right. Thanks again for stopping by."

Lee was aware that her words were abrupt and sounded cold, but being around Jamison had her feeling off-balance. She couldn't stop looking at her, drinking in the darkly gorgeous features and even now she yearned to touch her again. She had to gain some distance.

Jamison's smile faded and she looked deep into Lee's eyes. A quality she couldn't name rested there. It was dark and sensuous and she couldn't look away. "I'll see you in the morning," she said softly.

The husky timbre vibrated along Lee's nerves, resonating long after Jamison had driven away. A few raindrops slapped the porch in front of her and she realized she'd been standing there alone for the last ten minutes.

"So much for distance," she mumbled.

A peal of thunder shook the ground and Lee looked around the vacant front yard.

"Cleo!"

Chapter Six

HIS HAIR WAS thick but coarse, predominantly dark brown yet shot through with silver. Deep sable eyes were kind and gentle, graced with the wisdom of the ages. They were soft and portrayed not only intelligence, but also the gentleness that housed his soul. Observant and cautious by nature, he was silent as he walked along the game trail. Pine needles crushed quietly beneath his tender feet and the slightly acrid scent wafted into the thick evening air. Trees that he normally saw as companions of the natural world felt like they were closing in on him, causing the blood to pump faster through his heart. The night was heavy and thick with the promise of a northeastern thunderstorm. Lightning flashed in the sky far away but he knew by an instinct older than time that the distance was deceptive. The storm would arrive soon and he'd have no choice but to seek shelter. Abruptly the forest fell silent. Crickets and frogs stopped their nocturnal racket with the suddenness of a radio that had been switched off.

He stood as tall as he could on short legs and peered into the darkness. Although he couldn't see anything, he knew something was there. It wasn't anything solid he could identify, but an evil deeper than the surrounding night, which floated ominously on the strengthening wind, and caused the hair on the nape of his neck to stand on end. His heart raced with fear. It was coming closer, of that he was sure. But he couldn't tell from which direction. Regardless of the avenue of approach, if he were still standing here when it arrived he'd be torn to shreds.

His instincts led him north, away from his home and into this alien forest toward someone he sensed was in great danger. For a moment, he wondered if the thing coming toward him in the night was what he was meant to save the stranger from. As abruptly as it came, the thought was gone under the weight of more pressing issues.

He was no match for the evil if he encountered it. Although his night vision was extremely good, the beast would no doubt overpower him in an instant. No, it was safer to find shelter for now. He still had a destination to reach.

Remembering the unknown one that beckoned him, he spied a huge cypress tree fifty feet farther up the trail. Although only moments ago the trees had made him uncomfortable, they were suddenly a refuge. The trunk was slightly inclined and would be easy to climb. The branches were close together and heavy with foliage. It would be perfect for concealment and he knew through experience that a predator rarely looked up. With these thoughts in mind, he scaled the tree and settled in the fork of two thick branches. Only minutes later the thing that made him feel the urge to urinate passed along the game trail below.

Even with his enhanced vision he couldn't make out the details of the shadowed hulk. He could only perceive a misshapen torso covered with dark hair and a grizzled snout full of wickedly sharp teeth, but very little real detail. All he knew was that it made him tremble and struggle to control the frightened whimpers that would surely draw the monstrous killer to where he hid.

Slowly the evil passed, carrying with it the stench of blood and rot. Eventually the night creatures resumed their song, as though they had never been interrupted. He decided to rest and

to continue his journey by the safety of the morning sun. Instinct told him the creature had been traveling the wrong way but would finally figure out its mistake and change direction. Until then it would give him enough time to find the person he knew needed help.

Soon the thunderstorm broke directly overhead. Rain fell steadily, but not too hard, and soaked his thick hair through, creating a stream from his pointy chin. Wind buffeted him, but the moisture didn't bother him. It was just another facet of nature. Eventually the storm passed and the raccoon fell asleep as he held fast to his lofty perch.

LEE WALKED DOWN the steps behind the kitchen to what was considered the manor's basement. To her way of thinking, it was really another floor of the old house since it contained more than just a root cellar and wine storage. It also boasted a rec room, sitting room, bar and a mechanic's workshop. On the south side, one could find an old chamber used just for playing cards at the base of a turret that rose up throughout the structure. Lee had decided that a tiny, antiquated parlor would serve nicely as a darkroom. The underground setting was ideal. Unfortunately, the entire floor gave her the creeps.

"Come on, Cleo," she said, just to hear the sound of her own voice. "You're going with me."

Normally, the beagle was happy to follow her anywhere. She'd sit quietly nearby for hours chewing her feet while Lee pattered in the pitch-black, developing photographs. This time, her lolling-tongued grin was noticeably absent. Lee knew she was following out of a sense of duty.

The stairs terminated near the entrance to the root cellar. The original builders had seen fit to keep a dirt floor in that room. Shelves occupied only by spider webs, half an inch of dust and various minutiae took up most of the two sides. A large area in the back held a few wooden barrels. Lee had only been down there once. When she first arrived the sharp, unpleasant odor of whatever still floated in the casks was enough to keep her away. It almost smelled like an animal's den; wet, musty and dank, tinged with a hint of disease.

She'd closed the warped wooden door tightly after that first inspection and kept it that way.

Lee stepped to the right off the stairs and entered an 'L' shaped hallway. The short leg of the corridor held the darkroom and the underground entrance to a three-car garage. If she'd gone the other direction, the hallway would have taken her back under the manor and through the other rooms.

"You stay out here and protect me from the monster in the root cellar," she ordered her loyal companion. "I took some shots of Saranac Lake I need to develop."

Cleo cocked her ears forward and tilted her head in what Lee called her, '*you make no sense but I'm trying anyway*' expression. Lee laughed and switched on the safe light before she closed the door to shut out the dog. She'd tried letting Cleo into a darkroom while she worked before and it was always a disaster. The beagle would move at the most inopportune time and Lee would end up tripping over her. They'd ruined more than one roll of film along the way.

Thunder boomed overhead while Lee worked. She tried to concentrate on the new photos; developer, stop bath, fixer, hypo. For about an hour she was fine, but very slowly she came to realize the small hairs on the back of her neck were standing at attention. Her heart beat a little too quickly and she tasted the bitterness of fear in her mouth.

"Oh stop being a goon. It's just a storm and a stinky old room with a dirt floor."

Cleo let out a ferocious bark before she suddenly started baying in heart-breaking, terrified peals. Then she was clawing furiously at the base of the door. Lee thought she must have scared

her by shouting so unexpectedly and lunged for the access. Her elbow struck one of the stainless steel processing tanks, sending a chemical bath across the floor. Sliding a little in the dark, Lee fumbled for the light switch and tore the door open.

Cleo charged toward her and Lee scooped her up before she could step in the chemicals. The beagle shivered and panted uncontrollably.

"It's okay, baby. I have you. I didn't mean to scare you, you silly girl."

Lee saw lightning splinter in the sky through a window above the stairs just before a cacophony of thunder crashed through the air. Cleo shook even harder and tried to claw her way up Lee's neck.

"Oww, stop! That's enough. It's just a storm." The words were an instinctive effort to calm the pooch, but she was just as spooked. The dog's atypical behavior and this squall had her nerves on edge.

"Maybe you've got a point. Let's go upstairs where there's some light."

Lee hugged the warm, furry body to her and walked toward the stairs. The dank, animal smell seemed to have intensified in the last hour and she frowned, concerned that they might have a leak. Then she saw the door to the root cellar was standing open.

"What the hell?"

Cautiously, she reached one hand around the frame searching for the light switch. When Lee recalled the stark single light bulb with a pull-string switch occupied the center of the room, she gulped audibly. She'd have to walk all the way in to flip on the light and check the area. Was it worth it? Another deafening burst of thunder made the decision for her.

"Not tonight."

Lee grabbed the knob and slammed the door shut, thumbing the lock. She grasped Cleo close to her chest and bounded up the stairs two at a time.

Chapter Seven

RAINDROPS TRICKLED FROM the roof of the grand old house, plopping to the wet earth with tiny muffled thuds. The storm had been severe, but the morning promised to be crisp and clear. The sun had not yet breached the horizon, hovering just behind the mountain peaks like a shy lover. It was going to be a beautiful day, yet for all that, the birds were silent and nothing moved in the darkness. Nothing save a lone, twisted hulk.

The figure, more shadow than substance, shuffled around the front yard, absorbing the moonlight as he prowled. He sniffed the truck tires, the acrid bite of rubber assaulting his olfactory senses. He sneezed and moved away from the conveyance, seeking more interesting smells.

He was roughly the size of a Rottweiler, but held no resemblance to the noble canine. The spine was rounded, hind legs tucked under. His mouth hung open as he panted out a continuous, low chuckle. Guttural, almost unintelligible words issued from mangled vocal chords as he trailed around to the side of the house.

"...rabbit...eat...dog...dog...bitch..."

A clattering sound caught his attention and disfigured ears swiveled toward the noise. A clear rubber flap continued to swing back and forth even after the tan and white animal stepped outside. The dog sniffed near the rear steps before squatting. Steam rose from the puddle it deposited.

The thing threw its head back and the jaws opened, tongue lolling as he inhaled the sweet scent of flesh.

"...meat...dog...blood..." Hunger clawed his belly and he salivated at the nearness of such helpless prey. He'd almost had it last night.

A soft step in the forest a hundred yards away caused the creature to swivel around. The sound was beyond human hearing, but he was more. He was new.

Downwind of this more intriguing quarry, he was safe from detection. The beagle re-entered the house, but the monster was already slinking into the trees. Long, fixed claws ripped furrows into the soft, muddy earth as he stalked unhurried. A gurgled growl issued from the beast, transforming into a choking giggle.

"...deer...eat...deer...blood...good... blood good."

LEE SAT IN *Andy's Café*, smiling and eating lunch with a woman she'd met barely twenty-four hours ago. The restaurant was packed and although she garnered a few curious looks, she didn't feel like a bug under a microscope as she had that first night in Harmon. She glanced across the table at Jamison during a lull in their conversation, thinking how much her expectations of the day had changed after only a few hours.

She'd got up early and cleaned the mess in the darkroom from the night before. The dank offensive odor wasn't as strong as it had been, but once again the root cellar door was standing ajar. Lee had walked into the shadowy room and switched on the light. Further into the chamber, the stench grew stronger and she decided that whatever was in the wooden barrels was growing more fetid. On the way out, Lee noticed how warped the door really was and how poorly it fit into the jamb. She felt sillier now about the previous night's drama when she realized how badly she'd scared herself. She had allowed a series of minor, random events to be colored by a thunderstorm, a hysterical dog and a warped door. She cringed and thanked God she'd been the only one to witness to her insanity.

Then Jamison had arrived with a brilliant smile, doughnuts, and a thermos of coffee. From the start she'd been open and friendly, toting camera equipment without complaint and doing her best to stay well out of range when Lee began snapping pictures at Madawaska Flow. Now she sat quietly eating a rare steak and looking nothing short of windblown handsome. Her dark hair curled sweetly just below the nape of her neck, giving Lee the sudden urge to sink her fingers into the thick locks.

Lee felt a powerful attraction for the dark, mysterious park ranger, but Jamison didn't emanate anything stronger than friendliness. Except when their eyes connected from time to time, Lee amended silently. On those rare occasions, she thought the unusually green eyes saw clearly into her emotions. More than that, sometimes she was convinced Jamison might hold more than friendly interest toward her. Then she would smile and look away and Lee would be left wondering if she was imagining the whole thing.

She took a deep breath and asked the question she'd been wondering since the first time she saw a gorgeous stranger standing on the side of the road. "So, when are you going to let me photograph you?"

Jamison choked a little and reached for her water glass. After a sip she answered. "Never, if I can help it."

"Why ever not?" Lee had never met anyone so camera-shy. On more than one occasion, she'd raised the camera in Jamison's direction only to have the stunning face blocked by a raised hand or arm.

Jamison shrugged minutely, but the smile never faded. "I don't photograph well."

"Why do I find that hard to believe? You're beautiful." Heat flooded her cheeks, but she refused to amend her statement. It was the simple truth, no matter how much her stomach tingled when Jamison looked into her eyes like that. The gaze skated over her features and Lee's lips parted to take a deeper breath.

"Thank you."

For long seconds they stared at one another until the silence threatened to become awkward. Then someone entered the café and Jamison's eyes shifted toward the door. The change of expression was astonishing. What had been a slightly shy smile transformed into a grin that crinkled the corners of her eyes. She stood and glanced quickly down at Lee.

"There's someone I need to say hi to. I'll be right back."

She started across the restaurant toward a lithe redhead and the only thing average that Lee could discern about the stranger was her height. Long red hair fell in lustrous waves to her mid-back and when she turned, Lee could see just how gorgeous she was.

Girlfriend? Partner? She was surprised by the sudden surge of jealousy. Briefly, their eyes met. The woman's eyebrows rose and Lee was convinced her thoughts were transparent.

Jamison's strong arms circled the stranger and she looked away. She knew she had no right to feel this way. Jamison bristled with sensuality and primal magnetism; it was only natural that other women would notice. She concentrated on trying to finish her lunch and block out the sounds of the conversation taking place across the room.

"Hi, Sis. What's going on?"

Dinah returned the hug and then leaned away. "Nothing really. All's quiet so far."

"I wasn't really asking for an update. Just making conversation."

"I know, but I might as well answer both questions at the same time."

"Efficient," Jamison said.

"None of the other teams have found anything either." Dinah cast a quick glance toward the corner table and asked on a more personal note, "Did you finally take my advice and hook up with someone already? Tell me, who is the tall, gold and yummy one?"

Jamison glanced over and met Lee's eyes. She returned the smile directed her way and answered, "Lee Grayson, Chris' great niece." She wasn't aware of the slightly dreamy quality to her voice.

"That was fast work."

"Huh?" She didn't really hear since she was still paying attention to her lunch companion.

"I thought you just met yesterday."

Finally, Jamison focused on Dinah with a curious frown. "We did. Why?"

"That must have been some meeting. It's obvious she likes you."

She blushed at the delighted humor in Dinah's expression, but didn't know how to respond to the accusation. Had she missed something? Jamison couldn't deny she found Lee fascinating, but did the other woman feel something stronger than their fledgling relationship suggested?

"Great Mother! You have the hots for her!"

"Keep your voice down," Jamison whispered harshly, flushing even harder. "It's not like that."

"Uh huh. Is that why you're here on a date, sharing a couple of bloody hanks?"

"It's not a date...exactly. She's a photographer so I offered to show her around the park."

One eyebrow went up. "Is that the equivalent of showing her your etchings?"

"Stop it."

"Oh, I get it. You thought you'd show her some of the more romantic vistas and generate a little...inspiration."

Jamison rubbed one hand over her face and groaned. "Get your mind out of the gutter. I'm telling you, I'm just trying to be nice. Besides, you know I don't date outside the community."

"Yes, yes. I know how boring you can be."

"Dinah!"

"Too bad," Dinah said, eyeing Lee again although she was attempting to be a little more discrete. "She is gorgeous."

Jamison laughed and said, "Back off, Lightning."

"Why'd you call me Lightning?"

"Because you strike so fast and unpredictably."

Dinah grinned. "I'll take that as a compliment. So, what's the verdict?"

"About?"

Dinah sighed. "Is there any feeling of family there?"

Not the kind you're talking about, Jamison almost said. "The jury's still out."

"Really? How's that?"

She shook her head. "I sense the Panthera in her blood, that's to be expected considering. But, there's definitely more *homo sapien* there than homo erectus. The scent of shape changer is so faint it's almost undetectable."

"Then she probably can't shift."

"More than that, she probably doesn't even know our kind exists."

"You don't think Chris would have mentioned it at all, even as some kind of fairy tale when Lee was little?"

"I doubt it." Jamison shrugged. "We all know Chris' niece was killed in a car accident when Lee was a little girl. Chris had wanted Marina to come live with her and raise the child since she didn't believe they belonged among humans. Instead, her niece chose the man over her own family. When she died, Lee was raised by her father."

"Yeah, and from what I understand, he didn't like Chris."

"He probably sensed that something was different about his wife's family and was afraid of it."

"You give him too much credit," Dinah said. "Humans aren't that sensitive. Evolution has seen to it that they lost whatever animal instincts they used to have."

"Maybe some of them, but probably not all. What about you?" Jamison asked, changing the subject. "I thought you had a hot new flame of your own. Why are you hanging out at *Andy's*?"

Dinah grew uncomfortable and glanced away, but not before Jamison caught the smoky look she directed toward the café owner.

"Andy?" she asked in astonishment.

"What's wrong with Andy?"

"Nothing," Jamison said, holding up both hands in a gesture of surrender at the fiery look in Dinah's eyes. "I'm just surprised, that's all. We've known her all our lives and you never said anything about liking her before."

"Yeah, well. Sometimes it takes a while before you see what's been staring you right in the face the whole time."

Dinah looked across the room and Jamison saw her gaze connect with Andy's. The two weren't the most obvious couple. Dinah was small and light, with an overactive lifestyle and very definite opinions on right and wrong. She didn't back down from a fight. Andy, in contrast, had a bellowing laugh she didn't try to rein in and a pudgy middle that showed her love of food. Given a choice, she'd rather be in the kitchen than walking a trail and she didn't care a whit for politics. Still, Jamison couldn't deny the smoldering looks passing between the women.

"As long as you're happy." Jamison clapped a hand on her shoulder. "Come on. I'll introduce you to Lee."

Chapter Eight

LEE SAT UP straighter when Jamison and the redhead walked toward her. She put her fork aside and pasted on what she hoped was a sincere looking smile. The tightness in her chest made it difficult for her to really be polite to anyone Jamison might be involved with.

"Lee," Jamison waved toward her companion, "I'd like you to meet my twin sister, Dinah."

She blinked in surprise. Of all things, this was the last she had expected to hear. To cover her reaction and give herself time to adjust to the new information, she stood and held out her hand.

"Lee Grayson. It's so nice to meet you."

Dinah grinned and shook her hand. "The pleasure is mine, but if you don't mind me saying, you look a little surprised."

"You got me," Lee laughed, releasing her grasp. "It's just that you--"

"We don't look alike? It's okay, we're fraternal twins."

Neither seemed offended by the observation. In fact, Jamison nudged Dinah a bit with her shoulder. "Yeah, she was supposed to be a boy."

"No, I wasn't!"

They all laughed and then Dinah said, "I'd love to stay and talk, but I've interrupted your lunch long enough."

Jamison didn't encourage her to join them and Lee surmised it was because they were finished anyway. Instead Jamison asked, "Did you get a chance to talk with Mom yet?"

"Yeah, she's taking care of things as we speak. She wants you to call her tonight and she'll fill you in."

"Is everything okay?" Lee asked, feeling a little like an intruder.

"Not to worry," Jamison said with a smile. "Just a small family matter."

"Right. Small," Dinah muttered. "I've gotta go, Jami. Call me later."

"I will."

They hugged briefly and Dinah walked toward the counter. Jamison laid some money on the table to pay for their lunch, catching Lee off guard. Because of her family's status, people usually assumed she would pick up the check. She wasn't accustomed to this kind of consideration and had to object.

"Let me get that."

Jamison stunned her by winking quickly and saying, "Next time. You ready to go?"

"All right, but I'll hold you to that."

They walked out into the bright sunshine and Lee pulled on her sunglasses before she slid into the passenger seat of a blue Chevy Silverado. As Jamison climbed behind the steering wheel, Lee said, "I'm glad you insisted on driving today. My truck's been acting up a little lately, not wanting to start."

"What's the story with that thing, anyway?" Jamison asked, pulling out onto the road.

"What do you mean?"

"I don't mean to be insulting, but it doesn't really seem to fit you."

Lee chuckled. "Because it's an old piece of junk that passed its prime ten years ago?"

"Something like that," Jamison admitted, grinning back.

"It's a long story, but basically I bought it used because I didn't know what kind of terrain to expect."

"If it gives you that much trouble, maybe you should think about getting a new one."

"Oh, I don't know. There's life in the old girl, yet."

Lee looked out the windshield. How could she tell Jamison that she could go out and pay cash for just about any vehicle she wanted? She'd be opening herself up to being taken advantage of yet again.

She was coming to trust Jamison very quickly, but life had taught her some painful lessons. How many times had Lee thought, *'this time, I can believe in this one'*? And how many times had she paid the price, literally? It always boiled down to one thing...money. People found out she had it and they wanted it. She'd like to think Jamison was different, but that wish was motivated by attraction. The desire to tell her the truth was overwhelming, but thoughts of her ex-girlfriend kept her silent.

They pulled onto Blue Mountain Road and Lee asked, "Do you mind if we stop at the manor and pick up Cleo?"

"Not at all. We're going right by there anyway."

Lee had been in the area for a few weeks and had yet to be to the top of the St. Regis Mountain because she'd been checking out the rest of the Park. She looked forward to climbing to the summit, but she didn't want to leave Cleo at home. There was something wonderful about watching Cleo's delighted interaction with nature.

A few minutes later they pulled down the drive and around to the front of the house. Cleo must have scrambled out the newly installed dog door because she came running from the side. Lee was pleased to note that she stayed a careful distance away until the vehicle came to a stop.

"Hey, girl." Lee squatted on the ground and Cleo came running. "Were you good today?"

She scratched behind the dog's ears as she panted happily. Then

Jamison came around the pickup. The change was abrupt and unexpected. Cleo spun around and backed up against Lee. She braced her front legs in front of her and shifted her weight back toward her rump.

"Sorry, she's normally not like this."

"It's all right. She doesn't know me and I'm sure she's been through a lot lately, with the move and everything."

Jamison knelt down far enough away that her outstretched hand wouldn't intimidate the animal. At first Cleo pulled back, but Lee spoke softly to her. Gradually she relaxed and sniffed the fingers extended toward her. Cleo perked her ears up and took a tentative step in her direction. Then she took another. Jamison moved very slowly and stroked her head.

"Do you want to go with us, Cleo?"

The beagle reacted to the word 'go'. She jumped up straight and spun around in a circle. Lee laughed and said, "I guess that means yes."

They spent the rest of the afternoon at the top of the mountain. Jamison parked the truck at the trailhead on Keese Mills Road and the trio hiked the rest of the way. The summit itself was bare rock because of a fire started by a party of surveyors many years before, but the view from the top included thirty lakes and several other mountains in the distance. An abandoned fire tower stood nearby.

Cleo chased squirrels and when Lee wasn't snapping pictures she was throwing a Frisbee for the dog. Jamison seemed content to wander around the area and watch the other two. She entertained Lee with stories about the park and some of the tourists she'd encountered over the years. She also told her about Michael Wallace and his mythological bear. By the end of the afternoon they had both laughed and talked a lot as they got to know each other, the mutual attraction growing steadily, but the day soon was drawing to a close and Jamison had work to do as soon as the sun set.

DRIVING THE PAIR back to Mafdet Manor, Jamison realized how much she'd enjoyed herself. Lee had slowly opened up with her and Jamison was no longer oblivious to what was brewing between them. There were several instances of long, lingering looks. Then one of them would become aware of it and look carefully away. But even if there was some chemistry there, it wasn't anything Jamison could afford to act on. The current investigation took priority over anything personal.

"I had a really good time," Lee said as they pulled in front of the house. "Maybe we can do it again sometime?"

"I'd like that. And I think Cleo enjoyed herself, too." She reached over to pet the dog, who wagged her tail furiously in response. Jamison smiled, pleased that she had won the animal over.

"Oh, yeah. She always loves it when she gets to go anywhere with me."

Lee smiled and opened the door. Cleo jumped out ahead of her, but Lee suddenly got back in. "I forgot to give you my number--in case you want to get together again."

"You don't need to explain why. I want to see you again, too."

"You do?"

Jamison didn't know why she said that, but found she couldn't stand the idea of making Lee's brilliant smile fade. She pulled out her cell phone, ready to program the details in and looked up expectantly. "Yes, I do. What's your number?"

Lee read off the digits and then got out.

Jamison remembered the tripod and all of the other equipment and stepped out of the truck to help. They hauled the gear across the yard, but Lee stopped abruptly. She peered toward the back of the house as the wind gusted and an unpleasant look crossed her features. Jamison's eyebrows went up when Lee parted her lips slightly and her nostrils flared.

She was scenting the wind.

Excitement rippled through her veins when she saw evidence of Panthera behavior, but Jamison forced herself to concentrate on what Lee smelled. Surreptitiously, she moved to do the same. But, the wind shifted before she could hone in on what had disturbed her companion.

"Something wrong?"

"No," Lee answered slowly. "I'm sure it's nothing. Come on."

They carried the equipment up to the house and sat everything on the front porch.

"I'll carry it in later," Lee said. She started to hold out her hand, then seemed to think better of it and stepped closer, hesitantly embracing. Jamison's breath caught and she slowly returned the awkward hug, breathing in the other woman's clean, fresh scent.

She could sense the blood rushing just beneath the surface. She felt the slight trembling in Lee's frame and closed her eyes, relishing the warm body in her arms. All she wanted was to hold on, to let the darkness fall around them and see where the night might lead.

Gradually, reluctantly she drew away. "I should go."

"Sure," Lee said huskily. "I need to feed Cleo anyway."

Jamison nodded and dropped her arms. She started walking back to the truck, but Lee stopped her again.

"Hey, by the way. There are some barrels down in the root cellar and they smell really bad. Do you know of anyone around here that can get rid of that kind of thing for me?"

"What's in them?"

"I couldn't tell you." Lee shrugged. "All I know is they reek and they're starting to smell up the rest of the basement."

"I might know someone," Jamison teased.

"Oh, I see. And just what would I have to offer as an enticement?"

Jamison was letting the flirting get out of control, but couldn't seem to help it. "I'll think of something. Good night."

"Good night."

She got into the truck and waved to Lee before driving back out onto the roadway. As soon as Mafdet Manor faded from view so did Jamison's smile. She really liked Lee, but now it was time to get her head back in the game. Tonight she wanted to investigate the areas where the killer had struck. It would be easier to do in the dark since most of the tourists would have returned to the campgrounds. The thunderstorm the night before had interfered with her checking the areas so this would be the first opportunity she had to form her own opinions about what had happened.

She drove west through the park's firebreak trails. In twenty minutes she arrived near Lilypad Point. Jamison closed the vehicle door with a soft click and walked through the woods. Leaves crunched under her boots as she easily navigated shrubbery, trees and fallen logs. She could see as easily as the rest of the animals in the woods around her. When she arrived at the scene, Jamison squatted down and touched the ground. The blood had dried long ago and the recent storm had scattered the rest of the spoor. The hog had died in this location, but there was nothing more she could learn here.

Reluctantly, Jamison walked back to the truck and drove toward her own home. The site where the bull had been killed was just south of Meacham Lake. Logically she should have gone to that location first since she was essentially backtracking, but she had done so on purpose. The second destination was only eight miles from her house. She planned to make the trip on foot.

Her home was located down a long gravel road. Nestled back in the trees, it was less than half the size of Mafdet, but she preferred it over the towering manor house. The log structure blended into the forest that surrounded it, part of the natural world that Jamison loved.

She drove into the garage and took the connecting door into the kitchen. There was no need to turn on lights so she stripped her shirt off as she walked down the hall to her bedroom. She neatly folded all of her clothes and placed them on the bed before she padded toward the rear deck off the living room and stepped outside naked.

It had been a while since she had run free and Jamison needed this. Her skin had been tingling since she met Lee the day before and transforming often helped her find her center. She'd also unearth more with her true senses than her human counterpart ever could.

Jamison stepped out into the moonlight and closed her eyes. The cool air felt good on her bare skin and for a moment she stood in all her naked glory before she allowed the alteration to begin. She relished what was about to happen and shivered in anticipation. Goose flesh broke out

on her skin even as a bead of sweat trickled down her temple. An ecstatic feeling coursed through her veins and her nipples hardened in the cold breeze.

It had been so long since she had allowed it that Jamison controlled the change, drawing it out as long as possible. Her spine began to lengthen and thicken, tapering into a long tail while her fingers lengthened. Her pelvis shifted abruptly and Jamison dropped to all fours to accommodate the new posture. Claws erupted from the ends of her fingers and thick, dark hair broke out of her pores. Her jaw elongated and her teeth grew wickedly pointed, while the pupils of her eyes contracted to mere slits. There was no pain during the metamorphosis, only the feeling of unmitigated joy, freedom and anticipation of what was about to occur.

In mere seconds, far too quickly as far as she was concerned, a slick, muscled black jaguar stood where she had been. Her pelt was the color of midnight, inky shadowed movement beneath the treetops. Her senses exploded with the scents and sounds of life all around her.

Even in her human state Jamison's senses were enhanced, but in this form she was completely in tune with the world around her. The air spoke to her, the earth touched her soul. It was in this state that she was most free.

She set off through the woods at a steady lope. The animals in the darkness bolted from the predator, but Jamison didn't allow herself to be distracted. Eventually, she had to cross Meacham Lake to reach her destination. Without pause she leaped into the water with a happy rumble, swimming eagerly to the other side. Jaguars loved the water and she was no exception.

Once she had crossed, Jamison took a moment to shake out the moisture. Droplets flew through the air and, like any domesticated house cat, she took simple pleasure in chasing them for a few seconds. Then she was off again. Soon she arrived near Red Dot Trail and slowed to a walk. Her shoulders shifted sensuously with every step, heavy paws barely disturbing the ground beneath her.

Jamison could smell the hunter that had been there long before she reached her final destination. Had it confined its killing only to wild animals no one would have cared. When it began to attack livestock was when the community got involved. The threat of it moving on to other targets, such as humans, was becoming too great.

Slowly, she circled the clearing. Near the base of the tree where the carcass had been discovered, she found a print. The storm had wiped away almost everything, but because it was between two protruding roots, the mark was somewhat protected from the worst of the rain. Although it was only a partial, there was no doubt Jamison had located a paw print. She bent close, carefully sniffed the impression then sneezed in disgust. She smelled lion, but this animal was not natural. The track was the right size and rough shape, yet the claw impressions were wrong. They dug much deeper into the ground than normal and Jamison would have bet the beast lacked the ability to retract them.

With only one partial impression, Jamison couldn't really determine the size of the beast or if there was anything else abnormal about it. Nor did she care to, in her animal form. She had learned as much as she could from the trampled area and now her jaguar was demanding its own needs be fulfilled. She wanted to run in the moonlight. She wanted to feel flesh rend between her fangs and taste blood. She wanted to hunt.

Jamison spun around and disappeared in the shadows, the spoor of rabbit and fox filling her nostrils.

Chapter Nine

THE TUNNEL WALLS were rough and damp under his fingertips, but it was only habit that made him touch them. Even in the near pitch-blackness, he had no trouble finding his way. As long as there was ambient light, his vision could easily compensate. In addition, he had navigated this access to the manor so many times over the last few months he had it memorized. After the old woman died he had come and gone without fear of discovery, but now someone else had moved in. Fortunately, she didn't seem to know about the hidden entrance into the storage room on the basement level. It allowed him to sneak undetected into the house and into the quiet place no one explored. The root cellar was dark and cool; the dirt floor was soft and comforted his body when the fevers came. If he hadn't discovered the little-used room when he did, there would have been no safe haven.

He had to be extremely careful leaving the narrow tunnel, crawling under the lower level staircase and into the root cellar with the new occupants around. When the woman wasn't home, he had to look out for the damned mutt. He'd considered eating it but, as satisfying as it would be, it would also alert the new owner to his presence.

The younger woman had taken the old lady's place and the threat of detection grew every day. Eventually, he might have to move to the tunnel itself. The thought held little appeal. He couldn't leave yet because he still hadn't located what he needed.

He found it difficult to concentrate with these headaches that were getting more frequent. There was relief when he transformed, but even shifting had become problematic. When he changed back, he couldn't always remember everything he had done.

He reached the entrance to the main house and placed one hand against the wall while he closed his eyes to concentrate on listening. His sensitive fingertips detected no vibrations from the other side, nor did he hear anything that might lead him to believe anyone was nearby. It was so late he didn't really expect the woman or the dog to be awake and moving about the house, but he had to be sure he was alone.

Cobwebs covered the rusty wall sconce embedded into the brick, but he didn't hesitate to grasp the base and twist sharply. A four by two foot panel slid open and he crawled through. He had always been small for a shifter and had lost weight since the headaches started.

After moving through the opening, he crossed under the staircase and hurried into the root cellar. His stomach complained noisily and he ran toward the wooden barrels in the back. A grin that was more of a snarl contorted his features when he looked inside. He always kept part of his kills in case he needed food later.

"I'M SORRY, MOM. That's all I was able to pick up and I grant you, it wasn't much. The storm damaged any evidence that might have been there. All I know for sure is that it was a lion, but there seems to be something unusual about it."

Jamison listened carefully while Darlene Kessler responded. The cell reception wasn't very good and the static over the line made communication difficult.

"What do you mean, there's something different? Did the animal smell sick?"

"Not like rabies or anything, if that's what you mean. It's something else, but sick is the only word I can come up with. Did you talk with Frank Chiesel?"

Darlene sighed and Jamison smiled, thinking Dinah had her mother's affectations. "He says they haven't had any rogue lions or banishments lately and he can't think of anyone who could be doing this, or what possible motives they might have."

"You don't sound like you believe him."

"Oh, no. I believe him. I just don't think he's telling me everything. Maybe there were too many ears listening in."

"He's the alpha, why should he care?"

"Politics, dear. It always comes down to politics and a lion pride isn't a very forgiving community. Frank is aging and not gracefully. If he does anything that could be seen as acting against their best interests, someone might challenge his position."

Jamison thought about that. A challenge for authority in a lion pride usually resulted in a violent altercation. One of the combatants would die and the other would be the unquestioned alpha. It wasn't very good incentive for Chiesel to provide intelligence to an outside group of shape changers.

"What does the Council recommend?"

"A face to face discussion. Frank would be well within his rights as pride leader to speak with a visiting shape changer alone and in person."

"Uh huh, and let me guess who's elected?"

Darlene laughed. "You really are the most qualified for this sort of thing. You handle individuals outside the Panthera every day. Most of our people wouldn't have the patience."

"Fine, what are your instructions?" Jamison's shoulders slumped and resignation set in as she listened to what the elders expected of her. She jotted down the address in Newton Falls where she could find the Felidae Coalition.

She hung up her cell phone and grabbed her keys. It was already nine o'clock in the morning. It would take forty minutes to drive over to the lion-dominated town, more time to get past their security to speak to the leader and then actually talk to the man himself. She rolled her eyes. This was going to take all day. At least she could check in with the beta teams by cell on the way. It was breaking her cardinal rule about talking on the phone while driving, but she wouldn't have any other time if she wanted to speak with them today.

Just as she sat behind the wheel of her Chevy, the cell phone rang. She was surprised when the caller ID listed Lee's number.

"Hi, there," she said, a smile brightening her features.

"Hey. How are you?"

Lee sounded a little reserved like she wasn't sure she should be calling. It was something Jamison thought was cute and she grinned even harder. "I'm fine. How are things going over at the manor?"

"Oh, same old thing. I was really just calling to tell you I had a great time yesterday."

"So did I. Cleo certainly seemed to have fun, too."

"Definitely." Lee laughed. "She crashed as soon as we came home. Listen, I wanted to ask you something."

"If it's about the barrels, I'm afraid I haven't had time to get hold of anyone yet."

"No. It's not that. I was just wondering if you'd be interested in having dinner with me...here...tonight."

Jamison's heart soared. She had told Dinah she didn't date outside the Panthera population, but she couldn't think of anything she'd rather do than have dinner with Lee. Excluding humans from personal interaction was quickly becoming overrated.

Or maybe it's just this one human, she considered. She had just taken a breath in anticipation of accepting when she recalled her errand and she didn't know how long it was going to take.

Damn.

"I'd love to, trust me, but I have to go out of town on business today. I don't know when I'm going to get back."

"Oh."

Lee sounded so disappointed that Jamison couldn't leave the conversation at that. "Can we do it another time?"

"Sure, it's no problem. I'm sure I can find plenty to do around here. Why don't you just give me a call when you get a chance?"

Jamison recognized the signs of putting on a brave face when she heard it. She had done it herself more than once. It bothered her that Lee might think she was just making an excuse.

"Lee, I really do want to spend time with you."

"I know. It's okay, just be careful."

Jamison hesitated a moment. Lee couldn't know she was in the middle of an investigation or that it might be dangerous. "Why do you say that?"

"I don't know; it's just a funny feeling. I get them sometimes and I usually try to listen to them."

"Most people would call that intuition."

Lee laughed. "Or they might call me a nut job."

Jamison smiled. "Maybe, but I don't think there's anything wrong with listening to your instincts."

"Thanks. I appreciate you letting me off the hook, but you will be careful driving."

It wasn't a request and Jamison felt warmed by the concern. "I will. You too." She hung up with a smile on her face.

JAMISON DROVE THE winding mountain roads to Newton Falls. Though not thrilled to have been handed the task of meeting with the Felidae Coalition's alpha, it just wasn't in her to shirk her duties. She wanted to get this over with quickly and head home. Maybe she could speed things along and still have dinner with Lee. The chances were slim since the Coalition had a reputation for being slow to communicate with outsiders.

It wasn't that shape changers were antagonistic or petulant, but Jamison knew from her own perspective how territorial they could be. Most jungle cats were. And while the Panthera and Felidae had an alliance, it still wouldn't be a good idea to mosey right up to their doorstep uninvited. Lions, on average, were twice the size of jaguars. They were second only to tigers among the big cats. Jaguars were third, but Jamison thought the Panthera were the most intelligent.

Biased much? she asked herself with a grin.

Fortunately her mother, an elder, had assured her she was expected.

The Newton Falls city limits sign made her sit up straight and pay more attention. Darlene Kessler had given her directions to the old plantation house where Frank Chiesel lived and the turn off would be coming up fairly soon. After that she'd have to look out for sentries, what the lion shifters called chasovye.

The Felidae had migrated from Siberia centuries ago across the Bering Strait. The Panthera were the descendents of Egyptian bodyguards. Their community languages were derived from their respective origins, but it wasn't just their languages that differed. It was their entire philosophies. Lion prides were structured quite differently. Where they were social and preferred many of their kind living together, jaguars were solitary. The Coalition used sentries on a continuous basis; Panthera came together only when necessary and formed hunting parties that broke apart once the need passed.

That being the case, lions had an alpha to lead them. Panthera wouldn't bow down to a single leader and many were too dominant to even consider it. A *pieta* was the closest thing they had to the equivalent, but Jamison knew that only made her a leader. It didn't give her the right to determine how other Panthera lived.

She was so lost in thought, Jamison almost missed where the road veered off. She pressed a little too hard on the brakes and pulled toward the shoulder. Gravel flew out from under the tires and showered a small mile marker. The truck swung a little wide, but she made it. Without her jungle cat reflexes, the results could have been disastrous. The shoulder of the road dropped away into a deep gully and there wasn't a guard rail. She let out a deep breath when seconds later she drove onto a narrow, blacktop lane.

She'd been told the house was half a mile up the private drive, but she had traveled less than half that when she came to a roadblock.

A black Nissan Armada with darkly tinted windows sat parallel across the center of the path. A woman wearing a cutoff green t-shirt that showed her muscled midriff, Army fatigue pants and carrying a military issue P-90 stood with her feet spread. The woman stood directly in front of Jamison's vehicle. Her eyes were covered with reflective sunglasses meant to intimidate.

Two men, similarly garbed, came around the front and rear of the vehicle to join the woman.

"Nice welcome party," Jamison mumbled under her breath.

She kept her hands on the steering wheel where they could be seen and rolled to a complete stop. Getting out of the pickup could be seen as an act of aggression so she kept her seat and waited for them to come to her.

The woman waited just long enough to make it clear who was in charge before she walked over to the driver's side. She motioned for Jamison to lower the window with one hand, but kept the weapon trained inside the Chevy with the other.

"State your business," the woman said as soon as the glass had lowered far enough.

"I'm Jamison--"

"I didn't ask for your name. I said state your business."

So much for manners.

Jamison ground her teeth for a second, but bit back a retort. She was out-numbered and out of her territory. If these shifters wanted, they could make her disappear and disavow any knowledge. They could just say that she never showed up and no one would be the wiser.

"Panthera representative to speak to Alpha Chiesel."

"We haven't had Panthera here in years. What do you want?"

From the speculative look on her face, the sentry was fishing for information. Her authority began and ended with security for the Felidae Coalition, otherwise she'd have been up at the plantation house with the community leader.

"That is between me and the alpha," Jamison said with a slight growl. She might be a guest, but she knew better than to show any weakness. "Now I suggest you do your job and escort me in."

"Or what?" the woman asked with a snarl.

"Cody," one of the men called out from where he still stood by the Armada. "Alpha saw her drive in on the cameras. Do you want to explain that you kept him waiting so you could satisfy your curiosity?"

Like nearly all shape changers, the three chasovye had hair the color of the lions they'd become if the mood struck them, but the male who spoke to Cody also had facial hair reminiscent of his mane. Jamison wondered if he realized that.

"Fine. Let her pass."

The one with the mane climbed into the Armada and backed it into the scrub on the side of the path enough to allow her to get by.

"Take this road straight to the main house. I don't recommend you deviate from that order in any way."

Jamison pressed her lips together in irritation, but only nodded. She shifted into drive and started slowly up the path.

Aggressive little lioness. She'd probably love nothing better than to tear my head off.

Within a few minutes, the large white house came into view. Although built in a bygone era with tall support columns and a wide, sweeping front porch, the dwelling had none of the class Lee's home displayed. Jamison couldn't prevent a small smile from thinking about the other woman. One day in her company and she knew she was completely captivated; every idle moment was spent wondering what Lee was doing or how she'd react to any given situation. Lee was quickly becoming addictive.

The weeds were high, but Jamison spotted the rough track leading up to the house. Everything about the grounds spelled neglect. If Cody was any indication, humans wouldn't be allowed anywhere near the property so there was probably no need to keep up appearances. She decided the Felidae just preferred a more natural state on their home ground.

Home ground isn't quite right, she thought a moment later. This isn't his home, it's their headquarters.

There were two large metal structures near the side and back of the house. She counted six Felidae walking between the buildings and none of them carried weapons so they couldn't be sentries. Two of those stood to either side of the front door and they were both male. A third female chasovye sat on the bottom step smoking a cigarette. None of them seemed to have the slightest interest in her, which she thought very odd considering the reception at the main road.

Jamison drove into the central clearing and shut off the motor. She sat for a second to see if anyone would approach, but finally opened the door when no one did. She froze with it cracked only a few inches.

A beautiful golden lioness in full shift stood right next to her.

"I'm here to see the alpha," Jamison said carefully. She didn't want this five hundred pound cat to attack, especially since it would take a few moments for her to shift and call on her own natural weapons of tooth and claw.

The lioness chuffed slightly, a signal that Jamison should continue. When the feline took a few steps back to allow her to move, she stepped out of the vehicle and slammed the door. They all knew she was here, so what was the point of being quiet? She figured she might as well act like she was perfectly comfortable.

Jamison walked up the front steps past the smoking chasovye and onto the porch. It was then she saw another lioness off to her far right. The female was lying down and had been concealed by the railing. Jamison couldn't help but smile when she saw three cubs tumbling around their mother.

She met the cat's eye. She sent a mental communication to the content lioness. *They're gorgeous.*

Jamison sensed one of the sentries move in her direction and she turned her head. One of the males that had been standing in front of the door was watching her closely. Before his P-90 had been held upright against his shoulder, now he gripped it tightly in both hands as he waited to see what she'd do. His actions were protective, his pheromones just short of aggressive, and she thought the lioness might be his mate. Clearly, he'd eliminate her if he considered her a threat to his family, regardless of the orders from his alpha.

Jamison realized she had come here with some preconceived notions that lion shifters were naturally more violent than jaguars, like the beasts they shifted into. Now she knew she had been wrong. If anything, their society was constructed as it was because they took no chances where the safety of their members were concerned. That being the case, this male would die on the spot to protect his mate. Literally. If he went against the leader's orders and harmed a diplomatic representative, even to protect his own family, the alpha would have no choice but to take action or lose face. The *chasovye* would be eliminated or banished.

"I'd never try to harm them," she assured him, looking deeply into his eyes in reassurance. "You have every right to be proud."

Jamison averted her gaze first, not out of weakness, but so he'd know she wasn't challenging him. Then she started uninvited toward the front door. The sentry still standing there opened both doors and indicated she should pass. She stepped out of the mid-morning sun and into a wide, open entrance. Unlike Mafdet, this foyer wasn't empty and unlike the grounds, what she could see of the house was in perfect condition. Cushioned chairs and settees were scattered along the walls, obviously intended for use by anyone who chose to do so. At the moment no lions were present, but she didn't think it would stay that way long.

"Follow me."

The mated sentry led her away from the entrance and down a long corridor. He stopped in front of thick, double doors and knocked twice.

"Enter."

The voice was male and full of confidence. No doubt this was Frank Chiesel. That was another point where the lion community differed from them, she thought. This was a dictatorship that would always be led by a man while the Panthera was led by the pieta and a council comprised of both genders. At the moment, the jaguar elders were dominated by women; four to three.

The *chasovye* opened the door and walked in. Jamison trailed behind and tried not to show her surprise. Frank Chiesel was not exactly as she expected. Although he was her height and easily twice her weight, that wasn't what caught her off guard. It was his grizzled, unkempt appearance. Lines marred his face and hands, and worry colored his slightly cloudy gaze.

This alpha had been leader of the Felidae for a long time and was clearly past his prime. Only love and loyalty kept him in that position because, Jamison thought, any young lion could probably defeat Chiesel in a challenge.

Frank assessed her appearance quietly, starting at her head and moving all the way down to her feet before traveling upward again. Only then did he look at the guard. "Give us ten minutes, Xander."

Really? Jamison fought the urge to roll her eyes. She was an official envoy of the Panthera and here on legitimate business. She'd submitted to all their paranoid security procedures without one word of complaint, but this was too much.

"Is that ten whole minutes, or...?" Jamison shrugged and lifted her brows to make the point.

Chiesel's jaws tightened and he looked at the sentry again before reiterating, "Ten minutes."

Xander nodded once and backed out of the room, pulling the door shut as he did.

As soon as they were alone Chiesel began sternly, "I don't know who you think you are, but this is my pride. I give the orders here and no one questions them."

"I think I'm here at the behest of the Panthera Council of Elders. I don't mean to be disrespectful, but it took just as long to get in here to see you as it did to drive down from Harmon."

"What did you expect?" He sat on a low-backed sofa without offering her a seat. "I'm like the President of the United States around here. Did you think they'd escort you in without question? Just because we're expecting an emissary doesn't mean that's you. Anyone could intercept a phone call."

Paranoid, just like I thought.

"All right, I accept that. But ten minutes hardly seems like enough time for what we need to discuss."

"On the contrary, I consider it quite sufficient. Although you've wasted a whole minute of it arguing with me. Why don't we just get down to it? I have a community to run."

Jamison took a deep breath in an effort to calm down. Things had not started out the way she expected and she was only going to get more frustrated if she continued.

"Elder Kessler explained the situation to you?"

"She did, but I fail to see what I can add."

Darlene had said Frank seemed to be hiding something during the call and that he might be more willing to open up about it in person. So far, Jamison couldn't imagine this man cooperating no matter who spoke to him or in what setting. She decided to try one of Hank's tactics. The direct approach.

"I investigated the most recent kill of a Belted Galloway bull and there was the scent of lion all over it. How do you explain that?"

Frank's eyes narrowed. "What are you implying?"

Nice, answer a question with a question. Classic diversionary tactic.

"Alph...are you trying to waste my time?" Jamison deliberately kept the question soft, as though she really wanted to know instead of making a direct accusation. "You know there are no other lion shifters in this part of the country. The only place such a shifter could come from is here. To answer your question, I'm not implying anything. I'm asking if it's possible that you have a rogue on your hands?"

"No. It's not possible. We've had no recent incidents of the kind your elders described."

"Recent? Does that mean you've had these kinds of things happen in the past?"

Frank considered the question carefully. "I do remember something a little similar, but it was years ago. I wasn't alpha at the time. I couldn't give you the details."

Can't or won't, Jamison wondered. The way the Coalition leader kept avoiding eye contact told her there was something he wasn't saying.

"How many years ago?"

"I don't remember exactly."

"Can you at least tell me who the perpetrator was?"

"No!"

Frank stood abruptly and walked over to one of the large windows that overlooked the rear of the compound. His hands were clenched tightly behind his back and, over his shoulder, Jamison could see people coming and going from one of the metal buildings. Some of them carried food trays and she figured it was some sort of cafeteria. Such a thing hinted of a self-contained sanctuary. If they had enough food supplies the Felidae could dig in here indefinitely.

As long as they had electricity, she amended silently. Then she saw the commercial grade generators sitting next to each of the two outside structures. Supposing there was one for the house too, the plantation property was a veritable fortress.

She kept quiet, waiting for him to add more. She didn't yet know if his negative answer was a denial of any knowledge or a brusque refusal to answer her question.

Finally, in a much quieter tone he said, "We never found out."

Chiesel had been uncomfortable before, but the more she pushed the more flustered he seemed to become. Definitely atypical behavior for an alpha, especially one safely ensconced in his own pride. His scent shifted abruptly and nervous sweat coated his body in a light film.

He's lying.

"Now, if you don't have any more questions? I believe your ten minutes is up."

Jamison glanced at her watch. It had only been seven, but what was the point of haggling? He wasn't going to answer any more of her questions. Even if he did, she couldn't trust what he would say.

"Thank you for your time, Alpha."

Jamison looked at the man once before leaving the room, but he never left the window. As soon as she walked out, Xander flanked her and escorted her back to the front door. He followed her down the steps and toward the Chevy and she wondered if he'd pursue her back to the highway. When she got into the truck, he stood there like he wanted to say something.

"What is it?"

"Nothing. Have a safe trip home."

Jamison's eyes narrowed. Whatever it was, he clearly wasn't going to tell her. "Thanks."

She drove back down the narrow lane without incident, surprised to see the Nissan Armada was already out of her way. Someone must have contacted the chasovye.

As soon as she safely could, Jamison pulled into a rest area and used her cell phone to contact her mother.

"Hi. It's me."

"That was fast." Darlene sounded amused. "What did you find out?"

"Other than the fact that these Felidae are really paranoid? Not much. You're right about Chiesel, he knows something and I'm pretty sure he lied to me about not knowing who was doing this."

"But?"

"But unless I'm prepared to make an outright accusation and risk our alliance with absolutely no proof, there's nothing I can do."

"Clearly, we can't do that," Darlene said. Jamison heard the frustration in her voice. "Okay, all we can do is try. Anything new with the hunting teams?"

"No, I checked in with all of them before I came out here. Dalton's group is on tonight, but so far our predator has been quiet for the last few days."

"All right. Come on home. I'll inform the rest of the Council."

"That's one order I'm happy to follow. Goodbye, Mom." Jamison was already planning to call Lee before she'd even hung up.

"Bye, Jami."

Chapter Ten

LEE HUNG UP the phone after speaking with Jamison and sat back on the sofa. "Okay, Cleo. Looks like it's just me and you."

Cleo cocked her head and then tore off across the living room floor to her toy box. She tried to stop and slid the last few feet before snatching up the Frisbee and racing back toward Lee.

Lee laughed and took the offered toy. "Fine, but we're going outside to do this. I don't need your claws tearing up the hardwoods."

She hurled the Frisbee across the yard and Cleo raced after it. At just the right moment, she leaped upward as far as her short legs could carry her and snatched it out of the air. She was an active dog, accompanying Lee each morning on her daily run, but this was her favorite thing to do. Lee appreciated that fact because it was sure to wear her out. After only ten minutes, Cleo flopped onto the grass panting with her tongue hanging out. No matter how hard she tried, Lee couldn't get the dog to play anymore.

"Come on, girl. Are you sure?" She held the disc out and shook it tantalizingly, but Cleo only rolled over with her tummy exposed. "Slug," Lee accused affectionately and squatted down to rub the furry belly. "Does that mean you don't want to go on a run with me?" Cleo rolled upright, but didn't bother to stand. "I guess that's my answer." Lee patted her thigh to encourage the dog to follow and walked toward the house.

She changed into running clothes and grabbed one of the hiking trail maps that she had printed out the first week at Mafdet. She made sure Cleo's bowl was full and locked the dog door before stepping outside. Lee didn't want her to change her mind and try following in the woods when she was already miles away.

Standing near the side of the house, she took a moment to stretch and then studied the map. Jamison had said she lived eight miles due east through the woods. Lee didn't intend to run the entire sixteen mile round trip, but halfway there and back was a possibility. She had enjoyed running for years and it wasn't unusual for her to traverse ten miles during her workout.

Meacham Lake was marked clearly at the end of one of the hiking trails.

For a second she felt like a stalker, but that didn't change her mind. It wasn't like there was any chance of her actually bumping into Jamison. Lee tucked the map into the waistband of her shorts and set off at a steady pace through the woods. The trees created a canopy overhead, allowing only mottled sunshine onto the trail. The scent of growing things and the fresh breeze surrounded her as she ran, her footfalls muffled by the decaying vegetation that had dropped onto the path. Lee never ceased to be amazed by the beauty in the Adirondack forest.

For a long time she just ran, concentrating on her form and leaping over minor obstacles in her path. Eventually, she began to think about all that happened since arriving in Harmon. Those thoughts led her to remember a recent conversation with Jamison concerning Aunt Chris. She said Chris enjoyed throwing a bash for the whole town twice a year and that the party was always held at Mafdet Manor.

Should she continue the tradition? It was true that she didn't know the townspeople and they didn't know her, but what better way to break the ice? Lee had planned to make the relocation permanent from the beginning and her time here only reinforced that decision. The air was clean, the people friendly and close-knit, and she had the feeling of being displaced in time.

For one thing, the pace was slower and there wasn't a sense of claustrophobia from being surrounded by millions of people. Sirens didn't scream at all hours and there was no threat of being attacked simply walking down the street. On the other hand, Harmon had no all night restaurants, nightclubs or movie theaters. Museums and art galleries were non-existent.

That's all right, I'm not that social anyway and New York doesn't have Jamison.

She grinned. She hadn't expected to be interested in another woman so soon after Debbie, but she couldn't deny the thrill every time she looked at the tall, dark-haired park ranger.

Lee estimated she was close to the halfway mark of her workout and slowed to swing back toward the house. She didn't bother to check her heart rate like many runners she knew because she'd feel it if her heartbeat was too fast. She did glance at her watch, pleased to see she had cut about thirty seconds off her usual four-mile time.

Something moved in the brush to her right and she instinctively dodged in the other direction. She spun toward the movement and stopped running, trying to peer into the undergrowth. Whatever creature had been there, it must have fled.

"Sorry about that," she huffed. "Didn't mean to scare you."

There were so many animals in the woods that unless it came out onto the trail and attacked her, Lee wasn't concerned. She started toward home and reached up to wipe the sweat out of her eyes. Her breath came easily as she ran and she allowed herself to drift on fantasies of what it would have been like to enjoy a romantic dinner with Jamison.

When she got home, Lee said hi to Cleo, opened the dog's personal exit then headed into the shower. The run had left her feeling refreshed and ready to tackle the rest of the day. A long hike seemed like just the thing and Cleo could get some exercise.

After her shower, she packed the back of the truck with a couple of different camera cases, lenses, flashes and a tripod. She added a backpack loaded with water and snacks for them both to the stack before she whistled for Cleo and put the dog in the cab. Yesterday, Jamison had taken them up to the summit of St. Regis Mountain and the view and the company alone had been worth the walk. As an added bonus, Lee had seen signs of deer along the path near the trailhead. She thought there might be a small herd in the area and wanted to try for some clean shots of them.

She drove into the parking area at the base of Keese Mills Road. Checking carefully for oncoming traffic, Lee let Cleo out and slipped the backpack over her shoulders. She stuffed her largest camera case with what she thought she'd need, locked the vehicle and headed up the trail.

They walked for about twenty minutes before Lee spotted the tracks from the day before. While Cleo sniffed around the area, Lee squatted down and touched the edge of one of the prints. It was soft and yielding, just like the surrounding soil that had yet to dry completely after the torrential rain two nights passed.

"What do you think? Are they fresh or am I deluding myself with this Daniel Boone act?"

Cleo looked at her and cocked her head. After a second, she huffed loudly and dropped onto the ground.

"Oh, no you don't. You already missed out on the run and you need some exercise. That little game of catch earlier doesn't count."

She pulled a bottle of water from the pack and took a long drink before offering Cleo her bowl. Lee always carried a plastic container with a tight, screw top lid full of water for Cleo when they went hiking. As usual, Cleo sniffed the contents and then shambled away. She preferred to drink when they got home, but that didn't mean Lee wasn't going to offer at regular intervals.

Repacking the water before heading up the trail, Lee spent the rest of the morning and early afternoon hiking around and looking for wildlife. She took pictures of flowers, birds and a few lizards, but didn't find the deer. Several times she ran across more tracks, but that was all. The next time she looked at her watch, three hours had passed. After the long run and the time spent walking back and forth down the game trail, Lee was ready to go home and rest.

Although she was tired, she felt good. She smiled and took a deep breath as they walked out of the path and onto the paved surface of the parking area. The dirty, brown pickup sat alone and undisturbed.

"Right where I left it. Huh, why am I surprised?" Lee mused dryly.

She replaced the equipment in the pickup and unlocked the door to lift Cleo inside. The beagle hopped over to her own side and sat panting as she stared out the side window. Lee slammed the door and put the key in the ignition. She was already thinking about what to microwave for dinner. An elaborate meal had been planned for the evening with Jamison, but she didn't intend to go to all that effort for one person.

Lee rolled down the window and turned the key. Nothing. The engine whirred, but refused to start. Frustrated, she thumped her forehead against the steering wheel.

"Not again."

After a second, she tried to start the pickup again but the result was the same.

"Great, this is just what I need." She glanced over at Cleo. "What we need."

Lee popped the hood release and got out of the vehicle, leaving the door ajar. Cleo jumped out as she raised the hood and propped it open then leaned on her hands to peer inside. She stood there for a minute and then had to laugh at her actions. Lee had never been inside an engine compartment in her life and had no clue what she was looking at. She could only check to see the hoses were still connected, but she didn't have the knowledge to find anything wrong no matter how hard she tried.

"Do you need some help?"

The voice caused her to twist around and Cleo to bark protectively. A man stood only a few feet away and Lee started to respond when his appearance finally registered. He was tall, but very thin and bent over slightly. The stranger was dirty and Lee could smell his unwashed body when the wind gusted toward her. From the grime covering him, she couldn't be sure what color his hair was but it looked oily and stubble covered his cheeks.

He took a step in their direction but Cleo moved fast, leaping in front of her. When she began to bark furiously, the stranger stopped and narrowed his eyes at the dog. He looked angry and for a moment, Lee feared for their safety.

"I'm not going to hurt you," he finally said in what she assumed was meant to be a reassuring tone. "It's just that I'm good with cars and maybe I can get it running."

"You know, I really appreciate it, but I can just call for a tow."

Before the strange man could answer, Lee whipped out her i-Phone and thumbed it on. She was so accustomed to counting on the device that it came as a bit of shock when she couldn't get any reception.

"The mountains block the signal and there aren't any cell towers until you get closer to Harmon."

He looked like a vagrant and Lee was hesitant to take him up on his offer, but she was running out of options. "What did you say your name is?"

"I didn't, but it's Bruce if that means anything. Now why don't I take a look?"

Intuition made Lee back away as he approached and she was pleased to see that Cleo followed. The dog's hackles were raised and she curled her upper lip back exposing her teeth. Dogs weren't usually influenced by appearance, but for some reason Cleo obviously didn't care for this man regardless of his helpful attitude. That was enough for Lee.

"Do you have a screwdriver or something?"

"There's an old toolbox in the back, but I'm not sure what's in it."

Bruce looked at her and a half smile twisted his lips, but the expression seemed more sarcastic than friendly. "Why don't I see if there's anything I can use?"

The day seemed to take on a sinister chill as the stranger moved around to the pickup bed and dug through the rusty box. The breeze so welcome on her flesh only minutes before now caused goose bumps. She kept waiting for him to drop the ruse of a friendly Samaritan and assume his true persona of a psychotic serial killer. Instead, Bruce found a screwdriver and a few other tools, which Lee couldn't begin to name, and moved back to the engine compartment. A few minutes later, he pulled off a black plastic piece that resembled a cup. Bruce inspected the inside of the mysterious object and then looked at her.

"You've got a cracked distributor cap. I can probably patch it good enough for you to get where you're going, but you'll need a mechanic to fix you up. There are other problems, too though. The belts are worn and the battery is so old it might not be holding a charge."

Lee nodded. She was still too wary of him to actually verbalize what she was thinking.

Bruce nodded back and set to work. It didn't take long before he was reassembling the distributor cap and lowering the hood. When it slammed into place, Lee came out of her fear-induced stupor long enough to remember her manners.

"Uh, thanks. I appreciate that."

She reached into her pocket and pulled out a wad of cash. Lee didn't know how much money was there, but she was sure it was more than was really called for. Still, he had saved her the cost of a tow and the time she'd have spent waiting so she considered it money well spent.

His hands were just as dirty as the rest of him and she suppressed the urge to shudder in disgust. She quickly released the cash and averted her gaze. She was ready to get away from him, regardless how helpful he'd been.

"Cleo, come."

She grabbed the beagle and jumped into the pickup, setting Cleo in her lap. She didn't bother to shift the dog to the other seat as she slammed the door. Then she elbowed the lock into place as surreptitiously as possible before she started the truck. She was so intent on vacating the area, she didn't even consider it wouldn't start. Fortunately, the engine fired as soon as she turned the key. Without even glancing at Bruce, she threw the transmission into reverse and backed out onto the blacktop.

"That's it. Tomorrow we buy a new car."

A few minutes later, Cleo stood up and walked over to her own side. Lee was so lost in thoughts about the creepy man, it barely registered.

Who was he and why was he sneaking around the woods?

The phone rang as she crested the rise toward Mafdet Manor and she jumped a little in surprise. She fumbled for the cell at her waist and drifted toward the shoulder for a second.

"Hello?"

"Hi, Lee? It's Jamison."

"Hi," she said in delight, dismissing Bruce from her mind entirely. "Where are you?"

"I'm on my way back from Newton Falls. I finished early and wondered if I could change my mind about having dinner with you."

"Uh, well, I don't know," she teased, as though she really had to think about it. "Okay, you talked me into it. What time sounds good?"

Jamison laughed. "Is eight o'clock too late?"

"Sounds...wonderful. Is there anything you won't eat or that you're allergic to?"

"No allergies, but I'm not big on rabbit food."

"Okay, so no hay. Got it."

"You're feeling good today."

Lee could hear the smile in Jamison's voice. "Yeah, I had a pretty good run this morning and it always leaves me feeling sharp. I just left Keese Mills Road, too. Cleo and I had a great hike looking for those deer we saw signs of yesterday."

"I want to hear all about it," Jamison said. "I just hope all that exercise doesn't have you falling asleep in your soup."

"No chance. I'm wide awake and there is no soup."

"Glad to hear it. Not about the soup, I mean I'm glad you're wide awake. I'll see you tonight."

Lee grinned, pleased she seemed to have thrown Jamison off balance. She wanted to keep this woman curious, interested and intrigued. "Tonight, then. Bye."

Chapter Eleven

LEE PAUSED TO check her appearance in the full-length mirror on the walk-in closet door. A critical assessment was necessary on this most important occasion, so she started at the top and worked her way down. She had pulled her shoulder length blonde hair back at the nape of her neck and secured it with a silver, jewel-encrusted clasp. Half-carat diamond studs glinted in her ears and matched her great aunt's pendant resting in the hollow of her throat. Her clothing was Armani, beginning with the three-quarter sleeve satin blouse with wide, buttoned cuffs. Lee thought the light, eggshell blue color set her eyes off nicely and hoped Jamison would notice.

The shirt opened down the front and the closures started at the mid-line of her breasts.

Just a hint of cleavage, she thought with satisfaction.

She tucked the shirt into navy, featherweight wool pants with wide legs and added a black leather belt to complete the outfit. Her favorite pair of Cole Haan chukkas gave everything just the appearance she was hoping for, chic but approachable. She had taken the time to buff the short boots that added four and a half inches to her height. Fortunately, they had a three quarter inch wide base so she wouldn't have to worry about staggering around on stilettos.

Overall, she was pleased. Lee took a moment to add some eye shadow and mascara before misting her body with a healthy dose of Cashmere. Then she hurried to check on dinner and to see if Cleo intended to behave. She'd already fed her, but that didn't mean Cleo was above begging, especially with the meal Lee had spent the last four hours preparing.

As soon as they returned from St. Regis, she had set the two-inch porterhouse steaks to soak in a Caribbean marinade of garlic, cumin, oregano and lime juice. Then she'd sat down at the computer to print out recipes from Food Network and her favorite Iron Chef, Cat Cora. It hadn't taken too long to create stuffed dolmades from grape leaves, ground beef, onions, parsley and rice, but the blueberry mascarpone cheesecake was another matter.

Mixing the ingredients exactly, she finally managed something she thought her guest might appreciate.

It was only after the dolmades and cheesecake were chilling in the fridge that Lee realized she had neglected to purchase some wine. Chances were slim she'd find anything more than the cheap variety around Harmon, but she managed to avoid a complete panic when Lee remembered the wine storage in the basement. Holding her breath, she ran down the kitchen steps to see if there was anything remotely palatable in the cool, dark room. To her surprise, she located a few bottles of stunningly expensive Sloan Proprietary Red-2007. She Googled the internet to find the cabernet was known for the high tannin content, but was richly balanced by the flavors of espresso, white chocolate and black currants.

Perfect.

She decided the entire idea of a romantic dinner was saved by that discovery.

Now, she walked into the formal dining room to make sure everything was set and ready to go. Cleo followed her every move, clearly understanding something was going on and not wanting to miss out on the excitement.

"I want you to be good tonight, Cleo. Do you understand me? If you're very good, there'll be a steak bone in it for you later." Lee wasn't above bribery at this point. Cleo responded by walking out the dog door and into the backyard.

"Good girl."

Finally, Lee was satisfied everything was going nicely. The steaks had a few more minutes under the broiler and then dinner would be ready. She glanced down at her ceramic Fossil watch and her heart sped up when she saw it was five after eight. At the same time, she heard a car pull up in the front and the engine shut off. A huge smile curled her lips and Lee walked out onto the front porch to greet Jamison.

The woman stood at the front corner of her pickup and Lee was so captivated by her appearance that she couldn't speak.

Jamison's short hair was feathered back on either side with a part just right of center. She had on a white, sleeveless button-down shirt tucked into the waistband of dark, boot-cut jeans and a pair of black, Hush Puppies, loafers. Negligently slung over one shoulder, she carried a well-worn blue-jean jacket. She was a dichotomy of everyday comfort and casual elegance.

After Lee managed to drag her eyes back up Jamison's, she started to say hi when she realized Jamison was staring off to the side of the house where Cleo's doggie door was located. The expression on her face was indecipherable, but it didn't seem to be one of joy.

What's she looking at?

Lee glanced to see what was going on, curious but unconcerned. At first, she couldn't believe it. Cleo stood near the block where Lee had been chopping wood a few days before. That side of the house was closest to the forest on the south side, standing only twenty feet away from the tree line.

Cleo stood rooted to the spot, nearly crouched in her anxiety. Right in front of her was a forest animal that showed not the slightest fear of the canine. The raccoon was big for his species and stood upright on his hind legs like a person. He looked intently into the dog's eyes and very slowly, Cleo approached him.

As Lee watched, the furry bandit reached out and placed one soft paw on the crown of Cleo's head. The dog flinched slightly and blinked in surprise, but again grew still.

It wasn't unusual to see a raccoon so close to the forest or even around people's homes. They were notorious scavengers and not above digging in the garbage for a meal. Lee had also heard stories about how mean-tempered they could be, ripping any dogs or cats that molested them into pieces. However, she could see right off this creature wasn't exhibiting typical behavior.

With a paw still resting on Cleo, the animal scrutinized Lee and Jamison. He showed no concern, but seemed to be scrupulously studying them. Thoughtful brown eyes rested on Jamison the longest before he lifted his head and sniffed the breeze. Without the slightest show of fear, he turned to Lee and repeated the odd little ritual. Then he focused his attention back on Cleo.

Lee was flabbergasted as he drew his paw across the dog's head and down one side to gently stroke her face and she was sure he was petting her. A moment later, the raccoon turned around and ambled toward the woods. He dropped to all fours right before he disappeared from sight. Cleo never took a step in pursuit, but only watched as her new friend faded into the trees.

Lee snapped out of her shocked confusion, suddenly worried the dog might have been injured.

"Cleo, come here, girl," she said, leaving the front steps and meeting her halfway across the yard.

Jamison joined her and they crouched down to check the dog over. Cleo wagged her tail happily at all the extra attention she was getting, but was unharmed.

"Do you think it was sick or something? I've never heard of a raccoon doing something like that."

"No." Jamison shook her head. "He didn't seem rabid or violent in any way."

"How do you explain it then?"

Jamison frowned as she considered the question. "Sometimes, people will find one as a cub; maybe the mom was killed by a predator or in an accident. They'll raise the raccoon but as soon as it's old enough to take care of itself, they'll take it down by the river to release it."

"So, what? You think it was like that because it's used to being around people?"

"It's the only explanation I can think of."

Lee shook her head. "This has been the strangest day."

LEE AND JAMISON sat on the thick, cushioned sofa in front of the fireplace sipping red wine. Dinner had been wonderful though Lee would have preferred a more intimate setting. She usually took her meals in the breakfast nook because the small chamber in the south turret was not quite so intimidating, but it hadn't really suited her needs on this occasion. Instead, they had shared a romantic dinner on her great aunt's long, highly polished mahogany table. The place settings were side-by-side at one end and a corner. It was close enough that Lee was still reeling from a sound Jamison made when she first bit into a dolma.

It was a low sound, a soft sigh deep in her throat that reminded Lee of many things, none of which had to do with food.

Now sitting on the sofa, she quietly thought about that moan and the images it conjured. Although she had fought the attraction since the moment she met Jamison, she couldn't ignore it anymore. She watched strong hands cup the fine crystal wine glass and wondered what they would feel like on her skin. Would Jamison be soft and gentle, or would she be demanding? Did she enjoy kissing as much as Lee did, or would she be more interested in the base carnality of sexual gratification?

Lee shivered slightly. She imagined Jamison naked beside her on cool cotton sheets, her body on fire with need, her hair in erotic disarray.

Jamison broke into the fantasy by asking, "So, what else happened today?"

"Huh?" Lee glanced over at her, mesmerized by the way the firelight flickered off her chiseled features.

"You said today had been really strange. What happened besides the raccoon?"

"Oh, that." Lee smiled. "I told you we were going back up to follow those deer tracks?"

"Yes, I remember."

"We didn't find anything, but when we got back to the pickup it wouldn't start."

Jamison laughed. "You really need to get rid of that thing."

"You're not wrong, especially considering the kind of help I received to get it going again."

"What do you mean?"

"This weird guy with shockingly bad hygiene suddenly popped out of the woods and offered his assistance."

Concern suddenly colored her expression and Jamison set the wine glass on the coffee table. "Are you all right? Did he try anything?"

"No, I'm fine." Lee rested a hand on a naked shoulder. She meant it to be a reassuring gesture, but abruptly found herself fascinated by the feel of warm, muscled flesh. Her voice was more gruff than intended when she spoke again. "But Cleo didn't like him much and he was really creepy. I won't even go into detail on how seriously he could use a manicure."

"I don't want you going out by yourself again."

Lee blinked and looked at Jamison like she'd lost her mind. She might like her, but no one ordered her to do anything. "Now wait a minute."

"I'm sorry." Jamison held up a hand to stop her. "But you can't prevent me from worrying about you."

"That's sweet, but how about if I just let you take me over to Gloversville in a few days to buy a new vehicle. I'm planning on going over there tomorrow and setting things in motion. I know it's a long drive, but it's the largest town around and I might have better luck finding something that suits me over there."

Jamison shot her a playful look, almost a challenge and said, "All right, if I can't convince you to stay locked inside the house for the rest of your life, I guess I'll have to settle for a reliable vehicle."

"Thank you." Lee grinned. "Now can you answer a question for me? It's something I've been wondering about since I moved here."

"Shoot. I'll answer anything you want to know."

Lee closed her eyes for a moment as her mind immediately went in the gutter. Focus, she told herself.

"Why are there so many steak houses in Harmon?"

"What?" Jamison had been caught off guard by the unexpected question.

"It's just that there's at least one on every street, sometimes two. And when the restaurant isn't advertised as a steakhouse, they still have it on the menu. Like Andy's."

Jamison shrugged. "I guess everyone likes a good piece of meat."

Lee froze and then burst out laughing while Jamison flushed in embarrassment. "Please tell me that was unintentional."

"It was, I promise."

"Fine, I'll let you off the hook."

"Any other questions you want to ask?"

"Let me think, since I do have you hostage at the moment."

"Oh really? Maybe I should be asking you the questions."

"Fire away," Lee said.

"Okay." Jamison picked up her glass and took another sip, looking thoughtful. "Why did you move back to Harmon? I know Chris always wanted you and your mom to live here, but you never did. I guess I'm wondering, why now?"

The question was fair. Jamison and everyone around knew her aunt, but she was a stranger who had come in and taken over Mafdet Manor like she had every right. Legally, she did. But that didn't mean there might not be a few people who took offense. If Lee wanted the possibility of something more with Jamison, she'd have to start with honesty. Of course there were certain things she wasn't willing to share until she got to know Jamison a little better, but one thing at a time.

"I've been to some of the most rustic places in the world and I absolutely love it. I've done more than most people have in a lifetime. Anything to do with nature or being outdoors and feeling free, but I was raised in New York City. My father is a senator and no matter how I've

tried to assert my independence, I've lived in his house my whole life. Aunt Chris willed me the manor and it seemed like the perfect opportunity to get out from under his thumb."

"You don't get along?"

"Well enough, I guess. The truth is that he really isn't interested in anything I do. I'm an embarrassment to him."

"I find that hard to believe," Jamison said. "You're intelligent, caring and beautiful. How could he not be extremely proud of you?"

Lee was thrilled by the assessment, but answered, "Let's just say he can't handle my orientation."

She had dropped the bombshell to see how Jamison would react. This was her opportunity to deny what was going on between them. Lee was scared that she'd take the easy way out and quietly held her breath to see what would happen next.

"Then that's his loss...and my gain."

Lee felt a little juvenile looking out of the corner of her eye to check Jamison's expression, but she was too nervous to look at her directly. The comment was unexpected. Jamison was facing the fire and staring into the dark purple liquid in her wine glass. She looked as uncomfortable as Lee; not because of any mutual feelings, but rather the fear of rejection.

No matter how mature we feel, most of the time, there's always someone who comes along and makes us feel like a kid again.

After a moment of hesitation, Lee blew out a breath and forced herself to relax. Jamison glanced at her and smiled.

"So it's your father we have to thank for you being here?"

"Not entirely." Lee thought about the incident with Debbie and how it suddenly didn't seem that important anymore. "I overheard my ex talking on the cell phone and let's just say what I heard didn't cast her in a very good light. I didn't even try to listen to her side of things, I just ended it."

"I'm sorry. That must have been very painful."

She bowed her head and then looked at Jamison. "You'd think so, but it really wasn't. I think I used what happened as an excuse. Don't get me wrong, I'm still not happy with what she did, but we never should have been together in the first place."

"Okay, next question. You said you've done more in your life than most people will do in a lifetime. Like what?"

"I went rappelling out of a helicopter once."

"You're kidding!"

Lee smiled. "Another time I went parachuting."

"You're out of your mind, do you know that? What could possess you to jump from those kinds of heights?"

"I want to try the things that interest me before it's too late." Lee shrugged, delighted at the reaction she had garnered.

"And orthopedic surgery is one of them."

"No, of course not." They laughed together before Lee asked, "What about you?"

"Me?" Jamison took a quick sip of her wine.

"You must have people clamoring for your attention."

"Not as many as you might think," Jamison said dryly. "I haven't dated anyone in a long time. At least three years."

"Why?"

"Work keeps me pretty busy. I work at the Adirondack Park during the weekdays and the rest of the time I help out with the City Council."

"That doesn't leave a lot of free time."

"I never needed any...before."

Lee narrowed her eyes. That was twice Jamison had made a statement indicating deeper feelings than casual friendship. Now it was up to her to either show she was interested or make it clear that she wasn't. She contemplated the broad shoulders under the white sleeveless shirt, the powerful arms and soft skin. Strong hands gently held the fine wine glass, showing how gentle she could be. Jamison had an aura about her, a quiet confidence that lent her an air of unassuming elegance no matter what she did.

"Please let me shoot you."

Jamison narrowed her eyes and shook her head. "Why is it so important to you?"

Taking a deep breath against the emotions swirling inside, Lee released it very carefully. Then she said in her softest voice, "Because I like you, a lot. Because I want to be able to see you, and not just when I close my eyes. I'm not asking you to feel the same way. I just want a picture."

"I..." Jamison lowered her eyes and then glanced back at her. "You make it hard to say no."

"Then don't."

Lee smiled and stood up. She offered a hand to Jamison who took it a moment later. Both of them set their glasses on the coffee table.

"Where do you want me?" Jamison asked, following as she was led across the living room.

"Right here. Sit on the hearth."

The brick facing of the fireplace sat two feet off the hardwood floor and extended three feet from the where the flames roared. Jamison sat down and tucked her hair behind an ear.

Lee smiled in unabashed pleasure. "Stay right there while I get my camera. Don't move a muscle."

"Can I breathe?"

"If you insist." Lee smiled tremulously, trying to keep the image of Jamison's naked breasts heaving in passionate, gasping breaths from forming in her mind.

A second later she was back, attaching a flash to her Nikon F6. Then she disappeared again only to return with a lever-lock tripod. It took several seconds to get everything set up, but Jamison never complained. She only watched with a slightly bemused expression until Lee had her equipment just the way she wanted.

When she stepped behind the camera and began sighting in, Jamison asked sardonically, "Are you ready?"

"Yeah."

Lee left the camera and walked toward her until she was standing just a foot away. Kneeling, she studied the sculpted features before reaching out to gently stroke Jamison's dark hair back from her face. At this distance, she could see the firelight reflecting off the green eyes and could focus only on what she found there.

Desire.

Her gaze moved down to the soft, full mouth. Jamison trembled. Lee smiled and slid her hand down to cup one cheek, gratified when Jamison leaned briefly into the touch. She adjusted Jamison's collar and took a chance by unbuttoning the top fastening of the white shirt. Jamison started slightly, but didn't back away.

Lee wanted to kiss her. It was a close call that she didn't. Instead, she backed away and behind the camera.

"Just be natural," she said softly. "Smile if you want or move around, whatever you like."

Chapter Twelve

JAMISON LET OUT the breath she'd been holding and shifted slightly. She hadn't been sure what Lee would demand from her or if she expected to put Jamison on display, but with just a few words she had been put at ease. She'd resisted this whole photography thing from the start out of concern that something in the process would display her hidden nature. Now, she wondered why she'd been making a big deal out of nothing.

A soft, continuous whirring finally caught her attention and she realized it was the shutter on the camera advancing very quickly. After a few seconds, it stopped and Lee peered at her from behind the tripod.

"That's it. I think they're going to be wonderful. Thanks for indulging me."

Jamison nodded and smoothed her palms down her jeans. She hadn't even been aware that her hands had started to perspire. As she stood, her cell phone rang. She offered an apologetic smile and answered the call.

"Kessler."

"Yeah, this is Dalton. You'd better get over here right now. There's been another attack."

Jamison bit her lip and took a second to calm down before she took Aaron's head off. She wanted to demand where his team had been while the assault was taking place, but she had to admit that they couldn't be everywhere at once. Worry and fear of what might have happened warred within her.

"When?"

"Not long ago. From the look of things, I'd say about an hour. Kessler, this one's bad. I've had to call the sheriff."

Damn. Sheriff Macke was a human. The Panthera weren't fond of humans knowing about them, but the sheriff's former lover had been a shape changer. Macke only found out right before her girlfriend died of a rare blood disorder. Sam was still angry that Roberta hadn't confided in her and she had no love for the Panthera in general.

"Understood. Where are you exactly?"

Aaron let out a disgusted snort. "Shouldn't you know where my team is patrolling tonight? Tell me again why you're leading this investigation?"

"Just answer the question." Lee couldn't help overhear her side of the conversation so Jamison tried to keep the ire out of her voice.

"The old sheep meadow just east of Meacham Lake, the Harrison place."

"All right,. I'll be there in twenty minutes."

Dalton hung up without saying goodbye. Jamison rolled her eyes slightly and put the phone away before she studied Lee.

"Everything okay?"

"Yes, I just have to go."

"All right. Are you sure there's nothing I can do?"

"No, but I really appreciate the offer. Dinner was wonderful, by the way. Thank you."

"Maybe we can do it again sometime?"

They walked toward the door and Jamison opened it to the cool night air. "I'd really like that." She faced Lee and felt unexpectedly unsure. A handshake was out of the question. Jamison considered a friendly hug, but even that wasn't enough. She knew what she wanted, but wondered if it was too soon.

Before Jamison knew what she was doing, she acted on her impulse. She slid one hand around Lee's neck and pulled her close. The move was quick, but the kiss was soft and sweet. She moved her lips over Lee's bottom one, and then sucked gently before drawing her tongue over the smooth flesh.

She felt Lee's startled intake of breath but it lasted only a split second before her mouth opened, inviting Jamison in. Lee's lips pressed back against her and her hands slid across Jamison's back.

Moaning softly, Jamison held Lee tightly. Passion rose between them and both were breathing harshly as it scorched them. In seconds they were kissing hungrily, mouths open and tongues tangling. She felt Lee's taut, strong body and tried to absorb every sensation that washed through her. In return, Lee's mouth was insistent. Demanding, soft sounds melted through Jamison as they sought to consume one another.

From her knees upward, Lee was tight against her body, both of them craving to have desires quenched. No thought remained except the sweet breathlessness sweeping them away. Lee was releasing soft sighs from deep in her throat that made Jamison want to carry things even further.

At last, they both slowly drew away. Jamison rested her forehead against Lee's and fought to bring her breathing under control. She was surprised to find she was shaking.

"I'm sorry. I want to stay, but I can't."

"I know. It's all right. Do...whatever it is you're going to do."

Jamison smiled at the trust in Lee's voice. So many others would have demanded to know where she was headed so late at night, even after a single date. This woman was definitely unique and she set her blood on fire.

"Okay. I'll call you later, if it's not too late."

"You can call even if it is late."

She smiled again and pressed her lips to Lee's briefly. If she let it go on any longer than that, chances were good she wouldn't leave. "Bye." "Night." Jamison cast one last longing glance back at Lee before she slipped through the door and into the darkness.

Chapter Thirteen

AFTER JAMISON LEFT, Lee cleaned up the dinner dishes and then discovered she was pacing restlessly between the living and dining rooms, lost in thought. She had a silly grin on her face and couldn't stop touching her lips. Jamison's kisses had been every bit as astounding as she'd dreamed.

It was late, but she was so wired sleep wasn't going to come easy. She remembered a trail on the west side of Mafdet still unexplored and thought a walk would help settle her restlessness. Night photography was one of her specialties and the full moon would help provide the perfect backdrop.

Lee chose her best camera for the job, a Nikon D5000 SLR, and attached a flash to the hot shoe. The camera came with a built-in flash, but it wouldn't be strong enough to capture a quality photo in the reduced light. The Nikon SB-400 would provide light for a distance of sixty-six feet.

She set the camera for manual operation and added a three hundred millimeter zoom lens. Zoomed out to its full capacity, she set the sharpness to maximum. To keep from blurring a shot, she really needed a tripod, but didn't think it was necessary tonight. At the most, she might find some forest creatures that would scamper away as soon as the flash fired. This excursion was intended to help her relax anyway, not win her the Pulitzer Prize.

"You coming?"

Cleo picked her head up from where she lay in front of the fire, her ears pricked forward in hopeful eagerness.

"Let's go."

The dog jumped up with her tail wagging and headed for the front door. Lee pushed it open and hopped down the steps with Cleo leading the way. As they entered the woods, Cleo foraged ahead. Her nose stayed to the ground and Lee could just see the white blaze on the tip of her tail. It took a minute for her eyes to adjust, but soon the pair moved down the forest trail with equal ease. This path seemed more overgrown than the others around Mafdet, but the full moon allowed them to avoid any obstacles.

I guess Aunt Chris wasn't big on walking in the woods.

The camera hung by a strap around her neck, but it wasn't long before she forgot about it. Lee glanced absently around the darkened undergrowth, her attention divided between the path in front of her and Jamison Kessler. Unknowingly, a soft smile graced her lips.

All Lee could think of was the gentleness in Jamison's kisses and the taste as her tongue stroked inside her mouth. She knew before it happened that she was attracted to the intense, dark-haired beauty. Now she was in danger of becoming enthralled.

But it's so soon.

It doesn't matter, she argued with herself. I can't help how I feel. Jamison is nothing like Debbie. She's warm, open, caring and down to Earth. When she looks at me, I can hardly breathe. When she kissed me.... Oh man, she can kiss. I felt it in my soul.

Lee came to an abrupt stop on the forest floor. "Oh my God, I'm falling in love with her."

She stood there in stunned amazement while Cleo continued happily on without her. The earlier euphoria of the shared kiss dimmed a little as she acknowledged how deeply involved she was getting. This wasn't something she had planned, but she couldn't deny how right it felt.

After the initial shock receded somewhat, Lee hurried after her dog. She ran into Cleo around the next bend, surprised the beagle was staring ahead through the trees with her hackles up.

Lee started to ask what she saw, but stopped short. First, Cleo wouldn't answer. Second, if someone was lurking nearby, she'd only be revealing her own presence.

And exactly what's out there, she silently scoffed. Maybe it's another monster like the one in the root cellar.

As much as her logical side insisted she was alone with Cleo, her baser instincts clamored for her to stay still and quiet. Lee obeyed, searching carefully through the brush. Something flickered, a trick of the moonlight as shadows danced farther along the trail. Her eyes widened and her heart rate spiked as adrenaline flooded her system.

That wasn't moonlight, she comprehended. It was fire. Specifically, it was a campfire.

She made a motion with her hand for Cleo to stay and shifted to the side of the path for a better look. As usual, Cleo ignored her and moved over, too. Several robed figures stood around the fire. Hoods covered their heads, preventing her from seeing their features. Anger quickly overcame any hesitation.

Oh please, what a cliché. Trespass onto someone's property in the middle of the night to hold your little satanic rituals? What's next? Are you going to bleed a chicken?

Lee stalked toward the fire, reaching for her camera at the same time. It was already in position and she started shooting as soon as she entered the clearing. The flash fired like bolts of lightning, illuminating the clearing in a strobe-like fashion each time she pressed the button. Pandemonium broke out among the trespassers and Lee couldn't believe what happened next.

Cleo raced forward, barking madly while the robed figures scattered. A hood fell back as its wearer ran in the opposite direction. From the long, flowing hair and slight build, this one was definitely female.

Another, Lee thought to be a man, turned to Cleo and released an unexpected roar. Lee started in fear at the sound that a human throat should have been incapable of making. At the same time, Cleo tucked her tail and bolted behind her. Then, inconceivably, the man bounded at least six feet into the air and over the top of the campfire before disappearing into the darkness.

She and Cleo were alone; the trespassers had vanished. The clearing was empty and if not for the fire that still burned, she might have believed she imagined everything. Lee stopped setting off the flash and blinked in confusion.

Had he really roared, she wondered, flabbergasted by the possibility.

The amazing jump over the fire quickly lost its impressive qualities as she remembered the noise he'd made. High jumpers vaulted much farther than that and there was nothing mystical about their abilities. She just couldn't believe he had roared at Cleo.

"It's okay."

Lee squatted down to pet Cleo, who had already forgotten her momentary fright, but was still happy to accept the attention being lavished upon her.

"They were probably doing drugs, too. Huh?"

Outrage simmered just beneath the surface as Lee stood and reached for the cell phone at her hip. It wasn't there and she realized she'd left it at home.

Great.

She looked at the fire and decided she couldn't leave it burning while she walked back to the house to call the police. The intruders were already long gone and she couldn't take a chance on setting a forest fire.

Her disbelief mounted as she walked toward the fire ring. Those people hadn't piled rocks in a loose circle and tossed in a load of brush to create a crude blaze. She was looking at a concrete pit that had been poured in a four-foot wide circle. A low wall at least ten inches high ringed the structure and, from the look of it, the whole thing had been there for years. She wondered if it was something constructed by the original settlers of the area. If so, it could be that the local kids knew about it and came out here now and then to mess around.

She started looking over the area and discovered a metal tap a few feet away. It was a gas line that fed directly to an in-ground grate beneath the fire pit. Lee twisted it to the off position and watched the height of the flames drop considerably.

If the fire ring had been installed that long ago, someone had modified it in the last several years to add the gas feed. She deduced the original inhabitants wouldn't have had this type of technology, and it couldn't be a recent addition judging by the rusty components.

"This had better not be tied into my utilities," Lee said, vowing silently to return with a padlock.

The fire had all but died away, a few logs flickering weakly. She kicked the timber apart carefully with her hiking boots and waited until there was only the glow from a few hot coals. When it was finally safe, she called Cleo and headed for the manor. Tomorrow she'd develop the pictures, but for now all she wanted was to take a hot shower and call local law enforcement.

"Cleo?" Lee asked as they walked down the path. "What's up with all the strange shit that happens around this place?"

She didn't really expect an answer.

Chapter Fourteen

THE SILVERADO ROCKETED down the narrow forest trail at a speed that could in no way be considered safe. Now that Jamison had a little distance, the urge to mate with Lee wasn't as strong and she could think more clearly. Dalton said this latest attack was on the old sheep meadow just east of Meacham Lake. It was less than two miles from her own home.

"Damn it!" She pounded the steering wheel once in frustration. If anyone should have found the rogue carnivore, it should have been her. Instead, she'd been off cuddling up to her newest neighbor.

Her conscience over neglecting her duty warred with the memory of kissing Lee, but she couldn't feel too badly about it. Jamison felt an insane urge to purr in contentment when she thought about the time they'd spent together. It was crazy that in the midst of all this chaos, just thinking of Lee would calm the jungle cat inside.

Her truck went airborne over the crest separating the lake from Harrison Farms. She slammed on the brakes so hard the pickup slid sideways before it came to a shuddering stop. All memories of the pleasant evening evaporated like a veil of mist. The sight below was almost surreal.

White, fluffy forms dotted the gentle rise and fall of the pastureland, like snowflakes on a deep felt of green. Overhead, blue-black clouds filled the night sky and framed the full moon. It would have been breathtakingly exquisite had those figures truly been the product of a temperamental weather system. Jamison wanted to believe that's what it was, but the blood-drenched corpses demanded her full concession. The entire herd of sheep had been slaughtered.

Men and women milled about the area, deputies marking each of the lifeless bodies with evidence placards. Central to the scene, three squad cars and a battered jeep with a roll bar had spotlights blazing to impose a false sense of daylight. Next to one of the law enforcement units, Jamison saw Dalton standing and talking with a much smaller woman.

He might be a good hunter, Jamison thought, remembering Dinah's observations, but she didn't consider him a diplomat, and leaving him in charge of public relations was not a wise idea.

She growled low in her throat as she drove down into the midst of the massacre and pulled up next to them. By the time she had shut off the vehicle and walked over, she had herself under control.

"Sheriff," she greeted with a nod, casting a warning look at Dalton.

"Well, looky here, if it isn't Harmon's own park ranger slash unofficial crime stopper. I'm assuming you're here representing the self-appointed Council?"

Sheriff Samantha Macke was unequivocally human, which made it hard for the shape changers in the community to trust her. If not for extenuating circumstances, she wouldn't even know about them. Still, Jamison had always found the smaller brunette to be honest and intelligent, even if she did struggle to treat the jaguars with the same fairness she extended to the human population.

"I guess we're here representing the Panthera," Jamison said, tipping her head toward Dalton.

Macke looked at the man over her shoulder, the dislike in her black eyes clear to see. "Yes, well. No accounting for taste."

"Excuse me?" Dalton started toward the sheriff with anger in his eyes.

"Stand down."

He pinned Jamison with a glare at the command and for a moment, she thought he'd refuse. Then he gave a disgusted snarl and stalked toward the perimeter. Jamison hoped he might use the time to cool off and search for anything that might tell them where the predator had gone.

"Sorry about that."

Sam shook her head. "Look, I've got a real problem with people who lack the proper training coming into a crime scene and taking over. Unfortunately, I realize that your particular...talents might come in handy this time. Just do me a favor?"

"What is it?" Jamison asked. It was rare for the sheriff to ask anything of her, regardless of the situation and she couldn't help her curiosity. She was a cat, after all.

"Keep that guy away from me. He gives me the creeps."

Jamison tried to hide her smile. "That makes two of us. So, what do you think of all this?"

Sam walked toward one of the dead sheep while Jamison followed quietly in her wake. The sheriff tucked her hands into her jacket pockets to ward off the chill and stood staring down into sightless eyes. "Shouldn't I be asking you that?"

"Honestly? I could give you details on the scent of the monster who did this. I could even describe what my eyes are able to discern about the wounds, but that wouldn't help and you wouldn't be able to sleep for a week. I'm asking what your impressions are, from a law enforcement standpoint."

"You mean, how would I profile someone who had done this if they were strictly human?"

Jamison hadn't expected Sheriff Macke to be so perceptive or quite so direct and her respect for the woman went up a notch. There was no horror or denial in her voice, only a quiet sadness at the reality before them.

"Yes. What would you say about his psyche?"

Sam frowned. "How do you know the killer is male?"

"I don't," Jamison said, shaking her head. "I'm using the pronoun in the generic form."

Sam nodded in understanding. "For what it's worth I think it is a man."

"Care to elaborate?"

Jamison had investigated the sites of both killings and for all the myriad of scents, she couldn't state the gender with certainty. The hunter hadn't sprayed urine to mark territory on any of the kills, so how could a human with so little understanding of feline ways begin to make such a declaration?

"Psych 101. I can rattle off statistics, but let's just say that the vast majority of serial killers are white males in their late twenties to early forties. They usually start by torturing animals." Sam made a sweeping gesture with one arm to encompass the meadow. "Of course, you and I both know this wasn't the work of a human. There was no reason for this except the thrill of the kill."

Jamison looked around and couldn't deny it. These defenseless animals had been torn apart, some with their throats ripped out, others gleefully dismembered. None of them showed signs of being eaten. Whatever had done this had done it for fun.

"What are you going to tell the owner?"

Sam looked at her fully for the first time. "Answer one question for me first. Was this one of yours?"

"No. Absolutely not."

"But you weren't surprised that it happened." Sam pointed over to Dalton. "You had a team standing by ready to go. Want to tell me why?"

"What if I say it's Panthera business?"

Sam's eyes narrowed in challenge. "Then I tell Bob Harrison the truth."

"And incite mass hysteria?" Jamison grinned a little, but there was no humor in it. "I don't think so."

Jamison could feel the anger radiating off the sheriff and relented slightly. "It won't come to that. I can tell you that for the last few weeks a carnivore of some type has been prowling the woods around Harmon."

"The last few weeks?" Sheriff Macke's voice rose and several heads revolved in their direction. "You're just now sharing this with me? Don't you think my office should have known?"

"Maybe," Jamison allowed, projecting calming thoughts toward the other woman, "but all of the attacks have been against livestock and a single wild hog. I will grant you nothing that happened before was on this scale though."

"Are you sure your people have nothing to do with it?"

Jamison nodded. "I investigated each of the previous attack sites and there is no indication of Panthera."

"What then? What did this?"

The question wasn't unreasonable, but Jamison had been hoping the sheriff wouldn't ask. With a shrug, she answered, "We think it's a rogue lion."

Sam stared at her for a second and then one corner of her mouth curled in a smile. "You're kidding me, right? I'm expected to believe that a lion escaped from the circus and did all this?"

"Laugh if you want to, Sheriff," Jamison said seriously, "but this thing isn't from any circus and he sure as hell isn't any lion you would recognize."

Sam shook her head in resignation. "I knew I should have stayed in Manhattan. All right, if you know so much...What does he look like?"

"We don't know."

"But you just said--"

Jamison held up a hand. "Please, bear with me. None of us has seen this creature. We only recognize it from the scent and that seems altered somehow. It's like it's mutated or something."

"Great," Sam said sarcastically. She tossed her hands into the air and spun away with her back to Jamison. "I can see it now, '*Mutant Big Foot Lion Crossbreed Roaming Adirondacks*'."

Jamison grinned at the mumbled comment the sheriff hadn't intended for her to overhear. The situation wasn't funny, but at least the sheriff had a sense of humor that would help see her people through this nightmare. She showed adaptability and a willingness to listen. Jamison thought she'd make a good ally as long as she could be convinced to keep the public in the dark about what was really going on. To do otherwise would incite mass hysteria. If the human populace learned of the shape changers, they'd start carrying guns and neighbors would be shot just on the suspicion of being Panthera.

"So, what's your cover story?"

"Give me a minute, will you?" Sam asked, turning back toward her. Anger still simmered in her coal black eyes, mixed with a quiet thoughtfulness. "You're a park ranger. Maybe we can use that."

"How?"

"We could say it was a rabid mountain lion and that we killed it tonight, out here."

"If you use the word rabid, all the tourists are going to run screaming out of these mountains," Jamison warned her. "The Adirondack's tourism trade could suffer a major setback that might affect the economy."

"Fine, we'll say it was a rogue."

Jamison nodded. "It might work. Do you think Harrison will buy it?"

Sheriff Macke shrugged. "If it comes from me he will and it'll keep him from suing the city, or the Council, for damages."

"Thank you, Sheriff. How long do you think your people will be out here?"

"For a few more hours at least. We've got a wagon coming to get all these animals and I'm not leaving until the scene has been secured."

Jamison nodded. She and Dalton's team would be scouring the woods and it was nice to know they'd have back up if they needed it. "All right. I'm going to talk to my team now."

Sam cast a disdainful look at Aaron. "Good luck with that."

Dalton squatted down over a crimson streaked carcass near the edge of the tree line. He didn't bother to stand as Jamison took up a position behind him though he could easily sense her presence. Jamison started to reprimand Dalton for his behavior with the sheriff, but he spoke first.

"Hot date? I can smell her all over you." Aaron looked up and his incisors were white spikes in the darkness against his lower lip. His voice was as rough as stone.

"Shut up," she enunciated sharply. "And control yourself. What I do is none of your business."

He stood quickly and moved into her space, but Jamison refused to give way. "Even though this happened right in your back yard? You were off with your girlfriend when that thing butchered a whole field of animals. Do you have any idea how long it took to do something like this?"

Jamison ignored the stab of guilt and focused on his insubordination. "Your team was the one on patrol, or have you forgotten about that? Where were you, playing poker in Jim Glasgow's kitchen? I can smell the whiskey on your breath."

He leaned even closer and Jamison felt her cat strain for freedom. Her features sharpened as bones slid over one another and took on new dimensions. Claws erupted from her fingertips and her own incisors flashed. A constant, low-pitched growl rumbled from her chest. Had she been in the company of humans rather than the darkness near the edge of the woods, Jamison wouldn't have allowed even that much of a change but she couldn't let his constant challenges go unanswered.

"It would be a shame to lose a good hunter," Jamison said through thickened vocal chords, "but the next time you push me, you'll not walk away. Find your gang and tell them to concentrate on the area from here to Mafdet through the eastern woods."

Dalton's eyes blazed gold under the moonlight, but he directed his gaze to the ground. She could see his jaws working and knew he was fighting the urge to have a confrontation with her. He was a dominant cat and it was natural for him to stand his ground, but he would lose. He knew that and would comply, for now. Lee was certain the time was coming when that changed. He would gleefully release his inner beast, with no restraints and no guilt.

When that happened, she'd have to kill him.

"Is your team in skin or pelt?"

Dalton took a breath, fighting to control his tone. "Pelt."

"Good. Their senses will be sharper. I'm going to Hank's and let him know what happened. He can update the rest of the Council. Then I'll patrol around the park's visitor center."

"Do you think the...elder...will be awake?"

He looked south toward the park headquarters, instinctively seeking out the direction in which Hank lived. He could never hope to see that far, but the actions were rote. Hank lived less than a mile from where they stood. The realization made her frown and she began to wonder why he wasn't here.

"Has anyone tried to call him?"

Dalton shrugged. "Not that I know of." He still refused to look at her.

In other words, he hadn't bothered to try to contact the elder even though Hank lived right over the ridge. She remembered Dalton's words at the morgue, how useless he thought the other man. Dalton would never have considered informing him.

She pivoted around without another word and walked back to her pickup. A few minutes later, she was driving up the private lane to Hank's home. The white paint stood out even under the canopy of trees, and lights burned toward the rear of the house. The wind had begun to pick up and leaves blew across the windshield, a sudden gust buffeted the vehicle before moving on to toss the heavy branches.

Jamison was less than a hundred yards from the house when something darted out of the tree line directly in front of her and she jumped in surprise. Even in the headlights, it was only a dark hulking shape between her and the front door. She stomped down hard on the brakes and came up sharply against the restraint.

At first, she thought it was a bear. Jamison never considered she'd actually run into the predator so quickly on her own. Then the thing turned its head and she knew beyond doubt that it was no bear, nor was it any other natural wilderness creature. Silver eyes blinked at her, a solid sheet of light uninterrupted by pupil or iris, and then it was moving. Not away, but right at her.

It scampered quickly on all fours like an ape even though the tawny color was all lion. Massive front paws kicked up bits of turf. Malicious intent flowed from it like a shadow and she could see its claws as it rushed forward. They were large, powerful and curving; the perfect instrument for ripping deep and perforating organs.

Fangs flashed as a red tongue rolled out, sampling the crispness of the night breeze.

Jamison could see scarlet gore splattered over its chest and muzzle. Her heart thundered and adrenaline flooded her system as her inner beast clamored to tear into the creature, but she wrestled it back under control. There wouldn't be time to get out of the truck before it pounced. With no chance to change, she'd be nothing but another victim. Her higher reasoning quickly assessed the situation and she came up with the only possible solution.

She was sitting behind the wheel of a one-ton deadly weapon.

Rather than wait sedately for it to rip her head off, Jamison slammed the accelerator to the floor. For an insane instant, the tires spun uselessly, giving her the impressing of existing in a real-life episode of *The Flintstones*. Then the tires dug in and the Chevy shot forward, engine straining. She watched as the demented cat's eyes widened in brief surprise, evidence of a reasoning side.

The truck didn't have enough distance to gather much momentum and couldn't have been going very fast, but when they collided, the sound of the impact was deafening. There was a loud thump followed by the shriek of twisted metal. Both headlights blew out and the creature was thrown over the hood, smashing into the windshield. The tempered glass crunched and cracks spider-webbed across the surface, obscuring any view of the monster.

Jamison slammed the pickup into park and reached for the door handle, shifting while in motion. She heard the seams at her shoulders rip and the top button of her jeans flew away. Razor sharp claws tore out of her fingertips and her incisors erupted as midnight pelt raced down her arms and the center of her abdomen. Out of the truck and partially shifted, she prepared to meet the lion in combat, but it was already entering the woods. Jamison thought she saw it limping slightly, but there wasn't any other indication of injury.

She started after it, a blur of motion, but stopped abruptly when she saw the front door of Hank's home standing ajar. Her cat raged and howled for a chance to continue the pursuit, but her worry for the elder gave Jamison the strength to battle the change. She looked briefly after the lion, but it was gone.

The night was suddenly quiet; even the wind had died away, and if not for the condition of the truck, it could all have been a dream. Except Hank's front door stood open in the middle of the night.

Instinct urged her to cock her ears forward, alert for any signs of life inside the house, but her human physiology wouldn't allow for directional hearing. She scented the coppery taste of blood even from a distance, and knew something was very wrong. With her gaze pinned to the front door and all of her other senses straining, she walked quietly toward the entrance. There was the possibility the monster had a companion still inside and she didn't want to alert anyone or anything to her presence.

Her foot had just touched the bottom step when a chill raced through her that had nothing to do with the cool evening air. She looked around quickly, sure she was being watched, but nothing moved in the shadows. Jamison climbed the four wooden steps, slowly placing each foot before shifting her weight onto it to reduce any noise she might inadvertently make. Although the killer had vanished into the woods, he could always change his mind and circle back around.

She paused at the shadowy entrance, afraid of what she might find. Then she leaned around the frame to peer inside. Nothing seemed disturbed.

"Hank?" Jamison's voice was barely above a whisper, but Hank would respond if he still lived.

She moved into the living room and could see that a massive struggle had taken place. Overturned furniture and shattered glass lay everywhere. Blood spatters abounded and in one spot a red stain adorned a wall. The rich, iron smell permeated the air, causing the fine hair on the back of her neck to stand on end. Debris littered the floor as she stepped toward the rear of the house and the kitchen.

Her foot struck something yielding and she recognized at once that it was flesh.

"Hank!"

With the overturned loveseat covering him, Jamison hadn't been able to see him. Only his arm extended and that had been concealed by the rubble. Now she could see streaks of blood covering his exposed flesh. Fear coursed through her veins and her tongue cleaved dryly to the roof of her mouth. She grabbed the end of the small sofa with one hand and heaved the piece of furniture off him. It landed several feet away with a crash, but she ignored it as she dropped to her knees and fought the urge to be sick.

Furiously blinking back the tears, Jamison forced herself to look at him. Hank's body was slashed in countless places, no doubt by the wicked claws she had seen earlier. He hadn't even partially shifted and she saw that he wore pajamas. He'd probably been sleeping on the sofa when the intruder attacked and hadn't had time to react. Hank never stood a chance, but the

murderer hadn't been content merely to take his life. She swallowed thickly and looked away from where his head should have been.

The beast had ruthlessly decapitated him.

A noise from deeper in the house, a sudden thump, brought her back to her surroundings. Jamison jumped to her feet and looked back toward the kitchen. As quietly as possible, she tiptoed over to the wall and moved toward the rear of the house. Nothing rushed out at her, but the destruction she'd witnessed in the foyer and the living room continued as she progressed. Jamison hesitated before stepping around the corner into the kitchen. This was where the noise had originated. Had the killer returned?

She pressed one hand against the wall, mentally bracing herself for what she'd find. Jamison absently felt the drying blood on her hand, from where she'd touched Hank, adhere to the sheetrock, but she focused the bulk of her attention on the darkened room. Slowly she leaned around the doorframe and the sight that greeted her caused her blood to freeze. The back door stood open and the breeze had caused it to thump against the frame, but that wasn't what captured her attention. Her vision narrowed down until all she could see was Hank's disembodied head resting in the center of the kitchen table.

Bile rose swiftly in her throat and Jamison sprinted for the door. She barely made it beyond the rear steps before she threw up in great, wrenching heaves. Every time she thought she had the spasms under control, she'd remember Hank's lifeless eyes and they'd start anew.

Finally, nothing was left in her stomach. She leaned over with her hands on her knees taking great shuddering breaths. A car door slammed and she frowned.

Who would come out here at this time of the night?

Had another Panthera sensed her distress? Jamison didn't think that was likely since the only one who knew she was here had no concern for her welfare.

Jamison walked around the side of the house, unable to risk seeing Hank's body again. She sniffled slightly, but quickly pulled her composure around her when she saw Sheriff Macke.

"Why are you here?"

Sam studied Jamison's appearance before she responded slowly. "I got an anonymous tip that it sounded like a fight was going on in the house. Are you all right?"

Jamison nodded. "Hank doesn't have any neighbors. How would anyone know what was going on?"

The sound of the screen door slamming made her start and whirl quickly back toward the house. Dalton was coming down the steps with a grim look on his face. Blood smeared the front of his blue and white striped shirt.

"Did you see him?" she asked quietly.

Dalton frowned, looking back and forth from Sam to Jamison. "See who?"

"Hank. He's dead."

"What?" Dalton's eyebrows climbed toward his hairline in surprise. "I didn't see anything like that, but there sure is a lot of blood in there."

"Hold on," Sam said sharply, "Who's dead? What happened here?"

"It's Hank Morgan, he's an elder on the Council," Jamison said to the sheriff before she turned to her beta. "You must have seen him. He's lying on the living room floor."

Aaron shook his head.

"All right, stay here." Sheriff Macke put her hand on her side arm and walked up the steps before disappearing into the house. As soon as she disappeared, Jamison confronted Dalton.

"You had to have seen him. That lion killed him, it decapitated him and put his damned head on the kitchen table like it was some kind of display."

"I didn't see anything like that," he insisted, rage coloring his answer. "All I know is I get here and you're covered in blood going on about an elder being murdered. Then I walk in and find his living room looking like a slaughterhouse."

Fury rose swift and deep, her eyes taking on more of the deep blue of a jaguar rather than the intense green. All of his previous comments about Hank and now the denial of his death made her want to shift and tear the truth out of him.

"I was trying to save him, but you weren't here when it happened." She eyed him suspiciously. "Why is there blood on your shirt? How do I know it wasn't you?"

Dalton couldn't shift as quickly as Jamison, but that didn't stop him striding toward her as his shirt split at the seams.

"Stop it! Right now!"

Sam's angry shout made both of them hesitate. The sheriff had her gun out and aimed in their direction. "You can piss all over the place and mark your territory later. Right now I want to know what happened. Starting with you, Ranger Kessler."

"I...I came over to let Hank know what happened," she said shakily, visions of his mutilated body fresh in her mind's eye.

"And your truck?" Sam asked, gesturing to the battered vehicle. "It looks like you ran into a tree."

She shook her head. "Not a tree. That...thing was here. It came right at me."

"So you used your pickup as a battering ram?"

Jamison nodded.

"Then what?"

"It got up like nothing happened and ran for the trees. I wanted to go after it, but the front door was open. I was worried about Hank so I went inside."

"Just like that?" Dalton asked mockingly. "You didn't even think about calling for some help when we were only a short distance away?"

She wanted to pummel him, but the doubtful look on the sheriff's face brought her up short. "No, I didn't. I wanted to make sure Hank was okay...but he wasn't. He was dead."

"How did you get covered in blood?" Sam asked gently, able to see the shock Jamison was going into.

Jamison shivered slightly. "I pulled him out from under some stuff, furniture, I think. I didn't know until then that he was dead, decapitated."

Sam didn't respond; she only stared at Jamison for several long seconds. Then she asked Dalton, "What are you doing here and same question...why are you covered in blood?"

"Uh, I came up here to see if Kessler was all right."

"Since when do you care?" Jamison fired at him with all her pent up frustration.

"Hey, in case you didn't notice there's a predator running around. You said you were coming over here to talk to Hank, but you never came back. I was just checking on you."

"I never said I was coming back. Didn't I give you orders to check the woods? Why are you still here, anyway?"

"Whatever," Sam interrupted. She gestured toward Dalton's ruined shirt. "And the blood?"

He looked down as if seeing the gore for the first time, hesitating far too long before responding. "It must have happened back in the meadow."

Sheriff Macke's eyes narrowed, as did Jamison's. He was obviously lying, but about what? Before Jamison could ask, the sheriff said, "I need to get some crime scene techs out here, but I don't want either of you going anywhere. You'll have to give statements and I'm going to have my people collect blood evidence from both of you, just to rule you out as suspects."

Jamison thought it more likely that Sam suspected one or both of them, but at least she was doing her job. If Dalton had something to do with Hank's death, Jamison wanted to know too.

"What about Hank? You can't just leave him there like that," Jamison said.

"Miss Kessler," Sam said, "I don't know how to tell you this, but there's no body inside that house."

"What? That can't be. He was just there."

"I didn't see anything either," Dalton said.

Jamison started for the house, but she didn't get far. Sheriff Macke moved to block her path. "Move, I'll show you where he is."

"No, you won't."

A growl ripped from her throat and Jamison reached out to physically remove the small human from her path.

"Don't even think about it," Sam shouted before Jamison could touch her. "This is a crime scene now and you aren't law enforcement. Your authority ended with a meadow full of dead sheep."

Jamison held her temper with superhuman effort. She ground her teeth until she had full control and said, "You're either very brave or very stupid."

"Probably a little of both," Sam said. "I'm just glad you stopped. Look, Jamison, you're going to have to trust me to do my job."

Jamison's eyes brimmed with tears and she blinked them back. "He was in there, you have to believe me."

"I do. His head is exactly where you said, but his body is missing. Let us find out how and why."

Finally, Jamison nodded and looked away. "All right. I realize you have a job to do and I'll cooperate."

Sam walked back into the house, pulling out her radio at the same time to contact her people. Jamison turned back to demand that Dalton tell her what he was hiding, but he was already gone. Looking around, Jamison spotted him standing near the porch close to the sheriff. Frustration simmered in her veins because she knew he'd deliberately walked over there so she couldn't question him. It was going to be a long night.

Chapter Fifteen

LEE ROLLED OVER and groaned in her sleep. A fine sheen of sweat broke out over her skin as the dream coalesced into clear images.

Millions of stars blinked in the night sky, obscured randomly by storm clouds that refused to release the promise of rain. All around the woods were silent, heavy with the portent of impending homicide. Darkness encroached on the truck from all sides, a living thing conspiring to press the doors closed and prevent any escape. Just as quickly, the vehicle became a refuge rather than a prison when a monstrous creature turned its head and peered at her through a moonlight-colored gaze.

Tension coiled tightly in the pit of her stomach. She waited, her breath held, for the moment to break. Then the great, hulking brute charged toward her. Terror made Lee's heart beat faster; adrenaline flooding her veins.

Unexpectedly, the vision changed, morphing like heat waves off a street. The creature was gone and she stood alone under the moonlight, but her body looked strange. Not hers. Dark hair glistened over tanned flesh and dangerously carved claws adorned her fingertips. Lee felt incisors erupt into deadly fangs. A shadow of soft pelt rose from her abdomen and disappeared into the waistband of her jeans.

She felt strong, the forest came alive and her senses exploded. Lee tasted the air, she breathed the colors and her mind saw the dampness of the nearby lake. Frightened woodland creatures shivered and cowered under the cover of shadow, hidden amidst rocks and brush. They were afraid of her, but they feared the other even more.

Her concentration shifted again and Lee found she had left the clearing. She discovered wood under her feet, not the type she'd find in the wilderness, but the kind processed in a sawmill. She was inside a structure. A house.

Furniture had been broken like kindling, lamps smashed. An iron, coppery scent hung in the air and the urge to hunt nearly overtook her. As quickly as the need struck, she shook it away. Blood was life, but in this case, it was despair. Someone who mattered dwelled here.

"No," she mumbled in her sleep, desperate to leave the carnage-soaked landscape she sensed was on the verge of revelation.

With unbelievable strength, she upended the loveseat and watched it crash against the wall at the far end of the room. A man lay beneath, but he would never draw another breath. Blood soaked the floor where his head should have rested and covered what remained of his body. Her heart twisted in misery and anger. He had been like a father to her and a daughter's sorrow battled with the rage that encouraged her to destroy the one responsible.

Grief won out and Lee crumpled to the floor on her knees, holding the mangled form protectively against her breast. Her shirt soaked up the half-dried blood, but she didn't release the nameless man until a sound made her look up.

Was the murderer in the house somewhere? Had she missed the signs that the thing had returned? Lee's nostrils flared, but she didn't smell anyone else inside the dwelling.

She laid the man gently against the floor. In an instant she was near the kitchen, the only room from which an overhead light burned. Lee didn't want to enter the chamber, she fought her body's forward movement, crying out to stop before her eyes witnessed what she knew she'd find.

Lee screamed and sat upright in the bed, her eyes darting furiously around the darkened room. An animal clawed at her and she caught herself from striking out just in time to realize it was Cleo.

"It was a dream," she gasped, reassured by the strong sound of her own voice and the warm body pressing against her.

Cleo frantically licked at her face and Lee pulled away, reaching up to hold her furry friend. Her heart slowly took on a more normal cadence and she needed a few moments to get her breathing under control.

"I'm okay. Good girl."

When she felt she might be able to safely stand, Lee pushed back the covers and navigated into the bathroom by moonlight. She flipped on the overhead switch and blinked against the glare before she walked over to the sink and twisted the tap.

Lee cupped cool water in her hands and splashed her face repeatedly, trying to wash away the last traces of the horrific nightmare. Then she gripped the edge of the basin with still shaking hands and looked up into her reflection only to find a stranger's eyes staring back.

Amber bursts of lightning flared intermittently in the deep blue depths. A phantasm of color swirling similar to a single-hued storm of fireworks. Shocked, she reared back from the mirror. Lee clenched her eyes as tightly closed as possible and shook her head. Then she opened them again and leaned forward, desperately searching the cornflower orbs.

Normal, she thought in relief.

She let out the breath she didn't realize she'd been holding. The dream had affected her even more than she had at first realized. She shivered and reached for a towel, drying her face without glancing into the mirror again. Lee threw the towel over her shoulder and walked back into the bedroom. Cleo still stood on the queen-sized bed, gazing at her with doggy worry in her brown eyes.

"It was just a dream, girl. We're okay."

Cleo seemed to take her at her word, lying down as Lee set logs to burn in the fireplace. A few minutes later the blaze caught and Lee felt some of the tension leech out of her shoulders. A quick look at the clock told her it was three in the morning and she doubted she'd get back to sleep tonight.

Crouching on her knees in front of the flames, Lee wondered what could have brought on such a horrific dream. Surely, the trespassers hadn't bothered her so much that her subconscious would generate such nocturnal imagery over it.

Maybe if she'd been able to get hold of the sheriff, or even have a car come out to take a report she'd have felt better. Unfortunately, the dispatcher had told her that everyone was busy and unless it was an emergency, she couldn't pull someone away from another call just to take a report.

But it wasn't an emergency, she thought. It was just some kids playing around and I need to get over it. They didn't hurt anything and the whole thing isn't worth these kinds of dreams. I'm making a big deal out of nothing.

Lee stood and walked out of the bedroom. She entered the library and switched on the overhead light before heading straight to the bar. Silly or not, the dream had felt entirely real and

tenaciously clung to the back of her mind. She pulled out a small, crystal snifter and a bottle of brandy. Lee had just poured a generous shot when the doorbell rang.

Who on Earth?

Cleo barked and ran toward the front door, her claws making small ticking sounds against the wooden floor. Lee frowned and set the glass on the bar before she followed in Cleo's wake. The doorbell sounded again before she reached it and she peered through the small fisheye window centered in the mahogany door. Her frown changed into a delighted smile and Lee quickly unlocked the deadbolts. She started speaking as soon as the door swung open.

"This is a nice surprise..."

Her voice trailed off when she registered the shock and sorrow in Jamison's eyes and the dark, reddish-brown stains on her hands and wrists. Jamison had one large brown smudge across her cheek.

"Jamison! Are you all right?"

Lee grasped her left hand and urged her to come inside. Jamison entered mutely, staring down at their entwined fingers. She hadn't spoken and that, more than anything, scared Lee.

"Come in and sit down. I'll call an ambulance."

"It's not my blood."

With her heart rushing in her ears, Lee didn't really hear. She led Jamison into the living room and had her sit in the easy chair while she switched on a lamp. Then she returned and knelt between Jamison's thighs.

"What did you say, honey?" The endearment slipped out without thought as she brushed the dark hair back from Jamison's forehead, visually inspecting for any signs of injury.

"It's not my blood."

Lee took both hands into hers and stared into the green eyes, trying to get Jamison to connect with her. "Was there an accident? Do I need to call the police or an ambulance?"

Jamison stared at the front of Lee's sweatshirt and didn't show any signs of answering the question. Lee shook their joined hands once, sharply, to get her attention, ignoring what had to be dried blood flaking onto the floor.

"Jamison, talk to me. Please."

A deep, shuddering breath shook her frame, but she finally said, "Hank...my boss. He's dead."

Lee had to lean forward to hear the softly spoken words. "Oh my God, are you sure? Where is he? We need to call the police."

She started to her feet when Jamison gently tugged her back down. "They already know. Sheriff Macke is there now."

"That explains why I couldn't reach anyone," Lee mumbled under her breath.

So many questions went through her head simultaneously, but she pushed them away. Jamison didn't need an inquisition right now.

"I'm going to get you something to drink. Are you okay for a minute?"

Jamison nodded and Lee quickly went to the library to retrieve the brandy she'd poured earlier. She hefted the glass, hesitated and then downed the shot. Then she poured another measure of the potent liquor and hurried back to Jamison's side. Lee knelt down in front of her again and encouraged her to drink.

"The whole thing," she said when Jamison coughed and would have stopped.

After the glass was empty, Lee sat it on an end table and concentrated on Jamison. She was still pale under her tan, but she had some color back in her cheeks.

"Can you tell me what happened?"

Slowly, haltingly Jamison described driving to Hank's house and finding the front door ajar. She spoke of the chaos she had found within and the discovery of Hank' body lying on the living room floor. Lee shivered, thinking how much the details sounded like her nightmare. Except for the monster her own twisted imagination had invented and the final detail that had awakened her from the terrible dream.

Lee had heard of people tapping into some sort of connection across thousands of miles when a loved one was in trouble. That type of relationship hadn't formed between them yet, but they obviously had enough of one to allow her to know Jamison was in distress, if not in actual physical danger. Lee's instincts had always been strong and this was more proof that they seemed to be getting stronger.

"I'm so sorry," Lee said gently when she finished. "Were you very close?"

Jamison nodded. "I've known Hank all my life. He's always been there for me."

Lee pulled the dark head onto her shoulder, content to hold Jamison for a few minutes. There was nothing she could say to make any of it right. "Do you know who did it?"

"Not yet," Jamison answered without moving, letting Lee provide this limited physical comfort. "But I will."

Lee pulled away. The thought of Jamison putting herself in danger terrified her. Someone had already died. What made Jamison think the killer would hesitate to make her another victim? "Please, don't tell me you're going after the killer."

Jamison thought and finally answered, "I'm going to do everything I can to help the police find him."

At least she hadn't said she was going after the murderer alone. Lee closed her eyes briefly. She wanted to talk Jamison out of doing anything foolish, but now wasn't the time. They both needed rest and Lee wasn't about to let her go home by herself after such a trauma. She hadn't broken down yet, but Lee knew it was coming and she wanted to be there when Jamison needed her.

She stood and pulled gently on Jamison's hand, encouraging her to stand. "Let's get you cleaned up."

"I...I shouldn't have bothered you. It's late. I should go."

"Nonsense. I'm so sorry about your friend, but I'm glad you felt you could come here. And you're not going anywhere. You're staying with me tonight."

"Why?"

"Because you've had a terrible shock," Lee said gently, "And you shouldn't be alone."

"I don't have any clothes."

Lee smiled, relieved that Jamison had relented. "You can wear some of mine."

Jamison looked down at their joined hands and hers trembled slightly. Tears brimmed in green eyes. Lee's heart broke and she wanted to pull Jamison into her arms. Instead, she led her through the house and into her bedroom. The fire had grabbed hold of the logs and burned steadily, chasing the cool night air away. The bathroom light was still on and Lee had Jamison sit in the dressing area while she got out some fresh towels and turned on the shower. She adjusted the hot water and then squatted down beside Jamison.

"Just drop your clothes outside the door before you get in the shower. I'll get you something to wear."

Jamison nodded mutely.

Lee pushed dark hair back from Jamison's forehead, enjoying the full thickness under her fingers. "I'll be right outside if you need me."

AS SOON AS the bathroom door closed, Jamison buried her face in her hands. The smell of Hank's blood was strong, but it didn't call to her jaguar. Her head felt stuffed with cotton. Her limbs were heavy and, though the desire for vengeance should have been driving her, all she wanted was to lie down and sleep. Lee's compassion comforted her, soothed the anger and made her long to be closer. But that couldn't happen while she was covered in gore.

She stood and took off her shirt. It was a spare she carried in the truck. Sheriff Macke had taken her blood soaked garment to check for forensic evidence. Jamison still remembered how heavily stained it was and knew the police would match it to Hank's blood type. Shuddering, she quickly undressed and dropped her clothes onto the ground outside the door as Lee had instructed and then she got into the shower. She let the water pound over her head, gratefully absorbing the almost scalding heat. Red tinted the water that drained away and after a time Jamison took a loofa and bar of soap from the shelf at her side and scrubbed until her skin was sore.

Her breathing hitched as she shampooed and rinsed, but she refused to let go of her emotions; frightened that if she did she wouldn't be able to regain control. Jamison shoved all thoughts and feelings away and finished her shower. When she climbed out, she discovered a pile of clothing on the sink edge. Lee had come and gone. Even with her enhanced senses Jamison hadn't heard, a testament to how distraught she was.

She picked up an oversized blue t-shirt and looked at it for a second before holding it to her nose. It smelled like Lee's shampoo, lavender and blackberries, and the warmth of her body. She put it on and was surrounded by Lee's essence. Somehow, being in Lee's presence made everything tonight bearable. Lee was quickly finding her way into places inside where Jamison had never allowed anyone else.

She dressed in the t-shirt and a pair of sweat pants, and then hung the towel over the bar before leaving the bathroom. Jamison stopped short as soon as she walked into the bedroom, an attack of nerves causing goose bumps to break out over her arms. The scene she walked into was one of seduction on the surface. A fire raged in the hearth and Lee lay in bed with the covers up to her waist. She sat propped up on several pillows and a single lamp burned next to her on the nightstand.

Cleo barked once and broke the spell. She stood at the foot of the bed and wagged her tail. Jamison smiled at the dog's efforts to welcome her. Cleo remained wary of her, sensing danger but wanting to be friends.

"Hey, Cleo. How are you, girl?"

She gently stroked the dog's hard cranium, ignoring it when Cleo flinched a bit. After a few seconds, the beagle yawned and moved over to the corner of the bed where she lay down.

"Does she always sleep with you?"

"Yes." Lee frowned. "Is that a problem?"

"No. Not at all."

Jamison appreciated that Lee treated the dog as a family member, someone she loved rather than as just an animal. It spoke of the kindness in her heart and acceptance for other living creatures.

Lee smiled and flipped back the covers on the empty side. "Come on. Let's get some rest."

Swallowing against a suddenly dry throat, Jamison walked over to the side of the bed and slid under the covers. She felt the heat from Lee's body as soon as she did and tried not to groan at the arousal that coursed through her.

She knew humans would consider her reaction unseemly, but she was Panthera, her blood ran hot and she had been withholding her emotions all evening. She had been forced to curb her desire for Lee earlier during dinner and then she had been forced to abandon pursuit of the monster changeling after having partially shifted into her jaguar. Later, rage had surged through her veins when she found Hank. All of that conspired to set her animal instincts ablaze and it was hard to ignore them now.

Lee turned toward her and Jamison jumped, nervous eyes shifted toward her. "What are you doing?"

"Getting comfortable." Lee tossed a few pillows onto the floor and lay back with only one under her head. "Are you all right?"

"Yes," Jamison said, deliberately misunderstanding the question. "I feel a lot better, thank you."

Blue eyes softened and Lee held out an arm. "Come here."

"Wh...what? Why?"

"It's okay; I just want to hold you while you sleep. Sometimes just the touch of another person can make us feel better."

"Oh."

Lee was providing reassurance, not making a proposition. Jamison should have moved away. She should have climbed out of bed, dressed and gone home, but she was weak. She snuggled up to Lee and rested her head against a warm breast. Lee's heart beat strong under her ear and she tried to let the sound comfort her. Jamison pulled a deep breath in through her nose, reaching for calm. It was a mistake. Emotions hammered through her defenses, knocking down walls she wasn't aware had been erected. She moved in Lee's arms, rubbing her face against satin skin.

Lee reacted by embracing her, strong fingers threading through Jamison's dark hair. Jamison pressed closer and nuzzled Lee's neck before sucking the corded muscles into her mouth. She grazed the skin lightly with her teeth and Lee arched into her. Jamison felt Lee's body tighten and hard nipples prodded into her chest through the cotton t-shirt. She resisted the drive to bite by the thinnest of margins.

"What are you doing?" Lee gasped, but she moaned and her arms tightened.

Jamison didn't answer, her need so strong she couldn't speak. She quickly rose up and kissed Lee. Full lips parted under the assault in heated welcome and Lee's tongue eagerly engaged her own. Like earlier, desire rose between them, a furious inferno that threatened to burn out of control.

Lee's breasts were soft against her and very slowly the fire in Jamison began to lessen, tempered by the tenderness she felt. She released Lee's lips and leaned away, but only by a few inches. Her pulse raced when she looked into blue eyes and found her own desire reflected there. She leaned down to kiss Lee again, but was surprised when Lee pulled away.

"Don't you want to be with me?" Jamison asked, caught off guard by the hurt that seared through her.

"Of course I do, Jami." Lee's palm stroked her cheek. "I know you can feel that."

Relieved, Jamison started to kiss her, but again Lee pulled away. "What is it?"

Lee's palm clasped the back of her neck and Jamison laid her head against her chest. "I've wanted you since I saw you on Blue Mountain Road and if this had happened earlier, I wouldn't have wanted to stop."

"So what's different now?"

"Nothing," Lee said, stroking her hair in such a way that Jamison felt her body begin to relax. "I still want to be with you, but it won't happen tonight. When we do finally make love, I want to know it's because of how we feel for each other. I don't want to face the possibility that you might regret it in the morning. Does that make sense?"

Jamison nodded and she knew Lee was right. She did want to make love, but her desires were intermingled with her animal instincts. As a jaguar, passion was often combined with violence, but now wasn't the time.

As the passion faded, grief gathered like a storm. Tears pooled in her eyes and slipped down her nose before dropping onto Lee's breast. Lee held her close and spoke gentle words of reassurance as the tempest broke. Sobs tore from Jamison's chest and she huddled closer, drawing what solace she could from Lee's strong embrace.

Eventually, the torrent passed and Jamison slept. In her dreams, she traveled the path between justice and vengeance. Each was enticing, but revenge called out to her most loudly. Her guilt fueled that desire. Then both slid away and for a time, she slept peacefully.

Chapter Sixteen

LEE AWAKENED WITH sunlight streaming through the window and over the surface of the queen-sized bed. Instinctively, she reached out for Jamison's warm body. Instead, she encountered cold sheets. Groggy from the lack of quality sleep, she forced one eye open and surveyed the quiet room. She was alone.

She sighed heavily and rubbed her face with both hands in an attempt to wake. Cleo took her movement as an invitation. She yelped excitedly and tried to bathe Lee's face through her parted fingers.

"Yeah, yeah, I got it," Lee grouched. She threw back the cover and padded toward the bathroom, scratching her side. "One doggy breakfast coming up as soon as I make a pitstop. Would you like bacon and eggs, your majesty?"

Cleo wagged her tail and barked before she jumped off the bed and followed.

"In your dreams," she mumbled absently, her thoughts centered on life-giving coffee.

Lee walked into the kitchen after she left the bathroom, ready to brew a pot only to discover that Jamison had done it before she left.

"Bless you."

She filled Cleo's bowl with dry kibble, blowing off the indignant look in favor of pouring a cup of Kona blend. After a scalding sip, she sighed in contentment.

With the first jolt of caffeine, her brain started to function once more. Lee walked out onto the back porch and left the door open behind her. The sounds of Cleo chomping her food and birds singing filled the air as she thought about everything that had happened in the two weeks since moving to Harmon. It definitely hadn't been dull.

Just meeting Jamison had been an eye-opening experience, not to mention everything else. Lee frowned. Too bad most of what she'd encountered wasn't nearly as pleasant. A memory of the first night in town came to her and the frown deepened.

Something weird had occurred in the grocery store with the townspeople staring at her like a particularly intriguing insect under a microscope. The incident definitely seemed strange at the time, but she quickly dismissed it. Now, Lee thought about the other small occurrences that had happened and things took on a more interesting slant.

She'd encountered a possible homeless man in the woods who was a pretty good mechanic as well as a raccoon with a penchant for petting beagles. A troop of trespassers had been holding some kind of ritual in the woods half a mile from the house and something in the barrels downstairs smelled like it had been belched out of the sewers from hell.

What could Aunt Chris possibly have stored that would smell so bad?

In addition to all that, Jamison received a phone call last night and went directly to a crime scene where a friend of hers had just been murdered. Lee's heart clenched again in sympathy, but she pushed her feelings away for the moment to concentrate on the logic of the situation.

Why would the police call Jami to come to such a site instead of calling the man's immediate family? That is, if it was the police who had phoned. Jamison never said and Lee hadn't asked, but she didn't see how it could be anyone else. Still, none of it made any sense.

Come to think of it, there were a lot of things about Jamison Kessler that didn't add up.

The woman was a park ranger who just happened to work directly for the City Council? Lee hadn't given it a lot of thought when Jami mentioned it, but now she had to wonder. Being part of the forest service at Adirondack Park would be a full-time job and Jami would be assigned to a day or night shift. Yet, she seemed to be on duty 24/7.

Lee stared into her cold coffee, but didn't really see it.

She had never liked secrets, they tended to come back and bite her in the butt. On top of that, she really cared for Jamison and didn't want anything to stand between them. If she had learned anything from her latest disaster of a relationship, it was to question potential problems before they blew up in her face. In order to do that, she had to find out what Jamison was hiding before it had a chance to ruin the feelings growing between them. But how?

Lee pondered the question as she walked inside the house and poured a fresh cup of coffee. She had to think about how to approach the situation, but right now there were other things demanding her attention.

While living at Mafdet, she spent her free time taking photos, learning the area and getting to know a certain dark-haired ranger. Since Jamison would no doubt be busy the next several days with her friend's funeral, Lee needed to get some of her aunt's personal belongings sorted. She needed to go through the closets and figure out what to keep and what she could donate to various charities.

Unfortunately, a quick look in the attic right after arriving had so overwhelmed her that Lee had put off the chores. She hadn't given them a second thought, but she finally had to stop procrastinating. Just the memory of cobwebs, a few dozen cardboard boxes, a couple of wooden chests and a ton of junk that looked at least a century old, was enough to make her groan.

All right, it's time to get it over with and maybe I can decide how to talk with Jami somewhere along the way. I just have to convince her she can trust me with...whatever it is.

"ORDER! ORDER IN these chambers." Darlene Kessler's shout overpowered all the other voices that were speaking at once. Her voice was loud so she could be heard, but was the only one not raised in anger.

Jamison stood quietly before the assembled elders, more impressed with her mother than she ever would have admitted aloud. Standing in the center of the long, raised dais where the remaining five Council elders sat, Darlene was quite the sight.

Regardless of how Jamison felt seeing the woman in action, one empty seat beckoned to her. She refused to look at it or the man behind her who had caused this uproar.

The din quieted reluctantly, but emotions still ran high. Two of the elders were especially upset and on the verge of shifting. Marie Tristan and Cole Verity both resembled their cats more than their human half. Muzzles had lifted and flattened and whiskers had sprouted. They were hunched forward slightly, incapable of sitting erect since their spines had lengthened in preparation of the change.

Even Gail Henson, the most junior among her peers, was affected by the tense atmosphere, but the only sign of it was her elongated canines. Jamison mentally compared the young brunette

to a vampire and would have laughed if not for the seriousness of the situation. The Council had summoned her because Dalton had registered a complaint.

"Say that again," Darlene ordered him.

Jamison recognized the warning in her mother's voice, but Aaron Dalton was too arrogant and sure of himself to notice.

"I accuse *Pieta* Jamison Kessler of incompetence. Her actions last night have endangered our community. She is not fit to become an elder."

Darlene's eyes narrowed and a spark of anger flared in them, yet she held onto her professionalism. Jamison wasn't as successful. Her teeth ground together in fury, but she intended to keep her mouth closed until the Council addressed her directly.

"That is not your decision to make," Darlene said. "Nor is it within your rights to call the Council into emergency session."

"Yet here we are." Dalton's lips twisted into a nasty sneer.

Outraged that he'd address the senior elder, the Caber, who also happened to be her mother, with such contempt, Jamison spun toward him and snarled. Her lips pulled back and her teeth elongated into deadly spikes. It was Darlene's voice that kept her from attacking.

"You forget yourself, Aaron. You have no standing here and the next time you speak to me or any other elder like that, I won't hesitate to discipline you."

In other words, Jamison thought, she's going to pulverize you in front of the entire Council and leave you with a permanent reminder.

Darlene could do it, too. Jamison's mother was a perfect example of Panthera; tall, sleek and muscled. Jamison compared her to Dalton, but in him she saw a jaguar who might be ill. He'd lost weight and was skinnier than usual. Dark circles rested under his eyes and a day's growth of stubble covered his cheeks. Unfortunately, the attitude remained the same.

With a smarmy smile, Dalton bowed slightly. "My apologies, Elder. No disrespect intended."

"Enough of this," Marie rumbled, her cat features slightly less pronounced. "These are serious charges. He must be heard."

Darlene cast an apologetic look to Jamison, but as the lead representative she had to be fair. "Very well. All Council members in favor of hearing this twaddle signify by saying aye."

Marie and Cole were the first to speak, followed closely by Lydia Booker.

Jamison wasn't surprised. Marie had just risen to second in charge with Hank's death and had always been against her appointment as an elder. She believed it would give one family too much power over ruling decisions, or so she said.

Lydia had a thing for Dalton that the whole town knew about. So far, he hadn't shown the slightest hint that he returned her interest, but that didn't keep her from trying.

Cole was another matter. The man was in his fifties and had been a Council member for a long time, but was still fifth in line as far as seniority. He wasn't a dominant cat and tried to give all issues an unbiased hearing. Jamison thought, in his concern for impartiality, it was too bad he often allowed his opinions to be swayed.

These three concerned her, and she was fairly confident on whose side they'd fall. Only Dominick Crane and Gail Henson remained quiet, signaling that they really didn't want to hear what the oaf had to say.

"I must abstain from voting as these proceedings concern my daughter," Darlene said. "The majority rules and we will continue, but I'm warning you, Aaron, any inflammatory remarks will result in you being tossed out on your ear. You will limit yourself to the facts that can be verified. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Elder Kessler. Those terms will be just fine."

Jamison rolled her eyes. Even when he tried to be ingratiating he came across about as trustworthy as a used car salesman. The thought triggered a memory of Lee wanting to trade in her pickup.

Jamison winced and forced her concentration back to the hearing.

Dalton stepped forward until he was even with her, eager for the questioning to begin.

"You've accused Pieta Kessler of incompetence while investigating the predator that murdered Elder Morgan. Explain."

"Instead of doing her job, Kessler was on a date with a human. Morgan and those sheep were killed less than two miles from her house."

Jamison felt guilt surge painfully through her chest. He was right. If she had been on patrol, Hank might still be alive.

"Correct me if I'm wrong," Dominick said, speaking for the first time. "Wasn't your team on duty last night? From what I understand, you were less than one mile from the scene and you didn't get there in time."

"Aaron and his men can't be everywhere at once," Lydia protested, brushing long blonde hair behind one ear as she smiled at Dalton.

Dominick frowned. "But Jamison can?"

"She was on a date," Marie pointed out forcefully. "With a human."

Darlene cut into the heated debate in an effort to thwart Jamison's adversaries. "What do you think, Gail?"

The thirty-something woman hesitated a little, considering the question. She was the newest Council member and Jamison worried that she could be easily influenced by her more aggressive peers.

"I'm sorry, I just don't understand why the fact that Pieta Kessler was on a date is such a big deal, regardless if it was with a human or a Panthera. As Dominick already pointed out, Dalton's team was on duty and already in that area."

Marie snorted at the comment, but Gail's friendly green eyes met her gaze and Jamison couldn't resist smiling back.

"Cole, we still haven't heard from you," Darlene said to keep things moving along.

The gray-haired man surprised them all by responding clearly and in a slightly aggravated tone. "I don't care if she had a date with a squirrel. It has nothing to do with whether or not she's incompetent. Get to the point, cub, or get out. We do have other issues to deal with."

"I agree," Dominick said impatiently.

"As do I," Gail added.

Darlene tried to hide her smile, but was largely unsuccessful. She called on each elder in turn and all relented, including Lydia who nervously avoided Dalton's gaze. The sole dissenter was Marie.

"I do not agree. Dating a human has the potential to publicly expose our kind. Where would that leave us? I'll tell you where. Persecuted."

Those same humans could learn a thing or two from you, Jamison thought. Marie didn't care about the people one way or the other; what she wanted was to discredit Jamison and this trivial issue was as good as anything to do it. It just infuriated her to see Lee being used as a tool.

"Your opinion has been noted, but the majority rules," Darlene said. "There are other humans who know about us, we don't live in a vacuum as much as we wish we did. Sheriff Macke is one of the few trusted with our secret and I agree that we should keep the knowledge of our presence

restricted. However, let's explore this human's potential danger just to satisfy all parties concerned."

Jamison didn't know where her mother was going with this train of thought and felt a brief surge of concern.

"Jamison," Elder Kessler began, "please tell us who this person is and their relationship to our people."

There was no curiosity in the *Caber's* eyes, just a hint of triumph. At first Jamison didn't understand, but then it hit her. Dinah must have already told her all about the woman living in Mafdet Manor.

"Her name is Lee Grayson and she is Christine Mafdet's great niece. I've spent time with her and though I sense that she is half human," Jamison's irritated gaze focused on Aaron Dalton, "I also know that she is half Panthera."

Stunned silence reigned throughout the chamber until Marie spoke. For once she wasn't caustic or antagonistic, merely curious and hopeful. "Have you seen her shift? Do you think she might be like Chris?"

Jamison saw the eager expressions of the Council. Chris had been very important to their community and since her loss it felt like a huge hole had been left behind. She wanted to be able to say what they needed to hear, but she wouldn't lie. This was too important.

"No, I haven't seen her change. Lee was raised by her human father after her mother's death and I'm not sure she even knows about her heritage or us. If she does, she's never said."

Disappointed murmurs passed around the table, but Cole leaned forward to ask the question that might brand Lee as an outsider.

"And the other? Do you think she could be talented, like her aunt?"

Jamison shrugged. "As I said, we haven't discussed it. I will tell you this, I sense something special about her and I'm not just saying that because I like her."

"*Pieta*," he said, "is she living in the manor?"

"Yes." Jamison felt that should be obvious.

"And is she a photographer?"

She scowled. These questions were too direct. Something else was going on. "She's a nature photographer, quite a good one from what I understand. Why do you ask?"

"We'll get to that," he assured her.

"If we're all agreed that who the *Pieta* dates is her business, I suggest we move on. Dalton, you accused Kessler of putting our people in danger. I, for one, would like to hear how."

Darlene's eyes narrowed when Marie assumed control of the session, but Jamison was surprised when her mother kept quiet and everyone ignored her question. What was that about?

"Agreed," Caber Kessler said, asserting her authority. "Aaron?"

He didn't look as smug as earlier and Jamison arched an eyebrow, challenging him to do his worst. Everyone in the room had calmed over the last several minutes and resumed their fully human appearance. She took that as a good sign that things were going her way.

"Uh, okay. *Pieta* Kessler left the sheep meadow to update Elder Morgan." Dalton regained confidence while he spoke and his voice grew stronger. "When she arrived at his home, she ran into this carnivore we've been searching for and did nothing to stop it."

"What?"

"You can't be serious!"

"I don't believe it."

The outburst was so jumbled Jamison couldn't be sure who spoke, but she kept her eyes pinned to the floor. She remembered being torn about what to do at that pivotal moment. Already preparing to go after the murderer, Jamison had let her worry for Hank override her instincts. Was it the wrong choice?

Sensing an imminent kill, Dalton continued. "Instead, she let that animal go and rushed into the house to find the elder. Now, I'm as sentimental as the next guy..."

Jamison sneered. As if.

"...but her actions allowed a stone-cold killer to escape. There's no telling how many more will die because of her questionable judgment."

Elder Tristan snarled at Jamison with a hint of satisfaction in her eyes. "Is this true?"

So much for things going my way. "Yes, Elder."

"Explain yourself." Dominick's previous support had become hard-edged disappointment.

"I saw Ha...Elder Morgan's door ajar and I was worried for his safety. Instinct told me the predator had already been in the house and the fact that the elder wasn't present led me to believe he might be injured."

"So you chose to render aid to a friend in the hopes of capturing this rogue later. Is that correct?" Darlene asked.

Jamison looked up at her mother, grateful for the carefully worded question that illustrated her actions in a more positive light. She appreciated what Darlene was trying to do, but it didn't change the facts.

"Yes, Elder, but I made the wrong decision and I see that now. Instead of stopping all of this when I had the chance, I tried to save a man whose body was already cold."

"Yeah, and you ended up puking your guts up in the backyard like a colicky cub."

Dalton's comment washed over her and Jamison's ire rose like a tide. Then what he said fully registered and fury took control. Her head snapped back and Jamison's bones slid rapidly as they reformed. The shoulder seams of her shirt burst and split as pelt erupted from her pores and claws exploded from her fingertips. At the same time, Jamison spun and grabbed Dalton by the upper arms, her claws digging deeply into muscle and sinew as she slammed him against the wall.

He cried out in pain and struggled to escape, but her animal strength allowed her to hold him six inches off the floor. Sharp teeth snapped together just in front of his face and the smell of fresh blood flooded the room.

"Jamison, put him down!" Darlene ordered.

"*Caber Kessler*," Marie shouted, "I really have to protest."

It was all Jamison could do not to rip Dalton's throat out. For several long moments it was a close call. Her cat was at the edge of full realization and howled at being restrained in the instant of the kill.

"*Pieta Kessler* put him down and explain your actions."

Jamison recognized Gail's voice, but her jaguar considered the woman a submissive and refused. Had Cole given her a similar order, the result would have been the same. There was a single individual present to whom she'd concede.

"Jamison, now!"

She growled in Dalton's face, her fangs centimeters from his nose. She shook him hard and then pinned him back against the wall, but she did refrain from killing him. Dalton whined but stopped struggling to keep from being more seriously wounded.

"He was there!"

Shocked gasps filled the room and Lydia protested weakly. "Ludicrous."

Jamison shook him again and dug her claws in farther until they insulted the bone. His blue shirt appeared black where blood poured from multiple injuries.

"Are you sure?" Dominick asked slowly.

She nodded and swallowed thickly. Her vocal chords had thickened with the change and speaking was a chore. "It's the only way he could know. I didn't tell anyone."

"Maybe you forgot," Dalton whimpered.

"Don't make me kill you."

"That's enough," Darlene ordered. "Let him go and we'll listen."

Reluctantly, Jamison lowered him to the ground, but getting her claws out wasn't as easy. They were designed for ripping and tearing, not releasing. She was pleased that taking them out caused as much pain as thrusting them in.

Dalton mewled and said, "See, she can't even control herself in front of the Council."

"Shut up. Speak out of turn again and you'll be removed and detained while we continue without you," Darlene said.

Dalton grimaced but obeyed, rubbing at the wounds that were already beginning to heal. By this time tomorrow Jamison knew they would only be shallow scratches; not nearly permanent enough for what he had just tried to do.

"*Pieta*, please continue."

She looked at Marie, irritated that the woman was continually trying to usurp her mother's authority. As a result, she pointedly looked away from her and addressed Darlene.

"*Caber*, I didn't tell anyone about running into the beast because Sheriff Macke was there. Though she knows about us and the fact that there is a killer loose, I'd never reveal details without the Council's approval. He," Jamison snarled, "could only know what happened if he was there from the start."

Dominick stood slowly, obviously fighting the urge to take over where Jamison had left off. His hands were fisted at his sides and his teeth clenched. He took a careful breath through his nose before speaking.

"*Pieta* Kessler went inside to check on the elder, but you could have gone after this predator. Instead, you let it escape so you could use what you saw against Jamison. Exactly whose judgment is in question here?"

"But she--"

"Silence!" Cole roared. "You were already warned by the *Caber*, now get out. Wait outside. When and if we decide to curse ourselves with your presence, we'll inform you."

Dalton shot Jamison a scathing look and left the room, slamming the door behind. She knew it wasn't over. He wouldn't be stupid enough to say anything else in front of witnesses, but he was the type to hold a grudge. Injuring him, no matter how much he deserved it, would only make him want to return blood for blood.

Jamison faced the Council with her head high. Her guilt wasn't completely alleviated, but knowing someone else had been there who could have gone after the creature helped mitigate it somewhat.

"*Pieta*, you realize as an elder you will be expected to put the good of the community first at all times?" Darlene asked.

"Yes, of course."

"Then can you please tell us why you made the choices you did?"

This was it, the only chance Jamison would have to make them understand. She didn't really care if they made her one of them or not anyway, and if she was going down it would be for who she was.

"Hank Morgan wasn't just an elder of the Panthera community. He was my friend. Since my father left, Hank stepped in and watched over us. I owed him everything, including my loyalty above everyone else except my mother and sister. Like all of you, my honor defines me. When I saw his door open there was no other choice. Trust me when I say I will catch this killer, but in that moment Hank's welfare took priority. I won't apologize for that."

When she finished, the elders shifted around and exchanged glances. She didn't know if she had gotten through, but they weren't prepared to discuss it in front of her.

Darlene said, "We'll consider your argument in closed session. Now, there is another issue before us. Marie?"

Tension rose thickly in the room and Jamison sensed the elders were uncomfortable about this other matter. Marie said, "Last night, shortly before midnight, the elders were in *moracin*."

Oh no, Jamison thought. Ritual ceremonies were held in only one place. "You were at the temple?"

It was really more of an outdoor shrine the Panthera established centuries ago at the original founding site. The temple was a holy place for them to reach out to nature and the elements. Mafdet Manor had been built on the grounds, a tribute to their kadin. The spiritual leader and their families had lived in the house ever since and Jamison understood the elders would continue with their customs regardless who lived there.

"Yes. It's time for the Summer Solstice. The tributes must be made," Darlene said.

"But something went wrong," Jamison guessed.

Dominick took over the discussion. "The human...I'm sorry. Miss Grayson stumbled upon the Rites of Summer. She photographed the Council members."

"Great Mother." Jamison rubbed a hand over her face.

"Exactly," he continued. "We need to get back any pictures she took."

Jamison wanted to laugh. Apparently she wasn't the only one displaying questionable judgment. "Were you in skin or pelt?"

"What difference does it make," Cole asked curiously.

"Because if you were in pelt, it'll be pretty hard to explain, but if you were in skin she's only got pictures of a bunch of crazy people dancing naked around a fire."

Darlene gasped. "Jamison!"

Marie hissed, her teeth drawn back over her canines.

"How dare you?" Dominick bellowed.

"From her point of view," Jamison said, her hands raised in a calming gesture.

"The ritual had barely started," Cole said. "We were still in robes."

Relief washed over Jamison. "Then you don't have anything to worry about."

"How can you say that?" Marie asked. "What if she sells the pictures and they're published?"

"You're right. They could be on the cover of some tabloid magazine as we speak."

"While I don't share her levity," Darlene interjected into the gasps of outrage, "she does have a point. Making a big deal out of those pictures will only draw more attention to them. We were on the young woman's property and we got caught. I suggest we need to be more careful."

"And the ritual?" Gail asked. "The Solstice is two weeks away."

"A lot can happen in two weeks."

"Yes, *Caber*," Gail said, unhappy with the answer.

Darlene directed her attention to Jamison. "Would you wait outside, *Pieta*? The Council needs to consider all issues before us. We'll call you in as soon as we've come to an agreement."

Jamison dipped her head in acknowledgment and left, closing the door gently behind. She encountered Dalton's scowl as soon as she entered the lobby.

"As soon as all this is over, you and I are going to tangle. Don't worry," he said snidely, "I won't kill you. I'll just tear off an arm or a leg. You'll be more useful as a reminder for others to stay out of my way."

Jamison made a show of studying the blood stains on his shirt. Then she feigned a yawn and said, "Whatever."

She settled into a comfortable chair, put her head back and closed her eyes. The elders' dominant personalities were well-known and it would be a while before they came to any kind of understanding. A catnap seemed like the perfect thing but every time she closed her eyes she saw Hank's body.

"What's going on in there?"

"You tell me," Jamison said without opening her eyes. "I'm sure you're listening to every word."

Panthera hearing was sensitive and Jamison could have overheard what was being discussed behind the closed door even if they whispered, which they most definitely did not. Jamison didn't make the attempt, though, because she'd find out soon enough.

Dalton finally chose a seat as far from her as possible.

Twenty minutes later the doors opened and a steward entered the lobby. Jamison recognized Denny, the check-out boy from the grocery store.

"The elders will see you both."

Dalton surged to his feet and strode across the room, his swagger firmly in place. He acted as though nothing had happened and Jamison shook her head as she followed more sedately. She took a stance in the center of the room and waited for the Council.

"*Pieta*," *Caber* Kessler said formally in her capacity as leader, "your actions in regard to Elder Morgan and this unknown predator have been deemed justified."

Dalton grumbled, but kept his mouth shut. Jamison could smell the fury pouring off him and felt the childish urge to stick her tongue out at him.

"You're hereby promoted to the rank of probationary elder. You will also take Elder Morgan's place as captain at the Paul Smith's Visitors Center. Our contacts in the Forest Service will be notified of the change. The appointment to elder is not official until this investigation is concluded. Is that understood?"

"Yes, *Caber*."

Jamison understood perfectly. She was free to find Hank's killer before she was forced to take a more administrative role in Panthera leadership. She probably had her mother to thank for that.

"You're dismissed."

She dipped her head and started to leave, but Marie Tristan wasn't finished. "*Pieta*, find this animal fast. The more lives it takes, the harder it will be to contain the situation."

"Yes, Elder."

Dalton began walking to the door, growling unhappily that things hadn't worked out the way he'd hoped.

"Aaron," Darlene said. "Please remain."

He scowled at Jamison, but returned to the center of the room. Jamison could hear him grinding his molars as she closed the door. He was about to be punished, or at the very least chastised, and she struggled not to take pleasure from his predicament. He'd earned it, but a man had died and Jamison couldn't bring herself to be happy about anything at the moment. She had a killer to catch.

Chapter Seventeen

DARLENE TOOK A moment to stare down at the cat standing before the Council. The jaguar mother in her wanted to change and attack, rip out his entrails with her back claws and watch him die slowly. It was the side of herself she had to force back. She was the Caber; the Council looked to her as an example. Now more than ever, she had to act for the good of their people and the other elders had decided. She didn't appreciate the decision made, but she had to go along. The majority ruled.

"Banishment is something the Council hasn't needed to consider in a very long time, but you're riding the edge of our patience."

His eyes widened and he fell back a step, worry making him open and close his mouth, but he didn't reply.

Good. I've got his attention.

"You allowed an elder's murderer to escape because of some juvenile delusion that you're more dominant than Pieta Kessler. You aren't, and if anyone else dies, their blood is on your head."

The last was grated out in deadly warning. Darlene took a deep breath and tried to ignore her pounding pulse. She detested this feline and thought eventually Jamison was going to have to deal with him. Unfortunately, for now, he might serve a purpose.

"The Council has decided to give you one chance to redeem yourself. Before I outline what your mission is, I must make it clear that you will be on your own. You will tell no one, not even Pieta Kessler. Clear?"

"Yes, *Caber*."

"There are pictures of the Council..."

OVER THE NEXT four days, Jamison concentrated her attention on the investigation as well as settling in as the ranger in charge at the Visitor's Center. She'd been out of the loop for the week prior to Hank's death because he'd been covering her shift while she dealt with the search for the unknown killer. The other employees took her promotion in stride since she was already second in command, happy that an outsider hadn't been brought in. Jamison was just relieved Hank's secretary had cleaned any personal belongings out of the office before she took over. She didn't think she could have managed that on the heels of his funeral, though the casket had been predominantly empty.

She sat back in the oversized chair. It had always been Hank's and sitting in it just didn't feel right, but the routine of running the park station was quickly becoming dull. At least it had allowed her to go over every detail of the case of the unknown carnivore. None of it made any sense. The killings were scattered around in different locations and the targets weren't related in any way she could find. Jamison was missing something.

An idea occurred to her and she walked out into the reception area to talk with the secretary. Jeanie Kraus had elected to stay on after Hank's death and Jamison was pleased with her decision. The woman had worked in the visitor's center for eighteen years and was just the kind of help she needed.

"Jeanie, do we have any maps of the immediate area, not the whole park, just around Harmon?"

"Sure." Jeanie pushed her black-framed glasses up her nose and looked at Jamison. "What kind do you want? Ours are specific to what kind of activity tourists want to pursue. There's hiking, water features, bird watching..."

Jamison didn't want anything like that. "Don't we just have a terrain or satellite map of the region?"

"Not really. The forest service tries to focus on what kind--"

"What kind of activities, I get it."

"Wait a minute." Jeanie pulled up an internet page and Jamison looked over her shoulder to see a map of the Adirondacks. In seconds, Jeanie zoomed in to their location. "What area do you need?"

"If we don't have anything, how'd you find that?"

"Google, sweetie. Now, you were saying?"

Jamison pointed to the spot just south of Harmon. "Here, I'd like to include from about ten miles south of where we are now to just north of town."

"And the east/west boundaries?"

"Hmm, how about from Newton Falls to Hayes Brook?"

"That's a big area," Jeanie said, her eyebrows raised to compete with the height of her beehive hairdo.

"Yeah, it is. Can you do it?" Jamison still didn't know if the Felidae Pride was involved, but including Newton Falls wouldn't hurt anything.

"Oh, sure. Look here."

It was perfect. "Can you print that?"

"How big do you want it?"

"As big as you can make it."

"Ranger Kessler, are you going to tell me what this is for? Are you going to make changes to the patrol sectors?"

For a moment Jamison thought Jeanie was referring to the areas for the Panthera hunting parties. Then she realized Jeanie was talking about the other park rangers. "No, I don't see any reason to change anything. I'd just like to know as much about what's around us as possible. You know, in case anyone has any questions."

Jeanie stared at her waiting for more, but when it wasn't forthcoming replied, "Uh huh. Okay, I'll print that out for you in a few minutes. Now, I have a question."

"Yes?"

"When's the last time you slept? You have dark circles under your eyes."

Jamison let out a tired sigh and rubbed her eyes. Since Hank's death, she'd been working almost non-stop. During the day, she was at the visitor's center. She spent her nights roaming the woods. Sometimes she stayed in human form, but more often she stalked the forest as a jaguar. As an animal, her senses were more acute and her instincts were stronger. There was very little downtime, her humiliation at letting the beast escape and sorrow at Hank's loss wouldn't allow it.

It was ironic that the other elders thought he was late for their Solstice ritual when in fact he'd already been killed.

She wasn't about to let anyone else die needlessly and with the tourist season about to kick off in earnest, it was more important than ever to find whatever was doing this.

"I'm fine, Jeanie. Just print the map off, please." Jamison retreated to her office.

"Whatever you say."

Jamison's cell phone rang just as she sat down. A quick look at the caller ID made her sigh again, but she ignored the call and let it go to voicemail, just as she had all of Lee's other attempts to contact her. Jamison missed her; being in Lee's arms and kissing her. She missed talking to her and hearing her unique point of view, but until this was over she couldn't afford to become distracted anymore than she already had. Lives depended on her staying focused.

Maybe one day Lee would understand, if Jamison ever got lucky enough to share the truth. It was far more likely Lee would just give up and move on.

It's probably for the best, she thought. I'm going to be an elder and there's no way she can understand that. Hell, she doesn't even know the truth about me.

"Here's your map."

"Thanks, Jeanie."

Jeanie handed her an 11 x 17 inch piece of paper with the area Jamison had requested.

"Thanks. I'll work on this in my office."

Jamison closed her door and spread the paper over a cork bulletin board that hung on the wall. She tacked down the corners and studied the map. She marked the first known kill with a large red pushpin, three miles east of Lilypad Pond.

The second attack she marked in blue. That event had involved the bull and taken place at Red Dot Trail, southeast of Meacham Lake and north of the visitor's center.

She hesitated to pinpoint the third episode. The attack there had been much more exuberant, resulting in a slaughter of a field full of sheep and the murder of a good friend. Finally she pushed in a yellow tack and stood back to see if anything leaped out at her. The third kill had occurred very near the second, just eight miles straight north.

Jamison tried to look not just at the physical locations, but at what landmarks were around them. She had almost given up when she realized there was a loose pattern. All of the events had taken place close to Mafdet Manor and Meacham Lake.

The attack on the hog had been twelve miles west of Mafdet. The bull had been found roughly ten miles south of the lake and Hank and the sheep were killed three miles east of Meacham.

Then again, they were still all pretty spread out. "Maybe I'm just too tired to think and this whole idea of a pattern is just my imagination."

Jamison looked at her watch. At five o'clock, Jeanie would already be gone. She wanted to make a few calls and then she planned to go home for a few hours of sleep before she took to the woods.

She picked up the handset from the telephone on her desk. "Travis? This is *Pieta* Kessler. Have your team concentrate south of Mafdet Manor and Meacham Lake. Start at Rainbow Falls and end at Azure Mountain. I'll have the other teams take quadrants to cover the rest of the zone."

"Yes, *Pieta*. Do you want me to advise the other hunters?"

"No, I'll call them myself." Jamison hung up before she realized she hadn't said goodbye. He might have had other questions, but if he did he'd have to call back. She dialed Dinah next.

As soon as the calls were finished, Jamison locked up and headed for the parking lot. She saw Brenda Thomas coming toward her and smiled at the young ranger.

"How's it going, Brenda?"

"Just fine, Captain, but I have a problem."

"Oh?"

"Yeah, beavers have started building a dam at the narrow point on Lake Falls Reservoir and all the water is starting to back up. What should I do?"

Great, Jamison thought. Sleep is overrated anyway.

Chapter Eighteen

LEE LIFTED HER leg and rested her foot against the side of the top stair to the back porch and leaned forward, stretching out her hamstrings after the five-mile run. Her breathing had already slowed to normal, but she wanted a good stretch to avoid any possible cramps. She had increased the distance of her run today, but not out of any desire to extend her workout. Rather, she was trying to keep her mind busy.

That had been the theme since the last time she saw Jamison. Lee had gone through the first and second floors of the house, and sorted through all of her aunt's personal belongings. She'd already made several trips to Goodwill and local thrift stores with most of it. The antiques were stashed in a guest room on the second floor until she had time to go through them more thoroughly. Lee was proud to say that she had even cleared out most of the attic, concentrating on the dusty cobweb-filled areas first. Old wire dress forms, dilapidated cardboard boxes and even a flattened rodent, she refused to try and identify, had all been gone through and removed. Most of it was junk, easily tossed and forgotten except for a small wooden disc that she couldn't resist keeping. It had the engraving of the sun on it and looked like it might be a piece to a board game. If it was, it was handmade and extraordinarily detailed.

Lee stashed it in her jewelry box, but so far hadn't found the matching game.

She had re-investigated the fire pit and found nothing, tried to call Jamison and attempted to strike up conversations with the townspeople during fabricated trips into Harmon. But the more questions Lee asked, the more recalcitrant they became, to the point where they actively began to avoid her. Something was definitely going on, but now it seemed like whatever it was didn't just involve Jamison. The whole town seemed to be included. She decided this mystery wasn't as easy to solve as they made it look on television.

Finished stretching, Lee entered the house and grabbed a glass of water from the kitchen. She drank it at the sink and then left the tumbler on the counter before she headed for the attic. The sweaty clothes she had on would be fine for finishing up there. Passing through the main entrance she spotted Cleo lying on the sofa and smiled. At least someone was getting a nap.

She took the stairs to the attic and looked around as she entered. The room was definitely in better condition than the first time she'd been here. Most of the floor was bare now and what remained was shoved to one side. She had tackled the more offensive areas first to get them over with and what remained wasn't nearly as intimidating. These were the things she thought her aunt might have actually used and she was curious about what could be hiding in a bulky hope chest and two large wooden cabinets.

Before she dug in, Lee considered phoning Jamison but changed her mind. It was clear her calls weren't going to be answered and one more attempt would qualify as stalking. It hurt that Jamison wouldn't phone her back, but there was nothing she could do about it and dwelling on it wasn't going to help. Shaking her head, she walked over to the hope chest and grabbed under the edge of the lid with her fingertips. Lee lifted up, but the top didn't budge. She frowned and knelt down to get a closer look, wondering if the chest was locked. She couldn't find a keyhole and

thought it might just be stuck. Lee placed the heels of both hands under the lid's lip and tried again, but the trunk was definitely locked. Then she noticed an odd inscription on the surface. A landscape impression had been burned into the wood. It was quite beautiful and detailed. Lee saw the trees, a jungle cat of some sort, a raccoon and the moon. The cat, raccoon and moon were all separate pieces inlaid into the background. Each was carved into a circular piece of wood and they rotated when she turned them. There was an empty space where it looked like one more piece was supposed to rest.

Aunt Chris certainly had a thing for cats, Lee thought considering the marble statues guarding the entrance to Mafdet. It's a wonder she didn't have a house full of them.

She touched the carving and suddenly thought of the disc she'd found in the dark corner of the room. She considered whether it might be part of this engraving. Lee fetched the sun disc from her jewelry box and was almost shocked when it popped right into place.

I wonder how it got all the way across the room.

Then Lee remembered when she'd first come into the attic. The chest had been laying over on its side like someone had gone through the room in a great hurry. That must have been when the disc fell off.

She looked more closely and finally realized what she was seeing. "It's a lock. How clever."

Lee had always been fascinated with cipher-lock puzzles. Now she just had to determine the correct sequence to position each piece, how to turn them and when to stop. Spinning each disc right side up probably wouldn't be right, because that was too easy. She studied the glyphs carefully and realized that what she had assumed to be branches or brush were actually grooves carved between each circular object. They were tracks to slide the images along. Also, each image seemed to represent north, south, east and west. A glyph rested in each of those positions but she suspected they weren't where they were supposed to be.

"Okay, I know I can do this. Each object has to rest on a direction."

The feline faced right, but sat at north while the raccoon faced left and sat on east. Those two definitely had to be east and west, she figured.

Lee slid the cat piece downward into what had to be a neutral point in the center. That cleared the space to move another object into it, but which one belonged at north? She played with the lock for a while with no luck when inspiration suddenly hit. She put the cat west, so that it was facing in toward the middle and slid the raccoon east so that it was doing the same. As for north and south, she realized how simple it should have been. The sun would be north to represent being overhead during the day and the moon would be south, awaiting its chance to come around again.

As soon as she slid the last object into place, Lee heard a heavy thunk and the trunk lid popped free. She clapped her hands together in glee.

"Yes!"

Lee lifted the top and it rose easily. The wood smelled well-oiled, with just a touch of some kind of perfume. There were books of different sizes and various glass vials, whose contents she could only guess. She got down on her knees and started to pull the books off the stack when she noticed a plain white envelope with her name scrawled across the front. It was sticking out of the top of what looked like a journal.

She picked it up and turned it over curiously. The envelope looked new, but she didn't know how that could be since she hadn't seen Chris in many years. Lee sat down on the attic floor and slipped a finger under the flap. There was only a single sheet of lined paper filled with her aunt's sprawling cursive.

My dearest Lee,

As I pen these words, I fervently hope you're sitting down and that you won't discount these words as the ramblings of a foolish old woman. I assure you, I'm quite sane even though what I'm going to tell you will be difficult to believe.

You're part of a special ancestry of beings. I know every family thinks the same thing, but let me assure you this is very different.

Our people are called the Panthera. We trace our origins directly to ancient Egyptian times when we served as royal bodyguards to the Pharaohs themselves. Over time, our numbers have dwindled but bloodlines remained pure, until your parents joined. The Panthera have retained the ability to become one with nature because of that purity. We still believe in the old ways and give thanks to the Great Mother for all our gifts.

I've served our community as Kadin, or medicine woman, all my life. Those in our direct line before me fulfilled the same role and in the event of my death, you will inherit that mantle. Everything in this chest is designed to assist your transition. I know it's a lot to take in, but you must do so quickly. A dark time is coming; I've seen it and know that I will not be there when it happens. You're the key. I can only hope you come into your power with the full knowledge of your calling, but the realist in me fears this won't be the case.

Your father never agreed with our ways and though I saw so much potential in the child that you were, I'm sure you've been raised in ignorance.

Go through the items in this trunk. Study the medicine book and the pictures. The answers are all here if you have the courage to see what's right in front of you.

Most of all, Lee, believe what you see in your dreams. They are a doorway. All my hopes and love, Chris.

Lee read the letter twice and still couldn't make sense of it. Special abilities and worshipping the old ways? She had a hard time believing Chris was some kind of shaman and her father knew all about it. More importantly, why would he keep it a secret? Did Aunt Chris have some kind of mental problem that her father knew about? And what was all this talk about dreams?

She remembered the terrifying dreams she'd had the night Jamison's friend died; how closely it mirrored what Jamison told her later. For just an instant, Lee was tempted to believe there was something more to this, but then reality grabbed hold of her. No way. Chris had been ill and Lee never knew, that was all there was to it.

Lee glanced over the letter again and then read the date at the top. It was written a month before Chris died. She felt a shiver pass through her.

"Stop it! You're being ridiculous." Lee didn't believe in any kind of enhanced powers, especially in relation to herself.

Regardless of her personal feelings about such nonsense, Lee still loved Chris, and whatever was in the trunk was valuable to her for that reason. She put aside the letter to go through the rest of the items in the chest. A brown, leather journal rested right on top. It would probably contain her aunt's most private thoughts and she sat it off to the side to read later. Lee just hoped it didn't say anything else about the Panthera, whatever that was.

Next was a large book the size of a common hardback. Was that the medicine book mentioned in the letter? She examined it on every side, trying to figure out what it was bound with.

Some kind of animal skin. Yuck!

It joined the ledger and Lee dipped back into the chest pulling out other items. She found a bunch of old furs, some bird feathers and several white candles. Some of the candles had been

burned, but others were new. Lee found a bundle of letters held together with twine and added those to the growing pile with the books. Near the bottom of the trunk, she found a large photo album. It was so big that it covered two thirds of the length and width of the chest and was about three inches thick. The album was also added to the heap.

Little remained after she removed the album except a smattering of loose photos, some glass vials and a brown cloth. Lee held the material up with both hands and saw that it was a hooded robe. She frowned, thinking it looked familiar, but she couldn't think where she might have seen it. With a shrug, she dropped the robe back into the hope chest. She glanced at the labels of some of the vials to discover they contained spices and a few rather unique ingredients that she'd expect to find on a witch's kitchen shelf. She pulled a cork out of one of the small bottles and sniffed the dried ingredient. It smelled a little like fish and Lee wrinkled her nose before re-corking the vial.

A flash of white caught her attention and Lee reached in and lifted out some rocks. She studied them closer in the low attic light and then quickly tossed them back into the chest. They were bones.

Lee thought they were some kind of animal remains, but why would her aunt keep such disgusting items locked away like precious treasures?

She put everything back into the chest except for the things she had saved to look through. Maybe these items would give her some insight into their previous owner and answer a few pertinent questions; like whether Chris was crazy or a member of some kind of outlandish cult.

Lee froze and then dug hurriedly back through the contents until she reached the robe. She held it up under the dim lighting and knew where she'd seen it before. The trespassers had been wearing the same garment. Things were starting to add up and they didn't look good.

She was right; Chris had definitely been a little mentally off and part of some kind of religious sect. From the items in the trunk and what she'd said in the letter, these Panthera worshiped nature. The glass vials had contained things like myrrh, cassia, toe of frog and mugwort. What could someone do with a frog's toe and what the hell was a mugwort?

Lee had a lot to think about. *They were probably pagans.*

She closed the lid and watched the circular discs slide around to settle into a random pattern. They weren't even in the same spots they'd been when Lee started trying to decipher the combination. Whoever Chris' people were, they were certainly talented when it came to creating such intricate locking mechanisms.

Chris' people? Does that make them my people, too? Are they actual blood relatives or just a bunch of people with the same beliefs?

Distracted, Lee picked up the items she wanted to examine and left the attic. She barely remembered to turn off the light switch and walked down the stairs into the living room. She planned to leave everything on the coffee table while she took a shower and then she'd spend some time discovering exactly who her aunt had been. She was halfway across the living room when she realized she wasn't alone, and it wasn't Cleo.

Lee came to a dead stop and stared at the creature resting on her sofa. It didn't show any signs of fear. The raccoon lay in the corner against the armrest on its back and seemed to be waiting to see what she'd do. When she only stood there, silently gaping, the raccoon rolled onto its stomach and slid off the couch. Then Lee watched in amazement when it stood up on its hind legs and started walking toward her. The little guy was only a few feet away when it held up its front paws like a small child wanting to be held.

She swallowed against a dry throat. "You're kidding me, right?"

Lee quickly realized it was the same animal she and Jamison had seen standing at the back of the house a few days ago. Jamison had said it probably wasn't afraid of people because it had been exposed to them before, possibly even raised by one. That thought gave her the courage to squat down and put everything she was holding on the floor. Then she reached out toward the small creature to see what happened. Lee never blinked. If the raccoon showed any signs of lunging at her with bared teeth, she'd dodge out of the way and get something to shoo it out of the house.

The raccoon walked into her arms and Lee picked him up off the floor. When she lifted him, the raccoon wrapped his lower legs around her waist and rested his chin on her shoulder. Lee finally swallowed and took a shaky breath. She stroked her fingertips over the coarse hair and smiled. She closed her eyes and hugged him, noting his weight and warmth. He smelled clean and a bit musky, like the forest. In fact, she could see the forest. The clouds overhead were full and fluffy, the sun bright through the trees. Lee could feel the roughness of the bark against her paw pads and hear the birds singing overhead. She felt her muscles flex as she walked down to the stream. When she looked into the water, she saw her pointed chin and the black mask on her face.

She opened her eyes with a start and looked down at the raccoon. He lifted sable eyes to meet her gaze and his nose twitched.

What was that?

Lee bent over and put the animal on the floor. He stood looking at her for a moment and then waddled off toward the kitchen on all fours. She followed quietly and watched him leave the house through the dog door. Whatever kind of spell she'd been in wore off and Lee strode across the floor to jerk open the back door. There was no sign of the raccoon.

Had she imagined the whole thing? Was Chris' illness passed genetically? Maybe something in one of those vials was a hallucinogen.

Yeah, that's it. It's probably that mugwort stuff.

Lee rubbed a hand over her face. *From now on, no smelling chemicals when I don't know what they are or why they're used.*

Tomorrow she was going to pour all those spices in the trash. Hopefully the effect wouldn't last long.

She walked back into the living room and placed the books and photos on the coffee table before she left to take her shower. Lee found Cleo lying on the bed when she went in for a change of clothes.

"Napping in the middle of the day? Not a bad idea, girl."

Cleo opened one eye and then went back to sleep.

"Nice to see you, too," Lee grumbled. "Good to know I'm wanted. Jamison won't answer my calls, you ignore me and even an imaginary raccoon walks out on me. What's next?"

Lee took a long hot shower and changed into a pair of jeans and t-shirt. She put on some sneakers and took a quick look out the bedroom window. The sun was already starting to set, but there was still time to take a short walk in the woods beside the house. She didn't plan on getting any more exercise, but she might get lucky and grab some nice pictures.

She picked up her night set-up and draped the camera strap around her neck. Lee whistled for Cleo and set off in the direction of Meacham Lake from the back of the manor with the dog leading the way.

Why do I always walk down this path, she wondered. Is it because Jamison might be waiting at the end of it?

Lee had never been to her home, but knew Jamison lived in this direction. She wondered what Jamison was doing. At first Lee hadn't tried to call because she knew Jamison would be busy with her friend's funeral, but that was four days ago. Didn't Jamison miss her at all? Lee had thought something really special was developing between them, especially when Jamison tried to make love with her. Apparently she had only been reaching for comfort, a normal reaction considering how close they had become during their date and the subsequent sorrow. Lee was just so glad she had stopped everything before it went too far.

Then again, maybe she should have allowed it. At least she would have the memories of that time together since it seemed Jamison didn't want anything else to do with her.

Cleo growled low and Lee saw that she was staring off to the side of the darkening woods. The sun had almost set and the wind had picked up slightly. A branch cracked not far away and Cleo's growling intensified. Lee sighted in through the camera and zoomed the lens all the way out. She didn't see anything, but thought it might be some woodland creatures out foraging for dinner. Lee started snapping pictures at random. Maybe she'd pick up something. The camera was digital and the flash might startle the animals, but it wouldn't hurt anything.

Lee had taken several pictures when Cleo's hackles went up and she started to bark.

This is how it goes in horror movies, Lee suddenly thought. The goofy woman takes a bunch of pictures thinking she's being cute and she's really being stalked by the monster the whole time. Listen to Cleo!

"Uh, okay, Cleo. You win. Let's go."

Lee started back toward the house, but Cleo stayed in place. Her barking grew more furious and Lee felt goose bumps break out.

"Cleo, now!" The dog spun around and ran toward her and Lee started walking briskly down the trail.

"I will not run. I will not run," she repeated silently even though every instinct urged her to do exactly that. They reached the house in half the time it had taken them to walk out onto the trail. Lee watched Cleo lope across the side yard and disappear into the manor before she finally gave in to her fear and tore after her.

JAMISON LAY ACROSS the tree branch and watched Lee snapping pictures all around the woods, but then the flash went off in her sensitive jaguar eyes. She slipped a little and dug into the bark with her razor sharp claws. Powerful haunches bunched and muscles rippled. Jamison snarled in anger and the small dog started barking.

Now Lee had a picture of the elders in ritual and Jamison in her pelt form.

Chapter Nineteen

"NO WAY."

LEE leaned over the desk and stared at the image on the computer once again. She'd been doing that repeatedly since plugging in the digital camera from the night before. Initially, she hadn't expected to find anything but a lot of photos of trees and brush. That's exactly what most of the shots were, but one picture near the end of the session stood out far above the rest. A large, dark animal crouched in the boughs of an oak tree, blue-green eyes glittering as the flash fired.

At first her mind refused to acknowledge what she was seeing, but finally she had to admit it. She raked her fingers through her blonde hair again, adding to its disheveled appearance.

"A black panther."

Lee picked up the phone and dialed the non-emergency number for the Sheriff's Department. It was apparently a slow day at the local law enforcement agency since she was put through fairly quickly to Sheriff Samantha Macke herself. Lee quickly outlined what she'd discovered in the woods outside Mafdet Manor the night before, but the sheriff wasn't as excited as anticipated.

"Ma'am, I'm sure what you thought you saw was very exciting."

"Don't patronize me, Sheriff. I've photographed jungle cats on location in Central America and Africa. I know what I'm talking about and I'm not prone to flights of fancy."

"I'm sure you're not, Miss Grayson, however the Adirondacks are considered wilderness and there are all manner of animals in the forest. That includes wild cats of different varieties."

"Sheriff, black panthers aren't indigenous to New York!" Lee couldn't temper her response, even though her ire wouldn't earn any points with the law official. "I'd think you would take this more seriously. I'm not calling about a stray dog."

"If you were, I'd tell you the same thing I'm going to tell you now, Miss Grayson. I recommend you call the proper authority regarding your complaint, Park Services. Unless you can tell me exactly where the animal is now, there's nothing my people can do for you."

"Of course I can't tell you where it is right now, don't be absurd. It's a forest."

"My point exactly. Do you know the number for Adirondack Park Services?"

Lee growled in anger. This woman was so frustrating. "Never mind, I'll find it myself."

"Have a nice day."

Lee hung up without responding. "That went well."

Though the idea of a panther stalking around her house was unsettling, Lee couldn't help be excited about the candid shot. Her agent would love it. The thought of Jasmine reminded her that she hadn't called her since she left New York. Now was the perfect time and not just because of the photograph. She picked up the phone and dialed the number from memory. It rang four times and just when Lee thought it would go to voicemail, Jasmine answered.

"Hi, Jazz. It's me."

"Don't call me that."

Lee grinned at her response, at this point it was more habitual and Jasmine proved it when she continued almost immediately.

"Where have you been? Why haven't I heard from you?"

"I'm sorry. Things here have been a little hectic. I'm calling you now."

"Yes, you are," Jasmine mumbled, slightly mollified. "So if it's so busy up there, why are you calling? Not that I'm not happy to hear from you."

"Believe it or not, I got a great photo last night that I thought you would love."

"Really, what is it?"

"Are you sitting down?" Lee couldn't keep the excitement out of her voice.

"Lee, darling, you know I love you, but nothing up there could possibly be that astounding." Jasmine actually sounded bored.

"I got a shot of a black panther in a tree right outside my bedroom window."

There was dead silence from the other end and Lee smiled, picturing Jasmine's reaction. It went on for so long that she'd begun to think the call had been dropped.

"Jasmine? Still there?"

"Are you serious?"

"Yep." Lee smiled. "Completely. Well, it wasn't really outside my bedroom window, but it was only a couple of hundred yards down the trail from the house, so it might as well have been."

She expected Jasmine to be as thrilled about the picture as she was, but that wasn't the reaction she got.

"You need to come home right now. Today. I'll call Davis and have him get the house ready. How long will it take you to get here?"

"What are you talking about? I'm not going anywhere."

"Lee, that place is dangerous. I will not have you living where there are panthers running around in herds."

Lee blinked. "Panthers don't live in herds, that's elephants. I'm pretty sure panthers are solitary creatures."

"Who cares? That's not the point. What if it decides you might be perfect as lunch?"

"Which brings me to the other reason I called."

"Why am I suddenly worried?"

"Because you're very perceptive?"

"Funny. All right, fine. What is it?" Jasmine didn't sound very amused, only resigned. She was used to Lee being unconventional, though she rarely liked it.

"You know that shotgun dad keeps in the trophy room?"

"You can't be asking what I think you are."

"Jasmine," Lee searched quickly for a way to make her understand without causing her to worry more. "I'm sure I'm over reacting, but having it around would make me feel better."

"Do you even know how to shoot that thing?"

"Of course. Dad showed me how to use it when I was a kid and I've used rifles on safari more than once. Please, do this for me?"

"Fine, but I refuse to touch it." Lee smiled upon hearing the peevish sigh. "I'll have someone bring it up for you this weekend."

"That would be great. Thank you."

They spent several more minutes just catching up. Lee promised to forward the photo so Jasmine could have a look and then she spent the rest of the time reassuring her that the situation wasn't so dire that she needed to return home like a scared little girl. Finally, she gave Jasmine directions to the house and ended the call, promising that she'd phone again in a week.

Lee checked the time and saw that it was almost noon. She still had some shopping to do and hoped she would run into Jamison while she was out. Jamison still hadn't returned any of her calls and Lee didn't know where she worked. Maybe she'd find someone who could direct her.

THE STREETS OF Harmon were bustling with visitors and locals alike. Tourism had increased just in the last few days and Lee was amused she actually felt like she wasn't an outsider anymore. She carried a bag of dry foods that she'd picked up at Fogerty's and strolled down the sidewalk toward Andy's. The place held fond memories for her since she'd had lunch there with Jamison that first time. Today she was only after an iced mocha and already she could taste the smooth, sweet coolness sliding down her throat. As she reached out for the handle, the door opened from inside and she found herself face to face with Jamison's sister.

"Dinah? How are you?" "Hi, Lee, it's good to see you." There was genuine welcome in her smile, but a slight wariness in the green eyes. Had someone told Dinah that Lee was asking uncomfortable questions? If that were true, it might mean that this young woman Lee was beginning to like might also somehow be involved in what she was starting to think of as the Harmon Conspiracy. The problem was, she had no idea what they could be involved in, or if she was making the whole thing up as a way to keep her mind occupied. Anyone would be suspicious of a complete stranger who moved in and was suddenly asking personal questions, even if they had the authority. Then again, Lee had wanted to find a way to get hold of Jamison and fate had just thrown her a bone.

"Uh, Dinah, I hate to ask, but can you tell me where Jamison is working today? I've tried to call, but she hasn't answered. I'm worried about her. Finding her friend like she did was such a horrible thing to happen."

Dinah didn't need to know exactly how many times Lee had called and maybe the bit about being worried would be a little incentive, not that it wasn't true.

To her delight, the cautious look was replaced by one of compassion. "That's very thoughtful of you. Jamison told you about Hank?"

"Yes, she came over right after it happened." Lee shuddered. "She was covered in blood and at first I was worried that she'd been hurt."

Dinah touched her forearm in reassurance. "It's hit her pretty hard and being promoted to head ranger in his place hasn't helped much. She's just so busy."

Lee's eyes closed in sympathy. It was no wonder Jamison hadn't returned any of her calls. "That must be pretty stressful, but I really do need to talk with her if only to reassure myself that she's all right."

"Of course." Dinah patted her hand and then reached into her purse for a pen and paper. She scrawled out something and then handed Lee the note. "That's the address for the Paul Smith's Visitor's Center and some rough directions on how to get there. Basically, you just keep taking Blue Mountain Road past Mafdet and you'll run right into it."

"Thank you." Lee didn't know if Dinah was playing matchmaker, or just wanted Jamison to see someone who wasn't directly related to the horrific incident she had just experienced. Maybe it was both, but she wasn't about to question her luck.

"Just be careful with her; she's a little fragile right now."

"I understand."

Dinah left and Lee walked away from the café, her mocha a vague memory. She scanned the note and then shoved it in her pocket, already planning what she'd say to Jamison. Lee neared the intersection she needed to cross to get back to her truck when a man leaned out of the shadows unexpectedly, causing her to start.

"Oh, you scared me."

Rather than apologize, the dark-haired man stared at her, quietly assessing. His long hair was tied back in a loose ponytail and his skin was leathery from exposure to the sun. The button-down, flannel shirt and jeans weren't pressed, but they were clean and his eyes were strangely mesmerizing. From his appearance she thought he might be Native American.

"Lee Grayson." It wasn't a question.

"Yes. Do I know you?"

"No, but I have information for you. It concerns Christine Mafdet."

Lee was completely caught off guard. This man was a little scary, but she decided that could just be the way he'd approached her. She had so many questions and he was the first person who seemed willing to talk to her.

"Who are you?"

"Nash Daylong, but that's not important. Come with me."

"Where? Why?" Lee looked around furtively, hoping he intended on conversing in a nice, public place.

The man had already headed back down the alley, but he said over his shoulder, "Do you want answers or not?"

Okay, guess I don't have a choice.

"Fine, slow down," she grouched, jogging to catch up.

She did so when he stopped in front of a run-down shotgun house at the end of the next block. The structure looked very small and the white-flaky paint on the exterior boards had definitely seen better days. Nash walked up the sagging porch steps and through a door that didn't look solid in the hinges.

Lee followed slowly, unsure what she was getting in to. She stopped at the edge of the entryway and waited for her eyes to adjust as she searched inside the darkened dwelling. "Uh, sir? What's this information you said you had and how did you know my aunt?"

"Your aunt was a very powerful *Kadin*," he said, not really answering her question.

Lee recognized the word from the letter Chris had left behind in the trunk. "How do you know that?"

"Come inside. I won't hurt you."

Hesitantly, she crossed the threshold and entered a dingy room. The shag carpet hadn't been new twenty years ago and the smell of cigarette smoke pervaded the small space. Lee fought the urge to sneeze and looked over where Nash sat in a tattered recliner. He nodded toward the only other seat in the room and she spotted an equally dilapidated loveseat a few feet from him.

Lee swallowed and perched hesitantly on the edge, hoping he'd get to the point so she could get out of there and go see Jamison. "I'm listening."

Nash grinned, showing yellowed teeth as he lit up a smoke. He exhaled heartily and then said, "You're impatient."

Her temper got the best of her. "You don't know anything about me."

"I know that you seek answers and I also know you won't find them where you're looking."

Great, like Aunt Chris' letter wasn't cryptic enough.

She let out an exasperated sigh. "And exactly where is it I'm looking?"

"On the physical plane."

"Huh? What else is there?"

He didn't answer. Nash took another draw on the butt. "Chris was very strong in the ways of healing and insight. The Panthera go to doctors just like everyone else, but Chris could cure diseases of the soul."

"You mean she was like a psychiatrist?"

"Psychiatrist, guide into the mystic, call it what you want. But she also had the ability to foretell the future."

"That's crazy."

Nash's expression hardened. "Silence. I'll tell you some of what you need to know. The rest you'll have to learn on your own."

Whatever. Lee regretted following this guy; anything to get away from him faster. She nodded her assent.

"I can see that you already know the true purpose of the Mafdet line, so I won't bore you with more of the same. What you don't know is that the Panthera don't worship nature, they're a part of it. They have the ability to change form, to interact as a beast of the forest rather than a puny human walking upright on two legs."

"Oh, come on. You're saying Chris was a werewolf? That's preposterous." He stared at her in response and Lee got the message. She held up one hand. "Fine, go on."

"In ancient times it wasn't uncommon for the people to have powers outside of the realm of what science now tells us isn't possible. The defenders of the kings had to have strength, courage, agility and the natural weapons that would disable any man, fangs to rend and claws to carve. Our kind has retained those skills because they are used. Evolution allows constant change and if something is no longer necessary, it's done away with."

"Sort of like a sixth sense," she said catching on. "Or losing all the body hair ancient man had because we now wear clothing."

Nash nodded once and continued. "But I'm not talking about werewolves. There's no such thing as someone being cursed into being a dog at the light of a full moon."

"What are you talking about then? Bears, lions, monkeys?"

Nash smiled and squashed his cigarette butt into an overflowing ashtray. "Some changers have bear shapes, some have others."

"But not these Panthera you're telling me about."

"No."

"Then what are they?"

"You already know the answer, and if you don't I won't ruin the surprise..."

It was too much. Lee surged to her feet and started pacing across the limited space. "You're telling me that selected individuals have the ability to become a totally different...thing...at will and that these people still exist today. If that's true, why has no one ever heard of them?"

"Because they have remained hidden. Could you imagine what would happen otherwise? I can tell you that the Dark Ages were not a very good time for them."

Lee snorted. "I can imagine. Let's say I believe you, which I'm not for one moment saying that I do. Why did you tell me about this?"

Nash suddenly looked very sorry for her. "You don't know it yet, but you're a part of us and soon you'll be needed."

"Okay, see, now I know you've lost it. I can't change into something else at will. If I could, I think I'd know it by now."

"Buried deep inside, beneath the years of separation, you do. Now that you've returned where you truly belong, your abilities will begin to manifest. They have already."

Lee frowned, growing more confused by the second. "How?"

"Have you not seen things in your dreams, touched the mind of the small one as he traveled through the woods?"

"What are you talking about?"

Nash stood and walked to the door, signaling that it was time for her to leave. "You'll know when the time is right. For now, I believe there is someone you need to see."

Lee was out on the front step with the door shut in her face before she could even formulate her next question. She spun away in exasperation. This whole damned town was crazy, but he was right about something. She needed to see Jamison.

The ride to the park's Visitor's Center didn't take long. Lee left the groceries on the front seat and slammed the truck door before she went inside. An older woman with a beehive hairdo and thick, dark framed glasses sat at a desk behind the counter.

"Can I help you, dear?"

"Yes, ma'am, is Jamison Kessler here? I'm a friend."

"Really?" The woman stood up, suddenly much more interested. She walked over to the counter and lifted a flap, indicating that Lee should step through. "Good. Maybe you can convince her to take a break. I'm worried sick she's just going to keel over. Come with me."

Lee followed, feeling like she'd just been run over by a bus. She had expected a lot of red tape, maybe excuses that Jamison was in some sort of meeting. To be ushered in right away disabled any preplanned speeches she'd prepared to get through the gauntlet of intimidation.

The secretary tapped on a connecting doorway and said, "Captain Kessler, you have a visitor."

Chapter Twenty

JAMISON LOOKED UP slowly at the sound of Jeanie's voice. Lost in thought, she hadn't realized she was no longer alone until Lee's scent hit her like a visceral punch to the gut. Lust raced over her so intensely her skin tingled. She lowered her feet from the desktop to the floor and stood without realizing, trying to calm her beast that was suddenly demanding to be near Lee.

"Thank you, Jeanie."

"Hi," Jamison said softly, walking out from behind the desk.

"Hi."

Lee met her halfway, until only a breath separated them, neither able to fully deny the magnetism.

"Captain Kessler. Very impressive." Lee looked into her eyes and appeared to have trouble speaking. "Congratulations on the promotion, though I'm so sorry about the circumstances."

The change of topic gave Jamison the mental distance she needed and she took a half step back. "Thank you. I'm sorry I haven't returned your calls. I've just been so busy trying to figure out what I'm going to do next."

Jamison looked at her feet feeling guilty for the half-truth. She'd been pulled in so many directions it was difficult to keep up, but she could have made time for Lee.

"It's all right, I understand. I didn't come here to make you feel bad. There's something I needed to talk with you about, at least Sheriff Macke thought I should."

"Sheriff Macke? What's wrong, did something happen?"

Lee smiled a little awkwardly. "It's nothing serious, really. I just took some pictures recently that I thought you should have a look at. One of them is a huge black cat sitting in a tree not far from the house."

Jamison swiveled around and sat in a chair. She indicated Lee should take the seat across from her while she considered the information. Jamison hadn't yet told the Council that Lee now had a picture of her and in the woman walked, practically holding it out on a silver platter.

"When you say cat, do you mean domestic shorthair?"

"No." Lee smiled. "I mean as in panther, or at least I think so. You don't have any reports of black panthers that have escaped from the zoo, do you?"

Jamison shook her head. She couldn't help but be charmed by Lee's teasing humor. "No, but if it's black, it's probably a jaguar. The Black Panthers are a social group."

"My mistake."

Jamison couldn't believe they were talking about a potential man-eating jungle cat with so much sexual tension permeating the room. She cleared her throat. "Do you have what you want to show me on you? I could take a look."

She swallowed thickly, aware of the innuendo in her words even if Lee wasn't. Right now, looking wasn't really what she wanted. She wanted to peel off Lee's shirt and kiss every inch of

her body. She craved the chance to slide her fingers under the waistband of her jeans and explore intimate flesh.

"I didn't bring them with me."

Lee's eyes dipped to Jamison's chest and lingered for a moment before she gasped and looked up. Jamison realized her slow arousal had become obvious.

"I could..." she licked her lips, her gaze drifting over Lee's mouth as she recalled the sweetness. "I could come by this afternoon and look at them."

"Okay." Lee hesitated. "Oh, wait. I have to go over to Lake Placid this afternoon."

Jamison's passion was quickly overcoming her common sense. She clenched her fingers, reaching for a modicum of self-control. Four nights ago she had wanted to make love to Lee, but it was nothing compared to how she felt now. Seeing her so unexpectedly after the separation that her jaguar clamored to be let out to take her mate told Jamison exactly how much Lee had come to mean. For that reason, duty was more important than ever.

"That's right. You're looking at new cars. What about later?"

"Seven o'clock?"

"Sounds good. I'll see you then."

Lee stood and Jamison came around to the front of the desk, drawn to her side. They shared a quiet moment, but when no one spoke Lee proceeded toward the door. She took a single step before she spun back again, her concern evident.

"Jami, if I've done something wrong, would you tell me?"

"No, Lee. Of course you haven't done anything. How could you think that?" Having Lee call her by her nickname effectively lowered all of her barriers at once.

Jamison wrapped one arm loosely around Lee's shoulders and tilted her chin up with gentle fingers. Her heart clenched when she saw tears swimming in the blue depths. The last thing she ever wanted to do was hurt Lee and she felt guilt gnawing at her for ignoring the repeated calls.

"It's just that I thought something was happening between us. When we kissed it was so amazing and hot. And then later, when you came back I thought we would...but we didn't. And now you won't even call me back and I've missed you so much. Don't you miss me?" Lee's voice cracked when she asked the question.

"I'm sorry." Jamison pulled her close and kissed her cheek where a single tear had escaped. "I do miss you. I miss you so much."

The kiss was inevitable, lips pressing gently before moving away and back again, easily bridging any remaining distance and mending tiny hurts. Lee groaned in her mouth and Jamison forgot duty and propriety. Her jaguar wanted its mate. It wanted to touch and taste and claim, and Jamison wanted the same. Not just that, but she wanted Lee to need her the same way.

Her hands caressed down Lee's shoulders, stopping once to embrace the small waist before dipping lower. She cupped slender hips and lifted Lee onto the edge of the desk. Strong legs circled her stomach and objects clattered unheeded to the floor.

Lee's fingers were locked in her hair, pulling Jamison so tightly against her that a lip split and she tasted blood. The primal connection pushed her past any restraint. Jamison grasped the bottom of Lee's sweater and pulled it off in one swift tug, releasing her mouth only for the time it took to remove the offending garment. She felt Lee unbuttoning her uniform shirt but was too busy mapping the strong body with her hands to pay attention until Lee broke the kiss.

"Take this off."

Jamison didn't question what was about to happen or worry that anyone would walk in. Instead, she unbuttoned her shirt and tossed it onto the chair. Lee had already started removing

the white tee Jamison wore under her uniform shirt and she quickly finished the job. By the time she dropped it onto the floor Lee had a hard nipple in her mouth.

"Oh, I knew you would taste like this," she murmured between kissing and sucking. "Your skin is so sweet. Touch me, Jami, please. I need you."

Jamison reached behind Lee and pushed what remained on her desk to the far side, thankful she didn't keep a cluttered workspace. She grasped Lee around the shoulder with one arm, laying her back and pushing her onto the surface at the same time. Then she was on top, lying with their naked flesh pressed together.

She tried to slow down and absorb every sensation, truly feel the texture of Lee's skin and meld with her on more than a physical level. Fingers stroked hard stomach muscles and she felt Lee tense against her hand, overcome with her desire.

They kissed again and Jamison deftly unsnapped Lee's fly. Her fingertips edged beneath the waistline of her panties and discovered warm, wet silk waiting for her. She stoked through Lee's passion until she was raising her hips seeking the touch she craved.

"Ah," Lee groaned, breaking the kiss. She arched her neck and Jamison sucked on the sinewy muscles while she explored below.

Lee was so hot and ready, Jamison slid inside easily; one finger and then two. She felt the internal walls clench, drawing her deeper. Lee's feet came up and braced against the edge of the desk. Her hips lifted, providing counterpoint to the rhythm Jamison set up, pushing in and withdrawing before thrusting forward again more deeply.

Jamison felt her own desire pounding in her veins as she quickly lost control. She straddled Lee's thigh and pressed down hard, gasping when the fire raced through her veins. Then she was moving, matching the pace of her thrusting fingers with her hips, clenching her ass each time she encountered soft flesh and hard bone.

"Jami, touch my clit. Please, I need to come. Let me come." Mindful of Jeanie in the other room, Lee's voice was a frantic whisper.

Jamison pressed down with the heel of her hand, grinding Lee's clitoris against her pelvic bone even as she continued moving inside. She felt Lee tense in her arms and her own body gathered for the pending storm. When her release hit, Lee bit down on the juncture of Jamison's neck and shoulder, trying to muffle her cries of satisfaction. The combined sensations were too much and Jamison felt the heat in her belly explode. She came with a quickly bitten off shout.

For a short while, the two simply lay there together catching their breath. Jamison inhaled deeply, her mind alive with the images of what had just happened. A week ago, she hadn't wanted to be involved with anyone. Now she couldn't imagine her life without Lee.

"You okay?"

She raised her head and looked down into smiling eyes. "Yes. You?"

Lee kissed her softly before answering. "Wonderful. This isn't exactly what I had planned when I came in here, but I can't say I'm sorry."

"Me either, but I think we'd better get up before Jeanie walks in on us."

Jamison kissed her deeply once more before she actually allowed her to move. Then Lee made a face and Jamison laughed as she stood up. She handed Lee her sweater and then went to find her own clothing. She had her t-shirt on and was buttoning the uniform shirt when long arms embraced her from behind. Jamison smiled and turned around to return the hug. Lee kissed her once, a short almost chaste touch of the lips before she stepped back.

"See you at seven. Don't forget about me."

"Not a chance."

As Lee walked out, Jamison automatically checked the wall clock and groaned. It was only noon. Seven very long hours before she could see Lee again. She tucked her shirt in and tried to force her mind back into mode, something she was sure would be unsuccessful.

Chapter Twenty-One

LEE WALKED INTO the kitchen and uncorked a bottle of red wine so it could breathe. She pulled two crystal glasses from the cupboard and set them next to the wine before she went back into the living room. She couldn't keep the smile off her face and it had been that way since she left Jamison at the ranger's station. The car dealer probably thought she was a complete whack job. Lee had to admit, he was probably right.

In addition to not being able to stop grinning and reliving her encounter with the tall, dark-haired forest beauty, Lee had definitely shown her elitism. At least that's what Jasmine would have called it. Lee understood the ins and outs of car buying when it came to Ferrari, Lamborghini or even BMW, but she knew nothing about Ford, Nissan or Toyota. She didn't think she was a snob; that was just the world she came from. In the end she settled on a dark red GMC 1500 Denali pickup. The one she chose had heated and cooled leather seats, a Bose stereo system and the navigation package.

She made arrangements to finalize the deal for the next afternoon and then rushed home to make sure she was ready for her date with Jamison. She showered, perfumed and then spent the last thirty minutes figuring out what to wear, and she was still an hour early.

Lee laughed at herself and sat down on the sofa. She reached down and helped Cleo up beside her, petting her for a few minutes. Then she picked up Aunt Chris' journal from the stack on the coffee table. It would take too long to read it before Jamison arrived and she didn't want to skim through and miss anything important. A quick look at the medicine book the night before had been as cryptic as the letter and the old man in the alley by the café, so she ignored that for the moment as well. Finally, she settled on the photographs. Lee hadn't seen any of those and was curious what she would find. She decided to go through the loose pictures first and save the album for later.

The first one she studied showed Aunt Chris standing and smiling into the camera. From the angle, whoever took the shot had been very short or sitting down. Lee turned it over and discovered a hand printed date. The photo had been taken around Halloween the year before. Chris looked hale and hearty, without any signs of illness. Lee frowned and moved on to the next image. It showed her down on her knees petting a small cub with little black spots. Chris looked much younger in this picture and had a huge smile on her face as she rubbed the animal's belly.

Lee grinned and turned the picture over. It read 'Chris and Darlene.'

Funny name for an animal.

She continued on through the bundle, her smile fading as she did. There were a few snapshots of Chris with other people or others without her, but the prevailing theme seemed to be jungle cats of various sizes although they were all the same type. In addition to the many cubs, full grown cats stalked around the manor and grounds at will.

Did she run some kind of nature preserve years ago? Is that where my visiting feline came from? Did it somehow escape when the others were taken away and now it lives in the forest?

The final photograph held her interest far longer than any of the others combined. The image was distorted, smudged; as though it had been double-exposed. Aunt Chris sat in the kitchen floor and held...something in her lap. Body parts of a small child were clearly identifiable, but so was the muzzle of a jaguar cub. In her occupation, Lee was fully cognizant of the imperfections of early photography equipment, but she had never seen such a disorienting effect from an overlapped image. And why was it only the child that was blurred and not the entire picture? Chris and the background were perfectly clear.

Perplexed and curious, Lee studied the back of the Polaroid. *'Chris and Marina.'*

Marina? Why would they name an animal after Mom, or was Mom named after the cat?

A shiver stole down her back. Lee felt like she was on the verge of understanding something of major portent, but as hard as she strained, the answers wouldn't come together. She knew instinctively these photos and all the other things she'd found in the trunk tied in with the mystery surrounding the entire area in general and the townspeople in particular. Before she could give it more thought, Lee heard a vehicle pulling up in front of the house and she tossed the already forgotten pictures onto the table.

She's here.

Lee's heart rate doubled and she swallowed in nervous anticipation, her mind already darting back to the earlier encounter with Jamison in the park office. Instantly, she could taste Jamison's lips pressing against hers in passionate fury and strong fingers massaging inside her body. The thoughts sent a flood of liquid heat through her and she had to take several calming breaths before regaining enough composure to start for the front door.

Cleo was way ahead of her, standing at the entrance with her head thrown back and baying for all she was worth.

"Yes, Cleo. Thank you very much. Come in," she finished with a slightly raised voice.

The front door opened and Lee was mesmerized by a pair of brightly shining green eyes. The moment seemed to stretch out indefinitely as she saw her own expression of dazed desire returned. Without thought, Lee walked up to Jamison until she was only a few feet away. It took all of her willpower not to latch hold of Jamison and kiss her senseless on the spot.

Probably not a good idea right now. Next thing you know I'd have her on the floor under me. God, Lee. Get hold of yourself.

Apparently, Jamison didn't have the same reservations. A smile ghosted across her tanned features and she eclipsed the small distance. Her head lowered and she brushed her lips warmly over Lee's, easily swallowing the gasp generated by a bolt of sharp desire.

"Hi, again," Jamison whispered.

"Hi, back."

Lee wanted so much to take this engagement into her bedroom, but reached for a little self-restraint. From Jamison's own actions, both of them wanted another physical encounter, but right now she had to focus on why she'd asked Jamison to come over. If she didn't, chances were good they'd never get around to it. She just hoped Jamison understood.

She took a half step back and noticed the perplexed look on Jamison's face. "I'm sorry. I'd love to take up where we left off earlier, but if we don't get the business end of this out of the way, I'm afraid I won't be able to concentrate."

"And I'm afraid that if we launch straight into business, I won't be able to concentrate," Jamison said.

Lee groaned and briefly closed her eyes. "You don't make this easy, do you?"

Jamison took a half step forward before she stopped. "I admit I want to be with you, and not just on the top of my desk. I want you under me right now, hot and naked and moaning my name. But I'll be good. I'll try to do my duty to the best of my ranger abilities and not picture stripping your clothes off."

"Thanks," Lee said wryly. "I know I'll be able to think clearly now."

She received a knowing smile before Jamison said, "Just doing my part. Now, why don't you show me these amazing pictures of a black panther?"

"Actually, there are only two pictures. One of them is the jaguar, as you so helpfully pointed out earlier, and the other one is ... something else."

Lee made the decision to show Jamison the picture of the trespassers as soon as she walked into the house. She hadn't considered it before, but one look at the open, caring expression generated a feeling of trust.

"All right, now I'm intrigued."

"Intrigued. It's funny you should use that word," Lee said as she turned and walked toward the kitchen and the rear steps that would lead down to her darkroom.

"Oh, why is that?"

"You'll think I'm crazy."

"Probably only a little," Jamison teased.

Lee cast a grin over her shoulder and opened the door to the basement. "I've just noticed some odd things since I've been here and it's all shaping up to look rather mysterious."

"I see, Sherlock, you'll have to fill me in on what you've....What is that smell?" Jamison had frozen in her tracks and a look of infinite disgust curled her top lip.

Lee stopped and faced her with a frown of her own. "It's those barrels I told you about. They're starting to smell like something died down there."

"They smell like several somethings died. I didn't realize it was so awful. You should have reminded me."

Lee blushed, pleased by Jamison's reaction. "I didn't want to bother you, so much has been going on." Then another thought occurred to her and she asked, "You don't really think something is dead inside those barrels?"

"I doubt it," Jamison reassured her quickly. "I'm sure it's just some old vegetables that have rotted and the decomp is really starting to saturate the wood. When you get down to it, any kind of biological organism smells like death when decay sets in and if it goes on long enough. I'll tell you what though, I'll contact a guy I know after I leave and we'll come out about ten o'clock tomorrow to get those nasty things out of here. How does that sound?"

"Wonderful. I may well have to kiss you right now just for that."

Jamison's eyes sparkled. "That sounds great."

"But?"

"But I'd rather not kiss you with that smell in my nose. It might be a bad association for me later."

Lee laughed. "I certainly don't want that. Why don't we save it until after show and tell?"

"All right."

The look in her eyes told her that Jamison wouldn't forget the offer. She felt a flurry of butterflies take up residence in her stomach and looked away, suddenly overcome with a case of nerves. What happened earlier in Jamison's office had been spontaneous. Lee had no time to consider what she was doing, only that she wanted Jamison fiercely and acted on that impulse. Now, they were actually planning for it to happen again and she felt unexpectedly shy. Instead of

responding, she reached inside the doorway and switched on the light switch to the lower level. Cleo had anticipated the move and was already two steps ahead of them.

"Does she always do that?"

"Oh, yes. She fancies herself my protector."

"Good girl."

"Except for the night of the last thunderstorm." Lee smiled thinking about it. At the time, both of them had been just short of panic, but now the fear seemed so juvenile. "You should have seen her pawing at the darkroom door in an absolute frenzy because of the thunder and lightning."

"Heart of a lion, huh?" Jamison asked in amusement.

"Exactly."

THE SMELL ON the basement level was so strong it effectively squashed Jamison's desire, even though she realized it was a temporary effect. She'd been attracted to Lee almost from the moment she first saw her and the brief physical liaison they shared only hours ago fueled that fire. Being with Lee was remarkable and when she'd bit down on Jamison's shoulder it had been like having sex with another Panthera. Biting was a common practice, not to draw blood but to establish a deeper connection. The combination of extreme pleasure and a minor pain had thrown open the doorway barring any lingering reservations on her part about becoming involved with Lee.

Jamison admitted her heart craved a mate and she needed Lee to fill that role. What had started out as 'just sex' had quickly morphed into so much more. Even following behind Lee with the offensive odor drowning out her other senses, Jamison had difficulty tearing her eyes from the trim figure leading the way. But was it too soon for her to feel like this? Her instincts told her Lee would probably think so.

They passed a closed door on the left and she fought the urge to hiss at the sickly sweet stink. Even a full human couldn't help but be overpowered by the stench. "They're in here, I take it. The barrels?"

"Yes, I'm sorry about that. It's not exactly the impression I wanted to make with you."

"There's nothing to apologize for, Lee." Jamison's voice was gently reassuring. "I should have remembered."

Jamison didn't want Lee to believe she thought less of her for something she had no control over. Everything in the root cellar had been there months before she arrived. The Council should have made sure the house was cleaned out before anyone else moved in, out of respect for their *Kadin* if nothing else. But the full burden didn't rest on the Council of Elders. As soon as Lee mentioned it, Jamison should have followed through to see that they were removed.

Lee soothed the small transgression with a simple smile. Jamison felt that she could fall into that expression, immerse herself in the calming mien and bask in it without end. She cleared her throat and broke the moment.

"Pictures?"

"Right."

Lee opened the darkroom door and flipped on the overhead safe light, casting a reddish hue over the contents. Rolls of film and photographs in the development process hung from what looked like a clothesline, giving the area a cluttered feel though it was really quite organized.

Jamison blinked against the abnormal light spectrum and followed her over to a table near the back where a few pictures were laid out. Lee picked up two 8x10 inch sheets and presented the first one.

"This is the jaguar. As you can see, it doesn't look like it's ready to pounce, but it isn't exactly frightened either. Cleo really spazzed out when she saw it and I was afraid all that baying and barking would make it attack us."

Jamison studied the image for several long seconds. Although the picture had been taken at night and was camouflaged by trees and brush, it was very clean. Every detail of the cat, herself, was clearly depicted. If this got onto any of the local news feeds it would quickly get out over the wires and half the hunters in the country would descend looking for a personal safari trophy.

"What are you going to do with the picture?" she asked quietly, hoping that Lee wasn't planning something outlandish like sending it to the newspapers.

Lee shrugged. "Nothing at this point. I told my agent about it and I might include it in one of my showings at some time in the future, but that's it."

Jamison looked at her and tried to gauge her sincerity. She believed Lee, but this was too important to take a chance. "You're not going to advertise it anywhere else, are you?"

"What, do you think I'm crazy? I'm not deliberately going to incite some kind of riot."

"I'm not trying to insult you," Jamison said, hoping that Lee believed her.

Sighing somewhat dramatically, Lee handed over the other photograph. "If you liked that one, you're going to love this. I told you I contacted Sheriff Macke about some trespassers last night. What I didn't tell you, or the sheriff, is that I got them on film. I'd like to hear what you think because I have something to tell you that I don't think you're going to believe."

Jamison already knew what she was going to see when she took the other picture. The paper was heavier and it didn't take much to realize that when Lee said she got it on film she meant it. She had developed this one herself and there would be a film roll lying around, possibly overhead. The first photo must have been printed off on Lee's computer and would be saved either to a flashdrive, disc or hard drive. Maybe all three.

The Council was already stirred up about the fact that Lee had pictures of them. It wasn't beyond the realm of possibility that they'd decide to retrieve them and all copies Lee might have. If they did, things could get very dangerous.

Jamison finally looked at the image and almost gasped out loud. It was worse than she suspected. Lee hadn't just captured a group of people standing around a fire, wearing brown robes. She had caught the elders in mid-flight, trying to run from the scene. She could see Dominick Crane's face, snarling toward the camera as he leaped straight up over the flames. Marie Tristan at least had her back to the camera, but Jamison recognized her long, red hair.

She had to get these pictures away from Lee. She wouldn't mention the idea of copies when she brought the snapshots to the Council and it might buy her some time to find their rogue killer before the elders thought about it.

"What do you think?" Lee said. "The sheriff said they were probably a bunch of kids playing around in the woods, but that guy doesn't look a day under thirty."

Lee was building up a head of steam, her voice rising as she spoke and Jamison had a hunch she was about to drop a bombshell. She'd already said she had something to tell that Jamison likely wouldn't want to believe.

"There is something going on around this town that no one wants to talk about. I think it has to do with both of those pictures." Lee gestured to the photos Jamison still held.

Thinking on her feet, Jamison said, "How can you draw that conclusion, a jaguar and a bunch of people on Mafdet land wearing robes? Granted the timing might be a little suspicious, but I'm sure it's just a coincidence."

"Coincidence my foot. That's not all. I found a trunk in the attic that belonged to Aunt Chris. Inside, I found a brown robe just like the ones those people are wearing." Lee pointed at the pictures again. "I also found some kind of spell book, or whatever."

Jamison felt herself pale at the words and was grateful for the reddish hue overhead that would help mask it. She wanted Lee to find out all these things, of course, but only when she was ready. Hammering her with the facts all at once might drive her off the mountain, or worse. At the moment, she couldn't do anything about any of it until she learned exactly where Lee was headed with her thoughts.

"And you think Chris was tied up with these people somehow?"

"I'm sure of it. How else do you explain it?" Lee paced away a few steps before she retraced her path, a fierce look of concentration on her face. "There was also a letter in there. Chris wrote it to me a month before she died and in it she talked about a society called the Panthera. She said she was one of them and that so was I. Jamison, she said she was a medicine woman. A Kadin, whatever that is, and she said I was supposed to follow in her footsteps. Now I don't know what you think about all this, but I believe Chris was involved in some kind of pagan religious cult."

For the first time since the conversation began, Jamison felt a flare of anger and annoyance.

The Panthera a religious cult? Ridiculous!

She bit her tongue to keep from blurting out her response. She had to approach this logically or Lee wouldn't listen. Maybe the time had arrived for her to know what was going on.

"Panthera, huh? Did she tell you what they are?"

Lee nodded. "It was all a little cryptic, but I gather they commune or worship nature. That's what I understand from the letter, but there was this guy I ran into in Harmon and he said the Panthera are actually capable of taking on other shapes and--"

"Lee! You've been questioning the townspeople about all this? What are you thinking?"

When this got back to the elders it would be a disaster. They'd begin to see Lee as a threat and someone would be out here to visit her. If they couldn't make Lee see reason and give them the photos and all copies, something bad might happen. She might even wind up dead since it was the community's livelihood and security at stake.

"I wanted to know what was going on."

"Why didn't you talk to me about any of this?"

"You said it yourself," Lee almost shouted back. "You've been a little busy and it's not like you were calling me back. Maybe if you had, I'd have talked with you about all this. Do you know what's going on? If so, I'd love to hear about it."

With the challenge thrown before her, Jamison had a decision to make. Telling Lee about the Panthera was a given, she'd have to do it, but right now her protective instincts were surfacing and all she wanted was to get Lee to back away from this whole thing. Once the killer was apprehended, there'd be time to fill her in on everything.

Her mind made up, Jamison said, "I can tell you that the Panthera are not a religious sect of some kind. They're peaceful people who just want to be left alone. I can also tell you that I'm worried that if these trespassers you photographed are dangerous, you shouldn't be out questioning half the town about it. Now, I'm not saying that they are. Just let me have the pictures and I'll talk to Sheriff Macke about it myself."

"You? Why should you be the one to do it?"

"Because I'm in charge of the safety of anyone in this area of Adirondack Park and that includes the town and you. And I don't want you taking any more walks after dark and trying to get pictures of jaguars or anything else as long as there's a killer on the loose."

As soon as she said it, Jamison knew she'd made a mistake. Lee grew very still and scrutinized her before asking calmly, "Why do I get the feeling you're not talking about the jaguar?"

Jamison slapped a hand over her eyes and quickly removed it, trying to figure out how to get out of this one. "There have been some animal killings; a bull and some sheep. I told you about Hank," she finished lamely.

"Your friend? You said he died, but you didn't say how. Jami, don't you see? This is just another layer on top of what's going on around here. How can you expect me to stay locked up inside my home and not want to do something to help?"

"Because I care about you!" Jamison finally shouted. Why can't you just accept that I want you to be safe?"

"Because I'm not a child!" Lee railed back. "I'm perfectly capable of taking care of myself and I'm not about to let you tell me what I can and cannot do. You have no right to try and control me. If we can find out what's going on we can prevent anyone else from being hurt."

"That's not your job, it's mine."

Jamison was frustrated and angry that she couldn't reason with Lee to stay out of this, but she knew that arguing further was pointless. She had to get away from her and get some fresh air, try to clear her head and see if she could argue her standpoint with Lee from a more logical angle.

"Can I at least have the pictures? I'd like to talk with Sheriff Macke a little more and I need to get a copy of the jaguar to the rangers in the area so they know what to look for."

"Fine, keep them, but I'm not changing my mind about trying to figure out what's going on. You can't just expect me to bury my head in the sand."

Jamison clenched her jaws and grated, "I'm going to look around before I leave, if you don't mind. Maybe I can find something near the fire ring. Where did you say it was?" Having spent many years running around the area, Jamison knew where the ritual pit was located, but she'd already slipped up enough for one evening.

"Straight west, the trail right out the front door. Are you going to come back?"

The question caught Jamison by surprise. When she'd first arrived, things had been headed in a very pleasant direction, but both of them were upset now. Lee was obviously hurt that her capabilities were being questioned and Jamison was still angry that she wouldn't listen to reason. For a second she almost told Lee how she felt, that she was falling in love with her and only wanted to keep her out of danger. She wanted to hold her close and eliminate all the secrets between them, but with their emotions riding so high now wasn't the time.

"I want to, believe me. I care about you so much, but I don't think I can right now."

Lee's eyes met the floor and even in the low lighting Jamison could see tears swimming. "I understand."

Obviously, she didn't, but Lee was trying to be gallant and Jamison almost folded. "I'll still come by tomorrow to get those barrels. Ten o'clock, be okay?"

"Fine," Lee said, her chin quivering slightly.

Jamison felt awful about how things were ending tonight and had to get away before she did something she'd eventually regret. "I'm going to look around."

Lee only nodded, making Jamison feel worse. She stepped forward and started to reach out. "Lee..."

"Just go," Lee said, looking up defiantly. "I'm not going to lie to you and say I'm going to drop this and it's clear we're not going to see eye to eye, so just do what you need to do."

All remorse evaporated in the face of Jamison's renewed anger. "You're so hard-headed."

She left the lower level of Mafdet Manor, taking the steps two at a time. Before she ever reached the trail to the holy area, Jamison regretted her outburst. Her instincts pressed for her to return and apologize, but just as she convinced herself to do so she caught a flash of color through the trees. Someone was on the grounds.

Jamison crouched low and stopped about two hundred yards behind the person on the trail in front of her. The breeze was blowing toward her so, at the moment, she was undetectable. Jamison raised her head and tasted the air, trying to identify who would be lurking about at this time of the night. She could smell old sweat, liquor and the thick stench of cigarette smoke.

Dalton. What's he doing here?

Carefully, staying low and away from the prevailing winds, Jamison tracked him as he stalked through the woods. He made no attempt to be quiet, smashing fallen tree branches and scattering leaves in his wake. He passed by the fire ring without a sideways glance and disappeared into the trees on the other side of the clearing.

If it had been any other member of the hunting teams in charge of ferreting out the murderous carnivore, she could believe he was merely following recent orders to scout the area between Newton Falls and Hayes Brook, but there were a few problems with that theory. His team wasn't assigned along the Mafdet perimeter, he was alone, and there was no reason to be so close to the manor house itself. His movements weren't those of someone on the lookout for a killer and why was he now getting into a car?

Jamison had followed him to a fire trail that would lead directly onto Blue Mountain Road. Dalton got into a late model Ford sedan, slammed the door and drove away without any indication of concern for having been followed.

Had he come to Mafdet tonight to see if Jamison was there? Was he following her, trying to create more trouble for her with the Council? Or was he more concerned about her activities with Lee? When he insisted on that emergency meeting with the elders, Dalton tried to make Lee out to be a threat to them then. Was he really convinced of that or was this just another way for him to gather information to use against Jamison?

She didn't know, but she resolved to pay more attention to his routine in the next few days. A sudden thought occurred to her and Jamison felt her blood run cold. Could Dalton be involved with these killings somehow? There had always been something intangible about the scent surrounding any of the slaughters and he had been there when the monster that killed Hank got away. Been there and let it go. Jamison thought he did it to make her actions suspect, but what if there was more to the story than that?

She felt bombarded with scenarios that flashed through her head. If he was involved, then who else? Was there anyone she could really trust besides Lee? The Council itself had members who would do anything to see themselves in charge, but would they stoop to some sort of conspiracy? What if these random killings weren't anything of the kind? Someone could have been hired to kill a couple of domestic animals or even an entire flock of sheep before they settled down and focused on their real targets. It would be a great way to throw the Panthera off the track, believing they had some nut on the loose killing at will, when the real targets were the senior Council members. Hank had been the most senior of the group and now her mother was in charge.

All right, Jamison, knock it off. You're just spinning theories, don't over react.

She didn't know anything for sure, right now, except that Aaron Dalton couldn't be trusted. Not that such information was groundbreaking news. She'd always known that. All she could do was watch him and make sure he wasn't any more a part of the problem than usual. Beyond that, there was nothing else until he did something to show his hand. At the moment she needed to get the pictures from Lee to her mother. Darlene could present them to the Council and hopefully take some of the heat off.

Jamison walked back to the house lost in thought, devising a strategy for tailing Dalton without his knowledge. She stopped beside her pickup and looked up at the house, where a light burned toward the back of the first level. Lee was probably getting ready for bed and Jamison desperately wanted to see her, but decided the time had passed. She needed to give her space to cool off.

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, able to taste Lee in her mouth from their shared kisses. Jamison carried Lee in her blood now, in her heart and the visceral reaction was so strong it made her ache. A whimper escaped as she climbed into her vehicle. Driving away felt like the hardest thing she had ever done.

Chapter Twenty-Two

THE SOUND OF a snuffling grunt caught her attention as she walked along the wooded game trail. Wisps of fog swirled through the air, preventing her from seeing whatever was ahead of her and somewhere droplets of water trickled, residue from a recent shower. The low pressure weather system had brought cooler than normal temperatures as well as rain that fell in a constant, if not heavy, drizzle. The conditions only served to heighten her dread, but Lee was determined to discover where this animal was going.

Farther along the path, only a hundred yards or so, she could discern the glow from an artificial light source. It seemed to be emanating from a small cave, more of a crevice really, but the glow helped to outline the creature between her and whoever was holding the light. The beast's pelt had been darkened by the storm and she could detect the foul, musky odor of gore and rot. The head appeared to be round with a full mane ringing his neck and shoulders and the sight of it filled her with fear.

Moving closer to the light source, Lee could see it was Jamison who held the lantern. She wore her ranger's uniform and squatted near the entrance to the hollow. Jamison appeared to be sifting through a pile of torn, blood-stained clothing, searching for something Lee couldn't fathom. She tried to cry out, to warn the woman she was starting to love, but the sound caught in the back of her throat. Lee knew this was the beast responsible for the recent deaths and she was convinced it had targeted Jamison as its next victim.

She still didn't understand what connection the black jaguar had to all of this, but she felt certain the cat wasn't responsible. What she comprehended without any doubt was that this monster in front of her would kill Jami without thought, hesitation or remorse.

Finally, she found her voice and screamed out a warning that Jamison didn't hear. The killer was closing in, its mouth gaping in a parody of a maniacal grin, teeth razor sharp and forked tongue lolling to the side like some kind of crazy serpent. It rushed forward, muscles straining to close the gap before its prey became aware.

Lee was running to get there before the creature could attack, to somehow save Jamison from this hellish nightmare, but she felt mired in quicksand. Her lungs burned, breath burst from her chest as she strained against her own physical limitations. Then she was different, more than she was before. Her claws tore into the ground as she propelled herself forward on four legs. Her clothing fell away, ripped into shreds from the force of conversion. A tremendous roar of challenge burst from her throat as her powerful haunches gathered, preparing for the fatal leap onto the monster's back.

Lee awakened with a scream on her lips, sitting up in the darkness and safety of her bedroom. Trembling, she raised her hands to her face, wiping sweat from her brow and pricking the sensitive skin of her forehead. Confused, she looked at her hands in the moonlight and was staggered by the appearance of her right hand and arm. Where she should have seen human flesh was a massive cat's foreleg and paw. Black, irregular patterns covered milky fur and the tips of her nails were sharp and curved into a deadly point.

A persistent growl from the foot of the bed caused her to gasp and look away from the fantastic sight, propelled back into the horrors of her dream. Cleo stood looking at her, forward legs extended and her lips curled back in warning over her teeth. Her best friend growled steadily and backed away as far as the footboard would allow and her gaze never once wavered from Lee's face.

"Cleo, honey, what is it? It's just me, everything's okay. What's the matter, girl?"

Lee kept her voice soft and steady, trying to reassure her. The nightmare had slipped away for the time being, concern for Cleo the only thing important at that moment. For several long minutes she tried to talk her down and finally Cleo began to relax. Her hackles were still raised, but she stopped growling. When Lee felt it was safe, she reached out her hand and Cleo came to her. She wagged her tail erratically, still unsure but willing to approach her. Lee gathered the dog against her breast and continued whispering reassurances in her ear until Cleo relaxed and began to pant in her post doggie fright.

When everything seemed normal once again, Lee put Cleo to the side and reached over to switch on the bedside lamp to reassure herself that her hand was indeed her own and not a giant paw. She opened and closed her fingers several times, relieved to find everything was as it should be. Then she looked down at the sweat dampened sheets.

Her hand was definitely as expected, but how could she explain the four long furrows ripped into the bedding?

SLEEP WAS OUT of the question. Lee sat sipping coffee at the table in the formal dining room. This wasn't a place she often found herself since the chamber was so big and often felt intimidating, but this morning it was exactly what she needed. The breakfast nook where she usually took her meals had left her with a slightly claustrophobic sensation, craving the feel of open space. The nightmare forced her to face all of the ramifications of what she'd learned since moving to Mafdet. Either she had to acknowledge the puzzle that was being slowly revealed, or admit she might be going crazy. Since Lee was fairly sure she wasn't insane, there was only one alternative.

What was it Jamison had called her, Sherlock? Well, Holmes always said, "When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth". That meant there really were people who could transform into mighty, morphing jungle cats.

Lee fought not to roll her eyes as she took another sip of her cooling brew and stared out the darkened window into the early morning.

Accepting there were such things as shape changers, it stood to reason that the robe-wearing partygoers were a component of that enclave. Aunt Chris' own cloak indicated she'd been involved with them and they'd probably been conducting rituals of some kind around that pit for years.

All of the answers had been provided for her, given by some truly unexpected resources. Jamison herself had said Chris held huge parties semi-annually and that the entire town attended. That confirmed Lee's prior suspicions that all of Harmon was involved and also explained why no one answered any of her questions. The jaguar she'd caught on camera was probably one of those so-called shifters, but Lee couldn't figure out why it was watching her.

Was it waiting to see if she would suddenly embrace her animal side; tear off her clothes and run naked and screaming into the forest? The question reminded her of the nightmare and she looked down at her right hand.

Was that part a dream, too? Or had it been real?

The sheets she had thrown away answered the question for her. Twice now, after having a nightmare, Lee had awakened and seen something unusual about herself, first in her eyes after the death of Jami's friend and then last night.

'Your dreams are the doorway.'

That's what Aunt Chris said in her letter. Could it be true? Was she really one of them, tied by the blood in her veins to a Kadin who tended to these people? Was Jamison one as well? Jami had lived in these woods her entire life. She obviously knew the people and had been very close to Chris. But if so, why didn't she just explain everything in a way Lee could understand?

"Why doesn't someone just tell me what's going on?"

Cleo picked her head up from where it rested between her paws. She looked up at Lee from the floor and cocked her head to the side.

"It can't be that bad, can it?" she asked her furry friend. "In fact, it could be kind of cool. I might have superhuman strength or be able to scale a brick wall with my claws. Let's see, okay?"

Lee chuckled and put her mug on the table. Then she closed her eyes and tried to force her body to assume another shape. What would she be? She thought of the jaguar and imagined herself with whiskers and a long, lashing tail. She concentrated so hard, she convinced herself that her skin had started to tingle. She opened her eyes quickly and saw that nothing was different.

"See," she giggled self-consciously, "same old me."

Cleo abruptly barked and jumped to her feet, startling Lee into sloshing coffee over the wooden surface. She was so on-edge that for a second, she was convinced a part of her body must have changed into something else. Then she saw headlights sweep across the yard and the windows. A vehicle came to a halt almost directly in line with the front door while the lights and engine shut down.

Who the...?

Lee automatically noted the time on the wall clock. 6:30.

Could it be Jami? Maybe she wants to make up for last night.

She couldn't imagine who else would drop by at such an early hour and left the mess on the table to clean up later, walking toward the door without a second thought. That decision didn't work out so well a few seconds later when she opened the mahogany entryway to the last person she anticipated seeing.

"Debbie. What are you doing here?"

Lee looked down into velvet brown eyes and saw the full smiling lips of the woman she had once thought she loved. Warmth filled her at the sight of the well-known face, but was quickly replaced with ambivalence. Their relationship had ended almost a month ago and she'd rarely thought of the woman since. When she did, it was with the remembered disappointment of overhearing a rather unsettling phone conversation. Although she'd only heard one side, it was enough to illustrate that Debbie Mason was after nothing more than her father's money.

Still, even so early in the morning she appeared as stunning as ever. Decked out in her usual Armani designer dress and heels, she might have been attending the latest gala event fresh from the red carpet instead of standing on the weather-beaten porch steps of a one-hundred year-old

manor. Lee glanced over and saw that she'd even driven her blue Porsche 911 TG2 onto Mafdet's rugged terrain.

Debbie reached up and brushed the long red hair back from her perfect features and cast a winning smile at Lee. "Hello, darling. This place is certainly hard enough to find."

She spoke as though there was nothing amiss between them and Lee felt suspicion creeping over her. She had never told Debbie where she was going and to her knowledge there was only one other person who ran in her former circles who could have done so. "Again, I ask. What are you doing here?"

"Oh, come on, honey. Don't be like that. I drove all the way up here myself just to bring you that nasty weapon you asked Jasmine for and this is the thanks I get?"

Jasmine. It figures.

"I'm so sorry you couldn't bring your chauffeur," Lee said sarcastically, "but then again it probably wouldn't have been good for your image. After all, why would Debra Mason possibly risk being caught rubbing elbows with some strange woman out in the sticks? Not that it matters, but what on Earth could have compelled Jasmine to load this task off on you anyway? I thought you two didn't get along."

Or I wouldn't have confided in her. That woman is going to hear about this.

"Normally, we don't, but I was just so upset when I didn't hear from you. I went to her and simply pleaded for her to tell me where you'd gone. After she heard what I had to say, she was only too happy for me to come up here and try to talk some sense into you." Her expression was an Oscar-winning combination of both confusing and sincere and Lee felt a prickle of apprehension.

"Uh huh."

"You could show a little gratitude. I spent all that time driving and almost got lost. What do you need with a rifle anyway?"

"Shotgun," Lee automatically corrected, her arms folded defensively. Debbie always had a way of talking so fast that she felt like she was running behind to catch up with the abrupt changes in conversational direction.

"Whatever. Aren't you going to invite me in?"

Lee reacted by taking a step back, just enough to clear the entrance into Mafdet. The uber-thin model stepped into the foyer, but one look at Cleo was enough to stop her in tracks. She never had liked dogs and it seemed that time away from the beagle hadn't improved her opinion. Debbie took a quick glance around the old-world style décor and her lips twisted in an unbecoming manner.

"Charming."

"Did you want something besides bringing me the shotgun, or are you just taking the opportunity to insult my home?" Lee didn't bother to close the door since she didn't want to encourage her uninvited guest to stay any longer than necessary.

Debbie became quiet and she seemed almost sad. For a few seconds, Lee could almost believe this was a true emotion and not some put-on. It was the first time she could remember seeing Debbie behave that way.

"Why did you break up with me?"

"You came all the way out here just to ask me that?"

She was astonished Debbie would leave the bright lights of New York for something she was convinced the red-head would think inconsequential. There were plenty of rich, single women who would jump at the chance to take Lee's place.

"It's important. I don't understand what went wrong. I thought we had a good thing."

"We talked about this."

"No, we didn't." Debbie was getting angry. "You came up with some lame excuse about having to take over the family estate out here in the wilderness and then you were just gone. Why?"

Lee had to admit she really hadn't given Debbie a proper answer at the time, but she didn't really think it would have mattered. Her experience with Debbie had shown her to be shallow and opportunistic with very little time for anything emotional.

"Debbie, you know our relationship wasn't what it should have been and it's not like you would have moved out here with me."

"You never even asked!"

"Why would I?" Lee demanded. "Am I wrong? There aren't enough parties out here or the right kind of crowd to mingle with."

An expression of horror crossed Debbie's pale features. "Of course I wouldn't live out here. Who in their right mind would? But you're still not being honest. Jasmine told me some things, things we need to talk about."

"She had no right!"

"Maybe, but I convinced her. I'm very good at that, if you recall."

Debbie reached up and rested a warm hand against her cheek. She leaned in so close Lee could smell the familiar perfume and see the small ring of black around her sable eyes. She started to react, to lean into the kiss she knew was coming, but she pulled back at the last moment.

What am I doing?

Jamison's tanned features raced through her head and she moved back, putting distance between them. "Stop it. The truth is it just wasn't working for me and it was time to move on. Accept it."

"Nice try, honey, but I can't. I know you have feelings for me and I'm sure we can work things out if you just give me a chance to explain my side of what you think you overheard."

Just remembering the incident was enough to make Lee furious. She'd felt used by what Debbie had tried to do and speaking with her now wasn't improving the situation. "I heard your side when you were on the phone telling your partner you still hadn't got the combination to the safe. That pretty much told me what I needed to know."

"Partner? You're the only partner I have and you misunderstood. Please, baby. Let's talk about this."

She had started to sound desperate and Lee wondered why it was so important to her. She didn't believe it was because Debbie had decided she couldn't live without her, but she could be very persuasive and Lee was starting to consider having the conversation just to get it over with. That wouldn't be a good idea because Debbie could be very persuasive when she wanted to be and it was time to end it now. Not just because of her developing feelings for Jamison, either.

There was a murderer running around the region, whether man or beast. She might not love Debbie but she didn't want to see anything happen to her and encouraging her to hang around when there was no hope was pointless. Lee might unwittingly be putting her in danger when she hadn't any intention of rekindling their past affair.

"Go home, Debbie. This is where I belong now."

Debbie was resolute, laying a comforting hand on Lee's shoulder. "I'm not going anywhere until I've had a chance to explain. I love you, but I can see you're not in the mood for this now."

I've booked a room at the Harmon Arms Bed and Breakfast, room number three. I'll be there when you have a chance to reconsider. Now come and get that dreaded thing out of my car."

Silently, she followed her to the roadster. Debbie opened the door and indicated for her to retrieve the shotgun. Lee blanched when she saw the weapon resting in the floorboard of the car with the barrel pointed toward the roof. The safety wasn't engaged.

"Are you trying to get yourself killed?"

"What?"

Lee shook her head and retrieved the shotgun, thumbing the safety at the same time. "Never mind. At least there's no reason for you to ever transport a weapon again."

She stood up holding the gun angled across her body with both hands. Debbie took advantage of her hindered stance to lean forward and press their lips together in an intimate caress that lingered for only a moment, but was far too long in Lee's opinion. She gasped and pulled back in surprise.

"Call me later, darling," Debbie said cheerfully and walked around to get behind the wheel. She waved once and drove away.

Clueless.

Lee shook her head and walked back into the house.

Chapter Twenty-Three

DALTON HAD WITNESSED the interplay between the women, one of whom was clearly a weak-blooded human. There was an unmistakable history there and from the scent of the slender redhead, she wanted to rekindle that past. In and of itself, he didn't care what they did, but it might be something he could taunt Kessler with. Getting her in trouble with the elders hadn't worked out like he wanted, but he wouldn't mind trying to burrow under her skin in other ways.

Spying on the new owner of Mafdet Manor had become very interesting since the Caber ordered him to retrieve the photos of them gathering at the sacred place. It seemed that most of what was occurring around the region had something to do with the old house. He just didn't understand why no one else had figured it out. It only made sense since the Kadin had lived here for centuries and while the dwelling didn't look like much anymore, it had slowly become imbued as a center of power. He thought it likely that the house actually drew energy from the individuals living there over a period of time.

Thinking again of the purpose for his being there, Dalton smiled nastily. *I bet Kessler would like to know her own mother told me to get that photo back. I just wish I could be the one to tell her. I'd love to see her face.*

Moving Hank's body out of the house while Jamison was outside throwing up had been part of his plan to make her look worthless, but it hadn't worked out that way. Before he could make his move, the creature circled back around the house and dragged Hank outside. Aaron hadn't planned on the beast snatching it up and making off with it, but there hadn't been anyone else there. It had to have been the killer. By retrieving the body, the creature had inadvertently rescued Kessler from the Council. The busy-body sheriff wouldn't find anything but sheep's blood on his shirt. It didn't matter. This latest assignment had the potential to elevate him in the elders eyes.

He sucked his teeth and picked at them with a dirty pinkie nail, considering how such an annoying chore had turned out to be a stroke of fortune. Already he'd learned the killer visited this particular spot repeatedly, the spoor was too strong for that not to have been the case. He'd accidentally found the scent in the woods and followed it back to the tunnel entrance leading into the basement level. All of these nostalgic manor homes had secret entrances and it was only a matter of time before he figured out how to make the hidden entry open. He couldn't just break a window and climb in because there was no guarantee he'd find what he was looking for the first time and it would be that much harder if he had to make a return trip.

A plan slowly began to form and his eyes narrowed.

First, I'll find a way in and retrieve those stupid pictures. That'll get the elders off my ass. Then, I'll kill Kessler's little girlfriend and make it look like our rogue did it. Maybe I'll get lucky and kill the beast, too. The pieta will be all heartbroken and pathetic and I'll be the hero. The Council will probably make me an elder instead of that bitch.

His cell vibrated against his hip and he rumbled in irritation, annoyed at being interrupted when he was in the middle of scheming. Looking at the read-out, he couldn't identify the caller

and almost let it go as a wrong number. Just before it went to voicemail, he answered. He couldn't afford to allow anyone to think he was shirking his duties, especially if it was one of the elders calling for a progress report.

"Dalton."

"Hey, Aaron. This is Xander Chiesel. How have you been?"

The voice wasn't familiar and it took a moment for Dalton to remember the man, a skinny, insipid undergraduate from Paul Smith's College at Lower St. Regis Lake. Like most shape shifters in the area, they both majored in Forestry. He had no great desire to talk with the lion-changer, but curiosity won out. What would the Felidae pride leader's son want with him?

"Is there something I can do for you?" Dalton snapped.

"Aw, now. Is that any way to talk to an old fraternity brother?"

The question told him this was going to be personal and that Xander was already trying to kiss up, so it was something not just anyone would be receptive to. In college, Dalton only hung out with Chiesel because of who his father was, going to the same parties and pretending to actually like the guy. Now it looked like all that wasted time might be about to pay off.

Xander spoke into the silence. "Uh, you remember my brother? I'm calling because he's missing and I hoped you'd agree to help me find him."

"Are you talking about that nut who used to follow you around? That's your brother? I thought you just felt sorry for the loser."

Quiet filled the airway and Dalton wondered if he'd gone too far. He didn't mind hurting the little twerp's feelings, but his interest was still piqued. Finally Xander responded.

"Last time I saw him, he was in treatment again up in Canada, but I called and they told me he was released a few months ago."

"Okay, so what do I care? I don't have nothing to do with no institution."

"Well, here's the thing," Xander said anxiously, "No one has heard from him; not me, my dad or even his mate, Thelma. She said she saw him once, about two months ago, but that was it and she said he's not looking very good. I'm afraid he might be in trouble."

"Sorry about your bad luck, but I don't see what I can do for you." Dalton was starting to wish he hadn't answered the phone. He had enough on his plate without getting involved with the Coalition.

"Look, the truth is that he's always been a little different, easy to anger and that kind of thing. Your *Pieta* was up here about some killings in the area and you know how he always liked the forest around there. If he is up there, someone might suspect him of being involved when I know he isn't."

Dalton started to retort that Kessler wasn't his *pieta*, but the full impact of Xander's explanation hit him. No matter what he said, Chiesel thought his brother was the one they were looking for.

"Do you mean he's the murdering bastard who's running around tearing up the countryside? This is great; the Council's going to have a meltdown when I tell them this."

"You can't do that!" Xander shouted. "We might go to war over this, and what if it's not him? A lot of people could get hurt and we still wouldn't find the one who's really responsible. Please, his mate is pregnant. At least consider the cubs."

Dalton snorted in disgust. "I heard you'd turned into an emotional wreck, even got a mate and cubs of your own. How cute. The truth is I don't really care about your problems. There's nothing in it for me."

"I'll pay you." That caught his attention and he listened as Chiesel continued. "It's not him, I know it's not. But if it is, we can stop all this before it goes any further. We can get him back and the killing will stop. No one ever needs to know what really happened."

"How much?"

Hearing the future leader of the pride beg for his help was music to Dalton's ears. He'd made up his mind to assist before Xander offered to pay him, but it would be for his own reasons. Not some imagined greater good.

"Fifty thousand?"

"Make it one hundred, half up front and half when we find the runt."

"Done." Xander didn't complain about Dalton's description of his sibling, illustrating just how desperate he was. "I can be in Harmon by noon. Can you meet me at the old lumber yard?"

The building had been abandoned for years and there would be no threat of being seen, but Dalton didn't like being told what to do. He needed time to revise his plans for Kessler, using this new situation with the Chiesels to bring about her fall from glory.

"No. I'm busy looking for your twisted brother and if I suddenly disappear without reason it might look suspicious. I'll contact you later today and tell you when I'm available."

Dalton hung up without waiting for Xander to respond, his mind swirling through scenarios. Movement near the edge of the woods drew his gaze and he watched a heavy raccoon waddle out of the brush, headed toward the back of the house. His jaguar rose up, insisting on being freed to pursue and consume. He almost allowed it until he felt the energy pulsing from the small icon.

Kadin frequently had a counterpart to balance their power, almost like a familiar to a witch. Christine Mafdet had used a raccoon and while Dalton didn't know if this was the same creature, it had the same aura. He wanted to eat it. He sensed the pulse, smelled the warm, meaty flesh and his mouth watered, but he resisted. No one would touch the icon, not even him, but the situation had just become more complicated. If it was here, Chris' replacement had been chosen. Then he realized there was a loophole he could exploit. Grayson wasn't in power yet and until she was, anything that happened to her would be seen as just a tragic accident. There would be no reason to investigate.

Dalton watched the animal climb the back steps and enter the house through a small flap. Once it was out of sight, he stripped and folded his clothing. He hid them behind a clump of brush and assumed his more powerful form, the shape he preferred. Strong hind legs propelled him into the cusp of the tree where he settled down to see what would happen next and await his opportunity to break into the house, perhaps for more than just stealing a few ridiculous photographs.

Chapter Twenty-Four

"HELLO. WHAT ARE you doing here? Just drop by for some breakfast?"

Lee spoke nervously to the gorgeous beast with the twitching black nose. The raccoon had sauntered through the dog door as comfortably as Cleo ever had. It was more than a little unsettling and she still wasn't convinced he was completely healthy, yet there he stood.

Keeping one eye on the critter, Lee finished rinsing out her coffee cup and then set it in the sink. Cleo wandered into the kitchen and approached their uninvited guest at a slow and steady pace. Her body was low to the ground, almost slinking, but not out of any attempt to stalk the animal. Rather, she seemed to be trying not to startle it. When the two were only a few inches apart, the raccoon reached out as he'd done before and rested a gentle paw on the crown of Cleo's head. The dog froze for a second before her inquisitive personality took over and she sniffed the air in front of her new friend.

Lee was surprised that she didn't feel threatened by the raccoon's presence near her dog. Instead he brought a sense of peace to her tumultuous emotions, jangled by the incident with Jamison last night and then meeting with Debbie this morning. A killer running rampant didn't seem as life-altering as it had before.

It's just a raccoon, Lee, she chastised herself. But it didn't matter. Silly or not, she was glad to see him.

The animal dropped the human-like paw from Cleo's head and ambled toward her. He stood up in what was quickly becoming a habit and held his front legs up, waiting to be held. Lee chuckled and hefted him into the air, wondering if she would see images of the forest again. The thought made her frown.

Chris supposedly had the power of insight and had written that Lee's dreams were the doorway. Now, she was seeing things that were hard to explain. She had witnessed her own body partially transformed and her eyes swirling with unexplained color. Just an hour ago she realized she had to accept what was happening as reality and that meant she had to face that fact that she had inherited her aunt's...gifts.

With the raccoon in her arms it seemed easier to face these impossible things. No longer did they seem like flights of fancy or the product of someone's overworked imagination. They felt real, but there was a part of her that still struggled against the incongruity of something she had always thought of as folklore. She reached down and took the raccoon's small hand in hers. The pads were soft, like a kitten's, but the claws were wickedly sharp. A dichotomy of lethal and benign.

"I'm starting to think you need a name."

He cocked his head and looked into her eyes. Then he twisted to the side and gazed at the floor. "You want down?"

Lee set him on the floor. "What do you think of Benjamin? Or how about Benny?"

The little fellow reached up and took hold of her index and middle fingers and she smiled. "Okay, Benny. Let's hold hands." But he wasn't content with that. Benny tugged insistently.

Looking for a snack? What do raccoons eat, anyway?

He toddled on his hind legs, gripping her fingers as they traversed the room and halted at the door to the lower level. She didn't question his actions and entered the basement without a second thought. For some reason, Lee still felt reassured around the animal and where normally the smell in the root cellar was enough to deter her from going downstairs, this time it was no big deal. Lee was eager to learn what the raccoon was up to and found it interesting how his behavior could be considered almost sentient.

They stopped in front of the warped, root cellar door and Lee finally acknowledged the beginnings of trepidation. Her smile faded as she realized his purpose for standing in front of this particular room. Obviously, he wanted her to enter. Benny looked at the door and back up at Lee, but she still stubbornly refused to move. The raccoon opened his mouth and emitted a soft shrill cry, the first noise she could ever remember him making.

"What? What do you want from me?"

He reached toward the handle with his other paw, but couldn't quite reach it and even if he could, he would never have been able to open the door. The smell emanating from within was stronger than ever. At least she wouldn't have to worry about it much longer. Jamison promised she would be there by ten and although Lee hadn't heard from her this morning, she trusted the woman to keep her word.

Lee finally, reluctantly, opened the door and the raccoon slowly walked inside while keeping his grasp on her index and middle fingers. He headed straight to the back of the darkened room and she pulled the light chain as they passed. Two wooden barrels with iron bands around the top, middle and bottom sat at the very end of the long, narrow space. Soon, they were as close to the containers as Lee had ever been. She could see a small clamp around the top metal ring that held the lid in place. Benny reached up as far as he could and rested his little hand on the side of the wooden surface before he looked at Lee once again.

"Oh, no. You're kidding me, right? You don't seriously want me to open that." Just the thought of it made her want to gag. "Let's wait until Jami gets here."

She tried to turn and walk away, but Benny held on and whimpered. When she looked at him, he slapped against the wood, creating a small thudding sound. She frowned, thinking the noise didn't seem right. Lee had always assumed the barrels contained rotted vegetables, floating in their own disgusting soup, but now she wasn't so sure.

Lee closed her eyes, mentally bracing herself for what she was about to do. "If these are just stinky old vegetables, you're cleaning up the vomit."

She shook his paw loose and unscrewed the clamp holding the top in place. She set the heels of her hands under the lid and pushed upward. At first the metal disc refused to budge, but then it wobbled just a tiny fraction. Lee crouched down just a little and tensed her whole body in a final upward heave. The top suddenly flew off and collided with the wall behind before it clattered to the ground.

The odor hit her full force, causing her to double forward at the same time that an involuntary retch clenched her stomach muscles. Distantly, she heard a keening cry and realized it came from the raccoon that was just as obviously affected. But the smell was nothing. Her vision narrowed down until the only thing she saw was a man's left forearm and hand sticking up obscenely from the congealed blood and gore.

JAMISON SMILED, DRIVING up the narrow lane to Mafdet Manor. It was a few minutes to ten o'clock and following dutifully behind her, as promised, was the man who would cart away the foul-smelling containers. Daryl Hines worked for Waste Disposal, but was more concerned with his personal side business of refurbishing and selling items he found in the garbage. It took some work to drag him away from that endeavor, but a fifty dollar bill did the trick.

She made the final turn that led up to the front of the manor and forgot all about her reason for being there. Black and white law enforcement cars were parked haphazardly on the front lawn. Jamison counted five. To her knowledge, that was the entire compliment of vehicles at the local office. Sheriff Macke must have called in all deputies from every shift.

Lee.

Her first thought was that something had happened to Lee; that a neighbor had found her. Dead, grisly images of finding Hank inside his house caused her heart to stutter. Then she saw Lee standing on the front porch near Sheriff Macke with her arms folded. Her head was down, eyes on the floorboards as they spoke, but she appeared to be fine. The relief that flooded her system left Jamison's hands shaking in reaction.

She stopped as near to the porch as she could past the patrol cars and quickly shut off the engine. Lee looked up and their eyes met through the windshield. A small smile graced her lips and Jamison stepped out of the truck and rushed toward her. Without thinking she embraced Lee, gratified when long arms encircled her neck.

"What happened? Are you okay?"

"She's fine," Sheriff Macke answered, "but I'm glad you're here, Ranger Kessler. I'd like to speak to you for a minute."

Frowning, Jamison looked at Lee for any indication of what the officer wanted, but Lee only shook her head that she didn't know. "All right."

They walked down to the end of the porch while Lee sat on the steps.

"Ms. Grayson called our office this morning because she found a body in her basement."

"A body?" Jamison was completely caught off guard by the statement. "Was there an accident? What happened?"

Sam gave a quick, solemn shake. "Nothing like that and it appears this person has been dead for a while. She found him in the basement stuffed in some old wine barrels."

"Great Mother," Jamison whispered and closed her eyes.

"You know something about that?"

"Only that an awful smell has been coming from the basement for a while now. We just thought it was some old, rotted vegetables."

The sheriff raised an eyebrow and hooked a thumb in her gun-belt as she considered the information. "I don't know how long you consider a while to be, but it definitely wasn't vegetables and the man can't have been there more than five days."

"How do you know that?"

"Um," Sam hesitated and then answered. "Because we think we know who it is."

Jamison was confused. If they had a body, the sheriff should know who it was unless the person had been disfigured in some way. And how could they know the victim had only been there for five days?

"What is it you aren't telling me?"

"Come with me."

Sheriff Macke led her into the yard. Jamison glanced toward Lee as they walked by, but Lee never looked away from the tree line, her expression distraught. Two wooden barrels stood at the side of the house and Jamison wondered how they got there until she saw a hand dolly nearby. She could smell the decomposition from a hundred feet away, but Sam halted before she could actually see anything.

"I hate to do this to you, Kessler, but I'm going to have to ask you to make an identification. He's not in very good shape and like I said, we think we know who he is. I just need confirmation."

"There's only one person I know of that's died in the last week and whose body is missing." Jamison swallowed nervously. "I'm guessing you've discovered Hank's remains?"

Sheriff Macke nodded. "We think so."

Sam walked toward the containers and Jamison followed reluctantly. Still six feet away, she saw his left hand sticking up in the air. It was close enough. "It's him."

"You sure?"

"I recognize his ring." Her voice caught and Jamison took a steadying breath. "What the hell was he doing here?"

"I don't know. Unless this is someone's idea of a sick joke, we just can't figure it out. Ms. Grayson has called my office twice before and now this, so I'm not sure what's going on."

"You can't possibly think she has anything to do with this?"

Instead of answering, Sheriff Macke asked, "What are you doing here this morning? I noticed you brought someone with a flatbed truck."

"I'm not trying to make off with the evidence, if that's what you're suggesting. I told Lee I'd have someone come out to remove those damned things because they were stinking up the whole house. You didn't answer my question, either. Do you think Lee is involved?"

"Yes," Sam surprised her by saying. "But not in the way you mean. Out of professional courtesy I'm going to share something with you. I told you she called the office a couple of other times. Once about some trespassers and then about a jungle cat."

"Yes, I know. I was going to speak with you about it later today."

"Were you now? Well, the people with robes I wasn't too worried about since I figured they were just kids and I assumed when Ms. Grayson got a picture of a black cat that one of your *Panthera* had gotten careless. Now, I'm wondering if there isn't more to it and those incidents were somehow connected to your friend's death."

"They're not," Jamison assured her. "As you know, the *Panthera* don't necessarily share conventional religious practices. Lee interrupted the elders holding one of their rituals. As for the cat, that was me. I was patrolling the area, we have teams out until this killer is caught, and she made me. I guess I'm not as stealthy as I thought."

Macke blinked in surprise. "I can't believe you people have remained undetected for so long. For what it's worth, you might want to be more careful. So what do you know about this situation?"

Jamison looked at the containers again and couldn't help imagining what was inside. "Do you know if that's all of him?"

"Not until the coroner checks it out. Thanks for bringing Daryl, by the way. We'll get him to help with the impound."

"I'm sure he'll love to be of assistance." Jamison smiled, but it didn't reach her eyes. "Like I said, the stench has been there for a while. Lee noticed it when she moved in and it just kept getting worse. The house was empty for months following the death of her great aunt."

Sam frowned and started pacing a few steps away and back again. She was silent and Jamison gathered she had figured something out.

"What is it?"

"It's possible your killer moved in here after the previous owner died and used the root cellar as a lair."

Horrified, Jamison asked, "You think he's been coming in and out of here all this time? Why wouldn't she have noticed, and how did he get in and out? I'm pretty sure she didn't give him a key and she's never said anything about a break in."

"All very good questions," Sam responded. "And until we find the answers and apprehend this perp, Ms. Grayson needs to consider staying somewhere else. I think it's pretty obvious this house isn't a healthy place to be."

"Funny, I tried to tell her that last night, but that was just because I didn't like her being all alone out here with everything that's happening."

"I'd say your instincts were right on." Sam started toward the front of the house again and Jamison was happy to get away from Hank's remains. "You might also want to convince her to see someone about the trauma she's been through."

"A shrink? Whatever for?"

"She appears to be in shock, understandable considering what she found, but it's going to hit her eventually and when it does, it might help to have someone to talk to."

"Lee seemed fine when I saw her a few minutes ago," Jamison said, curious what would prompt the sheriff to say such a thing.

"Most people would be hysterical and she's just so calm about the whole thing, unnaturally so. Plus, she was saying something about a raccoon leading her to the body." Macke shrugged. "It's something to think about."

"Of course." Jamison remembered the animal they'd seen with Cleo and guessed it was the same one. She certainly didn't think Lee had imagined the small animal, as the sheriff implied. She would ask about it, but right now she wanted to have a look through the root cellar. "I'm going to look around downstairs, if you don't mind."

"Go ahead. I'll take all the help we can get. Your senses are better than ours. Sometimes I wish we had a Panthera on the department."

"Thanks, Sheriff. That means a lot. I always thought you couldn't stand us."

"It's not that," Sam said. "Like most people, I have a hard time with things I don't completely understand. It doesn't mean I'm not willing to learn though. We're getting ready to wrap it up here, so call me if you find anything."

"I will."

The steps were empty when they came back around the house. The sheriff veered off to the left to speak with some of her people, while Jamison turned right and entered the manor. She discovered Lee sitting at the dining room table, sipping a cup of tea. Cleo lay at her feet and looked up curiously when Jamison walked in.

"Hey, girl." She knelt down and stroked the dog's head, looking deeply into the sable eyes. Cleo wasn't accustomed to all these people running around, but she didn't seem concerned. If anything, Jamison gathered she was more concerned with protecting Lee.

Finally, she looked up to discover blue eyes gently studying her features. She smiled and asked, "Are you all right?"

"Yeah. I know it's crazy, but I really am. I just can't believe there was a body down there this whole time."

At least Jamison could reassure her about that. "Not the whole time; only for the last week. It was Hank. His body disappeared from where he'd been killed. For some reason we can't figure out, the killer moved it here."

"Oh, Jami, I'm so sorry." Lee reached over and rested a hand on hers. Jamison kept hold of her, but rose from the floor and slid onto the edge of a chair. "But how did he get down in the root cellar when Cleo and I have both been here? We never heard anything."

"We don't know," Jamison said. "Sheriff Macke thinks whoever did this was using the space as a lair for quite some time."

"A lair? Then this murderer is a Panthera; one of those shape changers?"

Jamison was encouraged to see Lee come up with the answers on her own, or at least most of them, and now accepted shape shifters as the truth. "Not one of--"

She had almost said 'us', but caught herself. Lee had been through so much that Jamison sought to protect her from any further revelations. It would be best to allow her to absorb all the details of the Panthera society, and Jamison, a little at a time.

"We do believe this killer is a shifter, but not a Panthera."

Lee's eyebrows rose as she processed the information. "You mean there are others around here besides them?"

"There are shifters that live in communities all over the world. I think this one is from the lion coalition whose territory is almost an hour away, but I don't have any proof."

"And what, he's on vacation? Trying out the local cuisine?"

Lee's voice had risen and they were in danger of being overheard by the law enforcement officials who were still in the house. The Panthera were common knowledge to Sheriff Macke, but no one else and she couldn't afford to carelessly let their secret out.

"Lee, calm down."

"Are you kidding me? I've just found out that werewolves are real and that I'm probably one of them, if Aunt Chris' letter can be believed. The monster-on-the-prowl has been using my home as a hideout and bringing back take-out and on top of all that, my ex-girlfriend shows up this morning to say it was all a misunderstanding and we should get back together. So excuse me if I seem a little overwhelmed at the moment."

Jamison squeezed her hand in quiet support, but she heard only one small part of the miniature tirade. "Your ex-girlfriend is here?"

Lee smiled wryly. "Seems trivial now, huh?"

No, not really.

"I'm sure you must be very worried for her considering all that's happened, but you are my main concern. Sheriff Macke thought it might be a good idea for you to stay somewhere else until we catch this guy."

"Oh no, Jami, not that again. I thought we settled this last night."

"Things have changed since then, wouldn't you agree?" she said in aggravation. "Before, it was all speculation, but now we know that creature has been in your house. He comes and goes and no one knows how or why!"

Lee spent a reflective moment and then said, "Now that is a good question. Why?"

"What do you mean, or are you just trying to change the subject?"

"Seriously, Jamison. Of all the potential hiding places; cave systems, abandoned buildings or whatever else, why come here? Hank was killed miles away, yet his body ended up in my home. There has to be a reason."

"Maybe Macke was right and he's been using it all along. It could be he stumbled on the manor after your aunt died and it seemed like the perfect spot."

Lee frowned. "But we don't know it was after Chris' accident. That monster could have been here even then."

Jamison understood that Lee was spinning theories in an effort to make sense of all that was going on around her, but trying to do so without all the facts was pointless. She would only become more frustrated. "I guess we can't know until we catch him. We may never find out for sure. I think you need to let it go for now, but there is something you can do."

"Oh? And what's that?"

"You can promise me that you'll take Cleo somewhere safe until this is over."

"I can't keep her in a hotel, there's no telling how long this will go on."

On the verge of getting Lee to acquiesce, Jamison didn't think about the consequences of what she said. "Then stay with me." She could see she had surprised Lee with her offer.

"Are you sure?"

Her heart did a slow, nervous roll and Jamison gulped quietly. "Yes. I have plenty of room and my home is close enough you'd be able to check on the manor every day. Please. I'll feel better if I know you're out of harm's way."

Lee's cell phone rang and she pulled it from her side. Jamison's first thought as she checked the caller ID was that it was the ex she mentioned. Whoever was calling, Lee didn't feel compelled to answer. She shut the ringer off and returned the cell to the holster.

"Fine, but on one condition. Tonight you and I are going to sit down and you're going to tell me everything. No more secrets or half-truths. I'm not some child who needs to be protected. You owe me that."

Jamison nodded. "Fair enough. I'll tell you everything. Why don't you pack a bag while I go downstairs? I'd like to check the cellar out for myself before we leave, just to make sure the police didn't miss anything."

"All right," Lee said. "But we'll have to meet at your place later. That dealer from Lake Placid has already called twice and I'm supposed to finish up the paperwork for the new truck today."

"Are you up to that after what you've been through? I'm sure he'd understand if you explain what happened."

Lee smiled. "Thank you for worrying about me, but it's okay. I need to do something that feels normal, away from all this death and mystery."

That was something Jamison could understand and she was impressed with Lee's resilience. "Do you want me to take Cleo?"

"I appreciate the offer, but there's no way I'm letting that dog out of my sight. The salesman will just have to get over it if he doesn't like it. I only wish I could take Benny, too."

"Who's Benny?" Jamison knew Lee didn't own any other pets.

She blushed slightly and said, "The raccoon. I named him Benny this morning. Did I tell you he's the one who led me to the...downstairs?"

Jamison smiled. "Sheriff Macke said you mentioned a raccoon, but she didn't say how he was related."

Lee chuckled. "She must think I'm crazy."

"Who cares? We know better."

"Thank you. Jamison, that raccoon. He's not just an ordinary forest creature, is he?"

Jamison realized Lee had figured out more than she gave her credit for. No more holding back. "No, Lee. He isn't."

"You're going to explain what he is when we talk later, right?"

"Yes. All of it."

Lee leaned forward and kissed Jamison lightly at the corner of her mouth. "I'll see you later then."

Jamison watched Lee leave the room before she stood and walked through the kitchen and onto the rear steps leading to the lower level. Already the awful stench had faded, though it lingered enough to make her nose crinkle. The warped door stood open and a single, bare sixty-watt bulb illuminated the area, casting shadows farther back in the room where the light had trouble penetrating. Roughhewn wooden planks served as shelves along one wall and the floor was cool, rich earth. Drag marks indicated where the barrels had been removed and Jamison followed the impressions to the back of the storage space.

For several minutes she looked around, checking the brick and under the shelves for any sign of a hidden entrance. She didn't find anything and had to face the fact that the beast had another way of gaining access to the manor. Jamison heaved a tired sigh and left the room, clicking the light off as she did. Then she stood in the hallway looking around. This part of the house was along an outer wall and there might be an alternate entrance, a window that wouldn't normally be seen since the lower half of this level was below ground. But there were no windows that she could find, save for the small one halfway up the stairs. No getting in that way since the window was so tiny it barely allowed any light into the lower level.

Giving it up as a lost cause, Jamison walked back toward the stairs. A shaft of light under the staircase caught her eye and for a second she thought it was coming from upstairs. She squatted down and leaned into the shadows to get a better look and was astonished to discover a hidden panel that was open by a few inches. If the light hadn't been just right, she never would have seen it.

Jamison squeezed under the steps, but the panel was large enough for her to enter comfortably. Her nose twitched, assaulted by the smells of dirt and fresh air that flowed down a tunnel large enough for her to stand comfortably upright. Daylight from the far side cast enough of an ambient glow that even without enhanced vision she could have seen her way without concern. Nothing moved down here except the spiders, busily spinning webs in the hope of catching insects.

It didn't take long to reach the mouth of the tunnel, only a few minutes, and Jamison wasn't surprised to see she had emerged in the woods about one hundred yards from the house. What did catch her unaware was stepping into the morning and coming face to face with

Aaron Dalton in his jaguar form, sitting in the boughs of a tree.

His ears flattened and Dalton issued a warning hiss.

"What are you doing here?" Jamison demanded.

"Not your affair. Talk to elders if you don't like."

Communicating in animal form was much different than human speech. Most of what was conveyed was in the form of impressions or emotions. His reply was sufficient to translate that the elders had sent him and that he smugly refused to tell her why. Jamison smirked, considering she already knew the answer.

"If it's those pictures, you can give it up. Lee handed them to me last night and they're already with the Council. I guess this is just another failure for you as far as they're concerned."

Jamison realized she'd gone too far in goading him when Dalton snarled and leaped from the tree in her direction. The fur on his back was raised and his tail lashed from side to side, indicative of his annoyance.

"Bitch! My job!"

"Not anymore," Jamison replied with a chuckle. "You can leave now. Go on, do something useful like babysitting at the daycare in town. On second thought, scratch that. I wouldn't want you near any cubs; you're a bad influence."

"You and your human won't have to worry about cubs. I'm going to rip her heart out and eat it, after I have her."

Dalton sent mental images of brutalizing Lee's body before he crushed her skull and tore her apart.

Jamison reacted without thinking and she morphed into a sleek, black jaguar in the seconds it took to pounce. Tooth and claw clashed as both attempted to inflict mortal damage.

Chapter Twenty-Five

AFTER JAMISON LEFT to explore the basement, Lee went upstairs to retrieve a suitcase. The closet in one of the second floor bedrooms had become something of a storage area since they really weren't being used. Cleo followed her, sniffing around in her normal curious fashion, but Lee didn't pay much attention to her. She had too much on her mind. It was just staggering to find a body in the house she'd been living in for weeks. Lee had always thought herself more in tune with her surroundings for anything like that to happen without her knowing. She worried that something was wrong with her because she wasn't more upset. If anything, she felt strangely disconnected and wondered if Sheriff Macke was right. Was she just in some kind of shock that would wear off and leave her a hysterical wreck?

It was the biggest reason she had said yes to Jamison's offer. She wasn't worried she would suddenly have a psychotic break or anything that drastic, but if she did have trouble functioning she wanted to ensure Cleo would be all right. It bothered her to think she couldn't care for her own dog and Lee pulled the bag from the closet a little more forcefully than was required, turning back toward the exit as she did. Movement from outside the window caught her eye and she saw Jamison emerge from nowhere into the woods.

How'd she do that?

Her curiosity vanished in a flash when a golden jaguar leaped from the trees toward Jamison. The animal's spots, or rosettes, stood out sharply in the dappled sunlight. Even in her fear for Jamison's safety, Lee couldn't help note the jungle cat's musculature and supple grace. Then he lowered his chest toward the ground and exposed large, deadly fangs. Lee dropped the suitcase and raced down the stairs with Cleo in hot pursuit. She was halfway through the entryway when she realized Cleo would follow her into the woods if she wasn't careful.

"Stay!" she commanded sharply, pausing only long enough to make sure Cleo was still inside the house when she closed the door. Lee was so flustered she didn't even think about the dog door.

Lee ran as fast as she could toward the place in the forest where she'd seen Jamison encounter the cat. It occurred to her that she should have retrieved the shotgun, but it was too late now and she wasn't about to turn around at this point. Branches snapped underfoot as she careened forward, propelled by her concern and remnants of a nightmare in which Jamison had been attacked by a similar creature. Jamison's angry voice drifted toward her, illustrating how close she was before Lee bothered to question how the two of them could fend off the animal if it decided to strike.

"I wouldn't want you near any cubs; you're a bad influence," she heard Jamison say sharply.

Her comment told Lee that she knew the beast and that the creature wasn't a common garden-variety jaguar. He was a Panthera. Regardless, that didn't mean he wasn't dangerous. She could see both of them now and was about to call out when the cat struck, catapulting his strong, sturdy body toward Jamison at an alarming rate. Lee screamed out a warning and then froze as events unfolded in a way she never could have foreseen.

It all happened so quickly, yet at the same time it felt like time was suspended. She saw every detail clearly, heard the sound of clothing torn asunder as Jamison changed before her eyes. Her face flattened and lifted, cheeks rounded as whiskers sprouted, teeth erupted into fiercely sharp weapons of destruction. Lee heard the bones in Jamison's body snap wetly as they reformed. Her spine elongated into a supple tail. The coat was black, yet her rosettes were midnight against the inky pelt, still distinct even in the muted light under the trees.

Then the two cats were dueling, teeth ripping and claws tearing as each sought to gain the upper hand. Snarls and growls filled the air. Jamison clamped down on the other jaguar's neck but he shook her off, falling onto his back with the effort. The black cat pounced on him, seeking the advantage of having him under her, but the tawny animal was too fast for that. He raised his hind legs and dug in, trying to disembowel Jamison. Blood soaked the ground under the combatants and Jamison howled in pain, but still they fought.

No, not Jamison. She's one of them?

Cleo's loud baying distracted Lee from the tableau and she looked down to see the beagle beside her. She must have come out through the dog door and followed her into the woods.

Lee grabbed the dog and held Cleo against her as she ran back to the house, a strong sense of betrayal flooding her system along with adrenaline and fear. She needed to get away, from Harmon and all this death. From Jamison. Coherent thought was beyond her at the moment. Lee jumped into the battered brown pickup and sat Cleo beside her. She was vaguely aware of her breath bursting from her in agonized whimpers as she dug for the keys in her front pocket. It took three tries to get the truck going, but then she was flying down the dirt lane. Lee didn't check before pulling onto the blacktop and was almost side-swiped by a passing car. The driver lay on the horn and flipped her off, but she wasn't paying attention. What she'd seen in the woods kept playing in her head like a bad B-movie.

It was a full ten minutes before her heart rate began to slow and her brain began functioning at a higher level than sheer instinct. She was just outside Harmon, her final destination her father's mansion in New York, when she remembered Debbie. The woman was still waiting for an answer from her and though her response wasn't in question, Lee owed it to Debbie to let her know she was leaving town, especially since Debbie was planning to stay until they talked. Now there was no reason for either of them to hang around.

Lee pulled to a screeching halt in front of the Harmon Arms Bed and Breakfast, garnering a few curious looks. She left the window partially rolled down and ordered Cleo to stay while she went inside. Debbie had told her room number three, but she didn't know what floor that would be on so she stopped by the registration desk. It didn't take long to discover it was on the second floor and wasn't hard to find. Lee took a calming breath prior to knocking. The last thing she wanted to do was panic her ex, but it turned out not to be a concern when no one answered. She tried twice more, knocking louder, but still there was no response. Finally, Lee went downstairs and approached the young woman behind the desk. She looked like she was barely out of high school, with frizzy brown hair. Her nametag read 'Bernie'.

"Hi, I'm looking for the woman registered in room number three?"

Bernie's eyes lit up. "The one driving the Porsche? She left early this morning, about six o'clock."

"She never came back?" Lee was really worried until the young woman replied.

"No, but Ms. Mason said something about shopping in Lake Placid today."

Debbie did love Nordstrom and though Lee didn't think anything would have been open when she left the manor, she wouldn't put anything past her. Debbie didn't exactly march to the beat of an everyday drummer.

"Do you think I could leave a message?"

"Sure." Bernie grabbed a pad and a pen. "What do you want it to say?"

Lee considered the question. She couldn't say, *I don't love you, but I wanted you to know I've flown the coop and headed to New York. I suggest you do the same.*

"Just tell her I've gone back to my dad's house. She'll know what it means."

"Will do," Bernie said easily and offered her a smile.

Lee was still too upset to return the gesture believably, but she tried before she left and got back into the truck headed for the Big Apple.

THE CHILL OF damp evening air caressed her skin, rousing her slowly. Gradually she felt small rocks digging into her naked flesh. Jamison groaned and struggled onto her hands and knees. She wobbled a little, but finally managed to stand. Pain lanced through her body and she discovered that her torso was covered in blood. It had coagulated and dried, some of it trailing down her left leg. Dalton had tried to eviscerate her and from the looks of it he had almost succeeded. She remembered wounding him in return and then he'd fled into the woods. Exactly how badly he was injured she didn't know. She was more concerned with Lee, where she was and how she was reacting to what she had witnessed. At the moment she and Dalton clashed, Jamison heard Lee's shouted warning. She was also aware of the exact second Lee had turned and run from her, carrying Cleo in her arms. Jamison was desperate to try and explain, to make things right between them but she could barely stand. Everything was blurry at the outer edges of her field of vision.

Jamison grunted as she gathered her tattered clothing and stumbled back through the woods toward the house. It was the middle of the night and the manor was dark, the front door standing ajar. She really hadn't expected Lee to be here calmly waiting for her to return, but she wasn't sure where she'd gone. Maybe Lee took Sheriff Macke's advice and rented a room at the &B. B

Leaving damp footprints from the blood and dew across the wooden floor, Jami staggered toward Lee's bedroom. She planned to take a shower, borrow some clothing and try to find Lee. Nothing else was more important. She hadn't managed more than a dozen steps before she started getting dizzy.

Blood loss, she thought just before she fell unconscious to the floor.

Chapter Twenty-Six

LEE KEPT WIPING the tears of hurt and anger away as she drove. All along she had been trying to figure out what was going on, running her theories past Jamison while Jamison knew the truth and kept it from her. Did she really plan on telling Lee everything or was it just a delaying tactic while she thought of something plausible that would still throw her off the trail? Could she believe anything Jami had said?

Throughout the four-hour drive Lee kept turning it over and over in her head. She'd already started to come to terms with the Panthera and their abilities. She had accepted an eccentric raccoon and acknowledged that her aunt, and by extension she, herself, was one of the shape changers, and now none of it mattered. She was finished with all of them.

It broke her heart to think of never seeing Jamison again, but what was love without trust?

Lee pulled into the circular drive of her father's New York mansion. She stopped and put the truck in park, but it died with a loud backfire before she could touch the key. The front door opened and Davis stepped out with a cautious expression on his face. She got out of the vehicle and offered him a smile.

"Hi, Davis, how have you been?" Cleo raced past her and wriggled around the man in her excitement.

"Welcome home, Miss Grayson. I must say, it's been quite dull without you." He bent down and picked up Cleo, scratching her under the chin with his white-gloved hand. "Your father should be home momentarily."

"Wonderful, just in time," she muttered under her breath. "Can this day get any better?"

"Miss?"

"Never mind. Could you see that Hector gets his truck back? This thing is a piece of junk."

Lee started up the stairs but didn't miss the smile on his face.

"Of course. I'll see to it. Dinner is in one hour. Will you be down or should I bring something to your room?"

Eating downstairs meant joining her father in the formal dining room, a chore she abhorred at the best of times. "I'm not hungry. I'll stop by the kitchen later if I want something. All I need is a drink and a hot shower."

He tipped his head and sat Cleo on the floor. "In that case, I'll just take Miss Cleo for a walk."

"Thank you, Davis."

Cleo trotted happily along with him while Lee headed into the library. There was a large snifter of brandy with her name on it. She had just poured her drink and taken a healthy swig when the door opened and her father walked in. He didn't see her at first and Lee took the opportunity to study him.

Senator Douglas Grayson came from old money and it showed in his genteel mannerisms, the same courtliness that supposedly won her mother's heart. He was an older man, nearer to Aunt Chris' age than to Marina's. His hair more silver than brown, stress lines marred his face.

Even now, away from work, a perpetual scowl marred his brow and gave him a stern appearance. Lee knew it was more than superficial though. He had always been a serious man with little time for humor or compassion. She couldn't remember a time when he had truly laughed, every gesture of happiness an affectation for some visiting constituent or the latest fundraiser.

Would things have been different if her mother had stayed? Would she have returned contrite and begging forgiveness for her transgressions if a car crash hadn't claimed her life five years after leaving? Lee didn't really remember her mother, just an impression of a blonde-haired smiling woman with the bluest eyes. What she did recall left her with the feeling that her mother had been a carefree young woman who enjoyed life and Lee wondered what would compel Marina to become involved with the bitter man standing before her now. They were such opposites Lee could understand her leaving, but why hadn't she taken her daughter with her? Why hadn't she told Lee about the world she came from? Marina could have mentioned the strength that flowed in their veins, stemming from abilities nature had long since taken from the common human. Lee realized that if her mother had mentioned these things at a young age, she might have embraced them rather than run in terror from the woman she loved.

Her father came to an abrupt halt and looked up, surprised by her appearance and apparently not very pleased about it. The frown on his face deepened.

"Hello, Father."

He cleared his throat. "I thought you were hell bent on taking over the Mafdet estate."

He didn't ask why she had returned, but it was implied. "What, I can't come back to visit?"

She took another long sip of the brandy, feeling the heat burn all the way into the pit of her stomach. Lee had planned to stay here when she left Harmon, but just a few moments with her father told her that couldn't happen. She refused to remain in a home where she'd never felt welcome. What had been a refuge suddenly became a way-station. Lee had left the manor with only the clothes on her back. She would stay the night and decide where to go in the morning, but she had been presented with an unexpected opportunity. Her aunt's letter implied that Douglas Grayson knew all about the Panthera and didn't approve. Now was her chance to find out.

"I do have some questions for you, if you don't mind?" Her tone was aggravated and challenging, just the kind to induce someone cut from Grayson's cloth to get his hackles up and make him refuse to back down. "It has to do with Mom's family."

Douglas helped himself to a brandy and then moved away from Lee to stand beside the fire. Fall in New York was cold by most standards and the flames were welcome in the mansion with its vaulted ceilings.

"We agreed a long time ago not to talk about that," he said, his back to her.

"No," she said. "I was just a kid when she left and I never agreed to anything. As usual, you laid down the law and that was the end of it."

"And nothing has changed to alter that arrangement. She's still gone, dead now. There's no point in resurrecting old ghosts."

"What about new ones?" Lee said softly. "I found some of Aunt Chris' belongings when I was cleaning out the manor." He stood silently and she realized he was waiting to find out what she knew before he committed to the discussion. "I know what Mom was, what I am."

"You're nothing like those creatures!" he roared and threw the crystal glass into the fire. Flames shot from the fireplace, dying down in seconds as he spun around to confront her. "When I found out about those people I was disgusted. At first I didn't believe Marina, then she showed me her true form and I thought I would puke. I had lain with an animal, sired a child by her."

"You told her to leave," Lee realized. "It wasn't her choice."

"What did you think I would do? She wasn't normal. I told her to get out. She tried to take you with her, but I wasn't going to let her corrupt my daughter."

Lee felt vindication that her mother wanted her, that she hadn't left voluntarily. All the guilt she'd harbored her entire life, believing that she was somehow to blame, faded away to meaningless vapor. But she was also enraged that her father was so sickened by the Panthera. Lee wasn't very happy with Jamison and the deception, but she thought their ability to change was an amazing gift. That he judged an entire community and found them lacking for simply being themselves was outrageous. How would he feel if he found out Lee had inherited more than her mother's looks?

She finished her drink and set the glass on the sideboard. "Thank you, Father. What I discovered was so hard to accept, but now you've confirmed it. I just wish you'd told me the truth sooner. I wish anyone had told me."

"Why? You were an impressionable girl and I didn't want you getting any romantic notions about what your mother was."

"She was my mother," Lee shouted. "I deserved to know the truth."

"Well now you do. So what are you going to do about it?"

The question effectively dissipated the fury and Lee thought carefully for a few seconds. "Truthfully, I don't know, but you won't have to worry. I'll get the rest of my things and be out of your hair some time tomorrow."

"You don't have to leave, you know." He sipped his brandy. "You're still a Grayson and this is your home."

"Actually, I'm a Mafdet and this was never my home."

Lee left him standing by the fireplace. He could take her comment any way he wanted, but she realized her father would probably refuse to accept that her blood could be tainted by an animal.

JAMISON AWAKENED SLOWLY, her cheek pressed against something cold and hard. It took a moment to realize she was lying naked in Mafdet's entryway. She vaguely recalled going in search of Lee only to find the manor empty. Then the room began to spin and everything went dark.

She stood and focused on the old grandfather clock, feeling sturdier than she had previously. It was nearing two a.m. and Jamison was desperate to find both Lee and Dalton, though for very different reasons. She looked down to see that the injury was much better, the flesh knit back together but still very raw. Thank the Great Mother for accelerated healing.

Jamison took a quick shower and borrowed some clothing from Lee's closet. Lee was a little shorter so the pants rode a bit high, but the shirt was a perfect fit. Unfortunately, Lee's shoes were much too small. She had to make a stop by her own house to change anyway before she could begin searching. Lee must have been so frightened, witnessing the shift and the brutal altercation between herself and Dalton. It wasn't exactly the way she planned for Lee to find out. She just needed a chance to explain, to come clean about everything and hope Lee would forgive her.

What would I say? I got into a fight with a subordinate and had my ass handed to me?

Jamison didn't have proof of any wrongdoing, only her suspicions. Until she did, she needed to keep all of this to herself. She was ashamed she'd let the man goad her into losing control and refused to be caught off guard by him again.

She limped into the kitchen, thinking about what her next step should be. She was hungry and thirsty from shifting in and out of jaguar form and the first thing she needed to do was recharge her own batteries. Her body burned a tremendous amount of energy converting matter and rearranging her form at the cellular level. She snatched a can of Pepsi from the fridge and downed it in one long swallow, savoring the immediate sugar rush. Then a platter of roast beef covered in plastic wrap caught her eye. She sat it on the table, tore off the covering and devoured half of it with her bare hands. When she finished, she felt a little sheepish about her actions, but so much better that she didn't let it bother her for long. She found a rag by the sink, wet it and cleaned up her mess. Returning the leftovers to the refrigerator, Jamison took another can of soda and drank it much more slowly. She threw both empty cans into the recycle bin and left the house, a plan having formed while she ate.

An hour later, she drove through the woods north of Harmon toward Aaron Dalton's home. She had tried to call Lee twice, but there was no answer so she'd left voicemail messages, but wasn't hopeful that Lee would respond. She pushed thoughts of the incredible woman out of her mind, determined not to be distracted with something she couldn't change. Aaron's behavior was another matter. That was something she could investigate.

It was too early in the morning to start checking area hotels, but it was the perfect time to snoop around Dalton's place and find out what he was up to. She thought it was more than a simple matter of a difference of opinion.

Just thinking of his threats against Lee was enough to set her blood boiling and she had to clamp down on her response. She couldn't afford to confront him again in rage. She would find him, make sure he wasn't involved with the predator and then she would make sure he would never become a danger to anyone else. She owed Lee that much.

Jamison pulled her Chevy onto the grassy shoulder of a single-lane asphalt road near Dalton's. Like most solitary creatures, he lived a few miles outside of town and his home was removed from any neighbor's view. It wasn't exactly close to where any of the deaths had occurred, but if he was involved, what better way to avoid detection?

She cut through the woods, using only the light of the waning moon to find her way. The smells of the forest struck her and she took comfort from the loamy earth and the scent of the nocturnal animals. She felt stronger than she had in hours and her confidence grew with each step. Soon she stood at the outer edge of the clearing on which her adversary's wooden-frame house sat. Jamison waited, checking for signs of movement within and though a light burned, she couldn't tell if he was home. His Buick sat in the front yard, but that didn't mean anything.

She wasn't sure how badly Dalton had been hurt in their fight. He could be inside recuperating or he could be out hunting in his jaguar form. Either way, she needed some answers.

Jamison used all of her heightened senses and the night shadows to make her way to the windows undetected. She still hadn't seen anything to indicate her enemy was present. Light flickered in the living room and she looked through the glass, ensuring the room was empty. Then Jamison tried the door handle, unsurprised to discover the house wasn't locked. Dalton's scent was all over the porch and inside the front room, dousing the place with his pheromones. It made sniffing him out difficult, but soon she realized he wasn't home. The interior was neat as a

pin with nothing out of place, typical for a feline. It wasn't until she reached the bathroom that she found anything of interest.

Bloody clothing filled the hamper. He had come home to clean up, changed and left again. Since his car was out front, that meant he'd gone into the woods on foot. She was disappointed he hadn't been more seriously hurt, but more determined than ever to find him.

Scouting around the house, it took several minutes for her to discover a trail with Dalton's fresh scent leading away into the forest. Carefully, she trailed it a quarter of a mile from the house. Jamison realized how close she was only when she heard voices coming to her from behind the trees. Surprise hit hard when she recognized the voice of a pride sentry she had thought very highly of only a few days ago.

"Are you sure you won't tell anyone?" Xander Chiesel asked.

"Do you have the money?" Dalton said gruffly.

"Yes, here it is."

Jamison heard the sound of paper rustling.

"Then I won't tell anyone. I still think you're better off without that loser. Why don't you just let me put him out of his misery and get it over with?"

"He's my brother and I don't want to hear you say that again. This isn't his fault."

"Yeah, yeah. If you think he's so innocent why didn't you go to the Council for help?"

"Because they wouldn't understand," Xander replied hotly. "They would just assume he was the one they're looking for and he'd be killed on sight. I can't let that happen."

So Chiesel thinks his brother is the killer? How did he get Dalton involved in this?

"Fine, whatever. I found his spoor all over the basement of an old house near here. The place used to belong to our Kadin. Any clue why he'd be hanging out over there?"

"Maybe he thought a medicine woman could help him. He was pretty sick when he went up to the clinic in Canada and maybe he thought she would do a better job. That's the only thing I can think of."

"Yeah, except Mafdet died four months ago," Dalton said. "I have to wonder if this guy is firing on all cylinders."

"He's sick," Xander reiterated. "What's your excuse?"

Dalton laughed, but it wasn't a pretty sound. "You think I care if you don't like my attitude? Too bad. You just remember you owe me another fifty thousand when I find him."

"As agreed. Do you have an idea where to start?"

"Yeah. As soon as we talked earlier I got to thinking about it. Do you remember the old cave systems we used to explore up here when we were in school?"

"Explore?" Xander chuckled. "The only thing we explored was the inside of a bottle and some weed."

That answers how they know each other.

Jamison put it together that they suspected Chiesel's brother of being the murderer and they were trying to find him. She also realized that Xander was acting to protect his family, desperate to believe the man was innocent. For a moment she was tempted to step out of the woods and offer her word as Pieta that she and the Council would help find Xander's brother, but she held back. Dalton said he might know where to find the man, but if Jamison got involved he might try to mislead them. All Dalton was concerned with was the glory of being a hero and attempting to make Jamison look like a fool. Someone else might get hurt. It was better to let him lead her to the carnivore without Dalton knowing.

"True, but other than that house he was hiding in, it's probably the only other place he knows around here."

"Let's go then," Xander said. "What are we waiting for?"

"Not so fast. In case you didn't know, it's dark and he's likely out hunting. I'd rather come up on him in the daylight. Maybe we'll catch him sleeping."

Coward.

"Are you afraid of him?"

"You haven't seen him lately," Dalton said. "But I have, and trust me you don't want to interrupt this guy in the middle of a feeding."

Jamison suddenly flashed back to the night of Hank's murder. She remembered the beast in the moonlight, the silver eyes without a hint of pupil or iris and the forked tongue of a reptile. Whoever or whatever this thing was, he was no longer a typical shape changer.

"Why do you say that?"

"You'll find out. Just have my money ready. I'll call you when it's time."

"Are you going to be all right? That's a nasty injury and I have to know you can handle it."

"Thanks for your concern," Dalton said snidely, "but I'll be fine by tomorrow. It's just a little cut."

"Right, that's why half your ear is hanging off your head. You should get that looked at, it's pretty gross."

"Shut up. Just be by your phone. I'll be ready to go by this weekend."

"Whatever you say," Xander said.

Footsteps crunched through the leaves, moving away from her and toward her at the same time. Xander was leaving and Dalton heading for home. Jamison crouched down and held her breath as he walked by her. Blood still ran down the side of his neck from the torn ear, glinting wetly in the faint light and Jamison felt a surge of satisfaction. Not the mortal blow he deserved, but it was something. Now she knew he was somehow involved, but she still didn't have anything tangible. This weekend she planned to stick to him like a tick and find out where the monster was hiding. After that she would have to get the Council involved to apprehend him because she wouldn't be able to do it alone. If Jamison could bring the other hunters into the mix and contain the predator before Dalton, Xander Chiesel wouldn't be able to sweep this under the rug. The truth would come out and the situation could be dealt with properly. The killer would be brought to justice and forced to stand trial for his crimes, not carried off to hide behind the safety of the Felidae Pride.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

LEE AWAKENED SUDDENLY and pulled back from the wet tongue enthusiastically lathering her face. "Cleo stop it, I'm up."

She pushed Cleo back a few inches and stroked the bony head with her eyes closed, relaxing into the pillows for a few more minutes. It was still dark outside, informing her that it was too early to worry about getting up. Slowly, the conversation from the night before with her father came to her and she thought about his attitude toward Aunt Chris and the other Panthera. In a way, her reaction to seeing Jamison morph into a jaguar wasn't far removed. Her behavior had been ignorant and biased against something she didn't completely understand. Suddenly, she was very ashamed of how she had behaved, turning to run while Jami was fighting another jungle cat. How could she do that to her if she really cared, especially when everything she felt told her she wasn't any different?

It was true that Jami had kept the truth from her and they would have to talk about keeping secrets, but she didn't think it was anything they couldn't get past. What bothered her most was that she felt like a fool for not putting it all together herself before it came to that point. A thought occurred to her and Lee sat up staring into the darkness. Jamison was fighting when she left.

What if she's hurt? What if Jamison is mortally wounded, no one aware of her location? She could die!

Lee dove for the cell phone at her bedside and turned the ringer back on. When the display lit, she saw Jamison had tried to call six times and she had two voicemail messages. Jamison wouldn't have done that if she'd been seriously injured. Relief flooded her so strongly that she felt lightheaded for a few seconds.

She had to go back. The situation in Harmon didn't leave Jamison the luxury of running away and Lee wasn't going to let her face it alone. Not anymore. Her father had opened her eyes to a lot of things and one of them was the fact that whatever or whoever Jamison was, Lee loved her. She didn't know if she would ever be able to shift or if the Panthera would ever fully accept her because she was half human. At least, from what she had experienced, she could sometimes foresee future events. Now if she could just manage to activate her Wonder Twin Powers at times other than when she slept.

Or had she already? She thought about her last nightmare, where Jamison was being hunted, the killer ready to strike and it had fallen to Lee to save her. She'd awakened to shredded sheets and a belief that her arm had transformed. Was that a prophetic vision or her subconscious expressing her deepest fears? Lee didn't know, she had no frame of reference to decide or to distinguish between the two.

But if she's in trouble and I'm not there, Jamison will die.

Flinging back the covers, she got out of bed and headed for the shower. She stopped long enough to call downstairs and ask Davis to get her car ready and to care for Cleo in her absence.

There was no way she was taking Cleo back into danger if she could prevent it. They would be reunited once all this was over.

Lee washed and dressed quickly, her hair receiving a cursory towel dry before she reached for her keys, wallet and cell phone. The mobile rang just as she picked it up and Lee almost dropped it again in surprise. Hoping it was Jamison, she didn't bother to check the readout.

"Hello?" she answered somewhat breathlessly.

"Lee Grayson?" a familiar voice she couldn't quite place asked.

"Yes?"

"This is Sheriff Macke."

Lee thought she was calling about how the murderer had gotten in and out of Mafdet, and then she frowned at her own terminology. That wasn't right. This killer changed form and hunted as an animal, a lion according to Jami. He stalked his prey and killed by using the weapons nature gave him--fangs and claws. He was a predator. Pushing those considerations away for the moment she asked, "Did you have some news for me, Sheriff?"

"I'm not calling about the break-in. Bernie from the bed and breakfast said you stopped by yesterday to speak with one of their guests, a Debra Mason?" Her voice sounded guarded, catching Lee's full attention.

"Yes, that's right. What's Debbie got to do with this?"

"I hate to be the one to tell you, but a hunter found her car overturned on an old dirt lane late last night. It looks like she got lost on the back roads around Harmon."

Lee felt like she'd been punched in the stomach. She should have known immediately that something was wrong when Bernie told her Debbie had never returned. "You said you found her car. Did you find Debbie?"

Sheriff Macke hesitated and Lee instinctively knew she wouldn't like the answer. "Yes, ma'am. I'm afraid we did. I'm sorry to inform you that she was pronounced dead at the scene. It looks like she fell prey to the same suspect that killed Hank Morgan."

"Oh, God. I'm going to be sick."

Lee bent over clutching her stomach, tears flooding her eyes. It took a moment to realize the sheriff was shouting her name and reluctantly she put the phone back to her ear. "This is my fault. She went up there to see me and I wouldn't even talk to her. She told me she didn't know her way around, but I didn't care."

"Stop it! Blaming yourself isn't going to help, and the truth is the only one to blame is the bastard who did this. Now do I have your attention?"

Lee sniffled and took a ragged breath. "Yes. Of course."

"I need you to come down to the Medical Examiner's Office and make arrangements for your friend's belongings to be returned to her family. You'll need to go by the inn to get the rest of her things, too."

Lee nodded until she realized the sheriff couldn't see her. "I'll take care of it." She glanced at her watch. "I can be there by three o'clock."

"Ms. Grayson, I'd think you would make this more of a priority." The disappointment in Macke's voice was obvious.

"I'm in New York. I'll be there as soon as I can," Lee snapped.

"What the hell are you doing there? Never mind," she amended quickly. "I don't need to know. Just, please take care of it as soon as possible. Oh, and don't worry about breaking the news to her family. I've already done it."

"Thank you," Lee said sincerely. This was hard enough to deal with on an emotional level without having to face Debbie's mom and dad. Notifying the family was the sheriff's job as a law enforcement official anyway.

She ended the call and stared at the wall for a moment, trying to come to grips with recent developments. A tap on the door startled her and she opened it to find Davis standing there. Lee had almost forgotten him.

"Your car is ready, Miss. Would you care for breakfast before you go?"

"Um, no thanks. I'll get something on the way." Eating was the last thing she could think about after learning of Debbie's brutal death. "Just take good care of Cleo for me?"

Davis smiled and actually winked at her. It was the first time she could ever remember him making such a gesture. "Count on it."

Lee knelt down and hugged Cleo. She scratched her ears and spoke to her for a few moments, promising to return soon. Then she stood and walked away, trying very hard not to look back. Cleo was more than just a dog, she was a friend, and part of Lee couldn't help feeling like she was abandoning her. Even if it was only temporary.

She slid behind the wheel and was already on the Turnpike before she realized she was driving her gold Mercedes. She smirked at the irony that when she'd left New York for the small town, her sole concern had been starting over in anonymity. Her biggest fear that more people would try to take advantage once they discovered she was wealthy didn't seem all that important anymore. Jamison would never consider such a thing and Harmon was her home now.

The smile faded as realization dawned. Lee had always demanded honesty from everyone else, but she hadn't been willing to do the same. If she'd told Debbie the truth, that she didn't love her, she might not have died. Knowing how Lee truly felt, she would probably have stayed in New York. Whoever said secrets could kill was absolutely correct and Lee wouldn't be responsible for anymore misunderstandings.

Almost exactly four hours later, she turned onto Main Street and parked in front of the Harmon Arms Bed and Breakfast. She was distantly aware of the admiring looks cast toward the car, but this time the staring didn't really bother her. A lot of it had to do with the unpleasant task on which she was about to embark. Going through her ex's things was the last thing she wanted to do. Even when they were dating, Lee wouldn't have considered invading her privacy in such a way and with the distance between them since the break-up it would be doubly hard.

The same young woman she'd spoken to before was behind the counter and Lee reluctantly approached her. "Hi, Bernie. I'm Lee Grayson."

"Yes, ma'am, I remember." Bernie offered her a smile. "That's a great car. I'd love to have one like it someday."

"Thanks. Uh, not to be abrupt, but Sheriff Macke wanted me to come by and ..." Lee had a hard time saying the words and swallowed past a lump in her throat.

"Oh, right." Her expression immediately contrite, Bernie said, "I'm so sorry for what happened. Here's the key and if you need any help just give me a shout."

Lee was touched by the gesture and could only nod in response. She took the offered key and headed up the same set of stairs she'd used last time she was here. For some reason, the hallway seemed to stretch out longer than it should, taunting her with the distance it took to reach the room.

After the door closed behind her, Lee stood and looked around for a moment. Someone had been in to clean recently. The bed was made and there was nothing to indicate a guest resided here.

But she doesn't reside here anymore, Lee thought, grief slamming into her once again. While it was true that she hadn't loved Debbie in the way a life-long commitment would require, she had cared for her. Debbie wasn't a heartless person, she had just been a little disconnected from the rest of the world, more focused on her career and giving the right impression to the right people. In a way, Lee felt she had never truly known the real person behind the façade. To die in such a senseless fashion when she had so much potential just wasn't fair.

Lee steadied herself, determined to complete her task and get the hell out. She pulled open the top dresser drawer and found it full of clothing. Leaving it ajar, she went to the closet and found a

Victorinox suitcase. *Only the best for Debbie,* she thought wryly. The closet also held a few evening gowns and several pair of high heels. Fortunately, Debbie had stacked other bags inside the large suitcase. Lee tossed the largest piece of luggage onto the bed and quickly packed up the clothing in the closet. Once she was finished she moved to the dresser. It took several minutes to empty the contents from the chest and by the time she had, most of the bags were full. She moved to the bathroom from there and removed all of the toiletries Debbie had brought along for the trip. Satisfied that she had completed the chore, Lee took one last look around and realized she'd forgotten to check the nightstand.

I hope there's not much in there. I don't think the bags can hold anything else.

Lee held her breath and opened the top drawer. It held nothing but a Bible and a large, business sized envelope. The envelope arrested Lee's attention since her name was written across the front.

She wrote me a letter?

Lee was confused why Debbie would have done such a thing when she had insisted they needed to talk and since she had never returned from her early morning jaunt, she didn't have time to do it later. The only thing she could figure out was that Debbie had written the letter beforehand with the assumption that Lee wouldn't listen to her. If so, Debbie knew her better than she'd ever let on.

She opened it with shaking fingers and removed a single piece of stationery with Debbie's scrawling cursive.

Lee,

I know this is the only way you'll ever hear me out so I've written this little note. I hope it reaches your heart and you'll come to realize that we belong together. I'm not good at the mushy stuff, I'm sure you know that. But it doesn't mean I don't feel things. I have loved you from the moment I saw you, but as much as I hate to admit it, I have a reputation to uphold in public. Being openly affectionate with you would destroy my career. Hiding how I feel about you isn't something I'm proud of, but I've worked too hard to just throw everything away.

Having said that, here I am in this God awful hotel. Do you know they don't even have room service? Anyway, you need to understand what you overheard that day in the mansion. Jasmine told me about it; in fact she yelled at me and told me what a lowlife I was to do that to you. What neither of you knew was that I wanted the combination to the safe so I could see your mother's jewelry. You'd told me about it a few times and were so proud that you still had something to remember her by. I wanted to take a few pictures of the pieces so I could have my jeweler create a set of rings designed just for us. A one of a kind set of wedding rings.

You see, darling, I'd already figured out in my own meandering way that the career should never be as important as my love for you. I was going to ask you to marry me as soon as the rings were finished, but you beat me to the punch, didn't you?

After you read this, I hope you'll reconsider and come back to me. You're the only one I've ever loved, that I ever could.

All my heart, Debbie.

Lee's vision blurred from the unshed tears and she raised a hand to cover her eyes. All along she had thought Debbie was just after her money when nothing could have been farther from the truth. She had assumed, based on her own hidden fears about being used. Knowing the truth wouldn't have changed how Lee felt about being in a relationship with Debbie. But it might have paved the way to a friendship rather than Lee pushing her away and refusing to even speak with her.

The sound of the door opening made her look up and relief filled her heart at the sight of Jamison standing there. She looked unsure, as though wondering if she should intrude.

Lee dropped the letter onto the bed and walked around the furniture. Without hesitation, she slipped her arms around Jamison's neck and pressed tightly against her tense body.

"Oh, Jami, I've been so worried about you. I never should have left."

Jamison's arms encircled her waist, clinging to her as she pressed her face to Lee's neck. "The fault is mine. I should have told you everything from the start."

Pulling away to look up into her eyes, Lee responded with a teary smile. "I'm not sure I would have been ready for it then. I had to have some of the answers on my own before I could have believed such an amazing tale. But I'm back now, and I'm not planning on leaving again."

Jamison kissed her forehead and just held Lee for several moments. Finally, she said, "Sheriff Macke told me about your... about Miss Mason. I'm so sorry."

Lee nodded. "I am too. I should have talked with her when she came to the house. Instead I turned her away. I never thought she really loved me, but I was wrong."

"What do you mean?" Jamison asked, still embracing her.

"I found a letter when I was cleaning out her things. She wanted to marry me."

Jamison tensed again and after a second asked, "What would you have said?"

She sounded so worried that Lee backed up a little and looked into the verdant green eyes, trying to show all that she felt in her gaze. "My answer would have been no. Don't you know by now that I love you? Of course, I can see how you wouldn't, considering that I ran off right when you needed me most."

Gentle fingers rested over her lips, stopping the words. "Wait a minute, what did you say before?"

Lee smiled and nipped Jamison's fingertip. "I said I love you."

Instead of answering in words, Jamison dropped her head and claimed Lee's lips in a searing kiss. Lee brought her hands up, sliding over Jami's cheeks before threading her fingers through thick hair and cupping the back of her head. She felt the slightly rough surface of their tongues sliding together and tasted Jamison for the first time since their heated encounter in the ranger's office. It felt like an eternity since that last intimate caress and Lee couldn't get enough. In the end, it was the need to breathe that forced them apart.

"You don't know how much I've wanted to hear you say that," Jamison said huskily. "I've never wanted a mate before, but I knew after that first day we spent on the mountain that you were the one."

The word mate stood out and Lee considered it for a moment. "I'm not used to thinking in terms of mates or cubs, like I heard you say to that jaguar in the woods. All of this still seems a little surreal to me, but I'm sure all of that could change with a little time."

"Take all the time you need," Jamison said. "I'm not going anywhere."

Lee heaved a dramatic sigh. "Unfortunately, I am. I have to take care of Debbie's belongings here and I need to make a trip to the morgue."

"Why there? Sheriff Macke told me there was no need for you to make an identification."

"Thank God for that," Lee said sincerely, "but I have to gather up whatever she had with her in the car and return it to her family along with the rest of her things."

"Do you want me to go with you?"

"Yes, please. I don't want to have to do this alone." She was grateful Jamison offered.

"Then you won't." Jamison stepped back and took her hand. She looked over at the luggage stacked on the bed, but before she could make a move to retrieve any of it, Lee surprised her by speaking gently.

"Are you all right? I should have asked sooner, but I was a little distracted by everything else."

"I'm fine," Jamison said, frowning in confusion. "Why?"

"There was so much blood...in the woods. I shouldn't have just left you there. You could have been killed."

"I'm fine," Jamison reiterated. Her hand went to her left side, giving Lee the impression that was where she'd been injured most severely. "One good thing about being a Panthera is that we heal quickly. In another day or two you'll never know it happened."

Lee studied the floor, unsure if she should pursue this right now. "I got the impression that you knew him?"

"Yeah," Jamison said. "His name is Aaron Dalton and I've known him since I was a kid. We never got along because he's so arrogant that he grates on my nerves, but lately I get the sense that he's involved in some really bad things."

"Like what?"

"It's a long story and I'd be happy to tell you all about it later after we've had a chance to relax a little, but suffice it to say that I think he's involved in these killings."

Lee thought about what Jamison said and realized what a position she was in. Dalton was one of her own people and given the secrecy of their society, trust and xenophobia were necessary components to their survival. It was conceivable that this man had influenced others and the only way to ensure he did as little damage as possible would be for their own internal law enforcement to act decisively.

"Jamison, you have to tell someone." Lee was suddenly even more frightened for her. Having a run-in with a person you didn't like was a far cry from pissing off a serial killer.

"I can't yet, I don't have any proof. Frankly, I don't know if the reason I suspect him is just because I don't like him or if a part of me instinctively knows he's guilty."

Lee shrugged. "I can't answer that, but I can tell you he isn't the actual killer."

She could see that she'd surprised Jamison with her comment. Dark eyebrows lifted toward her hairline as she asked, "How? Have you seen who it really is?"

"In a way, I guess I have. Aunt Chris apparently passed some of her gifts on to me and one night I dreamed, actually twice, about a hideous creature that I believe is your predator. The first time was the night your friend was killed. I've experienced weeks of these dreams since, but it's only been recently that I started to understand."

"Could you describe him enough for someone to make up a sketch?"

"You mean like a police artist? Probably, but I don't want Sheriff Macke to think we're playing *The Hardy Boys meet the Harmon Werewolf*. Besides, you won't need a sketch. You've already seen him face to face and I don't think anyone would have any doubt once they do too."

"Exactly how much have you seen?" Jamison asked softly.

"Enough for me to know that you encountered him outside Hank's home that night and that you're lucky to be standing here. He was going after you, but was frightened away at the last minute. I'm not sure why."

"Dalton. I found out later that he'd been there watching, waiting for me to fail so he could use it against me with the Council. I hit the damned killer with my truck, but I'm not sure I even fazed it. The thing certainly didn't seem to be hurt very bad. Dalton must have surprised it shortly after that. Either that or Sheriff Macke's siren scared it away."

"You know, the more I learn about this Dalton guy the less I like him."

"Tell me about it," Jamison smiled. "All right, no sketch artist. Let me help you with these bags and we'll head over to the morgue. One of our people is the Medical Examiner and a friend of mine. It'll make things go a lot smoother."

"That's a relief. I'd really like to get this over with as quickly as possible."

Jamison stood and reached for the largest suitcase, but when she hefted it off the bed she grunted in pain. Lee quickly put a hand on the bag to prevent her from lifting it further, her worry replacing all other concerns.

"I thought you were all right."

"It's nothing, really," Jamison tried to reassure her and then attempted to change the topic. "I should probably let you know I had to borrow some of your clothes after the fight though. Mine weren't salvageable. I used your shower, too. I hope you don't mind."

"I don't care about that. Where were you injured? Let me see."

Reluctantly, Jamison let go of the Victorinox and raised the hem of her shirt. Lee gasped at the sight of the four-inch pale pink line that ran from the bottom of Jamison's ribcage to just above her hipbone. At this stage it resembled scar tissue, but Lee realized that she could have been gutted.

"He tried to kill you and I just left you there bleeding. How can you stand the sight of me after that?"

"It's not your fault." Jamison touched Lee's chin with her fingertips, urging her to lift her head and meet her gaze. "You were shocked by what you saw and reacted in a perfectly normal way. If anyone's to blame, it's me for not being honest with you from the start?"

The reassurance did little to relieve her guilt, but Lee understood the necessity of putting all of this behind them. "No more secrets?"

"Deal. Now let's get out of here. Where's Cleo?" Jamison asked as they carried the luggage down the steps.

"I left her in New York. I just couldn't bring her back here with all this going on, but as soon as it's over, I'll go and get her. You know I can't be away from my girl for very long. I just know that if anything happened her instincts would be to protect me and she wouldn't hesitate to rush in."

"I think that was a very wise decision."

Lee returned the key to Bernie and then they walked out into the street and toward the Mercedes SLK. She popped the trunk with the key fob and started putting the bags inside.

"This is beautiful," Jamison said conversationally. "Definitely better than that beat up old pickup you were tooling around in."

"Thanks. It was a gift from my father last Christmas." For just a brief instant, old fears came back to haunt her and Lee waited breathlessly for Jamison's response.

"I always wondered why you drove that beater around."

A simple statement, but it told her so much. "You knew who I was?"

Jamison grinned a little lopsided. "Lee, everyone in Harmon knows that your mother married a politician, but it's okay. No one thinks any less of you for being a senator's daughter."

Lee laughed at the gentle teasing. "I guess I never thought of it that way."

The drive to the Harmon Medical Center took only a few minutes with Jamison navigating the way. Once inside, Jamison led Lee to the basement level and directly to the morgue area. A slight, redheaded woman sat behind the desk and beamed a smile meant only for Jamison. Lee didn't know why, but suddenly she felt very territorial and wanted to tear the woman's eyes out for looking at Jami that way.

"Lee Grayson, this is Doctor Laura Paul. She's our Chief Medical Examiner."

Lee nodded at the woman, but couldn't bring herself to be friendly.

"Yes, of course," Laura said with a compassionate expression that Lee chose to see as a complete farce. "Sheriff Macke told me you'd be coming by. I'm so sorry for your loss."

"Thank you. This might be a little weird, but would it be possible for me to see her?" Lee had refused Debbie's last request for them to talk and felt she owed her this one final courtesy.

"I don't really think that's a good idea. We had to make the identification from dental records her family faxed over."

Lee blanched at that information and felt a little faint. The sheriff had said the car was overturned when Debbie was found and that they suspected she'd been murdered, but she'd left out any graphic details. It was horrible to find out that Debbie had been disfigured rather than simply killed.

Jamison slipped an arm around her shoulder and pulled her close, garnering a raised eyebrow from the doctor. Their eyes locked and Lee was sharp enough to figure out they were communicating in some silent way. After a moment, Laura looked away and Lee could have sworn she saw disappointment in her eyes. Clearly the woman had feelings for Jamison and had just learned they weren't returned.

Doctor Paul cleared her throat and retrieved a transparent plastic bag from a filing cabinet that stood against the wall. Lee could see that it contained a purse, a cell phone and a few other objects. Laura handed her the bag and a clipboard with a form attached.

"I'll need you to sign out her belongings, but everything else is in order. Mister Mason has already made the arrangements to transfer his daughter to the funeral home in New York."

Having difficulty speaking, Lee simply nodded and filled out the form. She returned the clipboard and turned to exit the building without really thinking. So much had happened in such a short period of time that she was starting to feel a little numb.

Back outside, Lee tossed the bag into the trunk and started to slide behind the wheel when Jamison asked, "Do you want me to drive?"

Lee gave her a halfhearted smile. "You just want a chance to see how she handles, don't you?"

"Guilty." Jamison's grin expanded when Lee handed over the keys.

Jamison pulled out of the parking lot and after they were on Blue Mountain Road she reached over to take Lee's hand.

"Are you okay?"

"I will be. It's just so unfair. Debbie wasn't part of this. She wouldn't even have been here if it wasn't for me."

Jamison squeezed her hand in silent reassurance and it was enough. Lee didn't want to hear anyone else say it wasn't her fault. She just wanted to say how she felt and not be judged or

redeemed. Jamison seemed to understand that on a fundamental level that Lee appreciated more than any words.

To her surprise, Jamison drove back to the inn and when Lee looked at her in silent question she answered, "I have to get my pickup, but I'd like to make sure you make it back to the manor all right."

"You already figured out I wasn't going to stay at your place?"

Jamison shrugged. "Well, the trunk was empty so you don't have any clothes. Unless you were planning on running around nude, which would be quite the sight by the way. I thought you might want to pick up a few things."

Lee laughed outright for the first time in what felt like days.

"Good eye, Sherlock. You do make a fine detective."

"Thank you, ma'am." Jamison tipped an imaginary hat in a chivalrous manner.

"But I'm not going to stay with you at your house." Jamison's expression became serious, but she didn't attempt to argue. "Mafdet is my home now and I'm not going to run away again and just let this monster have her, although I'll still have to make a quick trip to New York to return Debbie's things to her family."

"I admire your courage. Will you at least let me stay with you until then? Surely the manor is big enough for the both of us?"

Lee smiled shyly. "I'd like that."

Chapter Twenty-Eight

LEE STOOD IN Mafdet Manor's circular foyer. The house had a quiet, peaceful air about it and dust motes floated serenely in the warm sunlight. Lee closed her eyes and every part of her felt like she was home. She appreciated these few minutes by herself, though she already missed Jamison's presence. Jami had gone to her own home to retrieve a few necessities and promised to bring pizza when she returned. Before she left, she had shown Lee the hidden access panel and they'd ensured it was closed and locked. No one was getting back into the house that way. Lee didn't think the creature would return anyway, now that his hideout had been discovered. Additionally, she remembered the nightmare in which Jamison had been attacked and felt that the monster had found a new place to hide. If anyone asked exactly how she knew such a thing, she couldn't have answered. It was more instinct than anything.

Lee walked across the entryway to her bedroom and pulled out some sweats and a pair of socks to relax in around the house. They weren't exactly what she could call romantic attire, but at the moment comfort was her primary concern. After a long, hot shower Lee felt better, the stress of the day starting to fade. She began to anticipate Jamison's return. The temperature had already begun to drop and a thunderstorm was brewing overhead. Lee hoped Jami would make it before the rain started.

Since pizza was on the menu, she went into the kitchen and grabbed some paper plates, utensils and napkins, and set everything up in her favorite place to eat; the breakfast nook. Then she threw together a quick salad and left it in the refrigerator. Walking back through the dining room, she noticed that her Aunt's medicine book still rested on the long, formal table and thought she might take another look at it to help pass the time. First she wanted to get a fire ready in her bedroom to help ward off the chill later and make the atmosphere more inviting in case Jamison wanted to get closer. Just as she finished she heard Jamison's truck drive in and the engine shut off. A few moments later the front door opened and closed.

"I'm back!"

Lee smiled at the easy familiarity. Heading back out into the entryway, she asked, "Did you bring pizza?"

"Pepperoni, onion and mushroom."

Jamison had her hands full. One hand held a large pizza box like a waiter with a serving tray, and in the other she carried an overnight bag. Lee took the food and nodded toward the back of the house.

"Why don't you put that in my bedroom?"

Jamison swallowed nervously. "Are you sure? I don't want to move too fast for you or assume anything."

"Honey," Lee said, threading one arm around Jamison's waist, "you've slept in my room before and I think we're way past pretending. Unless it makes you uncomfortable?"

Jamison kissed her briefly. "Not a bit."

"Good. There's another dresser in there that's not being used. You can put your things in there if you like."

The rooms in the manor were huge by today's standards and Aunt Chris had seemed compelled to fill them up with as much furniture as she could find. There was no way Lee could ever hope to utilize everything, but the extra chest definitely came in handy at the moment.

"Sounds good. I'll be right back."

"What do you want to drink, wine or soda?"

"Soda, please," Jamison said over her shoulder.

Dinner was simple, but satisfying and they began to talk about all that had been left out before. Lee listened raptly while Jamison explained all about the Panthera and how important the *Kadin* was in their society.

"We even have our own language based on an ancient Egyptian dialect. I'm called a *pieta*, or leader. After Hank's death I was promoted and now I'm a probationary elder. Or at least I will be after this nightmare is over."

"Congratulations, that's wonderful. Isn't it?"

Jamison nodded, but said, "Dalton would disagree. His jealousy of me is just another thing that makes him so dangerous and unpredictable. I told you about his meeting with the heir to the lion pride shifters and that they're looking for Xander's brother."

"The one you think is doing all this," Lee said. "But what we saw was definitely not a lion. What do you think is wrong with him?"

"I'm not sure; possibly some kind of mutation or a sickness. Xander might be able to answer that question, but considering he's in cahoots with Dalton I hesitate to ask. One thing I do know is they're planning to find him this weekend and I intend to be tracking them when they do. After I have the location, I can inform the Council and have the hunting teams assist me by taking him into custody."

"At least you're not planning on trying it by yourself, and since it's only Wednesday you have a few days before you have to worry about it," Lee said in relief. "Whatever happened to this creature, he's dangerous."

Jamison nodded. "Lions are typically a lot stronger than jaguars, too, although I think we're a lot more cunning."

"Not biased are you?" Lee teased.

"Maybe a little."

"So, can you answer another question for me?"

"Fire away."

"What about Benny, the raccoon? When he's around things don't seem so bad, like he has some kind of power over my emotions. Stupid, huh?"

"No, not really. Chris used a raccoon as an icon. This guy isn't the same one, but he's definitely your counter."

"Icon? Counter?" Lee shook her head, not understanding the terminology.

"Think of it this way. A jaguar is a jungle cat. Their strengths are power, cunning, and speed. Like most cats, they tend to be high strung and quick to react. An icon is an animal that brings balance to the *Kadin*. It brings harmony in the form of calm, rationality, and gentleness. The icon allows the medicine woman to utilize all aspects of nature."

Lee felt the truth of what Jamison said; she had experienced it firsthand. "It's a lot to take in, but I just hope he's okay. I haven't seen him in a few days and he might have been scared off when all of that happened in the woods."

"I'm sure he'll be fine." Jamison took her hand and squeezed gently. "Forest creatures are very resilient. They have to be to survive.

Lee responded by yawning. "I'm sorry. It's been a long day."

"It's all right. Why don't I clean up here while you get ready for bed?"

"Are you sure?"

Jamison raised an eyebrow. "How hard can it be to throw away some paper plates and put the leftovers in the fridge? Seriously, you go ahead. I'll join you in a few minutes."

"Fine, you've convinced me." Lee leaned closer and Jamison kissed her lightly. "Thank you."

After brushing her teeth and washing her face, Lee climbed into the queen-sized bed and pulled the covers up. She left the side lamp burning and closed her eyes to relax and wait for Jami. She opened her eyes when Jamison slipped into bed beside her and shut off the light, only then realizing that she'd been dozing.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to wake you. Go back to sleep."

Jamison settled down on her back and Lee snuggled up against her, resting her head on her chest. One arm encircled her shoulder to hold her near. It was meant to be a comforting gesture, but Lee was suddenly surrounded by Jamison's scent and her warm, strong body. Any thoughts of sleep went out the window and she swallowed nervously, her own body tense with anticipation. Her emotions had been running high for days now and the physical closeness was just short of overwhelming.

"Lee? Is something wrong?"

This is crazy, Lee thought. We've made love before so why does it feel like this is the first time?

Immediately, she answered her own question. Before had been about passion, the all-consuming urge to take, conquer, and consummate. There had been little tenderness in the hurried groping that occurred on Jamison's work desk. This time, Lee wanted it to be special. She wanted to show Jamison how she felt.

Rising slowly onto one elbow, Lee looked down at Jamison's sculpted features, surprised by how clearly she could see her in the dim lighting. Full lips were parted, breath catching in unexpected arousal. Lee slowly narrowed the distance between them and took Jamison's lower lip between hers, nipping gently at the tender flesh.

Jamison moaned and brought both arms up to hold her, but Lee caught her and pushed her hands back against the mattress. "No. Let me love you. I just want you to lay there and feel."

"I don't know if I have that much discipline. I need to touch you."

"You will," Lee promised. "Later."

She felt the moist heat of Jamison's breath before contact was made. Lips opened and tongues engaged. Hunger overcame her and Lee caressed soft lips in a kiss that was demanding, loving, full of need. Trembling fingertips stroked a soft cheek and then drifted lower, mapping soft contours concealed by the nightshirt Jamison wore. Searing heat rose up between them as Lee pressed closer, almost desperate to merge with this woman who had claimed her heart.

The desire for more contact urged her to remove the barriers between them. Lee grasped the hem of Jamison's shirt, gratified when Jamison lifted her hips to free the garment and then partially sat up to allow Lee to dispose of it completely. She tossed it to the floor without hesitation and was riveted by the sight of the body lying beneath her. Jamison was the definition of carved muscle and womanly curves, just the balance necessary to render Lee breathless.

"You're so beautiful."

"Take your clothes off."

Lee complied swiftly, barely glancing away as sweatshirt and bottom joined the pile on the floor. Then they were kissing again, Jamison's mouth insistent, demanding Lee's total capitulation, which she was only too willing to give. She felt Jamison tremble under the tender assault, but she kept her hands on the bed as Lee had requested, her only outlet for the growing tension was to grasp the sheets in tight fists.

She moved away from the bruised lips, shifting lower toward the small, but firm breasts that had teased her on more than one occasion. Lee turned her face to the side and caressed the diamond hard tip with her cheek, before turning back and taking sensitive flesh between her lips.

Jamison cried out and pushed forward into the contact, instinctively seeking more. Lee complied, taking as much of Jamison into her mouth as she could, raking her teeth across the nipple and then soothing the tiny hurt with her tongue. Her hands caressed Jamison's body, outlining the ripped abs and sliding around to cup her backside.

Jamison moved rhythmically against her, heat and moisture bathing Lee's thigh. Her cries of pleasure encouraged Lee to take her to the next level and she slipped one hand between them, gently exploring the wellspring she discovered.

Lee raised her head and looked down into Jamison's eyes to find the tenderness and desire she felt reflected back at her.

"I love you," Jamison whispered.

Lee replied by sliding inside her with a single finger, not deeply, just a slight penetration to enhance what Jamison was already feeling. Jamison's eyes closed and her head went back. She moaned loudly and Lee moved lower, wanting to taste and bring her to the edge of forever before she allowed her to experience release.

Touching only with the tip of her tongue, Lee drew it down the length of Jamison's sex and then flicked the tip of her clitoris gently. Primal sounds of arousal and hunger issued from Jamison's throat and her head rolled from side to side. Then Lee took her, opening her mouth to fully surround and sucked swollen flesh between her lips. She slipped her arms around the powerful thighs, holding Jamison in place as she began to shake.

Jamison's body stiffened and she arched her back, her hands finding purchase on Lee's shoulders as she cried out sharply with the intensity of her climax. When she finally began to relax and Lee could elicit nothing more than a few tremors she moved back up into Jamison's welcome embrace and kissed her deeply.

"God, you're good at that," Jamison said once they parted.

Lee grinned and snuggled close. "I'm so glad you approve."

"Oh, I do, but don't think for one second that this is over. I still haven't had my turn."

Jamison rolled Lee over onto her back and the dance began again.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

AARON DALTON WALKED down the narrow forest trail toward the cave system he remembered so well from his youth. He had been here many times over the years, but it was in those earlier times that he had come to know the tunnels so well. Late on Wednesday night and in the middle of a thunderstorm, he didn't anticipate anyone following.

Kessler thought she was so smooth, but I smelled her all over the house. I shouldn't have told her what I was going to do to her bitch. I should have just done it. Now she's going to be up my ass until she finds out what I'm up to. But I'm not going to let it come to that.

He was more determined than ever to take everything from the *pieta* that she cared about, starting with her mate. Dalton felt perfectly justified for his actions now that Jamison had almost torn his left ear off, but he needed to do it in a way that wouldn't reflect back on him with the Council. He wanted her position and that wouldn't happen if the *Caber's* darling daughter could point the finger of blame at him. To that end he was out in the woods, soaking wet, and searching for a murdering scumbag. He'd convinced Xander Chiesel they would wait until the weekend only so he could find his brother and set things in motion without the lion changer following his every move. If things went the way he wanted, Kessler's girlfriend and the predator would both die tonight and he would take credit for saving the community.

Dalton neared the cave closest to Mafdet Manor. It was roughly three miles away from the house and set back some distance off the main trail, about two hundred feet. With the dense foliage no one would know it was here until they literally stumbled over it. There was no scent to lead the way this night and the moon was obscured by clouds. He had to rely on stealth and cleverness to scout the area without giving himself away if the killer was anywhere in the vicinity. The weather would keep the animal in whatever den it was hiding and that was another driving reason for Aaron to endure this misery. It was his best chance to locate the monster.

Crouching low, he approached the mouth of the cave but the darkness was total, telling him that no one inhabited this particular entrance. However, this was just the start of a much more extensive underground system. That being the case, it would be stupid to hang out near the front. He entered the cave, grateful for the respite from the storm, and took in a slow, lungful of the earth-scented air. Immediately he was hit with the stench of death and decay. He was here, somewhere.

"Here kitty, kitty," he said quietly before moving forward on the balls of his feet.

Aaron wanted to shift into his more powerful form, but there was a logical reason that prevented him. He wouldn't be able to speak as a jaguar, and animal communication lost something in the translation. There was just no nuance and he felt very strongly that he would have to get this beast's attention quickly if he wanted to survive.

He leaned into the blackness of the main tunnel and had taken only two steps when a furious roar pounded through the shadows toward him. Aaron reared back, his eyes widening with the knowledge that he couldn't see his adversary and had seconds before the creature tore his throat out.

"Xander sent me!"

The words barely left his mouth when heavy paws struck his chest and flung him backward onto the dirt floor. Aaron closed his eyes as teeth snapped millimeters from his face, but the creature halted as though flash-frozen.

Slowly, Dalton opened his eyes and flinched in horror. The animal looked even more horrific than it had that night the sheep had been slaughtered. Where before he was oddly misshapen for a lion, Bruce now bore absolutely no resemblance to that noble creature. The eyes were a solid sheet of silver, but those strange orbs had started to emit their own light.

Phosphorescence?

The teeth were no longer fangs, but had grown into huge tusks, thrusting upward from the lower jaw to curve up along the sides of his head. His tongue was forked like a snake and kept lashing out to taste the air.

"Xander?" Aaron heard in his mind.

"Yes, your brother. He sent me to find you. Don't you remember me? I'm Aaron. We were friends in school." Dalton was reaching. They had never been friends, but he was counting on the creature's mind to be as warped as his body.

"Friend?"

"That's right. I'm here to help you."

"Can't help, need Kadin. Need magic to fix."

Was that why he was at Mafdet? Aaron wondered. *He actually thought someone could make him the way he used to be?*

This was just too good to be true. Dalton almost laughed out loud, but held back at the last second. He didn't want this thing thinking he was making fun of it. He had to appear supportive while he manipulated Bruce into helping him with his own plans.

"There's a new medicine woman, better than the old one. She might be able to help fix you. We could go get her and bring her back here to help."

The carnivore growled and drool dripped from the corner of his mouth, soaking the front of Aaron's shirt. He grimaced in distaste, wanting to shove this disgusting beast away, but he couldn't take the chance. Already he could tell Bruce was growing angry.

"Old woman not help. Tell me to get out."

"Uh, yeah. Okay. I don't know what you're talking about, but I'm sure this new one won't be like that. Would you like to go see her now?"

"Yes." Bruce leaped away from Aaron, his fixed claws tearing easily through the cotton shirt. *"Go now. Make her heal."*

Dalton stood up and brushed the dirt from the seat of his pants. He wasn't happy with the condition of his shirt and carefully hid his frown. Why did everyone keep ripping up his clothing?

He checked his watch to find it was closing in on one in the morning. Perfect. The Grayson woman and Kessler should both be asleep and they could break into the house. They would have to create a diversion to separate the women so they could grab the Kadin.

"All right. We go now, but we have to bring the medicine woman here to perform the ritual."

"Why? Do there. Faster."

Thinking on his feet, Aaron replied. "It has to be done here so she can tap into nature. Not a lot of that inside a dusty old house, you know."

It was a lame excuse, but the only thing he could come up with on short notice. Dalton had to get the woman alone, where Kessler had less of a chance of finding her. He also needed the kill

to be done in the caves so he could say he discovered them while out on patrol and saved the day. No one would believe he stumbled into Mafdet Manor, especially with Jamison already on the premises and a witness to the contrary.

In the end, Bruce agreed but Dalton had one more stipulation. "You need to change back to human form. She might not come willingly and I'll need your help."

Not arguing the point, the beast sat up on his haunches like a squirrel and his body rippled like heat radiating off asphalt on a summer day. He took on a vaguely human form, the pelt receding into his body as the fangs shortened and the tail disappeared, but he couldn't seem to make the complete transition. Bruce was left with long, stationary claws and the silver eyes. His hair was shaggy, closer to the monster he had mutated into than the man he had once been.

"I guess that's close enough. Do you have any clothes?"

"*Get pants,*" Bruce telegraphed, and drifted farther into the darkness.

He can't even talk like a person anymore. Dalton knew it wouldn't be long before communication with the creature would become impossible. Had they waited until the weekend, he would have been useless in helping Aaron achieve his goals.

Seconds later Bruce returned dressed in a pair of torn khakis. He was bare-chested and shoeless.

"That'll work. Let's go."

They set off from the exit and Dalton was happy to see the rain had stopped. Unfortunately, the temperature had also dropped so he set out at a jog to generate some body heat as well as close up the distance at a steady pace. The moon winked out behind the clouds at irregular intervals, providing light for them to navigate and soon the shadow of the manor came into view.

Dalton didn't hesitate as he headed for the front porch with the malformed carnivore beside him. He anticipated that once Bruce's stash had been discovered it wouldn't take Kessler long to find the hidden entrance and he didn't waste his time trying that way in. Instead, he came prepared and would do things the old-fashioned way. He intended to pick the lock.

"*Me smash window.*"

"What are you, The Hulk? Stay quiet and leave it to me. We have to be quiet or her bodyguard will attack us."

The last was designed to keep Bruce complacent. Aaron reached into his pocket and removed a tubular lock pick. He inserted the tool into the lock and turned it clockwise. As it was pushed into the lock, each of the pins was slowly forced down until they stopped, binding the driver pins behind the shear line of the lock. When the final pin was pushed down the shear plane cleaved the lock open. It only took a matter of seconds.

Aaron opened the door slowly, using all of his senses to determine there was no movement in the house. The fading scent of sex struck him and his penis stiffened in response. Angry at the involuntary reaction, he bit back a snarl and tiptoed away from the smell toward where he knew the kitchen to be with Bruce close on his heels. He took the rear stairs to the basement.

"*Show me where the access is.*"

Bruce slid past him and headed directly for the panel beneath the stairs. Someone had put a hasp with a padlock on it, but he easily ripped it away.

Dalton rolled his eyes. Now it would be more difficult to make it look like an intruder had forced the door from the tunnel access, but he could still make it work. He knelt down and climbed inside the tunnel and then scooped up a handful of dirt. Aaron reached back through and smeared it over the inside edge of the wall, making it look like someone had grabbed hold to climb inside.

He stepped back into the house leaving the panel open and grinned up at Bruce.
Now it gets fun.

LEE SMILED AND turned over in her sleep.

The sights and sounds of the forest embraced her and joy filled her heart as she padded over fallen leaves and branches. Lee felt the strength in the muscles of her four legs and flexed her claws simply to let them sink into the coolness of the earth. The smells that came to her were a hundred times what she could sense in her human form, connecting her to the world around her in ways that she never could have imagined. A sound came to her sensitive ears that wasn't quite as pleasant, a persistent thudding followed by a resounding crash.

She awakened and sat up at the same time that Jamison did; the realization that the annoyingly loud sound hadn't been a part of her nocturnal imaginings.

"What was that?"

"Someone's in the house," Jamison whispered harshly, sliding out of the bed and reaching for her nightshirt. "Do you have any weapons around here?"

Lee quickly pulled on her sweats and retrieved the shotgun from the closet. "The breech is loaded, but you'll have to jack a round into the chamber and the safety is on."

"Got it. You stay here."

"I don't think so. I'm coming with you."

Jamison held the weapon in one hand and cupped the back of Lee's neck with the other. Looking deeply into her eyes she said, "I can't be worried about you and concentrate on finding an intruder. Please."

Reluctantly, Lee nodded. "Be careful." She hugged Jamison tightly for a moment and then she was alone.

JAMISON SLIPPED OUT of the bedroom into the main entrance, searching for the source of the noise. Her eyes and nose told her nothing was in this part of the house, but she could detect the same stench she had encountered on several occasions. The killer was in the house, but she couldn't imagine why it would have returned.

Another small thump, significantly quieter than the others, led her toward the kitchen. Thinking that the creature had gone back to the root cellar, she crossed into the dining room without hesitation. A few steps into the space, she realized she wasn't alone. Jamison started to turn around, but as quick as she was, the intruder was faster. A sharp pain lanced through the back of her head and Jamison slumped unconscious to the floor.

LEE WAITED FOR several minutes, but when Jamison didn't return and there were no further sounds she began to worry. She tiptoed on bare feet toward the door and leaned around the edge.

"Jamison," she said in a loud stage whisper and then she winced.

That was dumb. Just tell the serial killer where to find you, Lee.

She clamped her mouth closed and left the sanctuary of the bedroom, determined to find Jamison and help her if they ran into trouble. Lee was halfway across the foyer when she felt the wooden floor vibrate under her feet and knew she was being followed. She spun around and saw the almost unrecognizable, but grinning face of the man from the side of the road. It was Bruce, the one who'd helped her with the truck, but fear slammed into her when she suddenly realized he was the murderer.

Her scream was cut off abruptly when someone slapped a hand over her mouth from behind.

"Hello *Kadin*," a man said sarcastically. "I do hate to be rude, no that's not true. I love to be rude, and you're coming with us."

Chapter Thirty

THE STENCH OF urine and gasoline were the first things that greeted Lee when she regained consciousness. She lay still in the hopes that the two that had taken her wouldn't realize she was awake. Looking around without moving her head, Lee saw that she was inside some type of underground cavern, the dirt ceiling high overhead and the coolness of rich earth under her cheek. Dim, yellow light caused flickering shadows to dance over the cave walls.

A lantern?

Booted feet came into view and a man nudged her in the side. "Get up."

So much for that plan.

Lee hoped she could fake unconsciousness long enough for Jamison to find her, but it looked like she was on her own for the time being. There was no question that Jami would be searching for her and it was up to Lee to play along with these two until help arrived. If the opportunity presented itself, she would escape on her own and let the Council Jamison had told her about know exactly where to find them. She sat up and looked around, trying to note as much detail as possible. The slightest thing might provide her with the chance to get away.

There were two entrances into this chamber with no indication which might lead to freedom. A single Coleman lantern burned in the corner, but there was nothing she could see that might be set aflame to provide a distraction.

"Who are you? What do you want from me?"

Someone moved in the darkness and then drifted closer. When he came into the light she recognized Bruce. Lee had seen him briefly in the house and was horrified by his transformation, but looking at him now she realized how much worse his condition was. Bruce's jaw jutted forward, appearing to be dislocated and his stomach was sunken into his body, but his eyes were what captured her attention. Solid as a sheet of ice and covered in silver with neither iris nor pupil to break up the landscape. It wasn't just the impossibly uniform color, but the radiance being illuminated from within.

Dalton answered, drawing her back to the situation. "Not like it matters who we are, but I'm Dalton. He wants you to cure him. What I want is so much more."

His lecherous gaze slid down her body, resting suggestively on her breasts before moving lower. Bruce's new form was frightening to behold, but Lee sensed Dalton was the more dangerous of the two.

"Forget it, buddy. You're not my type."

Baiting him wasn't a wise choice, but Jami had told her who this guy was and her fear of him suddenly went down a peg or two. He was nothing, but an overgrown bully who would probably fold if someone actually stood up to him.

Dalton sneered. "Yes, I know. You prefer tall, dark and self-important elder wannabes."

"Actually, you're just too ugly. Hell, your friend here has a better chance, but I'll admit he could use some mouthwash."

The back-handed slap impacted her in the jaw. Lee hadn't expected the blow. It caught her full force, snapping her head to the side. She tasted blood, but before she could spit it out Bruce snarled and went after Dalton. He moved lightning quick, but Lee could see every detail. She was able to perceive the instant yellow-black fur burst from his pores, standing in rigid spikes down the center of his misshapen spine. The claws that had taken up permanent residence on his hands and feet elongated even farther, digging into the dirt and throwing it behind in a cloud as he lunged. The light behind the incandescent eyes became acute, illuminating some of the shadows around them. Lee flinched, an instinctive reaction to the attack.

Bruce hurtled into Dalton's chest, easily forcing him onto his back and pinning him against the ground.

"Don't touch. I need!"

His teeth had grown unbelievably long, more like the tusks of a saber tooth tiger only curving upward instead of downward, embracing his skull as they curved upward on either side of his eyes. Drool slipped out of his open mouth and slid down his throat to settle under his collar.

Bruce hadn't spoken aloud since Lee was taken and it belatedly occurred to her that he still hadn't. She heard the garbled sentences in her mind. This was how they communicated while in animal form, though she suspected one usually couldn't intercept the message. Otherwise, she would be hearing all the shape changers in Harmon every time she walked down the street. It was another indication of how far gone Bruce's condition was.

"I was just joking around," Dalton said, holding his hands up in surrender. "I didn't mean anything by it. Why don't you go ahead and ask her to cure you? As the *Kadin*, it should be easy enough."

"Not easy. Old woman said no. Said can't help."

"You knew Aunt Chris?" Lee gave away the fact that she could understand the silent words, but this was too important to let pass. "If she could have cured you, she would have."

Bruce left Dalton lying in the dirt and padded toward her, his serpent-like tongue lashing out to taste the air. *"Bitch said no, but Bruce not stupid. She let change to this. Her fault. Now you will help or I kill you, too."*

Fury raced over her, stronger than she could ever remember. A snarl tore loose from her in a way she never could have expected, but Lee didn't really notice. "You killed her? Are you such a genius that you didn't think she could be telling the truth?"

He flew toward her and this time she couldn't track his movements, but he stopped short of tearing her face apart with his tusks. *"No! I have sickness. She knew but thought funny to see me suffer. She deserved death."*

Lee fought to control her anger. She wanted to hurt him back for killing her aunt, but that would do little to bring Chris back and only create more problems at the moment. She took a deep breath as rationality took over. Antagonizing him would only lead to her own demise and she might be able to use this to her advantage. Bruce's sole concern was being cured of whatever disease held him in its grip. She believed there was no out for him, magical, mystical or scientific, but that wasn't what he wanted to hear.

"All right, you win. I'll help you, but I'll need something. I need the medicine book. It's on the dining room table at the manor." The two of them together had her trapped, but she'd just been given the chance to split them up. Assuming Bruce would go for it.

"She's lying to you," Dalton said, dusting himself off as he stood. "Even if she gets the book she has no intention of trying to do anything. Just kill her and get it over with."

Her eyes narrowed in sudden comprehension, dread skating over her flesh. Jami's nemesis helped capture and kidnap her, but not out of any desire to assist his companion with overcoming his curse.

"That's what you wanted all along." She turned to Bruce. "He doesn't want you to change back. He just wants you to slaughter me, to add to the body count. You'll never be like you were if you do that."

Bruce thought about it for a second and then turned to Dalton. Lee wasn't sure he really comprehended, but he went along for now. "*You go. Get book or I kill you next.*"

"Are you really going to believe that line?" Aaron asked sarcastically. "She's just like her aunt. They don't care about you."

"Go!" Bruce silently roared and Lee got a kick out of watching Dalton wince.

She could see the fear in his eyes when he thought no one was looking. Maybe she'd been wrong about this mismatched pair and Dalton was the weaker of the two. She didn't have any weapons and her hands were currently tied behind her back, but she had a better chance of overpowering him than Bruce if she could get free.

"If you don't trust him you could go," Lee said.

Dalton's gaze swiveled back to her and that smarmy look came back into his eyes. "Now there's an idea. We could spend some quality time and get to know each other. I'm sure after you spend a little time with me you'll never want to go back to women."

"On second thought--"

"*Panthera go. I stay, rest for hunt.*"

Aaron frowned and looked like he wanted to argue the point, but eventually he relented. With one last dark glance toward her, he left Lee alone with the beast. Chances were good he wouldn't actually retrieve the medicine book since he was smart enough to know it wouldn't work, but if it got rid of him for a while that would be okay, too.

Bruce padded over to the side of the cave and lay down. He rested his mammoth head against his paws, but carefully kept watch on her. Lee leaned her head back against the wall and closed her eyes, pretending to sleep. As subtly as she could, she twisted her wrists to check the bindings. There was just enough space to maneuver and she bit the inside of her cheek to keep from smiling. Dalton wasn't quite the marlinspike man he thought himself to be. Working slowly and deliberately, she was able to loosen the knot. She felt the sting of rope burn, but persisted until the cords gave way.

Chapter Thirty-One

FOR THE SECOND time in two days, Jamison picked herself up off the floor. Gingerly, she touched the lump on the back of her head. She didn't need to check the house to know that Lee was gone, but she did anyway. The scent of Dalton and his new friend was all over the house, telling her the who, but not the why. She ran out of the house intent on tracking the small group and saving Lee, only to run straight into the middle of a fall shower. Rain fell at a steady pace, soaking her instantly and the ground was completely saturated. She couldn't tell how long it had been raining, but it was long enough to obscure any tracks they might have made and dilute their spoor to the point where they were impossible to follow.

Damn, now what?

Jamison was terrified that she would be too late and all they would find of Lee was her bent and broken body. She needed help and it was time to bring the hunting teams into this. If the Council wanted to think this was just another tiff she was having with Dalton, she didn't care as long as they got Lee back in one piece. She would worry about their reactions later. Jamison ran back into the house to dress and her phone rang as she reached for her pants.

"Jami, it's Dinah. I just received an anonymous tip that someone saw our beast near Andrews Farm. What do you want us to do?"

"Did they say if he was alone? Was there a woman with him?"

"What are you talking about," Dinah asked, inherently understanding by Jamison's panicked voice that something was wrong.

"Dalton broke into Lee's house tonight with the monster. They're working together and I don't know why, but they took her."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, their stench is all over the manor. Get the others together and meet me at the head of Griffin Drive. We'll decide how to approach the property once we get there. Do you know if there are any deserted structures on the premises that could be used as a hiding place?"

"Couldn't tell you," Dinah answered quickly, "but Travis might know. He used to hang out with Jimmy Andrews when they were kids. Jami, I hate to bring this up, but if a Panthera is involved with this we have to inform the Council before we move in."

"They could kill her before we get there!" Jamison knew the elders would have to be brought into this, but Lee's life was the priority. The Council could be updated later as far as she was concerned.

"I know, sweetie, but it might already be too late and if they are there, we don't have a choice. The community comes before any one individual."

Panthera protocol dictated that a member of their society engaged in criminal activity would be brought to justice only before the Council. In this case, they would demand proof that Dalton was actually guilty of any wrongdoing before they took action against him.

"To hell with that. You can waste time talking to the Council, but I'm going after Lee."

Dinah quickly reached a compromise. "At least let me call Mom so she can meet us out there. With an elder present no one can say we breached protocol."

"All right. Just get there as quickly as you can."

"I will."

Jamison finished dressing and tore out of the house. Andrews Farm was almost six miles away and north of Harmon. Since Dalton lived close to that location it made sense he would take Lee there and she didn't stop to question the timing of the anonymous tip. She jumped into the pickup and tore out of the yard, slinging mud in all directions. Rain pounded against the windshield and she flipped on the wipers. Clouds obscured any light from the moon and visibility was almost nil. Jamison could barely see the center stripe when she pulled onto Blue Mountain road, but there wasn't any traffic and she floored the accelerator. For a second the rear tires spun dangerously and then they gripped the pavement and she rocketed toward town with no regard to being stopped by a bored state trooper.

She hadn't gone more than two miles when the glint of wet metal near the trees caught her eye and Jamison slammed on the brakes. The Chevy went into a sideways skid and she fought the wheel as the vehicle hydroplaned over the slick roadway before it came to a stop near the shoulder of the oncoming lane. Heart beating wildly, she drove the truck the rest of the way off the road and bailed out to investigate what she had seen. It could be that an innocent traveler had lost control of their car and gone off the road, but her intuition insisted that it was somehow related to Lee's disappearance.

Soaked to the skin, Jamison ignored the cold and jogged through the thigh-high weeds. Her night vision gave her the ability to see inside the car from a distance and she could tell it wasn't occupied, but she ran faster when she recognized it as belonging to Dalton. It occurred to her that Andrews Farm was nothing more than a ruse. After verifying that there was no sign of Lee, Jamison reached for her cell. The weather made reception spotty, but the call to Dinah went through without difficulty. The phone rang several times and then went to voicemail.

"Damn it!" She punched in another number and waited impatiently for someone to answer.

"Hello?"

"Mom! It's me, Jami. Did you hear from Dinah?"

"Yes, she explained what you said about Dalton, but Jami I think you're making a mistake. I know you two don't get along, but this is hardly the way to resolve your differences. Now, I'm sorry if you're upset because I sent him to get the photographs, but I would have thought that was all settled since we already have them."

"You sent him?"

Jamison was surprised how much that information hurt. She understood the Council would want their precious pictures, but hadn't expected her own mother to send another Panthera to obtain them. Why hadn't she said anything? Pushing the disappointment away, she tried to focus on more important issues.

"I'm not trying to get even with him. Dalton has Lee Grayson. The call Dinah got was probably him trying to fool us into searching the wrong area. I just found his car at mile marker sixty-two off Blue Mountain Road. If he isn't in on this, why would his car be hidden here in the trees?"

"Maybe he went off the road. This storm is pretty bad and he could be hurt."

"Will you listen to me?" Jamison asked, becoming frantic in her worry. The longer they argued, the more danger Lee was in. If they hadn't already killed her. The idea made it hard to breathe and she pushed it away, refusing to accept the possibility. "I need the hunters here, but

Dinah isn't picking up her phone. Can you get hold of her and have the others head this way. I'm going ahead. With any luck, I'll be able to pick up their trail."

"All right, but I still think your wrong. Aaron Dalton isn't one of my favorite people, but I find it hard to believe he's teamed up with a killer. Can you at least wait until someone else gets there? I don't like the idea of you going after that predator on your own."

Jamison was slightly mollified by Darlene's concern, but she couldn't sit on her hands not knowing what was happening to Lee. There wasn't any time to waste. "I can't, but I'll try to leave a clear path so the others can follow me."

"Promise me you'll be careful."

"Yes, ma'am," she said, stepping into the darkness of the forest. "Just make sure they get here in time."

Jamison clicked off the phone and the ringer. Sneaking up on a shape changer was difficult enough without the cell ringing at the most inopportune moment. One thing she did have going for her was the storm. If she couldn't detect their trail then Dalton and his partner wouldn't be able to track her.

Wet vegetation absorbed the sound of her passage as she stepped farther into the woods. She tried to avoid the scrub as best she could, but it pressed close on all sides scratching her hands and the side of her neck. The wind had picked up, and rain lashed at her from all sides. Eventually she stumbled onto a well-used game trail and turned toward the east. There was more than an even chance she was traveling in the wrong direction, but logic told her the trio would be moving away from the manor. She hadn't gone more than a hundred yards when she heard the distinct click of a gun's hammer being drawn back.

"You do have a hard head, Kessler. I'll give you that. You should have been out until morning."

Jamison didn't turn around. "Dalton. Now what in the world would you be doing out on such a miserable night?"

"I am part of the hunting teams," he said conversationally.

"You don't expect me to buy that, do you?"

"No, but it doesn't matter. The Council will."

She swallowed hard, knowing that he was right. No one wanted to believe that another Panthera, one of their own, could be hip-deep in all this. Such an individual was a threat against the entire community and their way of life.

"Get moving," Dalton said, breaking into her thoughts.

Jamison started walking, keeping her hands where the bastard could see them. She was fast and it would take only a second to shift and attack, but a bullet was faster still. Jamison couldn't outrun that.

"Tell me one thing. Were you in on this from the start?"

"What, you mean that damned predator? Don't be stupid."

Confused, she asked, "Then why did you kidnap Lee? I assume you were smart enough to find out who killed Hank, so why not just take the credit and help apprehend him?"

"Oh, I'll still take the credit. It'll just be unfortunate that he murdered you and your little girlfriend before I could shoot him."

Jamison snorted. "So this is revenge? How pathetically small-minded of you."

"Shut up. I'm not about to let you antagonize me into losing control. Bruce is going to tear you apart and I'm going to have a ringside seat."

"What's your buddy Xander going to think when he finds out about that?"

She couldn't resist trying to get more information out of him. Dalton was too calm about planning her death, but she had no intention of becoming his latest victim. When they did get away, she was going to have enough incriminating evidence for the Council to put him away for life. If Xander Chiesel knew about his schemes, it would create a rift between the Panthera and the Felidae, but it couldn't go unanswered.

Dalton actually laughed. "That idiot actually thinks I'm trying to help find his brother and return him to the family in one piece. I don't give a damn about that monster. You should see him. He's so far gone he can't even assume human form anymore. Once this is over, he'll be as dead as you and your pathetic girlfriend."

WHEN THE ROPES fell away, Lee cracked her eyes open and checked to see if Bruce was watching. He appeared to be sleeping. She could hear his rhythmic breathing across the short distance between them but that didn't guarantee anything. She waited a few more minutes, worried that she didn't have the time to spare before Dalton's return, but she was reluctant to move too soon. Finally, it was concern for Jamison that prompted her to take action. She knew Jamison would be frantic with worry.

She stood up slowly, keeping the beast Bruce had become in sight the entire time. Lee backed toward the exit Dalton had taken, stepping lightly. Her captor never moved and in moments she slipped out of the cave and away from the lantern's glow. Unaccountably, she had no problems seeing and easily followed the footprints left in the soft dirt, picking up speed the farther she went. Lee could smell the storm before she ran out into it.

She took a deep breath, feeling cleansed from the stench of rot that seemed to hover around Bruce. Then she looked around and was surprised, but thrilled to see that she recognized where she stood.

The men had knocked her unconscious for the trip to the cave system, but she was familiar with the terrain since she ran by here when she went out for her daily jogs. Lee turned in the direction of Mafdet Manor, but didn't go very far. There was no point in returning to the house except to check on Jamison and she had a feeling she wouldn't be there. By now she would be out searching for her and besides, Dalton had been ordered to go to the house to retrieve the book. There was too great a chance of running into him. Lee turned and headed into the woods. She hoped to make it to Blue Mountain Road and flag down a passing car. Sheriff Macke could get hold of Jamison for her and she would lead them back to where the refugee was hiding.

Recognizing a trail she traversed every day and maneuvering through the woods at night were two very different things and Lee was concerned she would lose her way. She concentrated on keeping as straight a path as she could, convinced that eventually she would make it to the roadway.

Pick a tree, she thought. Make it to that one and then choose another. Keep your eyes on it and don't look away.

Her night vision had been thrown off by the Coleman lantern inside the caves and she had to allow her eyes to adjust on the fly. The trees were great, hulking silhouettes with limbs that resembled living creatures reaching for her in the darkness. Any second she expected Dalton to pop out and prevent her getaway. If he turned into a jaguar she wouldn't have a chance. Quite likely he would just rip her apart right here and he could make up any story he wanted. Bruce

would believe she had run away and he would never get his cure. Dalton could say he never saw her and there would be no one to dispute him.

Thinking about such things did little to slow the pounding of adrenaline through her veins, but Lee doggedly stayed on course, or thought she did. Her watch told her that half an hour had passed since she left the cave, but she still hadn't made it to the road.

I'm running around in circles.

Panic paid her a visit, tightening her chest and making it hard to breathe. She froze in her tracks and tried to see the sky through the treetops, but there was little to clarify which way she should go. Slowly, Lee turned in a circle convinced she had passed this way more than once.

Okay, relax. If you lose it you'll never find your way out. What would Jamison do?

Lee scoffed at her own question. Jamison was a Panthera and could probably sense which direction to travel. She would never get lost in the woods. Lee couldn't hope to accomplish the same daring feats of navigation. Or could she? Lee was supposedly one of them, or at least half. Being able to tap into that part of her heritage might be the only chance she had to get out of these woods.

She closed her eyes and tried to relax, taking long, deep breaths in an attempt to center herself. She had never studied yoga or meditation, but she understood the concepts of trying to empty her mind of everything and focus on her surroundings. After what felt like an eternity, she turned to the left and traveled ever deeper into the thickening undergrowth. This was definitely a different route, the scrub that tore at her clothing told her that much.

When she stumbled out onto the blacktop twenty minutes later she was as surprised as the driver behind the wheel of the car coming right at her. The vehicle swerved at the last moment and slid toward the ditch, coming to an abrupt halt when it hit the gravel on the shoulder. Lee ran toward them, waving her arms in an effort to gain their attention.

"Help! I need to get to Harmon and talk to Sheriff Macke!"

The car door opened and a distinguished older woman with silver-streaked hair stepped out. She made no effort to evade the rain as familiar deep green eyes met Lee's.

"Lee Grayson, I presume."

Bafflement encouraged her to stop and reassess this stranger, but Lee knew they had never met. "How do you know my name?"

"Come out of the road before you get hit."

Lee cast an automatic glance down the blacktop. No other cars were in sight, but she did as she was asked, moving toward the woman she sensed wasn't a threat.

"I'm Darlene Kessler, Jamison's mom."

"Jamison! Is she all right? She was with me when they broke into the house, but I didn't see what happened to her."

Darlene held up a hand in reassurance. "She's fine. She called about forty minutes ago to ask for some help in searching for you. I have to say, you are a little worse for wear. Do you need a doctor?"

Lee was confused for a second and then felt her jaw where Dalton had struck. It was a minor injury and not worth the time spent discussing it.

"Did Jami say where she was? I don't think she could know where to start and if something happens to her out here I'll never forgive myself."

Jamison's mother smiled at the sentiment. "Jami is more resilient than I think you give her credit for. She said she found Aaron Dalton's car at mile marker sixty-two and that's where she went into the woods. It's only another mile or so up the road--"

"Dalton, he's the one who did this. I don't know where he is now, but Bruce wanted him to go back to Mafdet and get the medicine book so I could cure him. I played along, but I don't have that kind of ability. I don't think anyone does."

"You do realize you're not making a lot of sense, right?" Darlene frowned trying to take everything in. "Are you sure Aaron wasn't trying to save you?"

"Not unless threatening to kill me and Jamison is his crazy way of saying he's working undercover," Lee said sarcastically. "The only reason he left was because Bruce made him."

"Who's this Bruce you keep talking about?"

Lee shook her head. "I've only seen him once before, and he looked like some kind of transient. Now he's different, he looks like some mutated monster from hell with silver, glowing eyes and tusks that would make a warthog proud. He can't even talk anymore."

"Then how do you know he wants you to cure him? Did Aaron tell you?"

"No, I heard him...in my mind. Look, we're wasting time and I'll be happy to answer all of your questions later, but we need to find Jami."

Darlene pulled the cell phone off her hip and tapped in a series of numbers. She listened intently, her obvious concern growing as she waited for an answer that never came.

"She's not picking up."

"Something's wrong. We have to go find her."

Darlene nodded. "Get in."

Lee obeyed without question, happy to be inside the heated car if only for a few minutes. Darlene drove quickly and efficiently and it wasn't long before they pulled off the road beside Jamison's pickup. A quick check confirmed that no one was in either vehicle. The rain tapered off as they stood by the shoulder, deciding what the next move should be.

"The...searchers will be here soon. We should wait until they get here."

"You mean the hunting teams?" Lee asked. "Jami told me all about what's going on and you can wait here if you want, but I can feel that she's in trouble."

Lee was terrified at the thought of heading back into the ancient forest, but Jamison needed her and that eclipsed any fear she harbored. She wanted Darlene to come with her, convinced her instincts would be keen enough to prevent them from becoming lost, but she would do it on her own if she had to. Already, she was thinking about how to navigate the shadows and find her way back to the cave systems.

Darlene appeared to mull it over for a second, looking Lee up and down in assessment before she made her decision. "You win. Let's go."

"I thought you wanted to wait for the others."

"I'll phone them on the way, but that's my daughter, and if you say she's in danger that's good enough for me."

"I'm relieved that you agree."

Lee stepped into the woods without a second thought, her concern for the woman she loved leading the way.

Chapter Thirty-Two

"WHAT'S WITH THE gun? Are you afraid you can't handle me on your own?"

"You talk big for someone I left bleeding in the forest."

"And what's that on the side of your head, a birthmark?"

Dalton touched his torn ear with one hand, keeping the weapon trained steadily on Jamison. The growing anger showed in his face, but not enough for him to grow incautious. "Shut the fuck up and keep going, Kessler. You have an appointment with the devil and I'd hate for you to miss it."

At least the rain had stopped and Dalton would lead her right to Lee. Things hadn't gone exactly according to plan, but all in all Jamison wasn't unhappy. Once she was sure Lee was all right, they would find a way to get out of this and she didn't mean to leave either of their enemies unconscious or even minimally wounded.

Dalton crossed the line when he helped kidnap her mate. Her jaguar demanded retribution and when she looked at him all she could see was blood. It would be spattered all over the ground along with the miserable, murdering bastard he'd teamed up with. There was no question about that; the only point in dispute was the method of delivery.

Jamison walked down the trail Dalton had indicated. On the surface she appeared calm, but inside her anger boiled, her cat at the surface and ready to pounce. On top of that, she hated being wet and she'd been soaked to the skin for over an hour. Desperate to alleviate the need to tear him apart for touching Lee, she needed a distraction and since she didn't plan for him to live this would be the only chance to get any information.

"Why are you doing this, Dalton? I mean, I always knew you were a piece of crap but I never thought you'd help slaughter your own kind."

"You mean my own kind like you?" he asked, his lips twisted with distaste. "You think you're so perfect. You're just the whelp of a cunt that shouldn't even be an elder. She's weak, just like you. You think all this time that I've resisted your so-called leadership because I was jealous? Get serious. I'm the only one who's seen you for what you are. And after my friend Bruce gets rid of you and the little girlfriend, the rest of your family is next."

Fury rose like a tide, but ebbed in a steady flow. Jamison forced her jaguar back behind the cage, preventing her from leaping forward and dismantling him. A growl rumbled in her chest with the effort to hold back. He really believed what he said, she had no doubt of that, but the actual words meant nothing. What he told her might be the key to their escape. His hatred and bigotry knew no bounds.

"Here, turn left."

Jamison looked around, but the trail continued straight ahead. Her pupils elongated, allowing her feline vision to make out the underground entrance just back off the path. Nostrils flared as she took in the air around them, but all that came to her was musky humus and the tang of the leaves.

"They're inside?" The words came out roughly, like gravel against a stone. Just the small shift with her eyes had been enough for her beast to edge nearer to freedom. She wouldn't be able to contain it much longer; any provocation would send her into change, permitting the glorious transformation that would destroy those who dared threaten her and her counterpart.

For an answer, Dalton shoved the barrel of the gun between her shoulder blades. She stumbled forward a step and snarled as inky black pelt shimmered over her hands and down the center of her abs. The muscles in her arms, back and shoulders expanded until the material strained, but still she fought against her cat, not wanting Lee to see her in that regressed state. She wanted to look into the eyes of the woman she loved so that Lee would know her before justice was dispensed to the animals that so richly deserved it.

Jamison saw the monster leaping toward the exit of the caverns at the last moment and he didn't look very pleased. Great puffs of hot air burst from his nostrils in the cool night air and the ground trembled slightly from his thunderous approach. She dodged to the side, flinging her body amid the wet vegetation as Bruce plowed into Dalton and took him off his feet. She got her first full look at the monstrosity that had once been a lion shifter. Nothing remained to indicate he'd ever stood upright.

"Have you lost your mind? What the hell are you doing?" Dalton demanded.

"Where you take?"

"Take what? I haven't even been here."

"Kadin gone."

"You let her get away? You fucking moron! I went after that damned book of yours and you let her escape. Brilliant."

"You have book? Book have spell. Give."

Jamison didn't know what book he meant and couldn't have cared less. She heard Bruce's silent speech and let out a sigh of relief that Lee had eluded them, but now what? She didn't have a hope in Hades of taking on these two by herself. Lions carried twice the strength of a jaguar and Dalton wouldn't exactly be on her side. Her beast insisted she change and confront them, but the logical side urged her to slip away and find reinforcements. Dalton decided the issue for her.

"I don't have the damn thing. I found Kessler creeping around the woods and brought her here for you--a midnight snack. Look at her, doesn't she look good?"

The twisted features swiveled toward her for only a second, but Bruce had no interest in her. His jaws parted and he issued a roar that shook the very air.

"Told you get book!"

Oops, looks like you messed up, Dalton old buddy, Jamison thought with a touch of satisfaction.

She had no warning when Bruce buried his tusks into the meaty flesh between Dalton's neck and shoulders. He gave one quick twist and the sound of crunching bones and a bitten-off scream made her flinch. Jamison sensed his hunger as Bruce gulped down mouthfuls of a fresh kill. She didn't feel sorry for Dalton and Bruce's actions were justifiable for a jungle cat. He had taken down the prey and now he would feed. But she felt cheated that Dalton's death had been so easy and that he hadn't had the chance to resist. Without a fair fight there was no victory.

Unfortunately, it also meant she didn't have a choice what her next move would be.

Dalton would have been easier to track than this creature, but he was gone. She couldn't sneak away and hope to bring the hunting parties down on the pair. They might never find Bruce again and this had to end. Outmatched or not, she had to take the creature out here and now.

Jamison moved slowly, climbing to her hands and knees to facilitate her own transformation. It was possible to change while lying on her back, but the position would make things more difficult for a feline body. The freakish thing lifted its head and the dripping muzzle turned in her direction, ready for her.

LEE AND DARLENE froze as a ghastly roar reverberated through the woods. Fear skittered up Lee's spine and she tore off heedless of the thistles that grabbed for her jeans, latching hold and trying to keep her from crashing headlong through the trees. A branch reached out and snagged her shirtsleeve, but she didn't notice when it ripped away, fluttering in the night breeze.

Darlene was Jamison's mother and Lee might have expected her to lag behind. Instead the woman easily paced her, arms pumping. In her hand she still carried a cell phone. She had used it to call in the reinforcements twenty minutes ago, but had neglected to put it back in the case at her side. Rather than do so now, Lee watched out of the periphery of her vision as Darlene flung it away into the darkness.

Lee couldn't really see how the loss of a few ounces would speed their response time any, but if Darlene wanted to incur the cost of replacing her phone that was entirely her decision. She was more concerned with leading the elder and, by extension, the hunting teams to where Bruce could be apprehended. Hope encouraged her to believe that Jamison was out in the woods by herself innocently searching, but reality dictated that she would have contacted someone by now if she hadn't been apprehended by the forces of evil.

Instinct told Lee they should be reaching the trail by now and seconds later it came into sight. She took a running leap to clear a large boulder jutting up through the forest floor in her bid to reach faster ground but miscalculated in the dark. The hem on one leg of her jeans snagged as she soared over the huge rock and she went crashing face first into the muddy oak leaves and pine needles.

Way to impress your girlfriend's mother.

Spitting out a mouthful of dirt, Lee pushed herself upright and pounded down the well-known path as fast as she could go, ignoring the sting of multiple cuts and bruises. She caught up with Darlene at the next bend, the desire to chastise the woman for coming to an abrupt halt stifled by what she saw in front of them.

The sound of a snuffling grunt emanated from a shadowed hulk farther along the wooded game trail. Wisps of fog swirled through the air, preventing her from seeing exactly what was ahead of her and somewhere droplets of water trickled, residue from the recent shower. The temperature had dropped considerably while they were searching for Jamison and the conditions combined with the bellowing challenge only served to heighten her dread.

Weak light issued from the inside of a cave, telling her that they had arrived and served to outline the creature before her. The beast's fur had been darkened by rain and she could detect the foul, musky odor of gore and decay. The head appeared to be round with a full mane ringing his neck and shoulders and the sight of it filled her with fear.

Then she saw Jamison and a sense of déjà vu hit her so strongly that she almost doubled forward. She had seen this same sequence before, but watching it in real life or in her dreams wouldn't change the outcome.

Jamison wore jeans and a ragged white button-down shirt that was splattered with blood. She squatted near the entrance to the hollow and appeared to be sifting through a pile of torn,

bloodstained clothing, searching for something Lee couldn't fathom. She tried to cry out, to warn her, but the sound caught in the back of her throat. Then she realized that the mangled pile Jamison hurriedly searched was what was left of Aaron Dalton.

What the hell is she doing?

Finally, she found her voice and screamed out, urging Jamison to run. The killer was closing in, its mouth gaping in a parody of a maniacal grin, teeth razor sharp and forked tongue lolling to the side like some kind of crazed serpent. It rushed forward, muscles straining to close the gap before its prey could disappear.

Not considering the consequences, Lee hurried to get there before the creature could attack, to somehow save Jamison from this hellish freak of nature. Her lungs burned, breath burst from her chest as she strained against her own physical limitations.

Then she was different, more than she was before. Lee heard her bones shift wetly, felt the elongation of her spine and the rending of cloth. She expected pain, but felt only the driving need to defend what was hers. Claws tore into the ground as she propelled herself along on four amazingly strong legs. Her clothing fell away, ripped into shreds from the force of conversion.

The forest burst upon her like a new reality, the tastes and smells and sounds more intense than anything she could ever remember. Lee felt the heartbeat of the raccoon hovering in the trees overhead. She tasted the muskiness of the deer that had traveled the path scant hours before and experienced a freedom of which she had never conceived. The sensations would have been exhilarating if she weren't so intent on death.

She leaped for the creature, trying to get to it before it could harm Jamison. A tremendous roar of challenge burst from her throat as her powerful haunches gathered, preparing for the fatal leap onto the monster's back. He turned at the last moment and swiped at her with a heavy paw. Razor-like claws came away stained red and Lee screamed with the pain, the sound twisted in vocal chords that were no longer human.

Four parallel grooves had been carved into her shoulder, but the beast had missed anything vital. Jamison started to shift, to come to her aid, but the monster moved faster. He lashed out again and her body careened through the air, impacting solidly with a one hundred year old pine. Jamison hit the ground, her head falling to the side, and the sight of her blood filled Lee with a maniacal kind of wrath. Reason left her and primal savagery was pushed to the fore.

Chapter Thirty-Three

DAZED, HER VISION blurring, Jamison watched the white jaguar as it pounced toward the monster. For a second she wondered if she imagined the beautiful creature, like a human fancying a guardian angel had miraculously shown up to defend her. Pure alabaster was broken up by uniformed black rosettes and she knew without question it was Lee. She would recognize her anywhere and in any form.

Jamison saw Lee engage with the beast and even with the ringing in her ears heard the howl of pain and outrage. Crimson stained the pearly jaguar's pristine coat, wounds tearing deep into Lee's flesh and Jamison's heart. She shook her head to clear the mist and struggled to get up. Why the hell had she tried for Dalton's gun anyway?

Because I'm not strong enough to take this freak on by myself.

But she wasn't on her own anymore and Lee had actually transformed to save her. Just the idea that Lee was a shifter thrilled her beyond words, but she didn't have time to think about that right now. Jamison would focus on that miracle later.

Before the creature could strike again a small missile from high overhead hit him on the snout. A cat's nose was an extremely sensitive part of the anatomy and Bruce snarled in annoyance as more objects hurtled from the treetops. The miniature assault gave Jamison the time she needed to shake off her disorientation.

With a superhuman effort of will she launched herself from the saturated loam, morphing in mid-flight. She struck from one side while Lee attacked simultaneously from the other. Jamison heard the sounds of others converging on their location; human shouts and jaguar coughs and snarls. The hunters had arrived but this fight belonged to her and Lee. A blur of midnight and snow danced in the dark forest, rushing forward and hastening back. Time and again they tore at Bruce, leaving damage in their wake, but they didn't come away unscathed. Searing pain lashed through Jamison when he ripped through her poorly healed gash. They were taking too many injuries and if they didn't end this soon, Bruce might win.

Jamison backed up a pace to take a deep breath, grateful to see Lee do the same. It would give the predator time to regroup, but they needed to take a breath and Jamison needed to communicate, to try to implement a plan even if it was hastily thrown together.

Lee, together. Go high. I'll go low.

The ivory feline grunted back, as much confirmation as Jamison could reasonably expect. Then they struck, such a blur of movement that Bruce didn't have time to react. Lee's fierce jaws clamped onto his neck, crushing down with the full two thousand pounds of force unique to the jaguar.

Jamison had rolled underneath the mammoth beast. The position rendered her vulnerable to attack, but left Bruce open to her own assault. He choked as Lee bore down on muscles and major arteries, seeming oblivious as Jamison raised her back legs and tore into the soft underbelly with both hind legs. Claws dug deep as she ripped through hide that should have been tender, but was armored like an armadillo. It gave way reluctantly and Bruce surrendered with a

whimper because Lee's grip prevented sound from escaping. At the last minute Jamison sprang away from his falling weight.

Silence reigned in the forest and then Lee shook Bruce one final time before moving away. She took a deep breath and surprised Jamison yet again by issuing an earsplitting victory roar. Then she shook her head and glared around at the others standing nearby. They were strangers to her and she was still in full battle mode. Both were covered in bloody wounds and their flanks heaved with the effort to catch their breath, but Jamison was coherent enough to feel Lee's need.

A few of the Panthera carried industrial strength flashlights, lighting up the area all around. She shifted quickly back to her human form and approached Lee on her hands and knees. Lee's titanic head swiveled in her direction and a low growl emerged, but it was in acknowledgment and not reticence.

Darlene cut into the silence; her worry for her child outweighed the tense situation. "Jami, honey, are you all right?"

"Fine, Mom. Just give me a second." Jamison's voice was weak from exhaustion and all she wanted was to lie down and sleep, or eat a huge meal and then lie down and sleep. But she had been a Panthera all her life and was accustomed to the change and the toll it took on her body. Already, Lee's head nodded on her mighty neck. She craved rest, but the blood lust was still full upon her. There would be few she would allow near her.

"It's over, Lee. We're safe and we did it. He's gone."

Jamison reached out carefully, hesitating a few inches away before eclipsing the remaining distance. Her fingers sank into soft thick fur and she moved until their eyes met. Pale blue reflected back at her, holding Lee's intelligence and compassionate nature in their depths. They also carried confusion and wariness. She turned to gaze at the hunting teams surrounding them and took a step back, ready to bolt.

"Shh, it's okay. They're my friends, my family, and we're injured. Let them help us, Lee."

She had the jaguar's regard and continued talking softly, reassuring Lee that they were safe and among others of their kind.

Eventually, Lee's body began to relax and the suspicion in the eggshell blue eyes faded. Jamison sat on the ground, heedless of her nudity that was so common among the feline-based culture or the twigs that dug into sensitive skin. Gradually, she encouraged the gore splattered cat to lie down and rest her head across Jamison's thighs.

"You have to shift back, my love." Her eyes were getting heavy and her stomach growled in protest. "The public can't see them taking a jaguar out of the forest and the hospital would have a hard time treating you. You'd probably cause a panic."

She noticed that some of the hunters in skin form carried backpacks. They would be loaded with supplies in case of emergencies and Jamison could think of a good use for them, but she needed someone Lee wouldn't be threatened by.

"Dinah, can you bring a blanket? She won't be comfortable being naked around all these people."

The rustling of gear carried to her sensitive ears and then her sister approached from the side. Dinah was careful to stay completely in Lee's field of vision and not move too quickly.

"Hey, Lee. Welcome to the family." She gently laid a utilitarian green horse blanket over Lee and then backed away.

Jamison wasn't thrilled to hear Dinah's familiarity, worried it would cause a negative reaction, but she needn't have worried. Lee breathed easier, her battered body sinking into the

ground as it rippled and shimmered. Scant seconds later Jamison looked down on her familiar human features.

Lee wearily opened her eyes and looked up.

"Hi. You are one beautiful cat, you know that? A snow jaguar, who would have thought?" She stroked pale blonde hair back from the cool forehead.

Lee swallowed with some difficulty. "Is that really so rare?"

Jamison chuckled, relieved she could be curious about such mundane things considering her injuries. It was a good sign. "More than you know."

"You okay?"

"Fine. You saved my life."

Darlene ruined the tenderness of the moment by stepping forward and taking command. "Dinah and Travis please take a few others and get our girls to the hospital."

She knelt down and touched Jamison's face very gently. "I'm so sorry I didn't believe you. I feel like this is all my fault."

Jamison shook her head. She was angry that her mom hadn't listened to her, but now wasn't the time. "You didn't do this. Dalton and that monster did."

"Thank you. I'm glad you're all right." Darlene kissed her forehead and then looked into her eyes.

"Thanks to Lee."

The *Caber* winced and then smiled self-deprecatingly, allowing the slight insult. She rested her hand over Jamison's where it rested on Lee's shoulder. She appeared to be asleep. "She is special." Then she looked overhead where the raccoon still hung in the trees. "And so is her icon."

Jamison smiled up at the brave little animal. "You can come down now, Benny."

"Benny?"

"Yeah. Lee named him."

But Benny stayed in the trees. Apparently traipsing around with the *Kadin* and her mate was fine, but so many jungle cats milling around in such close quarters was more than his sensitive nerves could bear. Jamison thought he showed a tremendous amount of intelligence.

Travis bent down and easily lifted Lee from Jamison's arms, blanket and all. He treated her with reverence, like she was a precious object that would shatter at the slightest jolt. Jamison lost sight of the pair when someone dropped a blanket around her shoulders. She groaned as she stood, swaying precariously. Old Hal Walker caught her off guard by sweeping her off her feet.

"I may have a bum foot," he replied to her incredulous look, "but I can still haul you around like a sack of flour."

"Thanks for that flattering image." Jamison smiled and wrapped her arms around the older Panthera's strong shoulders. She stifled a yawn and her stomach growled, prompting her to send a significant look to her mother.

"Yes I know. You're hungry. Fortunately, I have influence at the hospital."

"You should since you're the chief surgeon," Jamison said.

Darlene ignored her. "Don't worry. I'll be there soon and make sure you both get something to eat. You'll need a lot of calories to replace what you've lost. First, I'm going to see that all evidence of this is removed and get Doctor Paul to conduct an autopsy on him. Maybe she can figure out what he used to be."

"A lion changer," Jamison answered slowly, exhaustion beginning to take its toll. "You'll need to contact the Felidae."

Darlene's face froze. "I see you haven't been telling me everything."

"My investigation, remember?"

"You are so stubborn..." Darlene clamped her jaws together and her nostrils flared as she took a deep breath. "Fine. You're right, but I'll expect you to tell me everything later, and I do mean everything."

Darlene was probably already thinking about how best to approach the pride leader, but Jamison's head was nodding. She was grateful her part of all this was concluded. The rest was up to the Council of Elders and she wasn't one of those. Yet.

Chapter Thirty-Four

LEE AWAKENED LANGUIDLY, stretching without opening her eyes. She felt like she'd slept for ages. A twinge in her right shoulder caused her breath to hitch and she finally looked around. Institution white greeted her and she groaned in automatic response to being in a hospital.

"Are you okay?"

She smiled at seeing Jamison in another bed a few feet away. The room was semi-private, leaving them a measure of solitude. But if Jamison was here too that meant.... "I guess it wasn't a dream. I really did change into a jaguar? We really fought?"

"You were magnificent."

The simple words confirmed what to Lee were incredulous events. What she had learned in the last month told her she had the potential to become a jungle cat, but she had never been an aggressive person. How could she kill so readily, wantonly take another's life regardless what he'd done? She could still feel the muscles and sinew give way under her bite, taste the blood and rank meat, hear the gasps of pain and fear.

"Lee?"

She blinked and focused on the woman beside her. Jamison was the answer. Lee would never be proud of her actions, but she had no regrets either. Jami was so much more than just her lover. Their connection went deeper than the physical, bordering on mystical. Lee would take on a hundred monsters like Bruce to protect her.

"I'm all right, really. It's just a lot to take in."

"Anything I can do?" The sadness and remorse in her green eyes tore at Lee's heart.

"You already have."

She offered a loving smile, but the moment was interrupted by a couple of quick taps on the door. It opened almost immediately and closed behind her as Darlene walked in like she owned the place. In a way, Lee supposed she did since she wore a white lab coat and a stethoscope around her neck.

"Good morning, ladies. How are you feeling?" Darlene smiled openly, glancing between the two.

"Starving," Jamison said. "Where's the feast you promised me last night?"

A dark eyebrow went up and Lee realized where Jami had picked up the gesture. "I didn't forget. Millie will be here in a few minutes with a full spread. You needed rest more than anything so I decided to wait. She's one of us and knows how important refueling is," Darlene finished, communicating the last bit to Lee by way of explanation.

"You're a doctor, too?" Lee asked, feeling a little slow catching up.

Darlene walked over to her bed and removed a clipboard from the hook on the footboard. She answered while scribbling something down. "Doctor, elder...most of the Panthera around here fill dual roles. Like Jamison; she's a park ranger by day and a super sleuth at night."

Lee chuckled, appreciating Darlene's sense of humor. She didn't really know her very well and they hadn't met under the best circumstances, but Darlene had an easy manner Lee found soothing.

"After you finish eating I'll process the paperwork so you can get out of here."

"Finally," Jamison grouched.

"So soon?" Lee felt the need to clarify when two sets of eyes swiveled in her direction. "I'm just a little surprised. We were pretty torn up last night."

Darlene turned to Jamison. "You've been neglecting her education."

"I'll take care of it."

"You better," Darlene sparred good naturedly with her daughter before she answered Lee's question. "One of the many perks to being a Panthera is that we heal very quickly. Your shoulder wound was the worst and it might bother you for a day or so, but if you check you'll find it's almost healed."

Startled, Lee shoved aside the upper portion of the hospital wear and discovered that Doctor Kessler was right. All that remained were four matching grooves that looked like scar tissue that had been there for years. The lines were thin and white and there was little discomfort. She'd heard about Panthera healing abilities from Jamison at the hotel, but had almost forgotten.

"That's handy."

Jamison snorted. "You have no idea."

The door opened again and a redhead peeked around the door, Lee assumed to make sure everyone was decent and awake.

"Doctor Paul," Darlene greeted. "Come to pay your respects?"

Laura smiled and entered the room, then moved over to Jamison's side and clasped her hand. Lee felt something dangerous poking at her for the other woman's temerity. "Something like that. I wanted to make sure you were both okay. The floor nurse told me you were in here too, *Caber*, so I decided to kill two birds with one stone."

What's a Caber, Lee wondered. Jamison really did need to educate her on so much.

"You found something," Darlene said, more a statement than a query.

"Nothing on the surface that would explain what happened to him, so I had to have one of our labs take a look. Our killer suffered from a dormant gene that activated for whatever reason and turned him into this thing."

"That's it?" Lee demanded. "He mutated into a monster from something that was in his DNA? If that's true what would stop it from happening to any of us, all of us?"

"We all have dormant genes in our make-up," Laura answered patiently. "DNA is so complex that it took years to decipher a single strand. The Panthera genome is even more complicated and it's comprised from our entire history as a species, but no it can't happen to just anyone. This man--"

"Bruce," Lee interjected.

"Bruce then...he was born with this condition. That it didn't manifest until so late in a life just shows how strong-willed he was as an individual."

"All right, I'll buy that," Lee said, "but how do you know that it was something dormant if he was born with it?"

Jamison stepped in to back her up. "She's got a point. Panthera branched off from humans very early on in our evolution and we retained the ability to change when they didn't. Isn't that another form of mutation?"

"Evolution is about mutation," Darlene said.

"You're all starting to sound like Nash Daylong," Lee said starting to feel her temples throb. She missed the sudden interest her words caused as she closed her eyes briefly, but the silence in the room informed her that something was amiss. She looked up to see everyone watching her. "What?"

Jamison cleared her throat. "Who did you say?"

"Nash Daylong. You must know who he is; kind of crazy and lives down one of the side streets on the same block as Andy's Café?"

"Lee, um..." Jamison hesitated and then finally said, "Mom, I don't really remember. How long ago was it?"

Darlene responded gently, but her attention was directed to Lee. "Nash passed away almost twenty years ago, dear."

"That can't be right! I just spoke with him a few days ago, maybe a week."

Doctor Kessler walked over and sat on the edge of her bed. She took Lee's hand between her own. "He was a mystic here his whole life and had a way of seeing things."

"Like Aunt Chris?"

"No, Chris saw future events and allowed people to make alternate choices if needed. She guided the Panthera and she was also a natural healer. Nash could see into a person's heart, tell if they were lying or dangerous. He did work a lot with Chris and I understand they were great friends."

"How could this be?" Lee asked, more to herself than the others. "He invited me into his house and we talked. Oh what, now?" Darlene's expression told her there was more.

"Honey, his house was torn down six months ago. It was so old and falling down that the city had it removed."

Lee looked across to Jamison for support and read confirmation in her eyes. "How could I imagine some guy I've never even met? I'm not crazy."

"Of course not," Jamison said. "Lee, you're starting to come into your abilities and the truth is that no one ever understood the extent of Chris' powers. Maybe you can actually speak with people who've...moved on."

"Great. I see dead people."

Darlene patted her hand and said, "Don't worry. You'll figure it out and we'll all be here to help."

"How can you be so nice to me?" Lee asked. "We never even met before last night."

Darlene grinned. "You love my daughter and nothing says it more strongly than saving her life. How could I not accept you?"

Lee's eyes shifted to Laura who caught the intent stare and the low rumble of warning. Reluctantly, she let go of Jamison's hand. "Yes, well. Congratulations," Laura said. "I guess it's time I should be going."

The door opened once more and Lee was starting to think the space was getting a little crowded. A nurse dressed in SpongeBob SquarePants scrubs entered, pushing a laden silver cart. The smell of food hit her nostrils and Lee unexpectedly realized how hungry she was.

"About time, Millie," Jamison said and sat up ready to eat.

Millie barely looked old enough to drive and Lee wondered if she wore braces, but it wasn't important enough to pursue with all of her focus on food. Her mouth salivated at an alarming rate and she had to concentrate on not drooling while the young nurse brought her tray, and Darlene pulled her bedside table into position. Then Darlene stood up and moved toward the door.

"Enjoy your breakfast. I know you will, Jami."

She received a grunt in response, but Jamison winked at Lee before tucking into her meal. They were alone again and Lee lifted the lid to find a T-bone steak, mashed potatoes with gravy and a small salad.

"This isn't like any hospital food I've ever had."

Jamison grinned at her around a mouthful of steak. "Now you have the answer to your question."

"What question?"

"Why there are so many steakhouses in Harmon."

Lee smiled back and began to eat. She could never have imagined she would find her soul mate and be granted strange and unusual powers when she moved here, but she couldn't have been happier. Life certainly took some unexpected turns.

Epilogue

"SO WHAT DO you think?" Lee asked, leaning back on the sofa in the circle of Jamison's arms.

A fire roared in the hearth and Cleo lay on the rug directly in front. Benny had even been in once or twice, but she didn't know where the furry little beast had gone. Lee looked up and kissed Jamison on the jaw. Jamison smiled down at her and hugged her more closely.

"I think a solstice party is a great idea. You'll be keeping up your aunt's tradition and it'll give you a chance to meet the other Panthera in town."

Lee smiled. "I think it would be the perfect opportunity for Dinah and Andy to announce their engagement, too."

Jamison kissed her forehead. "You're so thoughtful. I'll mention it to them and see what they say."

"You could invite Brenda," she said. "I haven't met her yet."

"Are you sure? She's a human and I'm not sure what the shifters would think of having her around even if she is a park ranger."

"She's got to meet them sometime. You just promoted her but the real question is, are you ever going to tell her about us?"

"I'm not sure." Jamison grinned. "She'd be pretty freaked to find out that we can turn into big bad felines, but I think she would handle it pretty well. In any case, it's not anything we need to rush into. There are enough people who know our secret. Maybe I'll invite her to next year's party. Mom called, by the way."

"Really?"

Jamison nodded. "I couldn't shut her up about you. She thinks you're perfect. I almost asked her if she wanted to adopt you."

Lee swatted her on the leg and Jami jumped a bit.

"They found the money Dalton took from Xander and returned it to the Pride. Frank Chiesel was here arranging for his son's body to be transferred back to Newton Falls and she said he was

relieved they found it. It seems Xander has a lot to answer for since he took the cash from their community fund without asking."

"Ouch. I hope he doesn't get into too much trouble. He really was just trying to help his brother and he didn't know Bruce was the killer or what Dalton had planned for us."

"That's true. Now do you mind if we stop talking about them? In fact, how about we don't talk at all?"

"What did you have in mind?" Lee asked teasingly, looking up into Jamison's eyes.

"I'll think of something."

Jamison pushed her back onto the sofa and Lee forgot all about talking for a very long time.

"THIS IS IT, Thelma," the pride's physician said, standing between the lion changer's thighs. Her lower body was covered with a sheet that was covered in blood. Thelma's blonde hair was so wet from perspiration that it looked brown and her face was deeply flushed. This hadn't been an easy birth and he worried that she might not survive. Her family had suffered so much with the death of her husband that he vowed to do everything in his power to keep the mother and child alive.

"One last time, push!"

Thelma clenched her teeth and bore down, grasping the hands of the attending nurse and her father-in-law. At the end of the contraction she screamed and the baby entered the world in a great gush of blood. Doctor Nolen gently grasped the babe and extracted him, snipped the umbilical cord and slapped the tiny bottom. A lusty cry issued from healthy lungs and he handed the child off to the nurse who stood by with a blanket.

"You have a son, congratulations."

Another nurse finished wiping the sweat from Thelma's brow with a cool, damp rag and the mother asked to see her baby. In minutes the child was returned to her. His body had been wiped clean and she happily received him into her arms. Then she frowned and Bruce's father gasped before he looked up to meet the doctor's eyes.

"What? What's wrong?" The child had seemed healthy enough and he couldn't imagine what the problem might be.

Nolen stepped over to the bed, intending to perform a quick examination of the infant when he froze in his tracks and stared down in astonishment. The newborn was too young to be able to see, but the eyes were a uniform plane of silver, lacking pupil or iris and appeared to give off their own inner glow.

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