



Dark Hunger

By Christine Feehan

From Hot Blooded Anthology

This story is dedicated to Diane Trudeau and all the ladies at the RBL board.

May you always know how to live life to the fullest!

Chapter 1

"You would have to pick the most humid night of the year," Juliette Sangria whispered to her sister. She wiped sweat from her forehead and crouched lower in the shrubbery to keep from being seen.

A spotlight swept the area of thick vegetation where the two girls were hidden, but it couldn't penetrate the lush shrubbery and multitude of vines and creepers hanging from the trees. Jasmine waited for the light to pass before shrugging. "I saw them bring in three animals tonight. We have to get them out before they hurt them or perform experiments on them. You know that's what this place is all about."

Juliette swore under her breath and melted back into the shadows as the spotlight slid by them in a long sweep. She was certain the light was more for the superstitious guards, always afraid of the encroaching jungle. She knew from experience the jungle never slept and always tried to regain what man took away.

The building was concrete and mortar, fairly new, but already covered with moss and fungi, a dark, moldy green as the jungle crept back. Creeper vines climbed the walls and wound around the top of the building as if seeking a way in. There were no windows, and Juliette could imagine how hot it was inside for the animals, even with the thick walls. Humidity was always high here, and the research center had been built in the most unlikely of places. She knew it was built in this remote location simply to hide the fact that animals on the endangered species list were being used for illegal research.

"Jazz, we'll only have six minutes to get as many animals out as possible. Some of them will be highly agitated. If any are beyond our help, you have to leave them. Is that understood?" She knew her sister's affinity for wildlife. "These people play for keeps. I think they'd kill us, Jazz. Promise me, no matter what, you'll get out in six minutes and head for home and stay there. I'll hang back and make sure they don't recapture any of the animals."

"You'll lay a false trail into the jungle to keep them off of me," Jasmine said.

"That too. We both know I can lose them. Yes or no, Jazz, do you give me your word? We aren't going in otherwise." Juliette would take her younger sister home and come back another night if she didn't promise. She detested that these men could come into her jungle and capture and torture animals and get away with it, but she wasn't losing her sister over it.

"Six minutes," Jasmine confirmed and set the alarm on her watch.

"Then let's do it. I'll take out the guard at the main entrance and you cut into the security system."

Jasmine frowned as she nodded her acceptance of the plan. Juliette always made it sound so easy. Distracting and taking out the guard was always dangerous. She moved into a better position, covering her sister and getting closer to the main box where the wires were stored. Few people paid attention to that little box, but Juliette and Jasmine knew it contained the highway for the main alarms. At night, only the guards were in attendance and they were always nervous and highly superstitious. They seemed as afraid of what was out in the dark interior of the jungle as they were afraid of what was inside the building they guarded.

Juliette unbuttoned her blouse to just below her breasts so that the thin material gaped open, revealing the generous swell of soft, inviting skin. She pulled a thick banana from her pack and slipped around the building, slowly unpeeling the fruit as she went. As she emerged from the thick shrubbery, she paused deliberately in the sliver of moonlight, bringing the banana to her mouth and running her tongue over the tip of it. The light shone through the thin fabric of her blouse, caressing her rounded breasts so that her dark nipples thrust invitingly against the fabric.

The guard's attention was immediately riveted to her breasts. He licked his lips and stared. Juliette smiled at him around the banana. "I had no idea this building was here. I'm camping with a small party of friends just beyond the stream." She used tentative Spanish as if she didn't know the local dialect. Juliette turned slightly, giving him a more intriguing view of her body, and pointed back into the darkened vegetation. She turned back to him, allowing her gaze to sweep him up and down, to linger for just a moment on the sudden bulge growing in his trousers. "Oh, my, I certainly didn't expect such a big, strong man as you."

He couldn't talk, staring at her mouth as she sucked on the fruit, her lips sliding up and down suggestively. Juliette pulled the banana from her mouth, gaining ground, her hips swaying, her smile flirtatious. "Are you hungry? I'll share." She held out the banana and seemed to notice her blouse gaping open for the first time. "Oh, I'm sorry, it was so steamy in the jungle, I can hardly stand having clothes on. Doesn't the heat bother you? It makes me feel... soooo hot." One hand went to her blouse as if to close it, but her fingers trailed over the ripe swell of her breast.

The guard swallowed hard, staring at her. She held the banana to his mouth. "Are all the men in the jungle as handsome as you?"

He took a bite of the offered fruit, he couldn't help himself. He was smiling down at her, still staring at her breasts when she used the pressure syringe on him, tranquilizing him. He was heavy, but Juliette was strong, and she dragged him into the cover of the bushes, sending up a small prayer that no predatory animal would find him defenseless, propped up against a broad tree trunk. She hastily prepared the scene while Jasmine penetrated the alarm system. From her pack, Juliette spilled a small amount of liquor on the guard's

clothes, settled the flask in his hand and removed the bullets from his gun, flinging them into the dense undergrowth.

Juliette and Jasmine stayed in the shadows, avoiding the open where a camera might pick them up as they hurried through the large building. The first few rooms appeared to be empty offices, but just beyond them, they could hear the uneasy sounds of animals in distress. The laboratories were fairly large, each holding several cages. They separated, glancing quickly at their watches and blowing a kiss for luck as they took separate sides of the huge building in the hopes of freeing as many animals as possible.

Both had the ability to calm and control even the largest of cats. It was more difficult when the animals had been teased and abused or tortured, but both women were certain of their talents and they moved fast and efficiently, their teamwork well practiced.

Juliette kept an eye on the time as she opened cages and directed animals. The last laboratory held the biggest animals. A sun bear, a jaguar, and a sloth. She cursed under her breath as she saw that the sloth was beyond all help. The sun bear had several injuries from someone poking it with a sharp instrument, but the jaguar was still in good shape, one of the newest animals the laboratory had acquired. She spoke softly, soothing the pacing animal, growling once low in her throat when it leapt at the cage walls in agitation. It took a bit longer to manage the lock and herd him out of the room down toward the entrance, using her telepathic link to guide him. She took three steps after the cat when she felt a tremendous draw toward her left. To her dismay there was another door.

The door was heavy, a thick, soundproof vault with several bars and locks. Juliette glanced at her watch a second time. She should be running to get out, but something outside herself demanded she investigate. Praying Jasmine kept her promise to depart and head home immediately, Juliette set to work on the door.

Riordan lay on the cement floor in a pool of blood, dispassionately watching as it seeped toward the built-in drain. His blood looked like a thin, pale gray trail of liquid pooling in an ever-widening puddle. It was unthinkable that he had been trapped like this, that one of his kind could be shamed and dying at the hands of his enemies. He was an immortal, a Carpathian male, no fledgling, but a man of honor and skill. He lay in a pitiful heap, unable to gather the strength needed to move. Unable to summon help from his own kind.

His brothers would be seeking him now, wondering why his mind was closed to them. He dared not draw another into the trap as he had been drawn. He would not be bait to ensnare more of his kind. The enemy had found a way to poison the blood of their people, to immobilize them long enough to drain their blood and keep them weak. He had thought he was skilled enough to push the poison from his body. In the past he had done so on numerous occasions, but the new poison held him helpless and weak and paralyzed against the continual torture.

There was no way to transmit the news to his prince, no way to warn of this new, even more lethal drug their enemies had devised. Riordan struggled into a sitting position until he lay, propped against the wall he was chained to, examining the compounds racing through his system. They had used some sort of electrical charge to stimulate the cell deterioration in his blood. He allowed his breath to escape in a long, slow hiss of deadly promise. Of deadly despair.

He would not die easily—his body would continually regenerate—but without the necessary blood, without the healing earth, it would happen, slowly and painfully. It was the last death he had ever envisioned for himself.

The drug was crawling through his body, a chemical monster nearly as lethal as the dark demon lurking deep within him. Before he died, he intended to transmit as much information on the poisonous compound as he could to his brothers. He would issue a warning, but he would not do so until his death was imminent. He would not betray his kin. He would not be used as bait to draw in the others. His prince needed to know that a master vampire was using the humans, playing puppet master. Riordan had to find a way to escape, there was no other option. He could not allow his life to end until he carried the vital information of this treachery to his people. He could not let pain and despair, his ever-present companions, weaken his resolve.

Riordan closed his eyes and crawled deep into his mind. Almost at once he heard the soft click of the lock at the heavy metal door. Fearing his immense power, his captors never came to him at night. He did a cursory scanning to touch the mind of the human entering the laboratory, his prison, but to his shock, he could not read the thoughts. He had the impression of a human female.

He sat very still, his mind working at a furious rate. Had his captors managed to find a way to shield their thoughts? They were protected most of the time by his own weakness. During the daylight hours he was helpless and vulnerable, but at night they had been cunning enough to stay away. Although they had drained his blood and his strength, he was mentally strong enough to command one of them should they venture near at night. This was his chance to escape or seek a way to end his life before they could use him against his own species.

He studied the mind of the single person entering his prison. She was a young female. He kept his eyes closed, conserving his strength, waiting for that one moment he knew would come. He would reach past the strange barriers in her mind, rip past each strange compartment until he had total control. He would force the human female to do his bidding. Escape or death, whichever it took to win this battle. He could smell her now, a clean, fresh fragrance suggesting the outdoors, the rain forest after a cleansing downpour. A hint of exotic flowers, and something else—something wild. Something not quite human. Riordan felt his muscles tense at the unfamiliar odor, a strange quickening, a heat spreading throughout his body, but he held himself under control.

Nothing could prevent his attack. It was the first mistake any of them had made, and he

would use it, capitalize on it. The demon in him was struggling to break free, listening to the steady heartbeat, the ebb and flow of blood in her veins. Hunger gnawed at him endlessly, mindlessly, brutally. He waited, unmoving, listening to the soft padding of her steps. There was only a whisper of sound, yet he smelled her excitement, the edge of fear and adrenaline. She was moving closer.

All at once the soft footfall ceased, her breath exploding out of her in a soft hiss of shock. "Oh no!" There was a rush of movement toward him, the rustle of clothes. Riordan clearly heard the shocked horror in her voice. She had not been expecting him.

Juliette couldn't believe the terrible sight, the man pale beyond imagining, his blood draining away on the floor. The heavy chains wrapped around his chest seemed burned into his very flesh. His hands were manacled, and blood seeped from a multitude of wounds. She couldn't believe he could suffer so much and still live. She knelt beside him and felt for his pulse.

Riordan opened his eyes to stare into her face as she squatted beside him, heedless of the blood smearing her clothing as she leaned in close. Her fingers settled gently against his neck. Her large, strangely turquoise eyes filled with compassion. "Who did this to you?" Even as she whispered the question, she was pulling out a small instrument from a tool belt hooked around her waist to work at the lock on the heavy cuffs. She carefully avoided looking at the cameras she knew were locked on him.

"We don't have too long. Can you walk? They'll send security after us and we'll have to run." He was a big man and Juliette didn't think she had a prayer of packing him out in a fireman's carry. She would try it though. She had come to this place thinking it was a research lab for exotic jungle cats. She had never expected to find a half-dead, obviously tortured man imprisoned within the walls. She had never seen so much blood, such a ravaged face, such intense eyes. The cuff dropped off of his left hand, and she stretched around him to work at the second one.

Her hair fell across her face in a silky fall of blue-black strands. Faintly shocked that he could see the individual colors, Riordan could only stare at her hair. For one moment he couldn't think, couldn't even breathe, drag air into his lungs. It was impossible, yet the hand he raised to the fall of black hair was smeared red with blood. Red, not a muddy gray. His fingers brushed her hair back over her shoulder with exquisite gentleness, an instinct bred into his bones, exposing the line of her neck to him. She didn't seem to notice, working meticulously on the lock of the thick steel cuff. Her skin was soft and inviting. Like satin. He bent his head forward, slowly, steadily, the fangs lengthening, the demon roaring, his body clenching. His breath was warm against her skin. His teeth almost touched her pulse, that vulnerable pinpoint beckoning seductively.

Her blouse gaped open, revealing exquisite breasts, lush and full and soft enough to pillow his head. He wanted to slip his hand inside her shirt and hold warm flesh as he bent to her neck.

She made a sound, frowning, still absorbed in her work. Riordan inhaled, taking the scent of her deep into his body. He didn't have control of her mind, and he was too weak to waste what was left of his strength on working out the intricate puzzle. The moment the heavy steel dropped from his wrist, he whipped up his arms, locking her body to his as his teeth sank deep into her neck.

White-hot pain lashed through Juliette's body, danced like a whip of lightning through her bloodstream, heating her body so that every nerve ending was alive and pulsing with fire. The pain gave way to a dark, erotic, slumberous ecstasy she was helpless to resist. Juliette was certain she struggled, but he was like iron, her softer body battering itself against his hard one, and he didn't seem to notice. She felt the strength growing in him, spreading through him, even as her own strength seemed to slide away from her. There was a part of her that seemed to be separate, standing apart, watching and feeling in a kind of horror. There was fire in her blood, moving through her body, muscles clenching, tightening, going boneless, pliant in his ironlike grip.

Riordan glanced up at the camera trained on him, his mouth twisting in a humorless smile, flashing his white teeth. With his eyes staring straight at the lens, he lowered his head and stroked a caress across the pinpricks on her neck with his tongue. That look would tell them everything. He knew each of them, knew their scent; he knew his enemies. Their stench was in his very lungs, and he was a hunter. He had gone from prey to predator with one small infusion of blood. It wasn't enough to completely heal him, but it was enough to allow his escape.

He lifted the woman's limp body easily to his shoulder, moving with a graceful show of strength. He had every intention of drawing his enemies to him and away from his family. But first he would destroy everything they had built out in the jungle. They hid their laboratory away from prying eyes. They hid their hideous torture chamber deep within the jungle, thinking they were far from the law, far from justice, but he would show them who owned this part of the world, who had owned it for a long, long time.

The woman erupted into a wild struggle, attempting to squirm away from him.

Riordan tightened his hold on her. "Stop it," he ordered. "You have no way to escape. It is impossible. Lie still." His voice was a soft, menacing command.

Juliette lay quietly, feeling the enormous strength in his arms. She fought down her panic, trying desperately to think. Her body had become lead. It was an effort to lift her arm, make a fist, pound on his back. She was dizzy and sick. His emotions were swamping her, a wild swirling of dark danger beating at her. She had never come close to feeling such overwhelming emotions. They welled up like a volcano, explosive, violent, very intense. She sensed something wild and untamed, a predator without equal. Her neck throbbed and burned and she wondered what manner of demon she had unleashed.

She actually felt the strength gathering in him. *Felt* it. A seething cauldron of enormous power. It built in him and seemed to spill out of him, out of his pores, bursting from his

masculine body so that the building frame shook and creaked ominously, until the very air was so filled, the walls actually bulged outward in an attempt to contain such power. Juliette clutched at the tattered remains of his shirt, her fist bunching the material in her palm, needing something, anything to hang on to.

"My sister might be in here." She managed to whisper the words, terrified Jasmine would be caught in the massive destruction of cement and mortar.

"No one is in the building but us," he assured. He moved then, his speed so incredible everything around her blurred. Juliette squeezed her eyes shut tightly to prevent the dizziness from overcoming her. Her stomach lurched and she clung grimly. She could feel the powerful muscles bunching beneath her, the rush of air over her body. She could have sworn at one point they left the ground, moving through space so quickly they were flying.

Chapter 2

Fear amounting to terror tore at Juliette. She had no idea what she was dealing with, but he was a powerful predator and from the condition she found him in, his anger was justified. She could feel a controlled rage simmering deep within him. Shockingly, they seemed linked together, she feeling his emotions, he feeling hers. She summoned her courage, her eyes still held tightly shut to keep dizziness at bay, keep from being overwhelmed with fear and the rush of wind in her face as they raced through the chamber of horrors. She needed all of her senses working if she was going to escape. She had to be alert for that one moment, that one chance when he would momentarily be distracted. She tried to gather her strength.

It seemed a monumental task in the face of being upside, her stomach rammed hard against his shoulder. He held her with one arm tightly across her buttocks, easily, casually, as if he barely remembered she was there. Her stomach rebelled and she was weak and light-headed. *But his touch seemed familiar, intimate even.* His fingers were splayed across her bottom, absently caressing the roundness of her muscles even as he was striding quickly through the building. Almost as if his touch remembered her body, knew her intimately in some way. Juliette couldn't focus properly no matter how hard she tried, aware of his fingers more than she would have liked.

The very foundation of the building shook; wrenching apart, the earth beneath them buckled and rippled violently. Sparks began to snap and crackle around them as the wiring popped from the beams, cracking and splintering overhead. Light fixtures swayed precariously. Fissures appeared in the floor, along the wall, great, ominous cracks.

There was a roaring in her ears, loud and insistent. The man locking her to him moved smoothly, fluidly, a certain poetry to his motion, not jarring her badly knotted stomach. *Breathe.* She heard the word as a soft whisper in her mind. Almost a caress, intimate. *Breathe.* As if warm air from his mouth was breathed into her ear. As if his lungs moved for her lungs. Her body still felt leaden, her arms hanging heavily down his back. She tried to concentrate, tried to gather her strength to wait for her moment, but that single word had disturbed her. Changed her. *Breathe.* It whispered through her body, swam in her bloodstream, spread insidiously throughout her body so that her very heart beat the rhythm of his heart. And the word was in her mind, not spoken aloud.

As the building vibrated, he took stairs three and four at a time. He leapt from the crumbling cement wall, a good twenty feet in the air, landing easily on the balls of his feet, still careful not to jar her. Flames were licking at the blocks of concrete, trying to find fuel, greedily looking for something to devour as he took her into the shelter of the jungle.

At once the dark green leaves enfolded them, swallowed them, a haven of rich, lush vegetation. The darkness was nearly impenetrable beneath the heavy canopy of foliage overhead. The fallen trees and thick shrubbery didn't slow him down. He moved as one born and bred in the jungle, silent and deadly, protecting her with his body as he raced through the darkened interior, putting distance between them and the crumbling laboratory. He seemed to know exactly where he was going, when most were disoriented deep within the forest. Before he had run with speed and power, now he began to falter, his legs shaking as if he were suddenly weak. Blood still ran from his wounds and trickled down his body from the many lacerations.

Juliette flexed her fingers, grasping his tattered shirt. She didn't have the energy to cry out a protest, limp and lifeless, hanging like a sack over his shoulder, but she was certain he was half-mad with pain. All at once they were back on the edge of the trees where civilization had hacked the jungle back to build small townships and villages. The jungle, as always, was creeping forward to reclaim what had been taken, providing cover all the way to the very edge of the village.

He stopped near a thick tree trunk, a shadow in the darkness. She felt his stillness, his gathering of information, scenting the wind. Her heart began to pound in anticipation, a loud, terrifying beat. He was hunting prey. Deep within her very soul, she knew he was hunting human prey with her leaden body draped casually over his shoulder. She wanted to struggle, to scream, to warn his victim. No sound emerged; her body refused to obey her. Her heart nearly exploded in her chest, wild and frightened.

Breathe. It came again. A soft command in her mind—gentle, intimate. A caress she felt on her skin, a stroke she felt in her hair. On her bare breast. Air moved through her lungs, through his, and her heart found the steady, natural beat of his.

She heard the padding of footsteps, the murmur of voices carrying in the night. Coming closer. Closer still. Who would be so foolish as to wander near the jungle this late at night? There were many predators in the forest. He moved then, shifting her into his arms, cradling her close to his chest, his black eyes burning deeply into hers for a long moment. She could only stare helplessly, half mesmerized, half paralyzed. Slowly he lowered her feet to the ground, keeping his arm around her to hold her to him. To hold her up. She was dizzy and weak.

His dark examination was the most intimate thing she had ever experienced. The connection between them was growing. His gaze drifted over her body, touched her exposed breasts with the heat of a flame. Juliette couldn't summon the strength to button her blouse so she stood swaying and vulnerable in front of him. As if reading her mind, her captor drew the edges of the material together and slipped the buttons in place. His knuckles brushed against her skin, sending a shiver of awareness down her spine. He bent his dark head toward her, a slow, almost seductive movement. Her heart thundered in her ears as his sculpted mouth came close to hers. A whisper away, no more. Mesmerized, she could only stare at him, waiting, forgetting to breathe. Abruptly, he turned his head toward the small group of houses.

Juliette saw two men moving toward them, walking straight as if on a path, yet they were walking through dense shrubbery. Neither spoke, nor looked right or left. Neither seemed to be aware they were close to the jungle where predators lurked. Juliette tipped her head back. It fell against his chest, too heavy for her to hold up on her own. His arm tightened, locking her even closer to him so that the heat of his body seeped into the cold of hers.

She could only stand there helplessly as the two victims walked closer and closer. There was a stillness in her captor, the coiling of a snake. She felt him gathering his strength, holding it in place while his prey came closer. The two men walked right up to him as if drawn, as if programmed. A shudder ran through her as one tipped his head back, exposing his throat. Her captor bent his dark head in that same, unhurried, almost casual manner, and sank his fangs deep and drank.

Juliette's heart pounded frantically, adrenaline racing through her bloodstream. *They cannot feel. They are not afraid, why should you be afraid for them? I am not hurting them. You always forget to breathe.* There was the merest hint of amusement in his melodic voice, an intimacy that took her breath away.

Her entire body clenched, searing heat touching her in places like the stroke of fingertips. Her breath caught in her throat. He was dangerous, far more than she first thought. His voice was a weapon, seduction a tool. And she was susceptible to his sensual mouth, his burning eyes and his velvet voice.

Juliette forced energy into her body, using her fear, her adrenaline and his momentary distraction while feeding. She attempted to jerk out of his arms, using the sudden surge of built-up terror. His arm remained clamped around her like a steel trap, unmoving, almost as if he didn't feel her resistance.

Riordan allowed the first human male to sit down on the ground, swaying weakly, and he reached for the second one. He needed fresh blood to replace the enormous loss he had suffered through his confinement and torture within the walls of the laboratory. With the infusion of blood, he hoped to heal enough to begin restoring his body to full power. With renewed power and without the constant electrical charges to stimulate the artificial poison he might be able to remove the substance from his system. Carefully, he helped the second human to the ground, retaining possession of the woman by holding her body close to his. He felt her. Every inch, every curve. Her skin was unbelievably soft. He bent his head to her thick mane of flowing hair, inhaling the scent of her. It took a tremendous amount of self-control not to bury his face in the silken strands.

She was very frightened, the fear swamping her despite the fact that he had tried to soothe her. Her brain patterns were different, the most difficult he had ever encountered. He caught her chin firmly in his hand and tipped her head back so her strange eyes were forced to meet his gaze. Her eyes were shaped like a cat's, a deep turquoise in color, and he could tell by her pupils she had excellent night vision. Her lashes were long and the same inky black color as her hair. He stared down into her eyes, a simple hypnotic technique that should have calmed her instantly, but instead he could hear the frantic rhythm of her heart

pick up.

"You rescued me. Thank you," he said softly, gently, compulsion buried in the silvery tones of his voice.

Juliette tried desperately to regain her energy. Her legs were very heavy, her arms still leaden. He was the only thing holding her up. She was dizzy, and every time she stared into his black eyes she felt as if she were falling forward. She blinked rapidly, trying to find a way to regain her ability to think clearly. "What's wrong with me?" Her mouth was dry and her voice sounded far away to her own ears.

"I took too much of your blood," he answered softly, honestly. "It was the only way I could escape from that hellhole. There is no need to fear me, I will replace what was lost." His arms tightened possessively.

Juliette pushed ineffectually at him. "Just go away. I don't want you to replace anything at all."

"I am Riordan, your lifemate. I have searched these long years to find you."

"You are some kind of bloodsucking something or other and I just want you to go away." Juliette nearly sank into the bushes, but he lifted her, preventing her from falling. It disturbed her that he had such strength when he had been so brutally tortured. Blood or no blood, he should have been as weak as a kitten. His chest held long, raw burn marks, almost as if the chains holding him had been made of acid. "You have to take care of these wounds. They'll get infected in the jungle. You can't have any open wounds at all." Why she cared made no sense. She just wanted him to go away. He cradled her as if she were a child hanging limply in his arms, her head lolling back on her neck. She was very aware of her throat, so vulnerable to his sharp teeth.

Riordan stared down into her peculiar eyes, searching her mind for a way to calm her fears. He heard a soft grunting cough coming from the darkened interior not very far from them. She reacted. She tried not to, but there was elation, hastily suppressed in her mind, and her body tensed for the briefest of moments. He felt her response beginning in her mind, he was already that tuned to her and they hadn't shared his blood yet. She took a breath. Before she could make a sound his hand clamped around her throat. Her frightened gaze jumped to his. Riordan shook his head.

You will remain silent. I will kill anything that comes to your aid. Is that understood?

Juliette nodded. She didn't understand the tremendous connection between them. She felt what he felt. She could almost see the black, volcanic thoughts swirling in his mind to match the dark violence churning in his belly. He frightened her in a way that had nothing to do with his teeth and evident abilities. Long ago she had heard the whisper of another race of beings, and she suspected he was of that race. Carpathians. Nearly immortal. Hunters of the vampire, guardians of the many species, yet always alone, always apart. She

knew little about them, only that they were extremely dangerous to her kind.

He had not killed either man he had fed on, even with the black anger stirring in his gut and the terrible need for vengeance riding him hard. She should have feared for her life, but it was something altogether different that frightened her. The way he looked at her was entirely predatory. Entirely sexual. Entirely possessive. And her whole being responded with heat and fire and secret longing and shocked terror.

Riordan allowed his hand to slip from her throat. He bent to place his mouth beside her ear, although when he spoke he used telepathic communication rather than speaking aloud. *I am taking you far from this place. The hunters will know I am weak. I must rid my body of their toxins before I can attend you. Close your eyes if traveling through the air frightens you.*

You frighten me. Leave me here.

He made a sound. Not out loud, but deep in his mind—a snort of derision. His face was an implacable mask, lines of weariness and pain were etched deep. If she could have, Juliette would have touched those small lines with gentle fingers. She wanted to take that look of bleak loneliness from his face forever.

You only fear that you have lost your freedom. You do not fear that I will harm you. You feel my need of you, do not pretend you cannot.

Juliette turned his words over in her mind. He couldn't read her as clearly as he pretended, which was a good thing. He was torn up, a stranger, a demon for all she knew, but something deep and feminine and animalistic responded to him with every fiber of her being.

She watched the earth drop away, the clouds whiten and mist form around them. Below her the canopy looked unbroken and impenetrable. He knew the jungle nearly as well as she knew it. He had a specific goal in mind. She rarely left her part of the forest to explore the deeper more mountainous areas, but she knew that was where he was taking her. She would be a hundred miles from home, maybe more. Juliette hugged her secrets to her. She just needed to find her strength, go along with whatever he wanted until she was able to make her escape.

His laughter was low and without humor. *I am not in the mood to go chasing you through the forest.*

What good news. She looked up at masculine face. He looked a man, not a boy, one who could be frightening, even a little cruel should he choose. Why would she be remotely attracted to such a man? It was unthinkable, yet she couldn't look at him without feeling the effects.

Maybe you should be afraid of me. He sounded more weary than sarcastic. *Are you going*

to tell me your name?

She tried to think clearly, tried to remember the old legends told around the campfires, told by her mother's people about such a race. Did giving her name give him more power over her? She couldn't sort through the haze in her mind quickly enough.

I think it essential to know your name. Are you going to give me something to call you or shall I make it up?

Juliette. My name is Juliette. She didn't want him calling her some endearment in his mesmerizing voice that she might come to believe. In any case, she couldn't imagine him having any more power over her than he already did.

Thunder rolled over their heads, booming through the clouds so that the tree branches below them shook and the space they traveled through vibrated in alarm. Juliette felt Riordan's body jerk. She clutched at his arms.

I will not drop you, we are being pursued by the undead.

I don't like the sound of that. If only she wasn't so weak. She didn't have a weapon, nothing at all that could help. *Is the undead what I think it is?*

I will not be trapped twice. There was such finality in his voice she shivered. *And yes, it is a vampire tracking us.*

How is he trailing us? You aren't leaving tracks behind.

He smells my blood. His voice was grim.

Juliette was silent, sensing Riordan was growing tired with the effort he was making. Her stomach flipped when he dropped unexpectedly to the ground below. The canopy was thick and leaves slapped at them as they plummeted through, skimming branches and hurtling toward the ground at such a fast speed she thought they would crash. She kept her eyes closed tight and only the thought of a vampire hearing her kept her from screaming.

Suddenly they were floating, coming to a halt. Riordan placed Juliette on the ground, her back against a tree. Her eyes widened with horror as he stared at his hand, his fingernail growing to a lethal-looking length. Juliette drew in her legs, stifling a gasp as he tore a long cut in his own wrist. Blood dripping, he flung droplets in all directions and took off running with blurring speed, away from her, winding through the trees, spreading the scent along the leaves and shrubbery over a long distance.

Juliette held her breath for a long moment, waiting to be certain she was alone. For some reason, Riordan shocked her by abandoning her to the vampire. He was clearly using her as bait. She dragged herself to her feet. So much for sexy, brooding heroes. Obviously the more tortured, the less heroic. "Maybe you weren't really all that sexy after all," she muttered out loud, furious that he would leave her. Her legs were wobbly and she was

dizzy, the ground tilting and rolling. It didn't matter. She was not going to wait for the vampire to descend from the clouds and find a helpless victim. If she had to crawl, she would find a way to escape. She let go of the tree and took two tentative steps. The ground rushed up to meet her. Before she hit the ground, a strong arm circled her waist and she was dragged up against Riordan's hard body.

Chapter 3

"What are you doing?" Riordan hissed the words at her, clearly annoyed.

Juliette glared at him. "I thought you left me."

"I am your lifemate. Your protection and health must be placed above all things. I would never leave you."

If she weren't so tired, she would have rolled her eyes in exasperation. She did the mental equivalent just to let him know he was an idiot for not explaining things she had no hope of understanding on her own. She glanced down at his wrist. The jagged tear was closed but looked raw and angry. "You laid a false trail of blood for the vampire, one stronger and fresher, didn't you?"

"Of course. It will hopefully delay him long enough for me to regain more strength and remove the poison from my body." He gathered her into his arms. "He will attack the skies blindly in hopes of finding us. You must remain silent."

Juliette was becoming annoyed at being hauled around like a sack of potatoes. "I'm not exactly a cringing baby. I got you out of that place, didn't I?"

For the first time a faint smile flitted across his face. It nearly stopped her heart. "That was before I showed you my teeth."

"Is that a little vampire humor?" she asked, but her stomach was doing a curious little flip. He looked so weary. She might have given in and put her arms around him to comfort him if she weren't so certain touching him was dangerous.

He bent his head to hers, his breath warm against her skin. When he smiled, she could see no signs of his incisors, but it didn't stop a small shiver from running down her spine. Unexpectedly her womb clenched. She didn't think that was a good sign. There was definite chemistry between them and it seemed to be growing. It wasn't logical and she just wanted to get away from him.

"The vampire will try to attack us in the air. He will not really know where we are, but he will hope to score a hit. It is essential you remain quiet. It will be very frightening."

She snorted derisively. "And you aren't? Let's get out of here."

He took to the skies again with dizzying speed. She felt him stirring in her mind, an

attempt to reassure her, but she wanted to keep him out. Mind-to-mind contact was far too intimate. He could read her thoughts and even, possibly, her strange attraction to him. It bothered her that she was susceptible to him. There was no way to tell whether it was physical attraction or whether he was manipulating her in some way. She definitely had no intention of sticking around long enough to find out which it was.

Without warning the clouds rained sparks, red-hot embers, slivers of molten fire that fell like raindrops in a steady barrage. Riordan bent his body protectively over Juliette, cursing that he wasn't at full strength and couldn't provide the shelter they needed as they streaked through the sky. Despite his best efforts, several slivers penetrated her arm and burned through her skin nearly to the bone. He heard her gasp, but she turned her face against his chest, against the terrible burn marks there, and remained silent. The embers burned his back and shoulders, raised welts and stung like angry bees along his arms. He was infinitely weary and wanted desperately to go to the healing ground in the way of his people, but Juliette could not do that, and he would not leave her unprotected while human and vampire enemies searched for them.

She was an unexpected gift, drawn to him by their connection, two halves of the same soul. She didn't want the connection, but it was there and it was explosive. In spite of the relentless pain, he was all too aware of her soft, generous curves and the heat and scent of her body. It only added to his physical discomfort and raised the level of her wariness. With her face nuzzling his bare chest, his insides were turning to mush. She had no idea how much faith and trust she showed him with that simple gesture.

I'm hiding from the embers. She denied his thoughts.

You are hiding from yourself, from the truth.

You could be the most infuriating, exasperating creature on the face of this earth.

Perhaps, but nevertheless, you find yourself inexplicably attracted to me. There was purring satisfaction in his voice.

Riordan took them lower into the comparative shelter of the jungle canopy and made his way toward the small forest stream where the plants he needed grew in abundance. Lightning slashed the night skies, lighting up the forests in flashes, sending animals scurrying for shelter. He moved through the trees until he found the darker, overgrown spot he needed for safety.

"If we are lucky, the vampire is weaving his way through the forest miles from here. Let me look at those burns." Riordan set her down and crouched beside her, drawing her arm straight out to examine it.

"You're hurt worse than I am," Juliette objected, her heart pounding. It was the way he was looking at her wound, his black eyes moving over her skin as if he took it as a personal affront that she'd been scored by the slivers of fire. "I can live with it."

"I cannot," he said simply and bent his head so that his dark hair, wild and tangled from the journey through the sky, cascaded around him, hiding his face.

She felt the warmth of his breath first. His lips, featherlight, a mere brush so that her heart quickened and her body tensed. His tongue swirled over the blackened welt. Electricity sizzled through her entire body. The breath went out of her lungs and her mouth went dry. She jerked her arm in reaction, but he held on firmly.

"I am sorry if this hurts, but I have a healing agent in my saliva. It should remove all pain. Just relax." He didn't just say the words, he breathed them against her skin. She felt his voice crawling through her pores, winding around her heart and lungs and every other vital organ.

Juliette closed her eyes against the waves of heat coursing through her bloodstream. Bloody and torn, swaying with weariness, Riordan was still the sexiest man she'd ever encountered. There was his voice, his eyes, the way he looked at her, the way he turned his head, his hard, masculine body, but most of all, the danger emanating from him. He was a powerful predator and it showed, yet his touch with her was amazingly gentle, almost tender.

She swallowed hard. "It isn't right that you're trying to heal me when your body is so torn up. I can wait."

"I feel your pain beating at me."

She made an attempt at finding humor when her body was stirring to life and her thoughts were turning to things better left alone. "See why we shouldn't share minds? It would be so much easier if you didn't have to feel my pain on top of yours." She frowned. "I'm in your mind, why can't I feel your pain?" She could feel how tired he was, but he had to feel pain with all the lacerations and burns.

His tongue swirled a second time. Then a third. "I am shielding you."

He could rob a woman of sanity. Juliette couldn't look at his gorgeous face without wanting to wipe away those terrible lines. His touch was beyond gentle, was causing her stomach to do flips and somersaults. Beads of sweat trickled down the valley between her breasts, and she was certain it had nothing to do with the humidity. The small burns miraculously stopped stinging under his ministrations. When he finally lifted his head and looked at her with his dark eyes, she saw the stark hunger smoldering there.

Riordan allowed her arm to slip from his fingers before moving a short distance away from her to the stream.

Juliette half sat with her back against the tree trunk watching Riordan carefully. "Thank you. It really does feel much better." She studied the lines in his face. "Is there really poison in your system?"

He glanced at her, his black, black eyes blazing a trail right to her heart... or her body. He began to carefully ease out of the bloodstained and tattered shirt. All the while his gaze remained on her, making it difficult to breathe. "Unfortunately, yes."

"Why? Why would they do that to you?"

"Because I am different. I am a creature to be loathed and hated. And because, I fear, they wish to kill our prince."

The burns on his skin were horrible to see. "Did they heat the chains? Is that how those burns got there?" Juliette wanted to rush to him, press her lips to those terrible marks. He had to be in such pain, yet he had attended to her first.

"They had vampire blood and they painted the chains regularly with it. They knew the blood was toxic and would burn as acid does. And they hoped the scent of blood, when I was drained and starving, would drive me out of my mind." He gave her a faint smile. "Perhaps they succeeded."

Juliette shook her head. "You're saner than they will ever be. We're both a bit shaky, but we made it out of there."

"Thanks to you. I am sorry you have to see me this way. As soon as I remove the poison, I'll restore your strength to you."

"I'm not as dizzy. I think my body's already recovering. You just worry about you." She wanted to look away as his face grew paler, as he made a tremendous effort, using every ounce of reserve strength in an attempt to analyze the poisonous compound used to paralyze him. A part of her mind was merged with his, or perhaps it was the other way around, but she could see the data flowing through his mind and was amazed that he understood each separate composite. "Who are you? How do you know all this?"

He leaned back against a moss-covered boulder. "I have lived a long life and learned much over the years. There is little else to do when you have nothing to live for. Knowledge is power and it keeps one alive, even when one no longer wishes to remain in a barren world." His dark eyes slid over her. He reached out his hand.

Juliette had no idea why she put her hand in his. The moment his fingers closed around hers her body came alive, and it felt right. Juliette wanted to pull her hand away from the heat of his, but he looked bone weary and tormented and she didn't have the heart.

"You changed that for me. You gave me back colors and emotions. I have four brothers. I have lived with them for years with only the memory of my affection for them, yet in that one moment when you spoke to me, *I felt* that deep love for them again. How could I ever repay such a gift?" His voice was soft, almost as if he were talking to himself.

"I love my sister and cousin so much. I can't imagine not being able to feel my love for them. I'm glad I could, in some way, restore those feelings to you." She tightened her

fingers around his. "Have you always lived in South America? You're obviously familiar with the jungle." She knew he was resting, gathering his strength to break down the poison and push it from his system. She could feel him continually scanning the skies, worried the vampire might have tracked them in spite of his sacrifice of precious blood to lay a false trail. He had fought vampires on many occasions and she briefly touched on those hideous battles through their link. The creatures were grotesque and evil and worse than the human monsters she'd encountered.

"Many years ago, when our current prince was still young, his father sent many of us out in the hopes we could stop the spread of evil. I was fortunate that my family was sent together. It made it easier to endure being so far from our kind, so far from our homeland. We made this our home." He squeezed her fingers as if for courage and started to let go.

Juliette tightened her grip, tugging until he looked at her.

"I'm strong enough to help you. I'm keeping you out of my mind, but I can let you use my strength."

"You do not have to, Juliette." He liked saying her name, was pleased she wanted to aid him, but he was not the gentle man she believed he was in her mind. He was far more ruthless than she knew, and he had no intention of allowing her to escape him. "I would not want you to expend energy you cannot afford."

He was warning her. Juliette felt a chill go through her body, but she chose to ignore it. He was drooping with pain. His wounds seeped and wept and every now and then, in spite of his efforts to shield her, she glimpsed the torment he was in. "I don't mind. I'm just sitting here anyway." She gave him a tentative smile. "How did they manage to capture you?"

His expression darkened. "I heard a cry for help on the common telepathic link all Carpathians use. When I followed the cry back to its source, I found a vampire, not a Carpathian. Unfortunately it was impossible to tell that he was vampire until it was too late. I was injected with the paralyzing formula and drained of blood to keep me weak." His gaze settled on hers, stayed there, a hypnotic, mesmerizing stare. "You are not shocked to hear of my species. You were frightened of *me* because I took your blood in such a manner, and for that I apologize, but the fact that I needed it did not fully surprise you. How is that?"

She was silent for a moment, weighing her words carefully. She felt him in her mind, seeking answers, but he was not nearly at full strength and the poison was hideously painful. With her brain patterns so different and the strength of her protective walls, he simply waited for her spoken answer. "When I was a child we often spent long periods of time in the jungle. At night my mother would build a camp-fire and we'd tell stories. She told us of a great people, Carpathians from the mountains in Europe with extraordinary skills and gifts. They were blood-drinkers."

"How did she know of them?"

"Our family goes back hundreds of years. Apparently my ancestor met a small group of Carpathians here in the jungle." She looked at him steadily. "Five brothers. They were said to have a vast cattle estate and human family to work their lands while they slept beneath the ground during the sunlight hours."

Juliette waited for a response to her revelation, but Riordan only stared at her for a few more moments in silence, then simply withdrew, pulling back into himself. He moved outside his own body, gathering himself into a ball of pure energy. It was fascinating to observe his healing abilities. She stayed merged with his mind, watching him not only break down the chemical compound so he could view each separate element and identify it, but also send the information to someone else with a warning to pass it on to the prince of their people and as many of their hunters as possible.

Sending the information over a distance was draining and Riordan faltered.

Where are you? The demand was strong in her mind. Male and frightening, it carried a command, a hypnotic draw that was very powerful and sent shivers of fear down Juliette's spine. *Riordan. I feel your pain.*

Riordan hesitated. *Do not come to me. I will be able to push the poison from my body and replenish myself.*

Juliette found herself holding her breath. She didn't want to meet the man behind that voice. There was a merciless, ruthless, frightening quality to the voice.

She felt Riordan touch her with his mind, a reassuring, caressing stroke.

I will not allow you to be recaptured. You were sent to check out the research lab to see what they were doing.

The Morrison research laboratory was a front for a vampire controlling the human society that hunts our people. I have destroyed the building. The animals they captured on pretense were allowed to go free. I will come home when I have healed.

Where is the vampire?

He is hunting us. Riordan broke off the communication and glanced over at Juliette. "My eldest brother is very exacting about our staying alive."

"Families are like that. My sister will probably be worried about me. I need to get back home." She watched his face, hoping to read his response, but his sculptured features went carefully blank.

Riordan stared down at his arms. She felt the gathering of his strength. Very slowly the poison began to respond, moving with reluctance as he shepherded the damaging compound toward his pores. Some of the droplets oozed through his skin, golden, thick liquid carrying the ability to paralyze his race.

Juliette pulled a small plastic container from the bag hanging around her waist. She leaned forward and pressed the lip of the container to his arm, capturing as much of the liquid as possible before she screwed the lid on tight. "This might come in handy if your people need to study this."

He leaned against the boulder, his head back, fighting for air, his strength gone. Juliette immediately opened her mind to his, sending him as much of her remaining strength as she could give. She knew the jungle, better than most, every rustle in the undergrowth, every sound the birds made. Something evil was stalking them, and the jungle was alive with the news. In her present state she couldn't escape, but she had no doubt Riordan could fight if given the strength.

He wasted no time removing every drop of the toxic compound as quickly as possible. The moment he was certain he had gotten rid of all of it, he dunked his head into the stream, rubbed the cold water over his arms to scrub off the thick, sticky residue. Riordan spun around and reached for Juliette, dragging her onto his lap, cradling her against his chest.

She felt a jolt through her body, an electric shock as their bodies came into contact. Her mouth went dry. "What are you going to do?"

"Exchange our blood. Your blood will help me get us somewhere safe where I can heal, and my blood is ancient and will restore the strength you have so generously given to me."

"Will it tie us together?" Her voice might have been an invitation, but her palm went up in a defensive gesture, fingers splayed wide against his chest.

"Yes." His strong fingers slid over her chin, pushed stray tendrils of hair from her shoulder. "But we are already tied together." He bent his head, his face buried in the warmth of her soft, vulnerable neck. The water from the small stream was cold as it dripped from him, down her skin, cooling the heat from the oppressive humidity.

A soft moan of pleasure escaped as his teeth sank deep. She settled deeper into his hard frame, moving with restless urgency as her blood went thick with heat. Her lashes drifted down, her hands sliding limply into her lap.

"I claim you as my lifemate. I belong to you. I offer my life for you. I give to you my protection, my allegiance, my heart, my soul and my body. I take into my keeping the same that is yours. Your life, happiness and welfare will be cherished and placed above my own for all time. You are my lifemate, bound to me for all eternity and always in my care." Riordan spoke the words in a black velvet voice.

Juliette felt his voice vibrate through her body, touch her deep inside. Somehow his words brought them together, skin to skin, organ to organ so that they breathed with the same lungs, shared the same heartbeat, possessed the same soul. He flowed through her, a dark temptation, learning her secrets, sharing his. Kissing her until her body caught fire and ached for his. There were hot blood and flames licking at her. She shook her head, suddenly

caught by the ritual of the entire thing. A ceremony as old as time.

Chapter 4

Juliette opened her eyes cautiously in the hopes that none of her recent experiences had been real, that she'd just been having nightmares. She had participated all too eagerly in the exchange of blood, in the exchange of kisses. "Damn, damn, damn," she muttered and pushed herself up from the bed of foliage she was lying on.

She could hear the steady drip of water. She was in a cave, and the leaves and twigs that formed her bed were man-made, not at all natural. Riordan had provided her with the safety of a shelter and a soft bed while he had "gone to ground." She carefully avoided walking over the spot where she was certain he lay in a bed of rich soil. She felt him there beneath the dirt and leaves, buried deep. Still, not breathing.

Juliette dragged air into her burning lungs and backed away from the spot. She had a mad desire to fling herself to the ground and claw the dirt away to get to him. A sob welled up in her throat. She took another step back. "It was a ceremony of some kind, wasn't it?" She whispered. "My people do not marry." She backed up another step, although this time her feet dragged. "You're an extraordinary man, but I'm not what you think and I never could be."

She had no choice; she had to get home to her sister. Juliette tugged off her boots and tied the laces together. She shrugged out of her blouse and then her jeans, tying the two garments tightly together with the boots. She stood there completely naked, holding one hand over her throbbing neck. Her body called to him. Her mind called. Her very heart tried to find the beat of his. Hastily, before she gave into the grief and madness welling up in her, Juliette tied the clothes securely around her neck.

She closed her eyes to block out all visual distractions and calm her mind. She would need every ounce of strength to leave him. When he had recited those ritual words, Riordan had carefully explained that they were tied together and should she wake without him she would feel the separation as intense grief. "And you weren't kidding," she said aloud. "I feel like my heart's been torn out. Whatever it is you are, whatever it is you did, it definitely works on me."

What are you doing? There was alarm in his voice. She could almost feel his fingers brush over her face, trail down her throat, slip over her breast. Her entire body reacted, recognizing his touch, reacting with heat and need.

Her eyes opened wide and she looked wildly around. *Where are you ? Why can't I see you ? How can you touch me when you aren't here?*

I am locked beneath the earth until the sun sets. You cannot leave me, Juliette. You know you must not.

Another gift? You can touch me, but I can't reach you? It was shocking that his touch seemed so real, could arouse her body and affect her heart when he wasn't even a substantial presence.

Tell me what you are doing. Why would you leave when you feel that we belong?

You don't know me. He had his secrets, but so did she.

You refuse to allow me into your mind and heart.

I can't. Her hand went to her suddenly raw throat. The thought of leaving him was painful. Hearing his voice only added to her torment, but she had obligations and she couldn't put them aside because her heart and soul and body cried out for his.

You can't escape me. Your blood flows in me and mine in you. He sighed. *I can see your mind is made up. When it becomes too difficult, reach for me, I will answer. In the meantime, try not to get into too much trouble.* Abruptly he broke the connection between them.

Juliette felt the loss like a physical blow. She took a deep breath and released the air slowly, calling up her other self, calling up the part of her that could give her the strength to go home where she belonged, when she really wanted to crawl into the earth with Riordan.

The change took her slowly, almost reluctantly, as if a part of her brain was fighting rather than embracing her other form. Spotted fur slid over her skin, muscles and tendons contracted and stretched. Stiletto-sharp claws sprang from her curving hands. She landed heavily on all fours while her body went through the change. It was always a slow process and somewhat painful, but never like this time. Juliette wept as the jaguar took her over.

The cat was small and stocky. Roped muscles and a flexible spine allowed her to flow across the cavern floor, seeking a way out to the jungle where she belonged. Rain fell softly as she emerged from the damp cave. She paused to get her bearings before taking to the trees and running along the twisting highway of branches high above the forest floor. She couldn't maintain this form for long periods of time, so she had to use it efficiently to travel across the greatest distance before shedding it. She ran as quickly as possible, threading her way through the leaves and foliage.

The rain barely penetrated the canopy, dripping steadily on the leaves but rarely touching her fur. Steam rose from the forest floor, but the jaguar didn't feel the heat the way Juliette would have. The boots banged against her neck and chest as she made her way through the trees and shrubbery. The birds screamed a warning to one another at her approach and monkeys chattered and threw sticks and leaves at her. She snarled at them, but hurried onward, not stopping to teach them manners.

After a time, she began to shake, her legs suddenly growing weak. She stumbled twice, tripped on a branch and leapt hastily to the ground. She was miles from the cave; the sun was setting and Riordan would be rising. Hopefully he would only find the scent of a large cat and she would be gone. Even if her blood called to him, she was a great distance away with a good head start.

She shifted into her human form, her sides heaving and her lungs burning for air. Leaves and twigs scraped her bare flesh. She looked hastily around to make certain she wasn't crouching in anything poisonous. The last thing she wanted was blisters on her skin. More than once she'd managed to shift at the most inappropriate time. She had little control when the form became too difficult to hold.

With a sigh she dragged on her clothes. Humidity was so high the material clung to her skin. Juliette was skilled in the jungle, but without the jaguar's fur and claws, it was much more difficult to make her way through the trees. The canopy kept out much of the light, and with the sun setting, the interior went dark quickly. She had excellent night vision, but it wasn't going to help much with night predators.

She passed the miles alternating between a run and walk. She tried to listen to the steady rhythm of the rain, but it sounded like a heartbeat. She tried to block out the scent of Riordan, but it clung to her body. Tears made a relentless path down her face, blurring her vision. Grief was a heavy weight that slowed her steps and robbed her of air.

Every step was a fight to go forward, to keep from turning around and running back to find Riordan. Worse, her mind continually tried to tune itself to his. Fighting herself was more exhausting than fighting the jungle. She needed a place to rest. Juliette found a small circle of boulders, nearly hidden by overgrown ferns. Within the ring of boulders a deep pool fed by a small stream shimmered in the moonlight. She sat down, lifted her face to catch the mistlike drops that managed to work through the thick foliage overhead. Thunder rolled. Lightning lined the clouds. A roar shook the ground, the trees, caused small waves to race across the surface of the water. Juliette's hand fluttered over her heart. He had risen.

Juliette was gone. His first reaction was to roar out his pain and frustration. Now Riordan let out his breath in a long, slow hiss of exasperation. He wanted to shake her. The physical attraction between them was a wildfire. That alone should have been enough to bind her to him. She was in for a long, difficult time, out there alone without him. The ritual bonding words would force her mind to attempt to connect with his. He had explained it to her, had tried to spare her the misery he knew she would be going through.

He was already feeling the effects of their separation. Worse, he was feeling her grief, a torrent of emotion every bit as deep as the well of passion he touched in her. She felt things intensely. Riordan raked his fingers through his long hair. He needed to find prey fast. He needed more time in the ground to heal, but more than anything, he needed Juliette. He lifted his head toward the heavens and roared a second time. She had opened the dam of his

emotions. He remembered nothing of anger and jealousy and fear, but now the feelings were crowding into his mind mixed with grief. It was a potent combination and a dangerous one.

He found the tracks of a large cat, but not the footprints of a woman. His heart beat hard in his chest, pounded with fear for her, with need for her. She had managed to disguise herself, leave no trace behind, but the call of blood and the ties that bound them together were far too strong to ever break. He moved quickly through the cave, shifting on the run, bursting into the air as a thick stream of white mist. The sky was orange and red, dazzling and vivid and near blinding to a man who had seen only shades of gray for so long. Even with the heavy mist for protection, his head burst with the sheer brilliance of color. He streaked through the trees, staying below the canopy, using the protection of the foliage while he acclimated himself to his new sight.

A bird shrieked, his only warning. He hit something and bounced backward. Droplets shimmered briefly through a dropping silver net, falling through on the outside. Instincts took over. He shot upward, through and above the silver. In his present form he was able to slip through, but he felt the thin blades, razor-sharp, cutting deep.

Riordan! Juliette sounded panic-stricken.

The trap had been set specifically for him. Juliette knew he would come after her. He had not fully penetrated the barriers in her mind. Could she betray him? Was it even possible for one lifemate to betray another? Riordan doubted it, but he didn't have time to think so he simply didn't answer, pulling his mind from hers. The echo of her anguished cry tore at his heart, but he refused to be swayed, streaking through the canopy and shifting into the form of a bird. He went still, hiding among the birds in the tree, examining the trap that had been set for him.

It had been sprung without an operator. He had merely flown into it, which meant there might be other traps out there waiting for him. Blood trickled down his beak and seeped through his feathers. Far below, on the forest floor, the silver net lay tangled in a heap. He could see traces of his blood on the thin wires.

Humans, puppets of a vampire, had constructed the trap, and only a master vampire could have kept his presence from Riordan. He was dealing with something extremely powerful and evil. Something willing to mingle with humans and use them for its own ruthless purposes.

Fear for his lifemate clawed at him. She was somewhere alone and unprotected. It couldn't have been Juliette. What would be the point of rescuing him only to lead him into a trap? He touched her mind, heard her weeping. His heart shattered. For a moment he couldn't breathe, couldn't drag air into his lungs. How could her soft weeping affect him so deeply?

Juliette, it is nothing, a trap that failed.

There was a small silence. He pictured her wiping at her tears, felt the anger stirring in her mind. *I hate that you did this to us. Tied us together until we can't breathe without each other.*

Destiny tied us together, Juliette.

You had a choice.

I did not have a choice. I was shocked to find you. I had never expected to find you. Tell me why you are so resistant. I can help you with whatever it is you feel the need to do. You are not so opposed to our joining as you want me to believe.

He felt her shock that he had penetrated her barriers to such an extent. He felt her hurt that he might think she was part of a larger conspiracy to harm him when she had risked her life to get him out of the laboratory. He felt her withdrawal, but he could not let it matter. He would find her. He had no other choice.

Carpathians often traveled in the form of an owl. The vampire had prepared to capture him in the form of mist, knowing hunters often used the fog to travel in. The vampire could very well have planned a trap for a bird winging through the sky. Riordan chose the shape of a smaller cat, a civet, able to move fast on the highway of branches above the forest floor. Any trap designed for an animal would be for a wolf or the much heavier leopard, forms routinely used for fast travel.

He was much more cautious as he leapt from branch to branch. His mind continually tuned itself toward Juliette. Riordan was used to being in complete control, without the danger of intense emotions, and his newly acquired feelings threw his normal balance. He sighed. *I am as ensnared as you.*

The silence was so long, he feared she would refuse to answer. *I would not say ensnared. I am merely obsessed, and obsession is very disturbing.*

I do not mind if I am the object of your obsession.

I mind. I refuse to be obsessed over anything, or anyone, let alone a man.

He felt the heat in her voice, the raw desire. Somewhere, Juliette was thinking of him, fantasizing over him. There was a silence, and he caught the shimmer of images in her mind. Their mouths welded together, her hands stroking his body, her lips traveling over the terrible burns on his chest. Riordan's temperature rose sharply. Thunder pounded in his head. His body went tight and uncomfortable. The small cat stumbled as the sexual drive hit it hard.

You cannot do this to me. He knew his voice was husky and slightly harsh but he couldn't help it. His body burned, was on fire. Each step was painful and mixed with the cat's animalistic emotions, his own beast roared for his mate.

Why not? You did it to me. I don't think my fantasy about touching your body or kissing you is nearly as bad as you touching me without physically laying a finger on me.

The little cat leapt over a twig holding a spray of leaves and nearly didn't make it, almost somersaulting into a thick snake coiled around a branch. The cat hissed and spit as it gave the snake a wide berth.

Riordan nearly groaned. Juliette wasn't stopping her fantasy at touching his body or kissing him. She was doing delicious things with her lips, working her way deliberately down his body to engulf him in the heated silk of her mouth. He groaned aloud, the small cat shuddering. It was becoming an effort to hold the form while hunger beat at him and desire swamped him. He had not taken the time to fully heal himself and if he were to regain his strength he would need sustenance.

More than anything he wanted to find Juliette, to bury his body deep in the haven of hers, relieve the terrible pressure building with unrelenting madness in his body. He could almost feel her mouth gliding over him. He could taste her heat and spice, feel her soft skin beneath his fingers.

A sound shook him out of his reverie and the small cat went instantly still, crouching low high in the forest canopy. He heard a soft sound in the distance, muted by the natural sounds of the night. Insects hummed. The sap ran in trees. Bats dipped and wheeled in the air. Bushes rustled as small rodents dashed around looking for safety. Larger predators hunted. But the sound was human—and feminine.

Riordan remained still, allowing his senses to flair out into the night, scanning the area for intruders, for traps, for the identity of the human hidden a few miles from him.

Juliette. His heart accelerated. He shifted to his natural form as his incisors lengthened in anticipation. She was close, just ahead near the stream. He could hear the water bubbling over rocks and emptying into a pool of sorts. She had to be there, cooling her body from the heat of the jungle, from the fire raging out of control between them. When he was absolutely certain they were alone, with no one near them for miles, he began to make his way toward her, using the foliage for cover.

I want you. He breathed the words into her mind. Meaning them. Needing her.

There was the smallest of hesitations. *Well, maybe I want you too, but I have things that I have to do, obligations to fulfill. I can't just change my life to suit you.*

Her voice was breathless, sensual. She was feeling the same heat, the same needs. Riordan was beginning to understand what lifemates were all about. He had been away from his people too long and he had forgotten the close bonds. He had forgotten whatever one lifemate was feeling, so did the other. Relationships were highly sexual and always intense.

He found his way to the small grotto where she rested. He sat above her, high in the trees, pleasure blossoming deep and wild just looking at her. She was so beautiful she robbed him of speech, of breath. He could look at her for eternity and never tire of it.

Chapter 5

Juliette lifted her hair from the nape of her neck and wiped the sweat gleaming on her body. It was very hot and her clothes were sticking to her skin. The moon's reflection in the deep pool shimmered with cool invitation. She slowly unbuttoned her blouse and allowed it to fall to her elbows.

Riordan's breath caught in his lungs. She shrugged the top off and tossed it to land on a large fern growing out of the boulders. Juliette dipped her hand in the cool pool and poured the water down the valley between her breasts. Her head was thrown back and her breasts jutted forward, high and firm and enticing in the moonlight. Her body was no girl's, but that of a woman, with generous curves a man could lose himself in. She looked a night temptress, a woods fairy, nearly insubstantial as the water ran down her soft alluring skin to her belly and lower still, disappearing beneath the darker material of her jeans.

His body tightened into a hard, painful ache just looking at her. Her hands were graceful as she pulled the pins from her hair and the thick braid tumbled down well below her waist. There was something terribly sensual about a woman unbraiding her hair, Riordan decided. His chest hurt it was so tight, his lungs burning for air. Her hair floated free, a mass of blue-black silk he longed to crush in his fingers, to bury his face in.

She crouched by the pool, threw water on her face. Droplets ran down her throat, down to the creamy swell of her breasts, and lay on her skin waiting to be licked off. Riordan shifted his weight in an attempt to ease the fullness of his clothes. He didn't dare warn her she wasn't alone: she would try to run from him, and it was necessary to find out the secrets she kept locked away from him.

A faint breeze fingered the leaves of the trees so that they glittered silver and black in the night. Her scent was ripe and feminine, an allure all its own. He felt a growl rising in his throat, the beast roaring for freedom. Temptation was a woman cooling the heat of her body there by the pool in the moonlight. Riordan sank his nails deep into the branch to keep from going to her. His head pounded, his blood thick and hot. Every movement she made was a seduction. And what the hell was she doing walking around half-naked all alone where any predator could come upon her?

Juliette rose with her lithe, sensuous grace, her breasts swaying in time with the seductive movement of her hips. He couldn't take his hungry gaze off of her. Honor and gentlemanly behavior were completely overridden by primitive possessiveness. She was his lifemate. She belonged to him. Her lush body was everything he could ever want. He wanted to start at the top of her head and kiss his way down to her toes, lingering in every

intriguing shadow and hollow along the way. His gaze narrowed as he saw her look around, scrutinizing the trees and bushes before stepping up on the highest boulder. She lifted her face into the air and sniffed, as if scenting the wind. Apparently satisfied she was alone, she stepped back to the edge of the pool, her hands going to the zipper of her jeans.

Riordan bit down hard on his bottom lip, hoping the pain would distract him. He couldn't have looked away if his life depended on it. She tugged at her jeans. The humidity was high and the material clung to her skin, so she had to squirm and shimmy to get them over her hips and down her thighs. Her breasts jiggled invitingly as she did a little dance to rid herself of her clothes. Tight dark curls formed a vee at the junction of her legs, a tempting arrow to draw his attention. At once he caught her feminine fragrance, the call of woman to man. Her body was burning, catching fire from his thoughts. He was broadcasting his hunger far too loudly.

Juliette was very susceptible to his needs. Dark cravings ate at him, hardened his body and sent erotic images teasing his brain. She was there waiting for him, her body open for his, craving his with the same terrible need that could never be assuaged. He closed his eyes and thought about how it would feel to plunge inside of her welcoming sheath, hot and tight and wet, slick with need for him.

Juliette made a single sound of distress as her body reacted to the waves of sexual hunger, the lust rising in him, lust she'd helped to create with her blatant fantasies. Riordan drank her in through half-closed eyes, his lids heavy and his body on fire. He wanted to see her hands travel over her soft skin, taking the path his hands would take. Up her thighs, over her rounded belly, up her narrow rib cage to cup the weight of her breasts in his palms. He wanted her thumbs to tease and flick her dark nipples, bring them to a heated peak in anticipation of his hot mouth suckling strongly.

He could already taste her, feel the soft mound of flesh in his mouth. He needed to pillow his head there, spend the night lavishing attention on each breast, on the dark inviting nipples, yet it wasn't enough. He wanted to feel how hot she was. How wet. How much she needed his body deep inside of her. His palms itched to feel her thighs, soft and rounded with firm muscles. He would slide his palms upward, feel the heat of her entrance before widening her stance, wanting her legs open to him. Gently he would slide one finger deep inside of her. He actually felt fiery heat, slick and moist, and it nearly stopped his heart. He wanted more. Wanted to feel her body grip and hold, clamp tightly around his.

He couldn't bear the feel of his clothes another moment and he dispensed with them easily with a single thought in the way of his people. The small breeze instantly caressed his body, touching him all over, adding to his sensitivity. He wished it were her fingers wrapping around the hard length of him. His erection was full and heavy and merciless, a pulsing, throbbing pain he could hardly endure.

Damn you, what are you doing to me? Her voice was breathless in his mind. Husky. Sexy. Fraught with an elemental need.

Damn you back. My body is on fire. I want your mouth on me. I want to be inside of you. I do not want illusion. Your stubbornness is going to kill us both.

Juliette had never felt such unbearable lust. It rose up from the very depths of her being and consumed her. She had always known there was passion deep inside of her. The heat of the jungle made her feel sensual when others found it oppressive. She often felt sexy, even seductive around men, but never had she felt such building heat. It was uncomfortable and unsettling, an edgy pressure demanding urgent relief. Her breasts ached for the feel of his mouth. She didn't want a gentle lover, she wanted him to feel the same smoldering, dangerous passion welling up in her. She wanted an explosive joining, his hard body driving deep and mercilessly into her. She itched and burned and hungered and there was no relief, no matter what she did.

Are you near me? She couldn't keep the invitation out of her voice. She looked around her, unconsciously enticing him with her body. She stretched her arms over her head, turned slowly in a circle. She knew she had a beautiful body and she wanted him to see it. He had done this to her, put her in this terrible state of passion, and it was up to him to assuage her unrelenting lust.

I am watching you. Can't you feel my eyes on you? You are so beautiful. Touch yourself for me.

There was seduction in his voice. A purring command, a promise of exactly what she needed. Sex—hot, elemental. A fierce lover who would slake her burning need. Juliette turned her head so that her silken hair flew around her like a cape, settling over her shoulders and body, sliding over her sensitive skin. She felt his heated gaze burning over her and she smiled.

I'm so much hotter than you can imagine. I'm slick and wet, dripping for you. She licked her fingers, a slow deliberate curl of her tongue before sucking her own tangy juice from her fingers. *I'm burning up. Are you going to just watch me all night or are you going to do something about it?* Juliette had never been so bold in her life, but then she'd never felt such intense pressure. She was angry with him for making her so out of control, and if she was out of control, she was determined he would feel the same. And she wanted him right there, right now, and didn't care that he knew it.

Riordan didn't wait for a second invitation. He floated across the sky toward the pool, settling to earth behind her. She had a beautiful back and a perfect, rounded bottom. His hands slid over the curve of her hips, starkly possessive, and he dragged her roughly against him, wanting her to feel the thick, hard length of his erection pressed tightly against her bottom.

The breath slammed out of her lungs and hot fluid rushed to pool between her legs. His teeth skimmed the nape of her neck, her shoulder, and his hands slid up to cup her aching breasts. The soft weight filled his palms, his thumbs slid over her taut nipples, stroking caresses.

"I never thought I would find you. I spent centuries without hope, and you came to me in my darkest hour." His lips drifted up her neck to her ear, whispering the words while his hips pushed into her, rubbed to try, unsuccessfully, to ease some of the pressure.

His touch set every nerve ending screaming for relief. "I found you." Juliette didn't recognize her own voice. She shook with hunger. His body was everything to her, his mind thrust deep inside of hers, heightening her pleasure at his touch, sharing her passion, the intensity of her desire until she couldn't tell where hers began or where his left off. "I can't wait anymore. I want you inside of me."

His hand slid between her legs, felt her wet welcome. She nearly sobbed with pleasure, pushing against his hand. Her arm went back, circled his neck, dragged his head around so she could find his mouth, drown in his kisses, devour him, her teeth nibbling at his lips, her tongue dueling and dancing wildly with his. "I *need* you inside of me, Riordan. I'm going to burn up if you don't hurry."

He bit wildly at her mouth, her neck, bent her back so he could get to her breasts. He'd been fantasizing about her breasts for so long he couldn't stand not tasting them, drawing her into his mouth, suckling strongly, while his hips frantically surged against her enticing buttocks.

She screamed at the pull of his mouth, her hand tunneling in his hair, clutching his head to her while he devoured her breast. Every pull of his mouth sent wet heat pulsating through her body and trickling down her leg. Her cries nearly sent him over the edge. He bent her body forward, planting her hands on the boulders while he thrust his fingers deep into her to test her readiness. She pushed back into his hand, riding, bucking, sobbing for him enter her.

He caught her hips and held her, looking down at her beautiful body. His lifemate. Sultry, sexy—everything he could ever want. Crying out for him. Pleading for him to take her, to unite them. *Demanding* he take her. He was so hard he thought he might shatter. He surged into her thick wetness, one long stroke that felt as if it blew the top of his head off. Fire raced up his penis, spread through his body, a volcanic eruption that reached all the way to his toes.

Juliette's body was tight and hot and gripping his as he withdrew so that he shuddered with pleasure. She sobbed again, pushing eagerly back onto him as he thrust forward. He was large and thick, and driving through the soft folds was sweet torture. "Are you all right?" He was so large and she felt so small. He pressed her forward, adjusting their positions so she could take more of him. "I want all of me inside of you."

"I want every last bit of you in me too," Juliette answered. "Can't you feel what I'm feeling? Harder. Faster. I need you to be crazy, because I feel crazy." And she did. She felt wild and heated and sensual and she wanted him out of control and driving into her with everything he was. Pouring his heart and soul and his very essence into her. "More, I want more."

Juliette gave herself up to the wild pounding. Every hard stroke sent vibrations of sheer pleasure rushing through her body. Every cell, every nerve ending, every tiny part of her burned and blazed. Her breasts ached and swung with every thrust, her hair brushed the ground and silky strands fell in her face. Her body was hot and sweaty and exploding in ecstasy. She took him with her over the edge, her muscles clamping around his thick erection and dragging every last drop of his seed out of him.

For Juliette it didn't end, her body rippling with aftershocks, colors bursting behind her eyes and fireworks going off in her mind. She didn't want him to move, wanted to savor their joined bodies. He was magnificent, long and thick and more than she could possibly have imagined.

Riordan slid out of her body reluctantly. When she made a soft sound of protest he drew her back into his arms. "We have time. All the time in the world, and I want to touch you. I love kissing you." His hands skimmed her breasts, moved up to frame her face. "And I hunger for the taste of you. I want to bring you more fully into my world."

She turned her face up to nuzzle his throat. "Do you know what I am?" She kissed the hollow of his throat, her hands sliding possessively over his body. Stroking his flat stomach and kissing her way along his chest. Her hands caressed his penis, shaping and teasing and memorizing the long line of him. "I'm jaguar. A shape-shifter. Are you certain I am what you want?"

Riordan answered her in the only way he could. His body was sensitized and reacting with more demands. His incisors lengthened as his penis did. He bent his head and buried his teeth in the pulse beating so strongly in her neck.

She cried out, threw her head back and circled his neck with her arms, pressing her body closer to his. He had not used his tongue to prepare her for the shock of the connection, but Juliette felt it only as white-hot heat coursing through her bloodstream, as whips of lightning lashed every nerve ending into a sexual frenzy.

He held her possessively, his hands tender, but commanding, shifting her so that the tips of her breasts rubbed against his chest and her hair was out of the way. So that his straining groin pressed against her soft belly. *You taste like an exotic fruit, tangy and spicy and hot. I wonder what you'll taste like when I crawl between your legs and drink my fill there.*

Her entire body clenched. She closed her eyes and pressed closer to him. She wanted everything from him, with him. She wanted it all.

His tongue swept across the pinpricks on her neck. His hand circled her throat, his thumb tipping up her face so that she was compelled to look into his eyes. *See what I taste like.* He commanded it in a purring, velvet voice, so mesmerizing she half fell into a dream. Riordan opened a line with a sharp fingernail, caught the back of her head in his palm and pressed her face forward until her mouth was pressed to the heavy muscles of his chest, just above his heart. She could feel it beating, accelerating as her lips moved over his skin, as she drew

his dark gift into her body.

He brought her out of her enthrallment when she had taken enough for their second exchange, his mouth ravishing hers. He could kiss her forever, over and over and never get enough. Their mouths clung, tongues tangling wildly. Abruptly he pulled away, scowling at her. There was an ominous danger to his smoldering gaze.

"What?"

"Do not *what* me. You were thinking of another man."

Juliette ran her tongue over her bottom lip. "I was not thinking of another man. I merely thought I'd never been with a man as sexy as you. There's a difference."

His hand circled her bare arm, brought her close to him. "You have been with another man."

"Jaguars are sexual creatures, Riordan. We need sex at times." She leaned forward and lapped at his chest, right above his heart. "Why should that bother you?"

"Juliette, we are bound together. I would know if you had sex with another man. You could not hide it from me."

"I wouldn't try to hide it from you." She pushed at the wall of his chest but he was a rock, and even with her unusual strength, she couldn't move him.

"I would kill him."

"Why would you kill him? He isn't the one bound to you."

"Exactly." Riordan turned away from her, a black anger he didn't understand enveloping him. To cool off, he waded into the pool and looked back at her. She stood there with the moonlight spilling over her luscious body, her expression a mixture of amusement and exasperation. She was so beautiful he hurt just looking at her. "I am not human, Juliette and you can never think for one moment that I am. I am a predator and I will protect what is mine."

"Did I say I wanted another man? No! I was thinking no one else could compare with you. I was *not* thinking I wanted someone else. How could I, after what we just shared? Are you going to be an idiot and act jealous all the time? That would make me crazy."

He ducked under the water to rinse the heat from his skin. He stood up, the water lapping at his hips. "Come here."

"You didn't answer me."

He sighed. "Yes, I am going to be an idiot and act jealous all the time. The idea of

another man touching you, making love to you, makes me want to tear out his heart."

"Well." Juliette smiled and waded out to him. "I'd want to tear out the heart of any woman that tried to seduce you." She reached him, tipping up her face for his searing kiss. "We'll both have to work not to be jealous idiots. I can't see myself wanting anyone else when I have you."

"I will not mind if you wish to seduce me." He kissed her again, long, addictive kisses that had a bite to them.

"How lucky for me." She bent down and hit the water with her hand, sending up a spray that doused him thoroughly. Laughing, she dove away from him, swimming beneath the water to the center of the pond.

Chapter 6

Riordan watched her swim, her pale body slipping sensuously through the water. The clear liquid shimmered over her feminine form, enhancing every curve and secret hollow. Catching the glimpse of another man in her mind had been a shock, and he wasn't certain why it would be. She was a very sexual woman. She was bold and knew what she wanted. He wanted that kind of woman, as sexual as he knew himself to be, yet the thought of another man leaning down to suckle her breast or plunge deep into her body made the beast in him rise. It was dark and ugly and utterly dangerous.

Juliette would attract the attention of men with her shapely body. She was the epitome of a sexual creature. Riordan dove under water and began to swim laps, back and forth, driving himself to keep his fury at bay. If she ever wanted another man...

I thought lifemates wanted only each other. There was curiosity in her voice.

You are the only lifemate I have ever had. I am new at this.

He sounded so disgruntled she laughed and swam to the other side of the pool. There was a smooth shelf formed from boulders beneath the surface near the edge of the water. Juliette sat on it and watched him swim back and forth like a shark. *Does it really bother you so much?*

Riordan heard the soft tremor in her voice. *Of course it bothers me. I am a possessive man. But it matters little, Juliette. We are lifemates. We are bound from this time forward and there will be no other.*

Is that a decree? She didn't know why she was suddenly close to tears. She wasn't ashamed of her past. She didn't want any other men now, but she couldn't help that she had been born into a species that made it nearly impossible not to have sex at certain times. She wasn't about to apologize for who she was.

Riordan caught the echo of her thoughts, the painful tightness in her chest, and knew he hurt her. Had that been his intention? He hoped not. He would despise himself if his newly acquired emotions were so out of control that he could punish his lifemate for something she did before he met her.

He swam slowly across the pool until he was directly in front of her. "I do believe I am the idiot you called me. I apologize for my jealous streak. I also find I have a rotten temper which I shall do my best to control." He grinned at her, a sudden melting smile that brought life to his dark eyes. "It is the passion in me. My blood runs hot and I am caught.

Fortunately..." He moved closer to her, his hands circling her ankles. "I can make up for my shortcomings in other ways."

"Don't you dare." She could see the mischief on his face.

He yanked on her legs, catching her by surprise, so that she slid toward him, her legs over his shoulders. *I thought I would find out how you taste. If you're as tangy and spicy all over as I imagine you are.* Without giving her the slightest opportunity to squirm away, he lowered his head between her thighs.

Juliette jumped, but his hands cupped her bare buttocks, fingers digging deep to hold her still. His teeth scraped the inside of her thigh. She heard herself moan softly. Felt the first surge of moist welcoming heat.

"Lie back for me," he said softly, "relax, float. Just feel. Just feel this time, Juliette."

She loved the way he said her name with his peculiar, very sexy accent. She loved the way his eyes went dark and smoldered and hungered and burned over her body. His hair touched her sensitive skin, her body trembled. She felt his hand pushing against her heat. She stared up at the night sky, watched the droplets of rain come down in slow motion. Some landed on her face, some on her bare breasts. Water from the pool slid over her stomach, a silken blanket arousing her further. Juliette gave herself to him completely.

His finger pushed into her, stroking deep caresses, teasing and dancing until she moaned with pleasure. His mouth replaced his hand, a hot pulsing of fire that left her breathless, unable to scream, unable to breathe. Pressure built fast and hard and raged through her body for release. When her orgasm hit, it was explosive and violent and shook her to the very core of her being.

Riordan slowly lifted his head from between her thighs, holding her secure when she might have drowned, might have just sunk to the bottom in a heap of heated feminine flesh. He pulled her through the water to him, rocked her gently while her body continued to sizzle and spark and ripple with pleasure.

Juliette wrapped her arms around his neck and laid her head on his shoulder. "I accept your apology."

His arms tightened possessively. He floated over to the small shelf near the water's edge. "I hoped you would feel my sincerity."

"Do you think a woman can fall in love with a man she barely knows?"

"I do not know, but she can fall in love with a man after she has walked in his mind and knows who he is and what he stands for."

She kissed his neck. "I never once dreamed I would have a man in my life. Never once."

"That is only because you could not conjure up the image of such a charming man." He sank down onto the shelf looking pleased with himself and pulled her onto his lap, cradling her close. "I have four brothers." He pushed the wet hair from the side of her neck and threw it back in a long, wet trail over her shoulder. "Our prince sent us out so many years ago this country has become our home. I am the youngest in the family, and my brothers worry for me, all of them. Nicolas and Rafael are out of the country at the moment so you are safe from meeting them en masse. We have very close ties to a family of humans..."

"The ones who work your cattle empire," she interrupted.

"Ranch. It is large, but it is no empire. Yes, they run the ranch. They have young orphaned relatives in the United States and two of my brothers went to help them smooth the way to bring them home."

She looked up at him suspiciously. "What does that mean? Smooth the way. By using their voices with hypnotic suggestions? Their eyes mesmerizing people?"

He grinned again, softening the lines in his face. "Is that what you think I do?"

"You're shameless about it," she confirmed.

"It worked on you, and that is all that matters."

"You wish it worked on me. I just happen to like the way you're put together." She laced her fingers through his. "So you have a big ranch and live there with four overprotective brothers and a human family as well."

"My other brothers, Manolito and Zacarias, the eldest, are probably heading this way as we speak to check on me as if I were an infant."

She brought his hand to her mouth. "I'll testify you're long past the infant stage if you'd like."

"I doubt if it will be helpful. I can handle my brothers. I am just warning you that their protection will extend to you. We have to avoid them until I know you're so completely captivated by my charm, you will not run away from them."

"I live with my younger sister, and my cousin. Jasmine, my little sister, is beautiful inside and out." Juliette frowned. "She is able to shift once in a while if she is under tremendous stress, but she can't count on the ability as I do. My cousin and I are the protectors in my family. Not just in my family but for all women in our bloodline."

He was silent, waiting for her to continue. He sensed a terrible sadness and tightened his arms around her to give her comfort and support.

Juliette leaned her head against his shoulder, her hair floating on the water around them like seaweed. "I have to go back home and make certain my sister and my cousin are safe. I

have a duty to my family, Riordan, just as you have one to your people. We don't have men to protect us. Our men do not mate for life, nor do they stay with us. Some of the men try to kidnap and hold our women prisoners just to be able to keep the bloodline pure. Very few of us are capable of shifting into our other form. And it will continue to become fewer and fewer. They treat these women like breeding machines. It's a horrible thing. They don't love them or try to create an atmosphere of happiness, they simply force them to produce babies."

"And what is it you think you can do to stop them?" His voice was utterly devoid of expression.

Juliette felt a chill go down her spine. She sensed his sudden stillness. She had been in his mind and there was a ruthless, merciless quality buried deep inside of him that alarmed her. "Someone has to rescue the women. I'm strong. I'm capable of shifting, and I'm not afraid of those bastards. I can protect my sister and cousin. Well, maybe Solange protects me." She turned her head to look up at his face. "They took my mother. She was held in a tiny room, and several men raped her to get her pregnant. It didn't happen immediately so they had her for a long time. It took us two years to find her."

"Juliette." He breathed her name. Her sorrow beat at him, tore at his heart and soul. He nuzzled the top of her head. "I am so sorry." She didn't need to tell him the rest. He saw it in her mind. Her mother had died in childbirth, too long neglected by the men who held her prisoner. The child had died as well, and Juliette felt responsible because it had taken so long to find her mother.

Riordan had been prepared to forbid her to assume the part of a warrior woman, but he couldn't speak, couldn't issue commands even though it might keep her safe. Her pain ran too deep. He understood the need to protect others. He understood honor and responsibility. His fingers crushed her hair in his fist. "Did you find the men who took her? You must know them by scent."

Tears burned behind her eyelids, tears she vowed would never be shed. She refused to spend her time crying. There were very few women capable of shifting and the jaguar males who had banded together were determined to possess them. She was every bit as determined that they would never get their hands on them.

"Jasmine may not be able to shift on command, but even the small ability she has places her in danger. She has other gifts to aid her, but she couldn't fight against the males if they captured her. I live with Jasmine and my cousin. Solange is my mother's sister's daughter and my mother raised her after my aunt was killed when several males tried to capture us. She fought them off, giving my mother time to escape with the three of us girls."

"So now you and your sister and cousin live in fear of these men coming after you. Why did you stay in the jungle where there is danger?"

"Why do you hunt the vampire?" she fired back. "This is our home. We're not the only

women these men are after, but we have skills. After what they did to our mothers, we don't plan to just let them steal and kill other women. We know the way the men think now, and we've successfully taken back several women."

"Juliette, what you do is very dangerous. These males are not right. I have known some of the jaguar race and the men did not commit these crimes against their women. Something is wrong."

"It isn't all the men. It is only a small group, yet they are very powerful because they have banded together." She turned in his arms. "Do you understand why I have to stay with these women? They have no other protection. Jasmine and I feared the males were in league with someone at the new Morrison laboratory. Too many animals on the endangered species list were being captured. We thought the jaguar males were trading animals for help in finding the females. That was one of the reasons we broke into the laboratory."

"Is it possible a vampire has connected with a jaguar male and corrupted him?"

"I think these males have corrupted themselves."

"We will return to your family and make certain they are safe, Juliette. If you care about them, then, of course, I care about them. There is no question this practice must be stopped."

"I tried not to blame the males, I really did. Our species is dying out, but they don't care at all about the females, only that they want the race to go on." She shook her head sadly. "It isn't right. We have a right to our lives."

He kissed her temple, the corner of her mouth. "I understand their desperation. Our species is nearly extinct also." He tipped her chin up so he could capture her mouth. His kiss was gentle, tender. "I bound you to me with no thought of your feelings, Juliette. Perhaps I am as guilty as these males." His arms circled her waist, pulled her onto his lap so that they half floated in the water, her body fitting into the cradle of his hips. "I never thought how selfish that would be. In my culture, lifemates are destined and must be together for survival. It is another world now, one where our women, perhaps, are not even from the same species. I should have thought more of what you wished to accomplish in your life and less of what I needed to survive."

Juliette lay back against him, resting her head in the niche of his sternum. His hands cupped her full breasts, taking the weight in his palms, his fingers gently massaging her almost without thought. Pleasure shot through her. She thought she might never want to move again, yet his hands on her body created a molten heat that moved slowly through her bloodstream and licked at her skin.

"I wasn't thinking either, Riordan, only how much I wanted you. I could barely think straight with wanting you. You hadn't bound us together at that point so I'm not so certain I would have said no." She turned over lazily and slid down his body, skin to skin, rubbing

along his chest and rib cage, delighting in the differences between men and women. His belly was flat and ridged with muscles. She licked off droplets of water. The rain fell gently, cool drops that seemed to sizzle against her hot skin. She wrapped her arms around his hips, nuzzling his navel lazily. Her teeth nipped his skin.

Riordan felt his body harden in response. Looking down at the clean line of her back, the rounded enticement of her bottom, her legs floating over his in the cool waters of the pool was enough to give any man pleasure. Her mouth wandered over him, tasting and licking. There was nothing inhibited about Juliette. She loved having sex with him, loved his body, and in her mind she let him know. With her body she let him know. It was exciting to have a woman so completely open and natural with him.

"I should have given you the opportunity to at least discuss what it meant, Juliette," he said. His voice was husky. Her mouth was doing delicious things to his body and it was becoming much more difficult to think straight.

"I don't think I wanted to discuss it." She slipped a little lower so she could breathe hot air over his heavy erection. She smiled when she felt his muscles contract and his hands clamp over her arms in reaction. Juliette lifted her chin so she could meet his gaze, reveling in the hunger darkening his eyes. "If I'd thought too much, I wouldn't have been able to have you. And I really, really wanted you." She lowered her head so she could lick along the head of his penis, a slow, leisurely exploration of the shape and texture of his body.

His breath slammed out of his lungs. "I have to admit, I am eternally grateful you want me. I do not think we will ever have enough time to do all the things I have in my mind." Deliberately he let her see his every desire, his every need.

Juliette laughed softly. "It's good we think along the same lines. I would hate to be tied to someone who isn't adventurous. I definitely need adventurous."

It was his turn to yell. The sound ripped from his throat when her mouth engulfed him, took him deep into her throat and began a slow, sensuous foray. *I thought I would find out how you taste. Whether you're hot and spicy and tangy.* Her teasing laughter played over his senses and stroked at his body. He lost time, drifting in the waves of the pool lapping at his body, with her hot mouth and tongue bringing him to a fever pitch. When he could no longer stay still, he moved his hips into her, letting her take charge of the rhythm, set the pace. She teased him to the brink of an orgasm, sucking hard and lavishing attention with her tongue, only to slide her mouth loosely over him, her teeth gentle. *I love to feel what you feel. I love to hear the roar in your head and know I can put it there just by doing this.* Her mouth pulled at him. His hands fisted in her hair, his hips growing more urgent, more frantic in his response. She took him deep, working him until he was so caught in her spell, so far gone with pleasure he couldn't think straight.

"Finish it or let me have you," he managed to hiss out between his teeth.

She complied, her soft, taunting laughter only teasing his senses more. Juliette reveled in

her power. He was enormously strong and dangerous, and yet he needed her. *You need fun in your life, Riordan. You really do need me.*

Damn it. He growled it in her mind, his hands bunching in her hair.

Her mouth sent him deliberately over the edge, milking him as her teasing laughter burned in his brain. She was etched in his very bones for all time. He would never be able to go back to what he had been. And he would never be able to be without her. She carried light with her and she made him feel it in the unrelenting darkness that had been his home.

She ducked under the water, pushing away from him. Riordan reached out and caught her, dragging her back. He pushed the wet hair from her face and stared down at her. His miracle. "I do need you," he admitted. If she could be brave and honest and admit what she wanted and needed he could do no less. "You are everything."

Chapter 7

"I need blood, Juliette. The night is slipping away from us. We must return to your family at full strength. I would love to spend the rest of my days here, making love to you and discovering the secrets of my lifemate, but I must have sustenance to renew my strength." Riordan waded out of the pool and held out his hand to her.

Juliette took her time, her eyes taking her fill of him. "I swore I would never have anything to do with a man. The men I've known have no knowledge of caring." She looked down at the ground. "It's a terrible thing to grow up being ashamed of what you are, knowing you might give birth to a male of the species and no matter what you do, how much you love him, how you raise him, his nature will always prevent him from loving you back."

His fingers settled around her wrist and he drew her to him. "I have lived many years and have found that each species has both strengths and weaknesses. The males of the jaguar race are wanderers, but the ones I encountered cared about their women. They could not settle down and the continual drive to perpetuate their race became their downfall. They would not stay with one female, though I believe many of them tried and were very distressed that they could not." He drew her into his arms to comfort her. "The rain forest here in South America is very large and there are no borders in the jungle. We settled in Brazil, on the edge of the forest, but we travel from country to country to insure the safety of the inhabitants. In our travels we often encounter the males. They are all solitary creatures. We had been instructed by our prince to avoid them if possible, but often we spoke with them. Jaguars, like our species, are on the verge of extinction. They are intelligent and know they contributed to their own extinction, yet they still could not stop what nature dictated." And a part of him felt very much as if they deserved their fate when they refused to treasure their women and children.

"You're saying it's not their fault." Juliette pulled out of his arms, turning her face away from him as she gathered her clothes with shaking hands. She stepped into her jeans and dragged them up over her bare skin, blinking back tears. That was twice she'd nearly cried in front of him. She didn't cry. Not because of a man.

"We are not talking about the rogue males, the ones out of control and doing harm to their women. They should be brought to justice, not allowed to be kidnapping and raping women with the idea of creating baby machines." He took the shirt from her hands and turned her around to face him, tipping up her chin so she had to meet his dark gaze. "I may be rough, Juliette, and I will admit I have long ago forgotten how to be gentle, but I would never harm a woman unless she threatened my life or my people. It is not done."

She framed his face, her palms resting along his shadowed jaw. "You're gentle enough for me." And he was. He moved her like no other man had ever done—or ever could. They had come together in fire, burning hot and out of control, yet then he had stroked tender caresses down her body with a trembling hand, sitting her on his lap, cupping her breasts reverently.

Riordan leaned down to kiss her upturned face, taking his time, lingering over it. His heart found the rhythm of hers. "You are an unexpected gift. I am not a man to throw such things away."

She took her shirt from him and slipped into it.

He reached out to pull the edges of the material together over her generous breasts. "Even in your clothes, you look so sexy I am uncertain whether or not I can keep my hands off of you." He lifted the soft weight of her breast, his fingers sliding over creamy skin. "Your skin is so soft and warm and inviting." He bent down and drew her nipple into the heat of his mouth, unable to resist the temptation.

Juliette closed her eyes, pressing closer to him, wrapping her arms around his head, holding him to her while waves of pleasure coursed through her body, swamped her utterly and completely. She loved the way he indulged himself with her body. She loved that he enjoyed her so much and that he obviously wanted her to feel the same about him. "We're never going to leave this spot if we keep this up," she murmured, wanting to strip off her jeans and wrap her legs firmly around his waist. "I think sex with you is addicting."

"I cannot help myself." His tongue teased her nipple into a hard peak before reluctantly releasing her. "Your body is such a temptation."

Her fingers drifted over his heavy erection. "There you go again, blaming it on me. I see you like this, hard and thick and so in need, and naturally I want to do something about it."

He groaned. "I have no discipline around you." He tugged at the jeans until they were down around her ankles and she could kick them aside. "If I do not get some relief, I doubt I will be able to walk, let alone battle any vampires. What do you intend to do about it?"

She circled his neck with her arms and pulled herself up his body, wrapping her legs tightly around his waist. "I thought I would just take a ride," she whispered and licked his ear with a teasing tongue. Very slowly she settled over his penis, lowering herself with slow deliberation. As he began to push his way through her tight folds she shivered with pleasure. "It's always so perfect with you." She waited to move until he had filled her completely, sinking down onto his shaft so that she was impaled and full and every nerve ending was alive and sizzling with flames.

Riordan didn't wait for her, catching her hips in his hands and helping her with her sensuous ride; long, hard thrusts that went deep inside of her, joining them together. He loved the way her breasts rubbed against his chest, the way she threw her head back,

obvious pleasure lighting her face. She purred, just like a cat, deepening the movement, as wild and uninhibited as he was. He was so tuned to her mind now, he could adjust his every movement to better give her pleasure. He knew the moment she wanted him to be slow and deep and he knew when she needed the hard, long strokes that sent fiery friction whipping through both of them.

Night shadows hid them in the small grotto. The wind rustled in the canopy overhead. Bats fluttered above the water, hitting insects just above the surface. Raindrops splattered into the pool. Juliette inhaled the scents of the night, the combined scent of man and woman. Her nails dug into Riordan's shoulders and back as wave after wave of orgasm burst through her. He shared the experience in her mind and the riptide of ecstasy coursing through her sent him over the edge. Juliette, merged so completely with Riordan, felt the pressure start deep in his core and explode through his body with the force of a locomotive. They fed each other passion and heat, a firestorm of pleasure that washed over and through them and left them breathless and clinging to one another.

Juliette fastened her mouth to his—hot, wet, hungry. She tried to crawl inside of him, share the same body, the same mind. Kisses went from greedy lust to slower, calmer, leisurely exploration, to long, lingering enjoyment. She lifted her head and looked into his eyes. They stared at one another for a long time, drinking each other in, falling into the depths of each other's eyes. "I look at you and everything just comes together, Riordan. I don't know why, and I don't think I want to question it too closely. I'm just going to take what fate offered me and grab on with both hands."

"You will never be sorry, Juliette," he promised, raining kisses over her face, her eyes, down her neck and throat. "You will never be sorry."

"I can feel your hunger now, the call inside you. It's a frightening thing. How can you keep it at bay the way you do? If I felt like that, I would be devouring something." She swept back his hair and slowly allowed her legs to drop to the ground. "You have to get some nourishment. I don't mind, Riordan. I'm not in the least bit hungry and the thought of food makes me want to gag, but it's sort of sexy when you take my blood. I think I'm getting a bit kinky." She looked around for her clothes, missing the look of wonderment on his face.

He reached down to snag her blouse from where it had been carelessly tossed aside. He didn't even remember stripping it off of her. "You are a very generous woman, but I think I will refrain from the temptation of your blood." This time he firmly buttoned the blouse. "You know I am going to think of your breasts just waiting behind this very thin barrier. If I am distracted later, you will know why."

Juliette laughed. She couldn't remember being so happy. "That's all right, you go ahead and think about my breasts. I'll be thinking of your very nicely put together anatomy." She yanked her jeans on and deftly braided her hair. "How much time do we have for traveling tonight?"

He glanced at the sky. "A few hours. We should be able to cover many miles. I will have to carry you, and that means I will have to find blood." He glanced down at the terrible marks on his chest. "Carpathians heal in the ground and yet I did not. I need to get back to full strength for the coming battle, and that means I need to find people."

She suddenly went still. "Not my sister or cousin." There was a warning note in her voice.

He grinned at her. "I do not think you have to worry. I would not risk your wrath." He tugged playfully at her braid. "You sound so fierce."

Juliette watched him clothe himself. It was done with a simple wave of his hand as if he'd manufactured the clothes from thin air. His hair was neatly brushed back away from his face and tied with a leather thong. There wasn't a drop of water on him anywhere and his hair was dry. "Oh, that is cheating. Look at me, I look like a drowned rat." She flipped her thick wet braid over her shoulder. "I want to be able to do that."

"You will," he assured. "Come here. We need to get started."

"You aren't going to throw me over your shoulder like you did last time, are you?" she asked suspiciously.

He grinned at her, his teeth very white. "Well, I was thinking about it."

"Refrain. Last time I considered getting sick all over you."

"I am so glad you didn't." Riordan gathered her to him, holding her close, and took to the air, shifting into his favorite form of a bird as he rose. It was easier to fly above the canopy than to try to wind his way through the thick branches and leaves. And he was wary of traps. They were nearing the area where he had first heard the voice of the vampire calling to him for help. He was certain the vampire and his human accomplices were responsible for the net that had nearly claimed him a second time.

Juliette laughed aloud as Riordan raced across the sky. Twice she reached out, trying to touch a cloud, unable to resist. *This is astonishing.* She felt a part of the night sky, the stars and the clouds and even the rain. It was as though she had merged with nature. She expected to feel fear, but she felt elation, joy, completely alive. It was every bit as wonderful as running through the jungle in the form of a jaguar.

Do not ever feel regret, Juliette. You will be able to shift into many forms and effortlessly hold those forms.

I have to tell you something. The smile faded from Juliette's face. Riordan caught the uneasiness rising as he followed the directions in her mind. *We have to move often. We have several homes.*

He waited. It wasn't what she wanted to tell him. She was hesitant, very unlike his bold

Juliette. She carefully turned over her words, trying to formulate the best way to get him to understand.

Juliette. You must trust me. Just say what you need to say and trust me to understand.

She could see the canopy far below her. The leaves of the trees were silver-black in the moonlight. The raindrops dazzled her eyes, glittering like diamonds as they fell from the clouds. *We have seen terrible things from the males. Young girls unable to shape-shift beaten and abused. Solange, Jasmine and I vowed never to have anything to do with a man other than the necessities.*

Necessities? She meant sex. Riordan felt his heart pound. Something black and dangerous swirled in his gut. It was ugly and volcanic, and he was ashamed of his reaction. She was telling him something terribly important, not only to her, but to her life, and his first thought had been that the necessity was sex with another man. He despised himself for being so petty. She was a beautiful and sensual woman. Many men would find her attractive, and he should be proud of her. Lifemates trusted one another implicitly. It was impossible to lie to one another or hide anything, and as they grew to know each other better it would be natural to spend more and more time in one another's mind.

I am not such a man, Juliette. At my worst, I would not harm a woman or child. It is abhorrent to me. I had no idea my returning emotions would be so overwhelming and intense, but I know myself well. I would never, I could never hurt you or your sister and cousin.

Juliette leaned into him, felt the tickle of feathers and immediately wanted to be able to join him in the form of a bird. *You don't have to tell me that. I already know you wouldn't ever hurt a woman or I would never be with you. I'm concerned my family won't be very accepting of our relationship.*

I will win them over.

Far below them, near the edge of the rain forest, was a small settlement. Riordan began his descent cautiously, one part of him scanning the area below for signs of the vampire. *Always scan to look for danger before revealing yourself.*

It feels a bit intrusive. You pick up random thoughts. She was studying his ways carefully, trying to learn as much as possible. *I would hate to pick up my sister's thoughts or worse, my cousin's.*

He laughed as he set her gently on the ground, shifting back to his natural form as he planted his feet in the thick vegetation. "You can avoid scanning the thoughts of your family. You will learn to tune things out once you refine the process. Start experimenting now with volume and reading the air. You can feel danger vibrating. If there is a blank spot where what seems natural to you is not there, a vampire is attempting to hide his presence from you."

"Do you always know a vampire is a vampire?"

"Unfortunately, no. If a vampire is skilled, such as a master vampire, he could easily walk up to one of the hunters, greet him in the way of our people and go on his way unscathed."

"How frightening."

"Stay here while I feed. You should be safe for the moment. There is a feel to the forest, as if the animals are in hiding."

Juliette went still. She had been so busy trying to think as a Carpathian, so wrapped up in Riordan as a man, that she had forgotten the first rule of living in the jungle. She hadn't paid attention to the warning system of the inhabitants. Riordan strode away from her, melting into the shadows so that it was impossible to see him, even when she was looking directly at him.

She lifted her face to the wind. She was jaguar. And her senses were enhanced by ancient Carpathian blood. She could read the forest news. Animals were hiding, lying low and trembling, waiting until a night bird signaled they were once again safe from predators. Juliette turned her head this way and that, on the alert, feeling the vibration of danger moving through the air. Something was wrong. They were a few miles from the laboratory and several miles from her home.

Her heart jumped. "Jasmine." A large predator or a hunting party had passed through the area and frightened the inhabitants. A sudden chill went down her spine. Or a *group* of predators. She was supposed to lead the guards from the Morrison laboratory away from the direction of her home, but Riordan had carried her off instead. Had they found Jasmine's trail? Jasmine might not have been as cautious as she should have, thinking Juliette would be drawing the guards away from her. What if it was worse than the human guards? What if the male jaguars had cut across Jasmine's trail? Solange was on a scouting mission, hunting for any news of missing females. Jasmine had been alone.

Juliette didn't hesitate, she turned and ran, following the small animal trail through the brush. *I think my sister's in trouble.*

I am feeding, near full strength. Wait for me. I will get us to her.

She couldn't wait. She knew it didn't make sense, but she had to do something. Adrenaline was pouring through her body. Fear took hold of her mind. What if Jasmine had been taken the night before and the males had her already for nearly twenty-four hours? *Please God, please God.* She chanted the plea, her chest burning, her throat closing. The more she ran, the more she was certain the jaguars had been on her sister's trail, tracking her.

"Juliette," Riordan caught her in strong arms, in front of her, blocking her way. She hit

his chest hard, but his larger frame barely rocked under her assault. "We have to be cautious. And we do not want to ruin any tracks. If they have her, it is better to slow down and find her trail, than to go running around without direction."

"You don't know what they do," she hissed, pulling away from him.

"We will find her and get her back."

She stepped away from him and wrapped her arms around her body, hunching. "You have no idea what she will suffer, and I can never take it back."

He led the way, moving fluidly, so silent not even the leaves rustled. Juliette tried to breathe, to get her brain functioning again. *I couldn't bear it if something happened to Jasmine. It's my fault. I was supposed to draw the guards away. I wasn't here to do it, and she probably left tracks. The males would be able to follow her easily.*

This is not your fault Juliette. Riordan could smell them now. He didn't want to tell her, but he knew as they approached the small hut covered over with vines and creepers. The structure was difficult to see through all the foliage. He reached for her hand. The door was splintered down the middle, one half cracked and broken out, leaving a large hole.

A terrible cry welled up in Juliette. She couldn't stop it, couldn't repress it. The sound tore through her body, raw and horrible, tearing her throat. It was an agonized cry of pain and heartache and grief. It was a cry of revenge, of promise, a vow of absolute retribution.

Chapter 8

Riordan went through the door first. The stench of terror permeated the room. The pungent odor of large cats was overpowering. A table was overturned. There was a smear of blood on the wall and another on a broken chair.

Juliette pressed her hand to her mouth, choking back a sob. "She's just a child, Riordan. She's just turned twenty." She pushed past Riordan and hurried across the room to the wall. She inhaled deeply, scenting the blood. "This isn't from Jasmine. It's Solange. She was here."

Riordan was examining the room and the forest floor just outside. "She came when they were taking Jasmine and she must have shifted on the run. Can she do that? See, here are her footprints, and here are ripped clothes and claw marks. She did not have time to shed her clothes and shifted with them on. The seams of the material separated and she ripped the rest away from her so she could fight. She was the one who destroyed the door trying to get to your sister. They barred it from the inside and took your sister out the back. One was carrying her. They were in the form of men. See." he crouched beside the tracks. "This one is suddenly heavier, and he's bearing a weight. Jasmine is not struggling."

"She's unconscious," Juliette said. "She would fight them with her last breath. We all watched my mother die. Solange saw them kill her mother and yet she raced in, without hesitation, to try to stop them." She turned back to study the blood. "She isn't hurt too bad."

"One remained behind, a big male, and he shifted into jaguar form. He probably didn't want to harm her when he saw she was female and she shifted on the run. After all, she is probably extremely rare." Riordan followed the tracks. "She got away, into the forest. The big male is after her." He turned back to Juliette. "Which one do we go after?"

"Maybe we should split up. I'll follow Solange. We've fought together before, and I know how she thinks. She'll accept me. You go after Jasmine. You're far stronger and can travel faster. You have a chance of getting to her before they hurt her."

"Dawn will be breaking soon, Juliette. I will have to go to ground. If I do not reach your sister before that time, she will spend another day in torment." Riordan cursed the vulnerability of his heritage. "I cannot walk in the sun." His fingers brushed her cheek. "You will burn, Juliette. Your skin is no longer able to stand intense sunlight and your eyes will burn."

"I don't care about my skin." Juliette pushed past him and studied the ground, the direction the group of men had taken. She tried to think who would need her the most.

Riordan was fast; he could get her close to her sister before he would have to get away from the sun. "Jasmine's already been with them for hours. If you don't think you'll have enough time to get to her then I'll have to trust Solange to get away from her attacker alone. We have to find Jasmine fast, Riordan."

Riordan circled her waist with one arm, lifting her. The surrounding jungle was a blur as he raced through it. She had no idea how he could focus on the tracks, on the small bruised leaves, snapped twigs, and occasional footprint when he moved so quickly. She didn't need to tell him her younger sister was in dire trouble; he could read every worry in her mind. When the males shifted form, they were without clothes. Jasmine was alone and without protection. Juliette could only pray that the males would want to get her as far from help as possible. She tried not to think of her cousin—alone, hurt, running for her life.

I can send for my brothers, but they are hundreds of miles away. They would not be here for several risings.

Solange will fight. They will not take her easily. Even as she thought it, a wave of hope went through her. It was true, Solange was a fighter. She would never surrender, never give up, no matter how injured she was. *I feel as if I'm deserting her, but she has a much better chance than Jasmine.*

From what I have seen of your cousin in your mind, she would want you to go after Jasmine.

Riordan was all too aware of the time slipping away from them. The jaguar males were adept at losing themselves in the forest. They had spread out, weaving through the trees, more cunning now, obviously certain there would be an attempt to follow them.

The wind rose in a sudden rush off the forest floor, carrying a swirling eddy of vegetation, leaves and twigs and petals of flowers in a dark funnel straight toward the sky. The debris burst over them, a cloud of missiles hurled from the ground by unseen hands. Riordan reacted instantly, instinctively swinging his body around in midair to better protect Juliette. Debris embedded in his skin, drove for his heart. He swore in several languages as he raced to get them to earth where he could fight without the burden of Juliette's human form hampering him.

Remove your clothes now and as soon as you feel the ground under your feet, shift and blend into the trees. Hide your true self deep within the animal.

It was the grimness in his voice that had her obeying without hesitation. She couldn't always shift to her other form, certainly not at will in the way he did, or even the way Solange was able to do, but she recognized they were in mortal danger. She managed to wiggle out of her jeans and unbutton her blouse before they were on the ground. She tossed her clothes away from her, willing the change, embracing it.

Riordan moved in her mind, picking up the image, lending his strength. The shifting was

slightly different from that of Carpathians, but he was deep in her mind and knew how it worked now so he was able to provide the extra speed. The jaguar sprang into the lower branches of a tree and disappeared entirely into the canopy. Riordan turned to face his enemy.

A shadowy figure exploded out of the ground, erupting directly in front of Riordan, fist slamming into his chest and driving deep. Riordan twisted slightly, taking the pain and letting it go, sweeping with one leg to send his attacker sprawling. There was no sound, and no face. The vampire was nothing more than black smoke dissolving rapidly. It was eerily silent. Not even the insects hummed.

Zacarias. Riordan reached along his private mental path for his older brother. *A master vampire is here, one with powers beyond all imagining. I cannot spot him. I cannot attack him. Should I fall, you must find and protect my lifemate.* Riordan crouched low, restless eyes searching, every sense on full alert. He dug into the forest floor and scooped handfuls of rich soil. He was losing blood fast. The vampire had deliberately weakened him. To preserve his strength, Riordan didn't move, other than to pack his wounds. He heard Juliette's distress in his mind, knew she remained close in hopes of aiding him, but there was no way to fight the unseen.

Riordan felt his brother moving through him, examining the terrible hole opened in his chest, estimating his strength, searching through his memories to replay the attack. *Get out of there. No lone hunter will take this one down alone.* Even as he sent the command, he was working to repair his younger brother's injury from a distance. Riordan could feel the warmth moving through his body, hear the healing chant in his mind.

He felt the air stir around him and immediately flung himself away from the disturbance, rolling to his left and coming up to face the shadowy figure. Riordan managed to deflect the jagged bolt of lightning before it struck him. The energy slammed into the ground, shaking the earth. He raised his arms and the ground continued to roll and pitch. Great cracks opened up, one rushing toward the insubstantial figure with ominous speed. Riordan felt the exact moment when both Juliette and Zacarias threw their strength in with his. The crack widened and split the ground and the vampire fell into the hole. Riordan sent the bolts of lightning streaking down after him, spear after spear, driving each deep in an effort to score a blind hit.

Riordan staggered as he moved to get away from where the vampire had last seen him. There was stillness now, as if the forest held its breath. Riordan realized the sky was dark due to storm clouds. Dawn was only a matter of minutes away. The vampire had struck fast and ferociously in the hopes of defeating him quickly.

He felt me with you. Zacarias thought it over. *He will not return to fight. He will most likely go to ground for a long period of time or leave our area. Whatever he wished to accomplish here is not worth his life. Whatever brought such a powerful enemy to our lands had to be important.*

I believe he has tainted some of the jaguar males. They have been capturing women and forcing them to mate for the purpose of breeding. Their women all have psychic abilities and are capable of becoming lifemates to our males. Riordan was certain a powerful vampire would only come to the jungle if it profited him. If the vampire could prevent the Carpathians from finding lifemates, more and more of their males would turn vampire or walk into the sun.

You are thinking this is a very defined conspiracy. Zacarias turned the idea over in his mind. This must be reported to our brethren in our homeland. I will send Manolito. We will deal with the jaguar males who are abusing their women. You must go to ground quickly, Riordan. Put your lifemate in the ground and stay until you are fully healed. I will begin the hunt for the women.

The sister of my lifemate has been taken.

You must heal or we will lose both of you. That cannot happen. Without children our race faces extinction, just as the jaguar.

Riordan abruptly broke off contact with his brother, despising the truth, despising the command in his brother's voice. It made them no different than the jaguar males.

"That isn't true." Juliette was at his side, pushing him onto the ground while she examined the blood-soaked pack in his chest. She pressed him to lie flat while she gathered more rich soil and healing herbs and mixed them with his saliva. "I learn fast. This ugly little recipe was in your mind while you were trying to do it yourself."

"It is true, Juliette. We need women desperately, and we need them to give birth to female children." He couldn't stop looking at her, bending over him with her beautiful feminine body. She was naked, crouched beside him, anxiety on her face, her incredible breasts swaying with every movement. He felt as if he were in a dream. She couldn't possibly be real. Women like Juliette didn't exist in his world.

"Riordan." She said his name sharply. "You're fading on me. Don't you dare pass out. Let me pack this tight and then I'll provide you with blood." She looked around nervously. "Are you certain he's gone? I never saw him. I couldn't help you because I never got a clear glimpse of him."

"It is dawn." Riordan sounded far away. He lifted his hand and touched her breast, barely skimming the soft skin to confirm that she was real. "He had no choice but to go to ground."

"Riordan, take my blood."

He shook his head. "You will be left weak and dizzy with no one to protect you."

She ignored the hand cupping her breast, massaging her flesh with gentle fingers. She caught his face and forced him to look at her. "Do as I tell you and take my blood. You can't die, and you will if you don't have blood. I need you to help me get Jasmine back. I want

you to live for me. Forget everything else, Riordan."

"I cannot protect you while I lie beneath the earth these long hours."

"I can protect myself. Please take my blood, Riordan." She was beginning to feel desperate.

There was a faint stirring in her mind. Another voice swirled there for a time, whispering with the same accent, far away and distant as if it was difficult to find the exact path. And then it was suddenly clear. *I am Zacarias. He will never willingly put you in more danger by weakening you. I will aid you, but you must remember, should anything happen to you while he rests beneath the earth, he will rise vampire and I will be forced to destroy him. You must stay alive.*

"Somebody ought to lay out the rules ahead of time," Juliette muttered under her breath, but gave the mental nod to Riordan's brother. She couldn't bear the idea of losing Riordan, and she could clearly see he was going to be stubborn and combative if she persisted without help.

She knew the exact moment Zacarias struck, taking hold of Riordan and forcing him to bite deep into Juliette's wrist. Even though he was under strong compulsion, she felt Riordan striving to protect her, swirling his tongue over her skin to lessen the pain. A surge of anger went through him briefly at what Juliette and Zacarias were doing, but his temper died a quick death. Juliette went her own way when she felt justified. If Riordan wanted to spend a lifetime with her, he had better get used to who she was.

Riordan pulled away from Zacarias's control the moment the blood gave him enough strength. He took only enough from Juliette to aid his healing before closing the wound with his tongue. He brushed his thumb over the pinpricks. "I want to spend several lifetimes with you, and I know exactly who you are, Juliette." He loved every inch of her, loved looking at her with her bare feminine curves, but time was slipping away and he was far weaker than he should be.

He fashioned jeans and a blouse for her, a soft lightweight material that wouldn't cling so much in the high humidity. "You must protect your eyes as best you can. I made the shirt long-sleeved to protect your skin. Try to stay under cover as much as possible. I know you will continue to track Jasmine, but do not put yourself in danger until I can aid you. It will not help your sister to have you killed or captured."

She pulled on the clothes, a little shaky from the blood loss and the terrible fear that welled up each time she looked at the shocking hole in his chest. "I'll be careful." She ran her fingers through his hair. "Do what you have to do. I'll see you as soon as the sun sets."

Riordan glanced around him, his fingers suddenly shackling her wrist, halting all movement. Uneasiness was beginning to creep into his mind. Scanning didn't connect with enemies, human or otherwise in the area. It would be impossible for a vampire to stand the

rising of the sun. Although most Carpathians could take the early morning hours, Riordan was severely injured and the light was already affecting his body. He rolled over to stare up into the canopy, unable to shake the sudden alarm coursing through his body. The leaves rustled and swayed with the mild wind. Every kind of plant climbed the trunks of the trees and twisted around branches, creating a jungle of foliage. The wind touched the leaves, the smallest of bushes, but it was enough to reveal turquoise eyes, gleaming like rare gems, glittering down at them.

The jaguar sprang, its stocky, compact body hurtling through the air, claws extended, eyes focused on its prey. Riordan shoved Juliette hard enough to send her sprawling and dissolved into mist, so that the cat hit the ground where he had been. The cat whirled, using its flexible spine, swiping with large claws at empty space.

"Solange! No!" Juliette rushed to grab the cat, running her hands through the soft fur, looking for damage. There were several lacerations, a series of ragged, gaping wounds where a cat had obviously raked her side. "You're hurt, these are deep." She turned to look for Riordan, felt his fingertips brush her cheek.

She meant to kill me, Juliette. I feel it in her mind. I must go to ground. She is enraged over the taking of her cousin. You stay safe and do your best to settle her down.

She heard the regret in his voice, the weariness and pain. "Go, Riordan. I'll see you at sunset."

Clothes floated to earth as he streaked away. The jeans were for someone with longer legs and a smaller waist. The shirt would cover Solange's well-endowed body. It had been easy enough to catch her exact proportions from Juliette's memories.

"He's gone, Solange. Tell me what happened."

Solange shifted to her natural form, remaining crouched on the ground, facing Juliette. "They already had her before I reached the house. I couldn't stop them, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry." She shook back her heavy fall of dark hair. "One stayed behind to try to give the others a head start. Once he realized I was female, and capable of shifting fast, with a more pure bloodline, I had a very real advantage. He didn't want to hurt me." Blood was dripping from the wounds in her side. "He did this before he realized what I was. I'm afraid it puts Jasmine in more trouble. They'll guard her much more carefully."

Juliette hugged Solange. "We'll find her and take her back."

"Who was that man?"

"Not one of them. He is Carpathian. Riordan. You heard Mom talk about them before." She couldn't help the defensive note in her voice.

"He's still a man, and they can't be trusted, Juliette. What does he want us for? Isn't the Carpathian race in the same trouble as the jaguar race?" Solange took the clothes from

Juliette's hands and knotted them together before tying them around her neck. "They need babies to keep their race alive."

"They at least respect women and want them to be happy, Solange. All men are not responsible for what a few have done. And there is some suspicion that the jaguar males have come into contact with a master vampire. I saw one, and if that is so, I felt how evil he was. The males may very well have been influenced by him."

"It matters little to me why they do what they do. They cannot have Jasmine," Solange said. "Get rid of the clothes and let's get out of here." She studied Juliette as her cousin stripped. "You're very pale." There was suspicion in her voice.

"I don't want to argue with you, Solange. Let's find Jasmine before we do anything else."

"We don't argue," Solange objected. "At least we didn't before you took up with a man." She studied her cousin's pale body. "A man who takes blood from others."

Juliette ignored the implication. "Is the jaguar still on your trail?"

"I doubled back and led him near the laboratory just to see if he would ask for assistance. A bunch of men are sifting through what's left of the building. It completely collapsed. Did the Carpathian have something to do with that?"

Juliette nodded. "I found him there, chained in a cell, and got him free. He was in bad shape. They'd tortured him."

Solange swore. "I suppose that makes me like him more. At least he knows a little bit of what our women go through."

Chapter 9

"The sun is burning my eyes," Juliette said, pressing her fingertips to her face. "No matter what I do they weep. My skin feels like it's blistering."

"It is. Shift, Juliette, hurry before you're a mass of blisters. We'll talk about this later." Solange looked at her closely. "You can tell me what that man has done after we get Jasmine back."

"Tell me whether or not the jaguar male went near the humans," Juliette encouraged as she tied her own clothes in knots and looped them around her neck.

"He did. He spoke briefly with them, although he didn't reveal his body to them. He was able to half shift. *Half* of his body human and the other half jaguar. I can't do that. None of us can."

"You come from the purest bloodline we know of," Juliette pointed out. "Mom referred to you as a princess once."

Solange made a face. "Somehow I don't consider myself very lucky. I wouldn't want to be the princess of the jaguar people." She glanced around her. "Are you ready? We have to get out of here. Those men have had Jasmine far too long." She was already shifting, fur bursting through her skin, rippling over her face while her muzzle elongated to accommodate teeth.

Juliette closed her burning eyes and reached for Riordan. *Tell me you are safe.*

I am deep in the arms of the earth. Let me help you shift. He sensed how tired she was, how weak. He stifled the need to keep her with him. Greater than his own need, there was hers. She had to find her sister, and he understood that. He didn't like it, but he understood it.

Juliette called up her large cat, concentrating on the shifting of muscle and bone. She felt Riordan moving within her, lending her power and strength when he didn't have it to give. A part of her wanted to weep when she felt his pain. She feared the coming separation from him, but she had to find Jasmine.

The change took her rapidly. Juliette touched muzzles with Solange and they turned together and raced off into the darkened interior. Using the jaguar's highly acute sense of smell they found Jasmine's trail immediately and hurried after her. They took to the overhead highway, the tangle of branches high up in the canopy that allowed them to travel

fast and in secret.

Birds took to the air, shrieked warnings at their passing, but neither jaguar paid any attention, and after a moment the birds settled back into the tops of the trees, ignoring them. The forest had stirred to life, insects humming, frogs croaking and deer barking to warn of the larger predators.

Juliette knew the exact moment when Riordan succumbed to the climbing sun and his heart stopped beating. The breath went out of her lungs, her heart stuttered in reaction, and she was suddenly and utterly alone—bereaved, grief-stricken. The jaguar stumbled, nearly tumbling from the branches. Claws dug into bark, scattering leaves and twigs and sending the birds once more shrieking. Solange turned sharply to growl a warning for stealth. They did not want to alert any of the males that might be guarding the back-trail.

The heavy canopy protected her from the sun, but Juliette still felt the rays piercing her skin through the thick fur. Her eyes wept continually, burning in the light. None of it mattered—not her grief, not her discomfort. Not the separation from her other half. She focused on her beloved sister. Jasmine was all that mattered. Juliette followed Solange.

The trail grew warmer in early afternoon. The pungent odor of the jaguar males was easier to follow. They were taking turns, hurrying through the forest, four in jaguar form and one in human form carrying Jasmine.

In spite of her determination, Juliette found she was having trouble keeping up with Solange. Her body, even in the form of the jaguar, demanded she sleep and worse, wanted to shift back into her human form. She'd always had trouble holding her animal shape for long periods of time. She had never gone from early dawn to early afternoon and it was nearly impossible to continue.

Solange stopped abruptly, her animal form suddenly stiffening. Juliette caught the scent of fear, of violence, of sexual predation. She lost her jaguar self, gagging, choking, catching the branch of the tree for support to keep from falling. Solange shifted into her human shape, holding Juliette as she was violently ill.

For a few minutes, Juliette's head roared with protest, with rage. She pounded at the bark of the trees until her fists were bruised and bleeding, weeping uncontrollably. "She fought them. She fought them, and I wasn't here. How could they do such a thing to her?"

Solange wept silently, the anger in her deep and firm and enduring. "We will get her back, Juliette. Be strong. You have to be strong for her. We can't let this slow us down. They wanted her docile and shocked. This was to show domination. This was to strip her of dignity and hope. But she knows we'll come. She knows we'll never stop until we have her back or we're dead." Solange brushed the hair from Juliette's eyes. "I see the sun is hurting you, that your body needs rest, but you haven't given in to it. You haven't stopped no matter what the cost to you. Jasmine knows what we're like. She will count on that and she will endure."

Juliette allowed her cousin to hold her, to comfort her for a brief moment. "We have to hurry, Solange. They can't do this to her a second time."

Neither woman wanted to think about their mothers, but it was inevitable. "Can you hold the jaguar form?" Solange asked.

Juliette nodded. "I don't know how long, but I'll do my best. Do you have any weapons stashed in this area?"

"About a mile from here. I think we're close to one of our caches. Clothes, food, drinking water, meds and knives. They have to stop soon. They're big males and they'll want to rest."

Juliette reached for her other form. It was easier not to think about Jasmine and what the males had done to her. She didn't want to see the smears of blood on the ground and the signs of struggle. It only weakened her. Her fury needed to burn bright and strong, and vengeful.

She struggled through the next couple of hours, pushing her body when it desperately needed sleep. Her eyes streamed every step of the way. but this time she was uncertain if it was the affects of the sun, or the grief raging in her. She knew by the way Solange carried her body that she felt the same intense emotions, a mixture of rage and sorrow that might never go away. She tried not to think of the girl Jasmine had been, her pixie smile and gentle kindnesses. Solange and Juliette burned with passion, hot and fiery with strong emotions. Jasmine was sweet and steady and irresistible.

Juliette felt a scream of denial welling up and just managed to choke it down as Solange veered from their path to indicate where the cache of weapons and food was stored. In human form, they dressed, strapping on knives with the same ease they dragged on clothes.

"They're close," Solange said, her voice very low. "I feel them. We're downwind of them." She drank water from the bottle stored with her supplies. It was brackish from age, but it was wet. She passed it to Juliette. "Are you up for this? It won't be easy."

Their eyes met. Juliette nodded. "We will succeed, there is no other alternative."

Solange took back the water bottle. "They outnumber us and they're strong, incredibly strong. I've heard Carpathians can perform incredible feats. Obviously if the man can become mist when under attack, it's true. Can he aid us, even from beneath the ground?"

Juliette reached for Riordan eagerly. Her mind had continually tuned itself to his, needing to touch him, compounding her sorrow when she couldn't. This time she was demanding, her call to him edged with need.

Juliette? His voice was faint and far away, but it was there, and relief swept through her heart and soul.

She replayed the events of the day in her mind. He went very still, withdrawing, but not

before she felt the impact of his black, dark rage. It boiled up, dangerous and deadly and far more lethal than her own. She should have been frightened, but she was comforted by his anger on her sister's behalf.

When he managed to get his anger under control, Riordan reached for her. The connection was much stronger. *These males are dangerous, perhaps their behavior is tainted by the vampire, perhaps they are a group of deviants who have banded together. They must be stopped, but two women against such odds is ludicrous and you know it. It will not help your sister if you are dead.*

We have no choice but to go in after her now, Riordan. We cannot subject her to more of their violence. Please understand I have no other choice. Can you help?

It is two hours until the setting of the sun. I can rise early. Give me another hour. He wanted to claw his way through the earth to get to her, but his body lay leaden.

Solange will scout them, but if they are raping her, we cannot sit back while they brutalize her. You can't ask that of us.

He swore softly. *I should have converted you immediately and you would be fully under my protection.* It was far too late to correct his mistake now. He was locked beneath the earth, and she was in terrible danger. He switched tactics, feeling her slight withdrawal. He didn't dare lose their connection. *Zacarias, awaken. I need your help. Manolito, we need you.*

Juliette held her breath, waiting. She knew Riordan was powerful, and she had already experienced his eldest brother's tremendous abilities. Hope surged through her.

Manolito is traveling to the Carpathian Mountains. Zacarias answered his call. I will feed you my strength when needed. Warn the women that should your lifemate fall, so will you, and in such a way that they cannot conceive of the monster that will be unleashed.

She understood more than they realized. She was already adept at reading Riordan's memories. She honestly didn't know whether or not she would have bound Riordan to her and converted him immediately if she were the one that could be consumed by the madness of the vampire. Juliette sent him as much reassurance as she could. *Thank you, Riordan. Please thank your brother.*

She turned to her cousin. "They are with us, Solange."

Solange handed her back the water bottle. "I'll trust your man if you do. Stay here and wait for the signal. I'll see what we're up against. That should give you another few minutes to rest."

"We go back-to-back, Solange, like we always do. If Jasmine is safe, we stall until Riordan is able to rise. If not, hopefully they can help us." Already she noted the storm clouds floating above them, helping block the sun and protect her eyes. The wind shifted

completely, bringing the strong scent of the jaguar male to them. Juliette turned and pushed her way through the shrubbery, careful to keep from making noise. Solange had already melted away, lost in the forest of orchids and fungi and fern. Few could surpass Solange's ability to blend into the forest and remain unseen. Juliette had complete faith in her cousin. She moved into position, a distance from the small encampment.

The jaguars were using a small cave, man-made, dug into the side of the embankment. The opening was a mere slit between two boulders. Solange worked her way in a circle around the area, knowing there had to be a back entrance. The jaguars would never risk being trapped in the cave. The wind shifted as she moved, always in front of her, giving her the exact location of the sentries. A jaguar male, obviously trusting in the forest warning system, rested in the tree branches to the left of the cave, sleeping in the late afternoon, tired from the two-day rush through the forest. The second guard crouched in human form near a large group of ferns. Solange was certain it was the bolt-hole for emergencies. She made her way back to Juliette to confer.

The two lay side by side in the grasses. Solange pressed her mouth to Juliette's ear. "I couldn't hear anything in the cave. I think they're resting. I'm fairly certain I can get close enough to the guard in his human form to kill him, but neither of us is going to be able to do much with the jaguar. He's big and he's a fighter." She touched her side. "He's fast too."

"We don't stand much of a chance inside," Juliette pointed out. "With the one up in the tree, I counted five. We're not going to win against five fully grown jaguars."

"Four," Solange said firmly. "After I take out the guard. You're right though, we have to draw the others out of the cave to have any chance at all."

"I can do that," Juliette said with confidence.

No! Riordan's harsh command was sharp. She heard the echo of Zacarias's protest. *Wait as long as possible.*

"Riordan wants us to wait, Solange," Juliette reported uneasily. She had no idea how her cousin would react. "He will try to rise before sunset to help us."

Solange nodded slowly. "I guess it makes sense, Juliette. We don't have to like it, but we don't have much chance against five males."

"I want to get closer, just to make certain they aren't touching her," Juliette said.

"I'll go. I can be invisible." A small, humorless smile tugged at Solange's mouth. "Well, not like your Carpathian, but I manage."

"You have a gift," Juliette acknowledged.

Solange began to circle back around toward the rear entrance, presuming Jasmine was being held as deep in the cave as possible. Once the jaguar in the tree stirred, yawned, his

mouth gaping open to show sharp teeth. Solange sank into the bushes, going completely still. Juliette slid a knife into her palm. The jaguar stretched, looked around and sniffed the air, testing with his tongue and sensitive whiskers. The wind carried the scent of the women away from him. The jaguar dropped his head back onto his leg and closed his eyes.

Juliette let her breath out slowly. Solange waited a few more minutes before continuing to creep forward again. Juliette strained to watch her cousin's process. The fronds of a fern swayed slightly, in time with the wind. Juliette couldn't understand how Riordan and Zacarias had the strength to guide the wind and follow Solange's progress. She could almost feel Riordan moving through her, attempting to get the layout of the battlefield through her eyes. He was waiting, much like a coiled snake, waiting for that moment when he could explode into the sky and come to her. Riordan's concern was comforting, and she sent him her appreciation.

Juliette's first warning was the way the human guard at the back entrance suddenly turned his head toward the cave with an evil smile. He walked a few steps and peered into the collection of shrubbery, his hand absently rubbing his crotch. She saw Solange move in behind him. A scream, a mixture of anger, terror and pain came from the interior of the cave. It was choked off abruptly. *I have no choice, Riordan.* It was her only apology for whatever might happen. Using higher ground, she ran to the entrance of the cave, catching a brief glimpse of Solange and the guard, the man falling to the ground, the bloodstained knife in Solange's hand.

Riordan was calm. He didn't protest, he simply waited, watching the events unfold through her eyes. Juliette could feel the presence of his elder brother. They coiled in her waiting their moment.

Stay to the side, hold the blade edge up. Riordan instructed as she neared the cave's entrance. Juliette didn't argue; she already knew his plan, catching the details in their shared minds. She called out Jasmine's name to let her know she wasn't alone and to draw the men from the cave. She had to trust Solange to watch her back and keep the jaguar off of her. Her arm flashed, faster than she knew how to move, an instinctual, timed movement that brought down the first man rushing from the cavern. Blood soaked the ground, but Juliette couldn't look, didn't dare look. She heard the roar of the jaguar as it leapt from the branches onto Solange.

Juliette turned to help her cousin, sprinting with a burst of speed not her own. Solange shifted on the run, coming together in fury with the heavy male cat, raking and biting, fur and material flying everywhere. Juliette skidded to a halt. She had no chance to help Solange, to try to kill the jaguar with the knife. The two cats rolled over and over in a terrible fury making it impossible to aid her cousin.

Juliette! Riordan was rising. She felt him bursting through soil and leaves to take to the air. At his warning she spun around, knife held low and close to her body, meeting the rush of the jaguar as it burst from the cave. The heavy cat hit her chest hard, driving her backward, the jaguar's foul breath hot in her face. Pain ripped through her as the sharp

claws tore through her skin to the bone. She felt Zacarias and Riordan moving in her, the knife plunging into the cat's sides and chest as his teeth drove at her throat. Breathing was difficult, but Riordan forced the air through her burning lungs. She slammed into the ground hard and lay pinned beneath the heavier body. Leaves and twigs soaked red with blood beneath but she couldn't tell whose blood it was. The cat's teeth were embedded in her throat and her arms were leaden, making it impossible to push the heavy body off of her.

Look at Solange. Riordan, so calm it was frightening. There was a command in his voice she couldn't disobey.

Jasmine screamed again, and Juliette's body jerked at the sound.

Look at Solange. Riordan repeated it. He was much closer and gaining in strength as the sun began to set.

Juliette couldn't move her head, so she shifted her gaze to see the male cat clawing Solange viciously. Blood seeped through fur and Solange staggered under the assault. A white haze was forming over Juliette's eyes. She blinked rapidly to clear her vision. Jasmine screamed again. Juliette could hear her weeping.

Stay focused on Solange. Riordan's voice softened. *Hold on for me. Just hold on, Juliette.*

Flames ran over the male jaguar's fur. Bright red and orange flames tipping the ends of the spotted coat and engulfing the animal. The two jaguars rolled on the ground in a terrible frenzy of claws and teeth, but not a single flame touched the female. The male howled and broke away.

Chapter 10

Riordan erupted out of the sky, a demon with red eyes, his black hair unbound and streaming in the wind. He materialized directly behind the man holding Jasmine as a shield. Juliette actually felt the man's head as if she had grabbed him. Riordan twisted hard. The frightening crack was loud as he snapped the man's neck and dropped him carelessly to the ground.

Jasmine ran to kneel by Solange while Riordan eased the teeth of the jaguar carefully out of Juliette's neck and tossed the heavy body of the cat away as if it were no more than a bothersome branch. Pain engulfed her, rushed through her body now that it was over and he was there. He pressed his hands to the puncture wounds on either side of her throat, clamping down hard to prevent her from bleeding to death.

Juliette began to choke. *Is my sister okay? Solange? I can't see them.*

Riordan glanced over his shoulder toward the two women. Jasmine's face was swollen and black and blue. Her clothes hung in shreds. There was blood smeared on her body, but she was alive and trying desperately to staunch the flow of blood from her cousin's many lacerations. Solange was naked and bloody, lying on the ground, but she was alert, watching Riordan as he bent over Juliette.

They are both alive, Juliette. Lie still for me. He trusted his brother to remain alert for further trouble as he went outside his body and into hers to attempt to heal her from the inside out. Juliette gurgled, choked and coughed up blood.

"Save her. Damn you, I know you can save her," Solange called to him. "Do whatever you have to do." She attempted to rise, pushed feebly at Jasmine, who held her down.

"I have to convert her."

"What does that mean?" Jasmine asked fearfully.

"Who cares," Solange snapped. "Hurry, before it's too late."

Riordan ignored everything and everyone around him. Juliette was slipping away from him. He bent his head to her throat and drank, taking more of her precious fluid for an exchange. Riordan gathered her into his arms, slashed his chest and pressed her mouth to the wound. Deep within Riordan's mind, Zacarias gathered his spirit into a healing ball of energy and moving through Riordan, found the puncture wounds and torn arteries in Juliette's throat and began to repair them from the inside out. He took his time, making no

mistakes, closing the gaping holes and removing foreign bacteria from her system.

Juliette felt both men from a distance. Zacarias broke off abruptly as if the connection between them had grown too difficult to maintain. She felt the lack of warmth immediately and shivered. Riordan leaned down and whispered to her, ending the flow of nourishing strength pouring into her body. She tried to lift her hand to his face. He looked so worried. Her hand fluttered next to her thigh but didn't quite make it into the air. Someone was crying. She turned her head toward the sound.

Jasmine sat beside Solange, wiping ineffectually at the bloody wounds and weeping softly. She was barely recognizable with her swollen face. "Is my sister going to live?"

Her voice was very soft and shaky. She didn't look at Riordan, but kept her gaze fixed on her cousin.

"Yes, little one," Riordan answered gently. "She will live. I have to take her away for a short time. I would like you and your cousin to go to my ranch where you will be safe until I can bring her back to you."

Jasmine shifted closer to Solange. It was a small movement for protection, but Riordan noted it immediately.

Can you take it away from her? What they did? Can you undo it?

Riordan lifted Juliette and carried her to her sister and cousin. "We can't stay long. I need to get Juliette to a place where she is safe while the conversion takes place and where I can heal her fully." *You know I cannot undo what has been done.*

Solange reached out to take Jasmine's hand. Jasmine twined her fingers through Juliette's. "Together we get through," Solange whispered.

Juliette tried to speak, but her throat was too swollen and raw. *Ask Solange if you can heal her.*

Riordan could feel the waves of distaste and fear coming from both women. They were doing their best to tolerate him and trust him because they loved Juliette. "She wants me to heal your wounds, Solange. I do not think she will leave this place and be calm without me doing so." It was the only leverage he had. If Solange didn't comply he would have no choice but to use his other gifts.

"Get it over with then." Solange never took her eyes from her cousin. "I am not going to your ranch. I'll destroy these bodies so our race remains secret, and Jasmine and I will go to our home at the edge of the rain forest, far from this place. We'll wait there for Juliette's return. Jasmine and Juliette will not be happy being apart." It was a clear warning.

Riordan nodded. "I am fully aware of that." Not wanting to waste any more time on talking, Riordan immediately allowed his physical self to fall away, called his spirit into a

strong ball of healing energy and entered Solange. She had many wounds. Most were superficial, but some went bone deep, just as he had found in Juliette. He spent precious time healing from the inside out, shocked at how difficult it was to keep his mind from Juliette and the fact that time was slipping away from him. He was always focused, yet it required a tremendous discipline to shut out all thoughts and concentrate on his task.

Solange lay watching him. Her gaze never wavered. Her eyes never blinked. Her hand remained in Jasmine's, but her attention was fixed on Riordan. When his body swayed and the soothing warmth disappeared from inside of her she let out her breath. "Jasmine, he's got to take Juliette now. We have to be strong a little longer."

Jasmine leaned over immediately and kissed Juliette. She didn't look at Riordan when she spoke. "Thank you."

"You two must be safe. If you go to my ranch—"

Solange shook her head. "No, I can't. Please try to understand. I know you've helped us, but we haven't had very good experiences with men and we feel safer alone."

Riordan couldn't help but see the shudder that went through Jasmine. Juliette squeezed her sister's fingers. "I am sorry. I really have to take her to a safer place for the conversion. I do not like leaving the two of you alone and unprotected."

"Thanks to your healing skills, I'm able to protect us." Solange looked around her at the bodies lying on the ground. "Most of our enemies are dead. Take her before we lose her."

Riordan gathered Juliette in his arms but stopped when Jasmine made a soft sound of distress. "What is it, little one?" He used his most gentle voice.

"How long?" Jasmine clung to Juliette as if she couldn't let her go.

"Can you be separated two days? That will give her time to heal enough to be safe rising. Solange knows of my people. Our word is our honor. I give you my word, we will return at once to you, the moment we rise. Juliette would want nothing else."

Jasmine nodded and reluctantly allowed her sister's hand to drop limply from hers. She leaned into Solange for protection. Solange wrapped her arms around Jasmine. "Go now, we can be unselfish enough to let you take her. I'll take care of things here."

Riordan didn't wait for a second invitation. He already felt the first stirrings in Juliette's fragile body, a wave of unease, a ripple of fire. Time was running out. He launched himself skyward, hugging Juliette to him, hearing Jasmine gasp then begin to sob. Glancing down he could see Solange sitting up slowly and gathering her young cousin to her.

I should be with her, with Jasmine.

It should never have happened, Riordan replied grimly. He had no idea how he managed

to keep the black anger swirling inside him at bay. He had Juliette's memories now, the intensity of her love for her sister and cousin. The memories of her aunt and her mother dying at the hands of deviant males. His every protective instinct was aroused, and rage lived and breathed inside of him.

Thank you for caring about them. And thank you for what you did for my cousin. I know it was uncomfortable not being accepted.

Fire blossomed in her stomach, spread through her body, engulfing every organ. He shared the pain, shocked at the intensity. He was as unprepared as Juliette for the violence of it. She shivered in his arms, biting back the cry of pain and trying to break the merge between their minds.

Riordan increased his speed. He couldn't make the protection of his ranch, or even get close to his home range, but after centuries living and hunting vampires in South America he was very familiar with their current surroundings. He dropped to earth in the rise of mountains, heading for a deep cave with natural hot springs. The soil was rich with minerals and the cave would be a natural protection against enemies. He could set strong safeguards and know humans and animals were safe from accidental encounters.

It took only minutes to prepare the cavern. Candles sprang to life, casting eerie lights across the shimmering pools. He placed Juliette on a soft bed he'd fashioned of rich soil that cushioned her body in welcoming arms. "I know it hurts, Juliette. I had no idea it was so painful."

We really didn't have much of a choice. Juliette didn't try to speak. Her raw throat wouldn't allow it, and in any case it was too tiring. She could feel the beast in her fighting for life, resisting the change in her body. The jaguar didn't want the reshaping of organs and tissue. Juliette was just too weary and in too much pain to care.

I would have converted you without the attack from the male. He felt compelled to confess it, settling next to her, holding her in his arms, lifting her fingers to his mouth. *I would not have been able to continue without you.* Riordan wasn't certain it was an apology, only that he wanted her to understand his conflicting emotions.

I would have been unable to continue without you. Riordan, so stop beating yourself up. Get my clothes off, I can't stand the weight of them against my skin. The last was said in desperation.

He stripped her clothes away without a thought for the material, shredding it from her body as quickly as possible. Her skin was hot to the touch. Riordan dipped his shirt into the coolest of the pools and bathed her face and wrists.

"I dreamt of you once," he said softly as he squeezed droplets of water over her throat and down the valley between her breasts. "You were laughing. I remembered the sound of your laughter for years afterward. It kept me going at times when I could not find a reason

to continue." He pushed the hair from her face. She was sweating. The beads of sweat mixed with tiny beads of blood.

I dreamt of you, too. There was happiness in her voice, the only thing that kept him from crying when a convulsion took hold of her and pain lashed for what seemed an eternity. She gripped his wrist, held on, trying to breathe through it, stay on top of it. When the wave released her she sighed. *I still think you're a dream.*

He had to swallow several times before he could speak. "Even now, with what I'm putting you through?"

Her eyes flashed, a reminder of her passionate nature, the fire contained in her feminine body. *I am jaguar. I have choices, and I make them. I wanted you from the first moment I saw you. As a jaguar, I have no future. With you I do. As a jaguar, there is no happiness, with you there is. I know the difference, Riordan.*

Before she could say more, the next wave hit her, even stronger than the last. The jaguar was not going to let Riordan have her without a fight. Riordan ground his teeth together, trying to take the pain from her, the bursting fire that rushed through her body and seared her insides. She was stoic about it, enduring the pain without a complaint. There wasn't a hint of blame in her mind. When the wave passed she inhaled the scent of the healing candles. *I'm going to be sick.*

It was his only warning and he moved quickly, holding her while her body rid itself of toxins. She was violently ill even as another wave of pain raced through her. Riordan was cursing when it ebbed away.

Wrapping her in his arms, he carried her into the coolest pool, submerging both of them up to their necks. He buried his face against her neck. "Are we going to survive this?"

She smiled. Not physically, but he felt it in his mind. *You are such a baby when it comes to me. I see you all rough and tough when you're scaring everyone around you with your bad-boy image and you fall apart because I'm in pain.* She caught a glimpse of something else and it brought tears to her eyes. *You're falling apart because of what happened to Jasmine. Riordan, it wasn't your fault. How could you think that?*

Before he could answer, the blowtorch blossomed in her stomach and lungs, eating through her until it was so great she convulsed again, her brain shutting off to prevent her from overload. All Riordan could do was hold her, feeling helpless and guilty and angry for not understanding what would occur.

Juliette opened her eyes and looked up at him. *You're crying blood, Riordan. Don't cry for me. I chose this path and I didn't expect my passing from one to the other to be easy. I feel the jaguar fading in strength. I knew from your memories that human women with psychic abilities could be converted, and all the jaguar women, and hopefully the descendents with more diluted blood, are psychic. I had hoped Solange would find a*

Carpathian to bring her the same happiness, and even, eventually, Jasmine, but I fear the jaguar in Solange is far too strong. It would never let her go.

Had I not taken you when you saved me from the laboratory, you would have been home to aid your sister. He couldn't say the words aloud to her. He whispered them in her mind. The idea that a male would commit such atrocities against a woman burned like a hole in his belly.

I was not expected back that night, Riordan. Jasmine knew I would draw the human trackers away. Neither of us expected an attack by the jaguars. I didn't even know they were in our part of the forest. I wasn't worried about the males.

He forced air through his lungs, so much rage in him the ground shook. I know her through you. A younger sister who will remain scarred for life. I wanted to insist she come home with us to the ranch, but I have brought you fully into my world. Who will be with her in the hours when she is alone?

The next wave was even longer, her thrashing body creating waves in the pool. Water splashed in agitation. The flames from the candles leapt as if a wind rushed through the cavern. The lights flickered, and the scents mingled to bring healing aroma wafting over the pool.

Juliette's nails dug deep into Riordan's skin. It took a few moments to find her breath again. She'll always have me. And now you. She's uneasy with your presence, and so is Solange, but they'll get better with time. We'll be more able to watch over them. Two of us with the Carpathian gifts will be able to guard them more carefully.

He bathed her, taking his time, cleaning her skin thoroughly, his hands lingering in places he sensed soothed her. The water helped to keep her skin cool.

The water helps. And the feel of your hands. When I dreamt of you, I dreamt of your hands touching me. I knew what they'd feel like on my body before you actually touched me physically.

"When did you dream about me? Did I look the same?"

Your hair was flowing in the wind, and you had that same incredible smile. I couldn't see your eyes as clearly because you were touching me and I was feeling rather than looking.

His heart nearly stopped beating. He remembered his dream vividly. He had awakened with a terrible hunger and his body alive with heat. He hardly recognized the sexual urges, he hadn't experienced them in centuries. He heard her in his mind, laughing softly, sensuously, calling to him. She was running just ahead of him, her scent ripe with heat. In his dream he had no choice but to follow her. She was always just out of reach, a tantalizing temptation, leaving in the air behind her a trail of sexual excitement.

We must have been close to one another and I was telegraphing my need. The purer the

blood of the jaguar, the more the sexual heats hit us hard. Fortunately, there aren't many of us women left. We stay as far away from the males as possible.

Riordan closed his eyes against the next wave of pain. The convulsion actually took her out of his arms, so that she nearly sank beneath the agitated water. He cursed his people, even his God, everything he could think of, then began to pray, promising everything he could think of if only her ordeal would be over.

He heard her soft laughter in his mind even before the pain leeches from her body. *You're going to save the world if this stops?*

He rubbed his chin over the top of her head. "I was desperate. It has to be over soon."

No wonder women have all the babies.

"Not you, not if it is anything like this. We will do without babies. I am serious, Juliette. I think I am going to be sick."

Well don't. I'm sick enough for both of us. I'm so tired. I just want to sleep.

He waded out of the pool, bringing her back to the rich, welcoming soil. "I can send you to sleep the moment it is safe to do so." He kissed her eyes closed. Kissed the corners of her mouth. "I love you."

How strange. I love you too.

It took two more intense waves of burning fire and convulsions before the jaguar was gone, the conversion was complete, and he could issue the command for healing sleep. He wrapped his arms and body protectively around hers and wept while the candles burned brightly and the water lapped at the edges of the pool.

Chapter 11

Riordan paced back and forth, his restless nature showing through his normally calm demeanor. Juliette had been in the house with her sister and cousin for most of the night. Dawn was only a couple of hours away, and he had yet to spend time with her. He understood completely the need to be with her sister after such a trauma, and he tried hard to suppress the selfish part of his nature, but fear was an ugly, clawing thing that kept him on edge. Solange and Jasmine wanted nothing to do with men. Riordan didn't blame them. Jasmine's gentle nature could barely tolerate what had happened to her. She was hanging on to her sanity by a thread. Juliette would help with her healing skills, strengthened by Riordan, but he knew the two women were a tremendous influence on Juliette. She also had a nature that demanded loyalty and responsibility. Jasmine was in pain, was terribly wounded. Juliette might feel she needed to stay with her.

The moment they had risen, he had fed, taken care of her needs and kept his promise to her family, bringing her straight to them. He knew they needed to be alone, and he had been the one to suggest he wait outside, but he couldn't help wanting to protect her from the pain of what Jasmine had gone through. It was difficult in the ensuing hours to keep his mind firmly away from hers to give Juliette and her family complete privacy, but he managed by pacing restlessly back and forth just in front of the small house.

He heard the door and spun around. Juliette was framed there, holding Jasmine and Solange to her, hugging them hard. She emerged with a bright smile on her face and tears in her eyes. It was obvious she had been weeping on and off for hours. Riordan's heart moved in his chest. He opened his arms, and she came into the shelter of his body.

He glanced over her head, nodded when Solange and Jasmine both lifted a tentative hand before closing the door. "I am so sorry I could not be there to comfort you," he whispered, brushing soothing kisses along her temple and down her tear-stained cheek. "I wanted to be there for you."

"I know. I carried you with me and leaned on your strength more than once. She needs time, Riordan. Please don't take the way they are personally. They'll come to love you, I know they will."

"They have given me acceptance," he pointed out. "I did not even expect that much, so I am grateful."

"I want to shift into another form and run away for awhile. I want it to be just you and me somewhere beautiful where I can't think about terrible things happening to people I

love. Take me away, Riordan. Let's go find our pool. Let's just be together where I can't think anymore."

"Would you like to try a leopard form? I often use it to travel through the forest."

She tugged until he let her loose. "That might be best. I still feel like a cat inside." Being close to Riordan definitely brought cat traits out in her. "Let's try." The thought of losing herself in an animal form was enticing. It had been wearing, all those long hours, holding her baby sister, rocking her, crying with her. She looked up at Riordan. "In the end, there's no real way to take it back. No way to help her." Juliette looked ashamed for a moment. "I almost asked you if you could remove her memories."

"Not with that large of a trauma. I could perhaps lessen the impact, but it would be in her memories and she might not know why she had reactions to things that were upsetting to her. If you want me to try—"

Juliette shook her head. "Jasmine is strong. She can survive this, maybe better than the rest of us. I've never seen Solange so filled with sorrow. We chose to remain here, moving from place to place because mom told us the males were kidnapping women they suspected of being of jaguar blood and bringing them here. They have no one else, no hope of rescue other than us. So we stayed."

"Now there are others to help, Juliette. I will. My brothers will. My people will."

She smiled at him, for the first time, her heart lightening. "Our people, Riordan. I'm Carpathian now."

He trailed his fingers over her cheek, framed her face with his hands and bent his head to find her mouth with his. His kiss was gentle, loving, tender even. "Absolutely, you are Carpathian."

"So how do I make the change?"

"In much the same way as before. I have the image and structure in my head. Study it, focus on it and reach for it. I will help. With us, we actually have to hold the image in our mind the entire time we stay in the form. You become the jaguar. We are the image of the animal. We have all of its senses and abilities, but we must maintain the outer shell."

She liked the idea. It would occupy her thoughts entirely. And she found she wasn't quite ready to give up the freedom she always felt running in her jaguar form through the heavy canopy. Juliette stretched her arms up to the night sky. "Show me the leopard."

"The leopard is in your mind. Hold its form, Juliette, do not think you can forget it as you did the jaguar," he cautioned.

"With you to remind me, I doubt I would have a chance," she teased, already reaching for the image. It wasn't all that different from her own unique beginnings, but it was complex.

As she changed form, so did Riordan. He made it seem easy and natural and fun.

The moment Juliette felt the familiar ropes of muscle, joy spread through her. She turned her head to look at the large cat beside her. He was big and shiny black with darker rosettes covering his body. He looked powerful and muscular and very alluring. She rubbed against him, body to body, a long affectionate signal to play. Whirling, she took off running in the direction of their private grotto.

Riordan, deep inside the body of the leopard, paced just behind her, admiring her sleek lines and beautiful curves. They leapt over fallen logs, roused rodents from the shrubbery, chased a small squirrel through several trees and splashed through two creeks and up an embankment. Both raked the bark from the trees, Juliette trying to reach higher than the much larger male.

He rubbed his muzzle along her face and neck. His teeth playfully bit at her neck and shoulder. Her fragrance was ripe and enthralling, captivating him until all he could do was think about her. She teased him openly, running away, waiting for him to catch up, crouching temptingly in front of him, only to leap away before he could blanket her.

Riordan was grateful to see the shimmering pool of water waiting for them in the natural rock grotto. The high ferns screened the lush oasis from prying eyes, making it a virtual paradise.

They shifted together, Juliette laughing with glee. "That was so fun." Her gaze drifted boldly, possessively over him. "I see the experience was particularly arousing to you." Juliette stepped close to him, inhaling his scent. Her fingers trailed with tantalizing expertise over his aching erection.

Before he could react, she shifted her palms to his bare chest, "I don't think the change completely took the cat out of me." She ran her hands over his chest, feeling every defined muscle. "I thought I wanted all of it gone, every last bit of that DNA from my body, but I've changed my mind."

Her fingers rubbed over his skin in small, demanding caresses, transmitting a certain urgency. "What part of the cat remained behind?" It was hard to breathe when she was so close to him. When he was already throbbing and mercilessly hard for her touch. For her taste. He closed his eyes briefly. For the feel of her tight hot sheath surrounding his body and milking him dry.

She leaned forward and lapped at his chest, rubbed her body the length of his. "Touch. Touch is very important to cats." Her hand slid down his body, over his belly, wrapped around his thickened penis. Her thumb rubbed the sensitive tip gently. "Like this. Cats love to touch and feel. We like to be stroked." She smiled up at him. "Do you think you can manage a little stroking?"

She didn't give him the chance, kissing his chest, her mouth open and wet, her tongue

working along his ribs and her teeth nipping until he thought he might go out of his mind. Riordan stood it as long as he could, with his body growing harder and the pressure building with every touch of her fingers and lips. He tunneled his hands into her hair and pulled her head up to fasten his mouth on hers. He devoured her, kiss after kiss, unable to stop to take a breath, his tongue dueling with hers.

The roaring could have been in his head, maybe it was hers, the roaring was so loud he couldn't tell. His body burned and ached and demanded relief. He kissed his way from her mouth to her throat, laved the valley between her breasts before stopping there, lavishing attention while he brought her body more fully into his.

Juliette twined one leg around him, aligning their bodies so the head of his penis was pressed tightly into her wet, welcoming entrance. "I don't want to wait anymore," she said, tugging at his hair. "I want to feel you inside of me."

He stroked her nipple with his tongue. "When?"

"Right now, this minute."

She tried to impale her body on his, but he moved, his mouth pulling strongly at her breast. With each strong pull a wave of liquid heat pushed over the head of his erection and trickled down the shaft.

"Are you certain?" When she squirmed again, he abandoned all pretense of teasing, caught her bottom in both hands and lifted her up onto him.

She cried out, sliding over him, fitting like the proverbial glove, contracting her muscles around him to hold him to her. She moved with him, meeting him stroke for stroke, urging him to move into her harder and faster. Her breath came in ragged gasps, but pleasure burst through her like a rainbow, beautiful after what seemed like endless darkness. She wanted their ride to be wild and abandoned and to go on forever.

Riordan, so tuned to her, drove into her body, going deeper with each stroke. He urged her hips into the rhythm of his. Juliette went unexpectedly over the edge, her body shuddering with pleasure, the intensity of her orgasm shaking them both. Riordan slowed the pace, heightening her enjoyment, drawing it out so that she had a series of strong orgasms. She moaned softly then cried his name, her nails digging into his shoulder. He allowed himself to go over with her, exploding with passion, riding the wave of pleasure until for the moment he was somewhat sated.

They clung to one another, her head on his shoulder, their arms around each other, as close as they could get. It took a few minutes before they could make their way to the inviting coolness of the pool, slipping into the water.

"I love this place, Riordan. Do you? Do you want to remain here in South America, or do you long to travel back to the place you were born?"

His white teeth flashed, robbing her of breath. It was always so unexpected, her reaction to his genuine smile. "I love this land. It has become my home, Juliette. And I would never take you far from you sister and cousin. You forget I am in your mind and can read your fears."

She grinned at him, looking mischievous, but obviously relieved. "What am I thinking now?"

His entire body tightened. "What you are thinking is anatomically impossible, but we can try variations."

She laughed at him, fully aware of his growing fascination with her. She hoped it would continue to grow for all eternity.

"It is obsession, not fascination," he pointed out.

She turned over to lie floating on her back, drifting with the small waves, staring up at the stars glittering over her head. "I'd like to think that somewhere out there is a man for Solange and another one for Jasmine. Good men." She turned her head to look at him as he paced slowly beside her.

Riordan scooped her up in his arms, unable to bear the melancholy in her voice. He wrapped her up tightly, holding her against his body, wanting to protect her from everything evil in the world.

Juliette brushed back his hair to look into his eyes. "Someone like you, capable of loving them no matter what. Someone capable of understanding what our lives have been like and the trauma they've been through. Do you think that will ever happen for them?"

"It really will come out right," he whispered, burying kisses in her hair. "Everything will be all right."

"I almost feel as if it will never be right again," she said and buried her face against his shoulder.

"They have us, Juliette. It will not happen overnight, but we can help them rebuild their lives. They are my family now, too. And they are under the protection of the Carpathian people."

She turned her mouth blindly to his, nearly sinking them beneath the lapping water. He responded, kissing her over and over again. His hands stroked her hair. "It will be all right, Juliette. I promise you, and I take my promises very seriously." He rested his cheek on the top of her wet hair, nuzzling her, making every effort to console and comfort her.

Juliette snuggled deeper against his body, tightening her hold on him. "I know as long as I have you with me, I'll be happy. With the two of us working together, I can only believe that the people I love will find happiness too. I'm not afraid of our life."

He lifted her chin and took possession of her mouth with his. They still had a few hours until they absolutely had to go to ground and he was determined to make the most of his time.