

The Awakening
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Chapter 1

The warm wind gently carried the message through the lush vegetation of the rain forest, traveled high into the dense canopy that shrouded the jungle in mystery.

Wild honeybees built combs just beneath the crown, out of reach of most of the animals. If they heard the wind whispering, they ignored the tales and went about their business. Birds of every kind, parrots clothed in a riot of color, helmeted hornbills and falcons, picked up the gossip and conveyed it swiftly on bright wings, shrieking with delight throughout the forest. Noisy troops of long-tailed macaques, gibbons, and leaf-eating monkeys heard and leapt from branch to branch joyfully, shouting with anticipation. The orangutans moved cautiously through the trees in search of ripe fruit, edible leaves, and flowers, maintaining dignity in all the fuss. Before long, the news was everywhere. There were few secrets in the community and everyone had been waiting with concern.

He heard the news long before her scent reached him.

Brandt Talbot shrank into the heavy vegetation, his chest tight and his body

taut with sudden anticipation. She was here at long last. In his domain. Within

his grasp. It had been a long hunt to find her, nearly impossible, yet he had

managed it. He had deliberately lured her to his lair and she had come.

He was

so close, he had to use iron self-control to keep from moving too quickly. He

couldn't spook her, couldn't tip his hand, allow her to realize for one moment

that the net was closing around her. It was essential to close every avenue,

drive her to the center of his domain, and cut off each escape route.

His strategy had been planned for years. He had had time to plan while he

searched the world for her, while he reviewed every document in his hunt for his



prey. When he was certain he had the right woman, the one woman, he put his plan into action using his lawyer to draw her into the rain forest, into his territory.

He moved swiftly through the thick fauna, silently but quickly, effortlessly leaping over fallen trees as he made his way toward the outer edges of the jungle. A rhinoceros grunted nearby. Deer scrambled in fear as they caught his scent. Smaller animals scurried out of his way and birds fell quiet at his approach. The monkeys retreated to the higher reaches of the canopy but they, too, remained hushed, not daring to raise his ire as he passed beneath them.

This was his kingdom and he seldom flaunted his power, but every species was aware interference would not be tolerated. Without his constant vigilance and his continual care, their world would soon disappear. He watched over and protected them and asked little in return. Now he demanded complete cooperation.

Death would come silently and swiftly to any who dared defy him. Everything was different the moment Maggie Odessa set foot into the jungle. She was different. She felt it. Where the heat on the coast had been oppressive, stifling, within the forest that same heat seemed to envelop her in a strange perfumed world. With each step that took her into the deeper interior, she became more aware. More alert. As if awakening from a dream world. Her hearing was much more acute. She could hear separate insects, identify the trilling sounds of birds, the cries of monkeys. She heard the wind rustling in the branches overhead and smaller animals scurrying among the leaves. It was strange, yet exhilarating.

When Maggie had first learned of her inheritance, she had thought to sell it off without seeing it, out of respect for her adoptive mother. Jayne Odessa had been adamant that Maggie never enter the rain forest. Jayne had been



frightened by the very idea of it, repeatedly begging Maggie to promise that she would never put herself at risk. Maggie loved her adoptive mother and didn't want to go against her wishes, but after Jayne's death, a lawyer had contacted Maggie to inform her that she was the daughter of a wealthy couple, naturalists who had died violently when she was a child, and that she had inherited their estate deep in the rain forests of Borneo. The temptation was too much to resist. Despite the promises Maggie had made to her adoptive mother, she had journeyed halfway around the world to look for her past. Maggie had flown into the small airport and rendezvoused with the three men sent by the lawyer to meet her. From there they'd traveled in a four-wheel-drive utility vehicle for an hour before they left the main highway and took a series of unpaved roads leading into deeper forest. It seemed as if they had bumped over every rut and pit in the dirt road. Eventually they had parked the vehicle to proceed on foot, a prospect Maggie hadn't been happy about. The humidity was high and she knotted her khaki shirt around her backpack as they trekked into deeper forest. The men seemed enormously strong and well prepared. They were well built, quiet when they walked, intensely alert. She had been nervous at first, but once they were walking along the trail in deeper jungle, everything seemed to change; she felt as if she were coming home. As she followed her guides, winding deeper into the darkened interior, she became aware of the mechanics of her own body. Of her muscles, the way they moved sleekly, easily, her strides almost rhythmic. She didn't stumble, she didn't make unnecessary noise. Her feet seemed to find their own placement over the uneven ground.



Maggie became aware of her own femininity. Small beads of moisture ran in the valley between her breasts, sleek with sweat, her shirt plastered to her skin. Her long, thick hair, her one call to glory, was heavy and hot against her neck and down her back. She lifted the heavy mass, the simple act suddenly sensual, lifting her breasts beneath the thin cotton tee, her nipples rasping gently on the material. Maggie twisted her hair with the expertise of practice, fastening the thick rope to her head with a jeweled stick. Strange that the heat and primitive jungle should suddenly make her conscious of her body. The way she moved, her hips gently swaying, almost an invitation, as if she knew someone was watching, someone she wanted to entice. In her entire life, she had never been a flirt or a tease, yet now the temptation was overwhelming. It was as if she had come to life, here in this dark, overgrown place with vines and leaves and every kind of plant imaginable. Shorter trees vied for sunlight with the tall trees. They were draped with liana vines and creeping plants of various shades of green. Wild orchids hung above her head and rhododendrons climbed as high as some of the trees. Flowering plants grew on the trees, stretching for the sunlight that managed to make its way through the heavier canopy. Brightly colored lorikeets and other birds were in constant motion. The raspy call of insects was a noisy hum that filled the forest. The air was sweet with perfumed flowers that teased her senses. It was an exotic, erotic setting where she knew she belonged. Maggie tilted her head back with a small sigh, rubbing at the sweat on her throat with the palm of her hand. Her lower body felt heavy and restless with each step she took. Needy. Wanting. Her breasts were swollen and achy. Her hands trembled. A strange elation swept through her. Life pulsed in her veins. An awakening.



It was then she became aware of the men. Watching her. Hot eyes on the movements of her body. The curve of her hips, the thrust of her breasts straining against the fabric of her T-shirt. The rise and fall of her breath as she walked along the narrow path. Ordinarily, knowing that she was being watched would have embarrassed her, yet she felt wanton, almost an exhibitionist. Maggie examined her feelings, and was shocked. She was aroused. Totally aroused. She had always thought she was a bit on the asexual side. She never noticed men the way her friends did, never really was attracted to them. They certainly didn't find her attractive, yet now she not only was aware of her own sexuality but was reveling in the fact that she was turning men on. She frowned, puzzling over the unfamiliar feelings. It didn't feel right to her. She wasn't attracted to the men, even as aroused as her body was. It wasn't the men. It was something deep within her she couldn't comprehend. She moved along the path, feeling eyes caressing her body, feeling the weight of stares, hearing the heavier breathing of the men as she went deeper into the darkened interior of the forest. The jungle seemed to close behind them, vines and bushes spreading across the trail. The wind gusted, heavy enough to drop leaves and small twigs onto the forest floor. Flower petals, vines, and even a few smaller branches settled onto the ground so that it looked as if it hadn't been disturbed in eons. Her eyes were seeing details differently, much more sharply, catching movement she shouldn't have been able to notice. It was exhilarating. Even her sense of smell seemed enhanced. She was trying to avoid walking over a beautiful white lacy plant that seemed to be everywhere. It gave off a pungent odor. "What is this on the ground?" she ventured to ask. "A type of fungi," one of the men answered gruffly. He had introduced



himself

merely as Conner. "Insects love it. They end up spreading its spores everywhere." He cleared his throat, glanced at the other men, then back at her.

"What do you do in the big city, miss?"

Maggie was startled that he asked her a question. None of the men had encouraged

much conversation. "I'm a veterinarian for exotic animals. I specialize in felines."

Maggie had always been drawn to the wilds, studying and researching everything

she could find on rain forests, animals, and plants. She had worked hard to

become a veterinarian of exotic animals, hoping to practice in the wilderness,

but Jayne had been so unwavering, resolute in her determination to keep Maggie

close, she had eventually settled for working for the zoo. This had been her big

chance to go to the place she had always longed to see.

Maggie had dreams of the rain forest. She had never played with dolls like other

little girls, but with plastic animals, lions and leopards and tigers.

All the

big cats. She had an affinity for them; she knew when they were in pain or upset

or depressed. Felines responded to her and she had quickly acquired a reputation

for her ability to heal and work with exotic cats.

The men exchanged a brief look she couldn't hope to interpret. For some reason

their reaction made her uneasy, but she persisted in attempting to converse now

that he'd given her an opening. "I read that there are rhinoceros and elephants

in this forest. Is that true?"

The man who called himself Joshua nodded abruptly, reached back, and took her

backpack out of her hand as if the weight of it was forcing them to slow down.

She didn't protest because he didn't so much as break stride. They were moving

fast now.

"You're certain of where you're going? There's really a small village where

there are people around? I don't want to be left all alone with no one



to help
me if I get bitten by a snake or something." Was that her voice?
Throaty? Husky?
It didn't sound like her.
"Yes, miss, there's a town and supplies." Conner's tone was guarded.
A ripple of unease went through her. She struggled to tame her voice,
make it
once more her own. "Surely there's another way to get there without
going on
foot? How do they bring in supplies?"
"Mules. And no, to reach your home and the village, you must walk."
"Is it always this dark in the forest?" Maggie persisted. What
landmarks were
they navigating by? There were so many trees. Iron wood and sandal
wood. Ebony
and teak. So many different kinds. There had been numerous fruit trees
such as
coconut palms and mango and banana and orange along the outer
perimeters. She
recognized the various types of trees, but couldn't tell what the men
were using
to identify the actual trail. How could they tell where they were going
or how
to get back? She was intrigued and a bit awed by their ability.
"The sunlight has little chance to penetrate the thick branches and
leaves
above," came the answer. No one slowed the pace, no one even glanced at
her.
Maggie could tell they didn't want to converse. It wasn't exactly as if
they
were being rude to her, but she could tell when she addressed them
directly that
they were uneasy. Maggie shrugged carelessly. She didn't need
conversation. She
had always been comfortable with her own company, and there were so
many
intriguing things in the forest. She caught a glimpse of a snake nearly
as thick
as a man's arm. There was a tiny spot of spectacular color that turned
out to be
a frog of some sort on a tree. And so many lizards she lost count. It
should
have been immensely difficult to spot such creatures. They blended with
the
foliage, yet somehow she could see them. Almost as if the jungle was
changing
her in some way, improving her sight, her ability to hear and smell.



Sudden silence took hold of the forest. Insects ceased their endless hum. Birds abruptly stopped their continuous calls. Even the monkeys ceased all chatter. The stillness disturbed her, sent a chill cascading down her spine. A single warning was shrieked high in the canopy, an alert of danger, and Maggie knew instantly that it was danger to her. The hair on the back of her neck raised and she nervously turned her head from side to side as she walked, her eyes restlessly probing the thick foliage. Her apprehension must have communicated itself to the guards. They tightened up the distance between them, one dropping back behind her, urging her to move more quickly through the forest. Maggie's heart accelerated, her mouth went dry. She could feel her body begin to tremble. Something moved in the deep foliage, large, heavily muscled, a shadow in the shadows. Something paced along beside them. She couldn't really see it, yet she did, the impression of a large predator, an animal stalking her silently. She felt the weight of an intent, focused stare, the unblinking eyes of something savage. Something fixated on her. Something wild. "Are we safe?" She asked the question softly, moving closer to her guides. "Of course we're safe, miss," the third man replied, a tall blond with dark, brooding eyes. His gaze slid over her. "Nothing would attack so large a party." The group wasn't that large. Four people tramping on a nonexistent path toward an uncertain destination. She didn't feel all that safe. She had forgotten what the third man's name was. It suddenly bothered her. Really bothered her. What if something did attack them and the man tried to protect her and she didn't even know who he was? Maggie glanced back. The trail had disappeared completely behind them. She lifted her chin, another shiver finding its way through her body. Something watched and waited to attack. Were they walking into an ambush? She



didn't know
any of the men. She was trusting a lawyer she knew very little about.
She'd
investigated him, of course, to ensure he was legitimate, but that
didn't mean
she hadn't been deceived. Women disappeared every day.
"Miss Odessa?" It was the tall blond. "Don't look so frightened.
Nothing is
going to happen to you."
She managed a small smile. His reassurance didn't take away her fear of
the
unknown, but she was grateful he had noticed and had tried. "Thank you.
The
forest went so quiet all of a sudden, and it feels so..." Dangerous. The
word was
in her mind but she didn't want to speak it aloud, to give it life.
Instead she
matched her stride to the blond's. "Please call me Maggie. I've never
been very
formal. What's your name?"
He hesitated, glanced toward the left into the heavy foliage. "It's
Donovan,
Miss... er... Maggie. Drake Donovan."
"Have you been to the village often?"
"I have a home there," he admitted. "We all have homes there."
Relief swept through her. She felt some of the tension leave her body.
"That's
reassuring. I was beginning to think I had inherited a small hut in the
middle
of the forest or maybe at the top of one of the trees." Her laughter
was low.
Husky. Almost seductive.
Maggie blinked in shock. There it was again. She never sounded like
that, yet
twice now her voice had become an invitation. She didn't want Drake
Donovan to
think she was coming on to him. What in the world had gotten into her?
Something
was happening to her, something she didn't like at all. She knew it was
wrong,
everything about it felt wrong, yet her body was raging at her with an
urgent,
primitive need.
From several yards away, Brandt feasted his eyes on her through the
thick
foliage. She was everything and more than he had expected. She wasn't
tall, but



he hadn't expected her to be. Her body was curvy, with lush breasts and hips, a small waist, strong legs. Her hair was thick and luxurious, a wealth of red-gold silk. Her brows were reddish, her eyes as green as the leaves on the trees. Her mouth was, a sinful temptation. It was oppressively hot and she was sweating, a dark vee down the front of her shirt molding to her high, firm breasts. There was a damp line down her back, drawing attention to the sweep of her spine, the curve of her hips. Her jeans rode low on her hips, exposing an enticing expanse of skin and revealing a belly button that he found exceedingly sexy. He longed to capture her right there, drag her away from the other men, and claim what belonged to him. He had taken far too long in finding her and the Han Vol Dan was nearly upon her. He could tell. The others could tell. They tried not to look at what didn't belong to them, but she was so naturally sensuous, so alluring and compelling, the men were reacting with the same ragged hunger as he felt. Brandt felt bad for them. They were doing him a favor, despite the danger to all of them from the overpowering emotions. He had been tracking poachers when she had arrived, and the men had gone to meet her in his stead, to bring her to him. The rain began, great sheets of it, working to penetrate the heavier foliage above them, sending the humidity up another notch. The downpour bathed the forest in iridescent colors as the water blended with light to make prisms so that rainbows washed across the vine-draped trees. The woman, his mate, Maggie Odessa, turned her face up in delight. There was no grumbling, no squeals of shock. She raised her hands over her head in silent tribute, allowing the water to cascade over her face. She was rain-wet. The drops ran down her face, her lashes. All Brandt could think of was that he needed to lap every drop from her



face. To taste her petal-soft skin with the life-giving water running over it.

He was suddenly thirsty, his throat parched. His body felt heavy and painful, and a strange roaring started in his head.

Maggie's white T-shirt instantly soaked through in the sudden deluge, rendering

the material nearly transparent. Her breasts were outlined, full, intriguing, a

swell of lush, creamy flesh, her nipples darker and twin hard buds of invitation. The richness of her exposed body drew his gaze like a magnet.

Beckoned him. Mesmerized him. His mouth went dry, and his heart hammered out an urgent tattoo.

Drake glanced back at Maggie, his gaze lingering for a hot, tension-filled

moment on the sway of her breasts.

A warning rumbled deep in Brandt's throat. The growl was low, but in the silence

of the forest, it carried easily. He coughed, the peculiar, grunting cough of

his kind. A threat. A command. Drake went ramrod stiff, jerked his head around,

peered uneasily into the bushes.

Maggie's gaze followed Drake's to the thick vegetation. There was no mistaking

the sound of a large jungle cat.

Drake tossed her the backpack. "Put on something, anything, to cover yourself."

His voice was clipped, almost hostile.

Her eyes widened in amazement. "Didn't you hear that?" She held the pack in

front of her, shielding her breasts from their view, shocked that the men seemed

more concerned with her body than with the danger approaching them. "You had to

have heard that. A leopard, and close, we should get out of here."

"Yes. That is a leopard, Miss Odessa. And running doesn't do a bit of good if

they've decided to make a meal of you." Keeping his back to her, Drake shoved

his hand through his wet hair. "Just put on something else and we'll be fine."

"Leopards like naked women?" Maggie quipped as she hastily pulled on her khaki

overshirt. If she didn't make light of the situation, she might panic.



"Absolutely. First choice every time—you might want to remember that,"

Drake

said, his voice tinged with humor. "Are you decent?"

Maggie buttoned the khaki shirt right over the soaking wet tee. The air was

thick, the scent from so many flowers almost cloying in the oppressive humidity.

Her socks were wet, her feet becoming uncomfortable. "Yes, I'm decent.

Are we

even close yet?" She didn't want to complain but she suddenly felt

irritable and

annoyed with everything and everyone.

Drake didn't turn around to check. "It's a bit farther. Do you need to rest?"

She was very aware of her escorts watching the heavy foliage warily.

Her breath

caught in her throat. She could have sworn she saw the tip of a black

tail

twitching in the bushes a few yards from where she stood, but when she

blinked,

there were only the darker shadows and endless ferns. As hard as she

tried, she

could see nothing in the deeper forest, but the impression of danger

remained

acute.

"I'd rather keep going," she admitted. She felt very out of sorts. One

moment

she wanted to entice the men to her, the next she wanted to snarl and

rake at

them, hiss and spit at them to go away from her.

"Let's continue then." Drake signaled and they were once more on the

move. The

three men were carrying guns slung carelessly across their backs. Each

of them

had a knife strapped to his waist. None of them had touched the

weapons, not

even when the large cat had made its presence nearby known.

The pace the men set was grueling. She was tired, wet, sticky, and far

too hot,

and most of all, her feet hurt. Her hiking boots were good ones, but

not as

broken in as she would have liked. She knew there were blisters forming

on her

heels. She was growing hungrier by the moment, but

Maggie wasn't about to complain. She sensed the men weren't pushing her

to be

cruel or to test her endurance, but for some other reason that had to



do with safety. She complied as best she could, hurrying along the trail in the sweltering heat, wondering why the jungle felt so close and where the trail had disappeared.

Chapter 2

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The house was surprisingly large, a great three-story structure set back in the middle of a thick stand of trees with a wide verandah that circled the entire building. Balconies on the second and third stories were intricately carved—a skilled artisan had etched the most beautiful jungle cats into the wood. It was nearly impossible to see through the branches intertwined around the house. Each balcony had at least one branch touching or nearly touching the rail to form a bridge into the network of trees, a highway high above the ground.

Vines curled around the trees and hung in long, thick ropes. Maggie studied the way the house appeared to be a part of the jungle. The wood was natural, blending into the trunks of the trees. An abundance of orchids and rhododendrons cascaded with at least thirty other species of plants and flowers from the trees and walls of the house.

The rain fell steadily, drenching the plants and trees. The rain was warm yet

Maggie found herself shivering.

She turned up her face to watch the individual drops fall to earth, threads of silver gleaming in the sky.

"Maggie, night conies fast in the forest. Wild animals prowl around.

Let's get

you settled in the house," Drake advised.

Dry clothes would be more than welcome. Or, the thought came unbidden, no

clothes at all. Briefly she closed her eyes against that stranger inside of her,

a part of her that the jungle was slowly awakening. She was uncomfortable with

that side of herself, a sensual, uninhibited woman who wanted to be the object

of a man's desire. She wanted to tempt. To entice. To seduce. But not



these men.

She didn't know whom she was looking for, she only knew her body had come to savage life and was making intimate demands she had no way of coping with.

Maggie took a deep, calming breath and forced herself to look around her, to concentrate on other things beside the edgy need crawling through her body.

"Maggie?" Drake prompted again.

"You're certain this was my parents' home?" she inquired, staring in awe at the craftsmanship. The way the house blended into the trees, vines, and flowers made it virtually impossible to spot unless she was staring directly at it or knew

exactly where to look for it. It had been cleverly designed to appear a part of the jungle itself.

"It's been in your family for generations," Drake said.

In the waning light it was difficult to see, but it appeared as if there were several flat areas running the length of the roof, almost like paths.

The room was steeply pitched and with jutting dormers and matching mini balconies. "Is

there an attic?" The house was already three stories. It seemed incredible that it could have a full-length attic but the large windows indicated otherwise.

"And what are those flat spots on the roof?"

Drake hesitated, then shrugged casually as he unlocked the front door.

"The roof is flat in spaces to accommodate easy travel if it has to be used as an escape route. There's a basement with a tunnel, too. And yes, there's an attic."

Maggie stood at the threshold, watching Drake's face closely. "Why would I need an escape route? Who or what would I be escaping from?"

"You don't have to worry. We'll all watch out for you. The house was designed well over a hundred years ago and is meticulously maintained. Over the years its been modernized but all the original features designed for escape were kept."

She blinked rapidly, her hand going protectively to her throat. He was



lying to her. It was in the sound of his voice. Her new, acute hearing picked up the strain, a sudden tension in him. His gaze slid away from hers for just a moment, touched on the forest long enough for her to have certain knowledge of his deceit. Uneasiness washed over her, through her. Maggie took a tentative step inside, feeling as if she were being lured by the unique beauty and eccentricity of the house. By the secrecy of her past. She had such little knowledge of her parents. They were shrouded in mystery, and the idea of learning about them was far too great a temptation to resist. She remembered very little, vague impressions only. Angry shouting, the flash of torches, arms holding her tightly. The sound of a heart beating frantically. The feel of fur against her skin. Sometimes the memories seemed the thing of nightmares; other times she remembered eyes looking down at her with such love, such pride, that her heart wanted to burst. Standing in the middle of the front room, she looked uncertainly at Drake as Conner and Joshua paced through every room in the house, ensuring there were no stray animals hiding. "Are you certain the village is close?" Before she had wanted to be alone, to rest and recover from the long journey. She was truly exhausted, having traveled for hours and definitely suffering jet lag, yet now she was afraid to be left alone in the large house. "Just through those trees," he assured her. "The house has indoor plumbing and we set up a small power plant on the river. Most of the time we have electricity, but once in a while it goes off. If that happens, don't panic; there are emergency candles and flashlights in the cupboards. The house has been stocked, so you should have everything you need." She looked around at the well-kept house. There was no dust, no mold. In spite of the humidity, everything appeared highly polished. "Is someone



living here?"

Drake shrugged. "Brandt Talbot has been the caretaker for years. If you need anything, you can ask him where to find it. He's had the run of the house, but he's going to be staying in the village. I'm certain he'll help you with anything."

Something in the way he said the caretaker's name got her immediate attention.

She glanced up at him as a frisson of fear chased through her body.

Brandt

Talbot. Who was the man that Drake had said his name so softly? Drake had

sounded wary and his eyes had shifted restlessly to the heavy foliage outside the house.

The other men left her luggage in the front room, lifted a brief hand, and

hurried away, Drake followed them at a much slower pace. He paused at the door,

looking back at her. "You keep the bars on the doors and windows, and don't go

walking around at night outside the house," he cautioned. "The animals around

here are wild." His sudden smile removed all traces of grimness from his face,

leaving him looking friendly. "Everyone has been looking forward to meeting you.

You'll get to know us all quickly enough."

Maggie stood uncertainly on the shadowed porch of her parents' ancestral home

and watched him go with a sinking heart. It was everything yet nothing like she

had expected, a place of mystery and shadows that awoke something primitive and

wild and very sensual deep within her.

Leaves rustled high in the trees above her head, and she glanced up.

Something

moved, something large but very silent. She continued to stare into the thick

foliage, straining to make out a shape, a shadow. Anything that might make the

leaves flutter in the night air against the wind. Was it a large snake?

A python

perhaps—they grew to enormous sizes.

She felt a dark premonition of danger, of something dangerous hunting



her.

Stalking her. Watching her intently with a fixed, focused stare.

Defensively she

put a hand to her throat as if warding off the strangling bite of a leopard.

Maggie took a cautious step backward, toward the safety of the house, her gaze

never leaving the tree above her head.

The wind plucked at the trees, stirred and shifted the leaves. Her heart slammed

hard against her chest as she found herself falling into the hypnotic gaze of a

large animal. She had always been fascinated with large cats, but every encounter had been in a controlled environment. This leopard, a rare black

panther, was free, wild, and on the hunt. The stare was terrifying, unnerving.

Power and intelligence shone in those unblinking golden eyes. Maggie couldn't

look away, caught in the gripping intensity of the focused stare. She knew from

her vast experience with exotic cats that the leopard was one of the most

cunning and intelligent predators in the forest.

A single sound escaped her, a soft moan of alarm. Her tongue darted out, traced

her suddenly dry lips. Maggie knew better than to run—she didn't want to trigger

an attack. She took another step backward, felt for the door. All the while her

gaze was locked with the panther's. The cat never looked away from her, a hunter

beyond measure, a fast, efficient killer that was concentrated on prey. She was

the prey. She recognized danger when she saw it.

He could hear her heartbeat, the fast acceleration that signaled intense fear.

Her face was pale, her eyes wide as she stared deep into his. When her small

tongue touched her lush bottom lip, he nearly fell out of the tree. He could

almost read her thoughts. She believed he was hunting her, stalking her. She

believed he was hungry. And he was. He wanted, needed to devour her. Just not in

the way she thought.

She backed inside the house, slammed the door shut solidly. He heard



the bar
slide into place. Brandt remained very still, his heart hammering out
his joy.
She was his now. It was only a matter of time. The intensity of his
need for her
shocked him. The instinctual drive for a mate went far beyond anything
he had
ever experienced.
The night was falling. His time. It belonged to him, to his kind. He
listened to
the whispers as his world stirred to life. He heard the softest calls,
knew
every creature, every insect. Knew who belonged and who did not. There
was a
natural rhythm to life and he was in the midst of a change. Disturbing,
disquieting, but he was determined to exert his discipline and handle
it as he
did all things, with iron control.
He shifted, roped muscles rippling beneath the thick fur as he padded
in silence
along the heavy branch, intent on following her progress as she moved
from room
to room. He couldn't take his eyes from her, drinking in the sight of
her,
torturing his body, his senses, with her. She moved him as nothing ever
had. She
stole his breath and aroused his body to such a fever pitch of
excitement he
found himself enthralled.
Nothing stood between them but his honor. His code. Nothing. No time or
distance. He had resolved that issue with his cunning intelligence. He
lifted
his head and forced his body to take in air, to read the night, to know
he was
in control in the midst of the upheaval. His body was different. Heavy
with
need, throbbing, aching. Every sense was alive. Every cell needed.
Hungered. His
head roared and ached, an uncomfortable state for one of power and
discipline.
Maggie leaned against the door for a long time. She had been crazy to
come here
to this far-off place with danger at every turn. Her heart was racing
and her
blood rushed madly through her body. Yet a small smile touched her
mouth in
spite of the adrenaline pumping through her. She couldn't remember



feeling so
alive before. She wasn't even certain she had been afraid, she was so
excited.
It was as if she had been walking through life asleep to all the
possibilities.
Now, here, in the primitive jungle, every sense was enhanced and on
fire.
She stepped away from the door, looked up at the ceiling with its fans
and wide
beams. This house suited her with its wide-open spaces and interesting
carvings.
She began to walk through it, confident that there were no animals in
her home.
It was exhilarating to feel as if she had closed out all danger and
left it on
the other side of the door. She picked up her packs and began an
inspection of
the downstairs. The rooms were large and each had the same high ceiling
and
sparse furniture, all made with a hard, dark wood. Curiously, in two of
the
bedrooms she discovered claw marks, as if some very large cat had
marked the
wall up near the ceiling. Maggie stared at the marks, puzzled by how
they had
been put there.
In the large kitchen she found a note on the small refrigerator pinned
in a
masculine scrawl explaining how the lights worked and where to find
everything
she might need for the first night in her family home. There was a bowl
of fresh
fruit left for her and she gratefully ate a juicy mango, her parched
throat
savoring the sweetness. She touched the large, looping letters of the
note in a
silent thanks with a caressing fingertip, strangely drawn to the
handwriting.
She turned the note over and over, brought it to her nose, inhaling the
scent.
She could actually smell him. Brandt Talbot, the man who had written
the note,
had lived in the house.
He was everywhere. His scent. He seemed to envelop her with his
presence. Once
she was aware of him, she realized his touch was everywhere. He lived
in the



house. The polished wood and gleaming tiles had to have been his doing. The artwork, which appealed to her, had to be his. The stairs were wide and curved in a sweeping circle up to the next level. Incredible photos of every wild creature imaginable hung on the walls going up the stairs. The photographs were rare treasures. The photographer had captured the very essence of wildlife, unusual action shots and beautiful pictures of plants, close-ups that depicted the dewy petals. She leaned closer, already knowing who had taken the photographs. In the corner of each picture was a four-line poem. Reading the words made her feel as if she had accidentally connected intimately with the poet. Each poem had been written in a looping masculine scrawl. The sentiments were thoughtful, beautiful, romantic even. It couldn't have been written by anyone else. Brandt Talbot had the soul of a poet. He was an unusual man and she was already intrigued. She inhaled again as she climbed the stairs, drawing the scent of him deep into her lungs. He seemed to belong. Here in the house. Deep inside of her where she breathed. The mysterious Brandt Talbot with his incredible photography skills and his love of wood and wildlife and beautiful words. He seemed familiar, a man who shared her favorite things. Weariness was making her droop. Maggie became aware of how uncomfortable her skin was, wet and sticky, as she made her way up to the second story. She found a bedroom at the end of the hallway that was to her liking. The bed was made up invitingly, the fans were already circulating air, and there was a spacious private bath off the room. She put her packs on the dresser, silently claiming the room as her own. Above the bed, up in the corner, she saw the claw marks etched deeply into the wood and she shivered. Her gaze remained there as she tossed the khaki shirt



aside

and peeled off the wet T-shirt. It was a relief to have the soaked material away

from her tender skin.

Maggie stood in the center of the room wearing only her low-riding jeans, and

she sighed with relief. Wet clothes clinging to her skin called up a strange

sensation, almost as if something lying dormant beneath her skin stirred for a

moment, tried to break through her pores, then subsided, leaving her itchy and

tender and very irritable. She stretched her sore muscles, lifted her hands to

take down her hair, shaking it loose so she could wash the heavy mass in the

shower.

Her boots came off next, then her socks. It was heaven to be barefoot, her soles

cool on the floorboards. Much more comfortable, she took the time to look around

the large room. The second-story bedroom was spacious with wide beams and little

furniture. The bed was huge with four intricately carved posters rising halfway

to the ceiling. Several fans whirled above her head, providing a welcome breeze

in the room. Her gaze touched once more on the strange claw marks, slid away,

then returned as if drawn by some unseen force.

She crossed the room to stare up at them, finally climbed up on the bed and

stretched to touch them with her fingertips. She traced each mark. The wood was

shredded; the claws had dug in deep. Was it from a long-ago pet kept in the

house? Something wild that had marked its territory?

The moment the unbidden thought came to her, she shivered, the marks taking on

life, burning her fingertips so that she pulled her hand quickly away from the

wall. Surprised, she glanced at her seared fingers but found them without a

blemish. Maggie put her fingers in her mouth, soothing the sensitive nerve

endings with her tongue.

She wandered across the room to the windows. The panes in the room



seemed
overlarge, big enough to climb through should she need to do so. Each
room had
similar size windows with the inevitable balcony around them. A grid of
bars
shielded each window, making her very aware she was in a wild setting.
Maggie stood at the window, staring out into the night. Into the rain
and the
forest. She could see the leaves waving and dancing in the trees as the
wind
increased in strength. Bone tired, she began to slowly peel away her
jeans, wet
from the tropical rain and sticking to her. She wanted a shower and
then to lie
down and sleep as long as possible. She didn't want to think about how
wild her
surroundings were, how she seemed so different here in this exotic
setting. She
didn't want to be aware of her body, every nerve ending heightened by
the sultry
air and danger surrounding her. She stood naked, staring out the window
into the
darkness, unable to look away.
The glass reflected back her image as a mirror might. The strange
heaviness was
on her again, a burning that pooled low and wicked in her body,
throbbing and
demanding relief. It was even stronger than the last time, as if a wave
of
sexual hunger gripped her, settled in her, demanded satisfaction.
Maggie leaned
closer to peer into the glass, inspecting her body. Her skin was
unmarred,
smooth and inviting.
Separated only by a thin pane of glass, Brandt's breath stilled in his
body. She
was so enticing with her innocent eyes and sultry mouth. Her body was
made to be
touched, to be enjoyed. Made for him. His heart thundered out a savage
beat and
his body shuddered with anticipation.
He could almost feel the texture of her skin, soft and inviting. He
knew the way
their bodies would come together in frantic heat, in a firestorm of
passion and
hunger. When she moved, her body was a seductive invitation, her full
breasts



drawing his heated gaze. There was a thin sheen of sweat on her skin so that she glistened like the petals of a flower after a rain. He locked his muscles to keep from leaping through the window and lapping at every inch of exposed skin. He wanted to suckle her lush breasts, feel her fiery heat surround him. He wanted to be buried deep inside of her. He had so many plans, each more erotic than the last, and looking at her, he vowed to have her in every way possible. Drawn by the sight of her body unveiled to him, he pressed closer, his eyes gleaming gold in the dark. Strangely, Maggie felt eyes on her, watching her. The impression was so strong she stepped even closer to the window. She doubted if any human would be out standing on the balcony in the deluge, especially with a panther near. Yet the feeling persisted that her lover had arrived and he waited for her. Wanted her. Was desperate for her. The feeling was strong, overwhelming, as if she could feel his savage hunger beating at her in her mind. His eyes were caressing every inch of her body. Her hands moved up her narrow rib cage on the path she wanted him to take. She cupped the weight of her breasts in her hands, an offering, a blatant temptation. She needed to feel him touching her, his thumbs teasing her nipples into hard peaks. Maggie's skin was hot and flushed, her body aching for release. When she moved, it was a sensual flow of muscles and curves, her hands following the lines of her body, drawing attention to the fiery triangle of curls at the junction of her legs. Her thighs felt smooth, her hips rounded. She ached for her lover to find her, to come to her, to touch her skin and find every secret place on her body. Her long hair fell around her like a silken cloak, strands sliding over her breasts and back as she moved, caressing her breasts and buttocks. The



sensation caused
her body to clench tightly in reaction, her blood to thicken and her
breath to
grow labored.
Maggie placed her hands on the glass pane. She wanted. She hungered.
For whom
she didn't know, but the feeling was strong in her. And it wasn't sweet
or
pleasant. The erotic images dancing in her head were rough and
consuming, not of
a gentle, considerate lover, but one taking her in a wild frenzy of
lust, of
elemental, savage desire.
The pictures in her head bewildered her and she turned away from the
window.
Maggie padded barefoot to the shower, hoping to wash away the strange
ideas in
her head. The strange sensations in her body. She wasn't at all
prepared for the
way the tropical forest affected her, and she just wanted it to go
away.
The water was cool on her skin. Maggie closed her eyes and savored the
feel of
it, the way it seemed to absorb into her tissues and pores. She was
exhausted,
wanting only to sleep, yet the fever in her blood was strong. A force
of nature.
She leaned against the wall of the shower and allowed the water to
cascade over
her breasts, massaging the terrible ache. If she belonged in this wild,
primitive setting, did it mean the reaction of her body would never go
away?
Maggie patted her body dry, leaving some of the cooling water to dry
beneath the
fans.
She lay on the bed in the dark, listening to the rain. Outside her
window the
wind blew, and unfamiliar sounds of the jungle penetrated the walls of
the
house. She lay still with her heart beating in tune to the rain. She
could feel
the sheet beneath her skin. She found herself rubbing her body along
the
material, wanting to feel every inch of her skin touching it. She
rolled
seductively, stretched, came up on her hands and knees to push her
bottom up in



the air. All the while she throbbed and burned and nothing she did gave her relief. Brandt watched as she was caught in the throes of the sexual heat of their race. She was the most sensuous creature he had ever seen. His body was on fire, painful, as she moved against the sheets. He watched her fingers move over skin that belonged to him. Touch places that were made for him. A snarl escaped, a low moan of hunger. The lust, the need was so strong he no longer cared about honor, about the future. He would have her tonight. Now. There would be no waiting.

And then she buried her face in the pillow and wept as if her heart were breaking. The sound stopped him cold. He stared at her, seeing her easily in the dark, and felt her fears, her loneliness. Felt her confusion and humiliation for things she couldn't hope to control or understand. He hadn't thought what changing her life so drastically would do to her, only what it would do for him. He crouched on the balcony and listened. While she cried herself to sleep. Unexpectedly, his heart nearly shattered.

Chapter 3

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Maggie dreamt of a man's soothing voice. Of comforting arms. Of fur sliding sensuously next to her skin. Over her skin. Of padding through the darkened forest on four legs, not two. Of behaving outrageously, seductively, rolling and crouching to entice a male to her. She dreamt of torches flashing and the sound of gunshots. She dreamt of a man with a scent that filled her with longing. She woke in late afternoon, her body sprawled naked, tangled in the sheet, with the memories of strange, disjointed dreams etched clearly in her mind. She became aware of sensation first, then sound. The raucous calls of



birds. The hum
of insects. The chattering of monkeys. The rain.
It was already humid and the fans were whirling to provide a semblance
of relief
from the sultry air. She turned her head toward the window and was
surprised to
find mosquito netting surrounding her bed. She reached out idly, not
quite all
the way awake, and pulled the netting to one side. She found herself
blinking up
at the most compelling, mesmerizing eyes she'd ever seen. Molten gold.
Liquid.
Hypnotic.
Her heart jumped and then began to pound out a rhythm of joy. Her small
teeth
bit into her lower lip. "What are you doing here?" Her voice came in a
rush. He
was the most physically intimidating man she had ever seen. She lay
paralyzed,
unable to move. She could only stare at him helplessly, shock mixing
with a
strange excitement.
Brandt pushed the netting into the corner, his gaze sliding
possessively over
her body. The sheet was tangled around her, revealing more than it hid.
Her
silken hair spilled around the pillow, a spun reddish-gold that matched
the
thatched curls peeking at him from the shadow between her legs. He
swallowed the
sudden dryness in his mouth. "I wanted to make certain you were all
right. It
occurred to me it wasn't safe leaving you alone in an unfamiliar house
in the
middle of a rain forest, so I stayed to protect you. I'm Brandt
Talbot." One
rounded breast was tantalizing him, drawing his heated gaze no matter
how much
he tried to impose discipline on himself.
Maggie felt the brush of flames from the burning intensity of his eyes
as he
looked at her body. With a small gasp of alarm, she sat up, dragging
the sheet
over her. "Good heavens, I don't have any clothes on!"
His perfectly sculpted mouth curved gently into a small smile. "I
noticed."
"Well, don't notice." Holding the sheet up to her neck with one hand,



she imperiously pointed toward the door with the other. He was the most alluring man she had ever seen. His hair was long and thick, jet-black, shiny enough to make her want to run her hands through it. Given the way she had been feeling the night before, she wasn't altogether certain it was safe for him to be in her bedroom. Especially when she was naked. "I'll get dressed and meet you downstairs in the kitchen." His smile widened into a melting grin. "I brought you up food." He pulled a silver tray from atop the dresser and placed it on the bed. "I don't mind your state of... er... undress. It livens up the place." She blushed, color creeping up her neck. There was fruit on the tray, a glass of cold juice, a mug of hot tea, and a colorful orchid. The flower was fresh. Exquisite. What kind of man would think to bring her something so beautiful on her first awakening in the rain forest? She stared from the tray to his masculine good looks. The man was all muscle, rippling biceps and wide shoulders. His eyes were mesmerizing, a burning intensity Maggie was lost in the moment their gazes met. She had never seen eyes like his before on a man. His eyes belonged on a creature of the jungle, a hunter, focused and intent on prey. Yet he had thought to bring her a flower on a silver tray of food. Maggie looked hastily away from his eyes before she was lost forever in their mysterious depths. Lost forever in the contrast between predator and poet. "I don't think this place needs livening up," she murmured, trying not to gape at him. There was no way she was going to try to eat fruit stark naked in bed with him staring at her with his sinful eyes. He was robbing her of speech. Of breath. Of good sense. Her entire body came alive with him in the room. It wasn't safe. That was all there was to it. "Really, you just wait downstairs and I'll be right down." His gaze moved over her. Hot. Possessive. She held her breath. His look



alone
could send her body into meltdown.
His white teeth flashed briefly, leaving her with the impression of a predator
as his smile faded. "I'll be waiting, Maggie," he said quietly as he left the
room. His voice was low, compelling. A tone that seemed to seep through her
pores to heat her blood. He had a voice, a body, eyes, and a mouth that were too
sensually sinful, and she was afraid of succumbing to his blatant sex appeal in
her present state. Fortunately, he had sounded a bit too aggressive. Too
arrogant. There was something proprietary in his tone that set her teeth on
edge. It was almost as if he had rubbed her fur the wrong way. Maggie laughed aloud at the analogy. She was in the forest a day, but already
she was embracing the wildlife. She tossed back the sheet and hurried to the
bathroom. Brandt Talbot had the keys to every door in her house. The bar on the
front door hadn't even slowed him down. She should be grateful to the man for
being so concerned about her. He had slept in the house with her. Had he come to her room in the middle of the night? Had he crept into her dreams
with his amazing voice? She tried to reach for the elusive memories but all she
could really think about was the way she had been on fire, the way she had
needed to be touched, to be stroked. Had he seen her like that? The idea made
her burn inside and out. She stared at herself in the mirror, wanting to see if she looked as different
as she felt. For the first time she noticed how incredibly large her green eyes
were. Her pupils were tiny pinpricks in the light of day, protecting her eyes
from the bright glare of daylight, although there was little sun. She stared,
wondering at the illumination of her vivid green eyes as she spread toothpaste
onto her brush. Her heart stopped, slamming hard in her chest, as she exposed



her small white teeth. Sharpened canines gleamed at her, a wicked addition to her delicate looks. Maggie covered her mouth, frightened, of the strange illusion. It had to be an illusion. Very slowly she took her hand away and stared at her exposed teeth. They were perfectly straight. Perfectly normal. She was losing her mind. Maybe Jayne had been right and she didn't belong in such a primitive setting. She had loved the thought of it for so long, maybe she was just too susceptible. On the other hand, it was the only time in her life she would be able to learn about her parents. She had never been a timid woman, or a nervous one. She had no fear of traveling on her own. She was well versed in martial arts and had confidence in herself in a tight situation, although here, in the wild forest, she felt so different, so unlike Maggie Odessa. Yet it wasn't in her to run. She dressed with care, as lightly as possible. The humidity was oppressive. Her hair was twisted into a neat French braid and pinned to the top of her head like a crown. It left her neck bare. She found her lace bra and matching panties, scraps of material she hoped wouldn't rub against her skin in the heavy cloying air. She was not making the same mistake twice, being caught without her bra in the middle of a tropical rainstorm. She had very little time to research her parents' history. She was determined to make every moment count. As she ran down the stairs, she prepared a mental list of questions for Brandt Talbot. Brandt stood up as she entered the kitchen, and every single word in her head melted away. Scattered. Dissipated so that she just stood in the doorway staring at him. He made her weak. Actually weak when she looked at him. Maggie feared if she tried to speak she might stammer. His effect was overpowering. He smiled at her, and a thousand butterfly wings brushed at the pit of her



stomach. As he came toward her, he moved in absolute silence, not even his clothing daring to rustle. He took her breath away. Maggie had never been so susceptible to anyone before and it was exceedingly uncomfortable. She forced an answering smile. "Thank you for spending the night in the house with me. I really wouldn't have been so foolish as to try to take a walk around the grounds but it's nice to know someone was worried." Self-consciously she seated herself in the high-backed chair he held out for her. "I suppose you have the keys to the house?"

"Yes, of course. I reside here most of the time. The forest has a way of reclaiming what belongs to it very quickly. The creeper vines wind beneath the eaves if I don't stay alert." He sat facing her at the end of the table. Maggie watched his strong fingers find a mango wedge and bring it to his mouth. Strong teeth bit down. Her entire body clenched in response. She forced herself to look away from him. "Can you tell me anything about my parents? I was adopted at the age of three and really don't remember anything at all."

Brandt watched her expressive face, the conflicting emotions chasing across it. Maggie was fighting her attraction to him, determined to ignore it. She was much more potent up close. The chemistry between them sizzled and arced so that the very air around them was electric. "All of us in the forest know of your parents, Maggie," he said softly, watching her closely. The mango tasted sweet, the juice trickling down his throat like the finest wine, but it couldn't take her place. She would taste sweeter, more intoxicating.

"Tell me then." She took a cautious sip of the juice and was instantly entranced. It was a nectar she couldn't identify, but her mouth absorbed her first sip as if parched for the taste. Embers smoldering in the pit of her stomach leapt to life, spread like a living flame through her bloodstream. The



hand holding the glass trembled. Brandt leaned closer, his fingertips brushing back a tendril of hair as it escaped from her upswept crown. His touch lingered, sent flames dancing over her skin to match the building conflagration inside of her. "The taste is unique, isn't it?" His lean, strong fingers closed over hers, brought the glass to her lips. "Drink, Maggie, drink all of it." His voice was husky, seductive, a tantalizing invitation to a feast of pleasure. She wanted to resist. There was something in him that frightened her even as he attracted her. A power, the possessive way he touched her. Maggie was certain she was placing herself in his control, but the scent of the nectar enveloped her, tempted her. One strong hand was at her nape, his fingers curling around her neck, making her all too aware of his strength. He tilted the glass and the golden liquid slid down her throat. Fire blossomed in her, pooled low, and burned out of control. Panicked, Maggie jerked her head back, her green gaze meeting his. He was so much closer than she had thought, the heat of his body seeping into her. She couldn't look away, hypnotized as he brought the glass to his own mouth. His lips settled intimately over the exact spot where her lips had touched. He tilted the contents down his throat, all the while holding her gaze with his own. Her lungs burned for air. She watched his throat work, watched as he caught a drop of amber liquid on his fingertip and deliberately carried it to her mouth. Before she could stop herself, her tongue darted out, swirled along his finger, absorbing the taste of him along with the nectar. For one moment her mouth was tight around his finger, sucking on his flesh, her tongue dancing and teasing provocatively. Maggie could feel her body dampening, burning with



sudden hunger.

Her hips moved restlessly and she ached for relief.

Brandt inhaled sharply, caught the enticing scent of her invitation. It nearly drove him crazy. He was half-mad for her already. The sensation of her mouth,

hot and moist, tight around his finger, made him as hard as a rock. It was an easy enough step for his body to know what it would feel like to have his mate

give the same attention to his heavy erection. His hand tightened possessively around her neck, he bent his head closer.

Maggie abruptly pulled away, nearly tumbling out of the chair as she hastily

backed away from him. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry." Tears burned in her throat,

glittered in her eyes. "I don't know what's wrong with me. Please go." She had

never, at any time in her life, ever acted in such a manner. And Brandt Talbot

was a complete stranger. No matter how much his scent and looks attracted her,

no matter how right he felt, he was a stranger.

"Maggie, you don't understand." Brandt stood also, stalking her across the

expanse of the kitchen. His body was compact, muscular, and he reminded her of a

great jungle cat, ropes of rippling muscles, power and coordination.

She retreated until the counter brought her up short. "I don't want to understand. I want you to go. Something's wrong with me." There was a fever in

her blood, her mind was in chaos. Images of writhing on the floor with Talbot

were etched in her brain. She could hardly think clearly. Her body betrayed her,

her breasts aching and tender. In her deepest, most feminine core she burned for

him. "Just go. Please just go." She honestly didn't know which of them was in more danger.

He put a hand on either side of her body, trapping her between his hard frame

and the counter. "I know what's wrong with you, Maggie. Let me help you."

Her fingers actually curled into a claw. She raised her arm, going for his eyes



even as her brain screamed a protest. Brandt was fast, whipping his head to one side, shackling her wrist tightly. Maggie closed her eyes, terrified of reprisal. Although his grip was like a vise, he wasn't hurting her. "Maggie, what is happening to you is very natural. This is your home, where you belong. Can't you feel it?" She shook her head, dragged in a lungful of air to regain a semblance of control. She wanted to go home, far from the influence of the jungle, of the heat. "I don't know what's happening, but if this is the way this place affects me, I don't want to be here." He was suffocating, reason gone, the world spinning madly. Brandt battled his savage nature, the fierce primitive need and hunger as elemental as time. She was frightened, unaware of her legacy. He needed to remember that at all times. Maggie couldn't get away from him, it was too late for her. He had to court her, persuade her gently, coax her into accepting her inevitable fate. The urgent demands of his body could not be allowed to destroy the fragile thread between them. "Maggie." He used his voice shamelessly, a blend of temptation and heat. "The forest is calling to you, that's all it is. Nothing else. You haven't done anything wrong. You haven't offended me. I don't want you to be afraid of me. Are you? Have I frightened you in some way?" She was more afraid of herself than she was of him. She shook her head, unwilling to speak, the masculine scent of him nearly overwhelming. "You want to know about your parents, don't you, and all the work they did with endangered species? They were legends in their own way with the progress they made." Brandt felt the tension began to slowly dissolve in her body. "Let me tell you about your parents, because, believe me, they were two very extraordinary people. Did you know that they protected the animals here? That without them, poachers would have succeeded in killing off the sun bear? That's



only one of their triumphs. They made it their life's work to protect rare endangered animals. Your mother was much like you, with a smile that could light up a room. Your father was a strong man, a leader. He lived here, in this house, and he took over his father's job of protecting the rain forest. Each year it has gotten more difficult. Poachers are bold and they have tremendous firepower."

As he felt the apprehension drain from her, Brandt slowly released her, turned away from the danger the close proximity of her body presented. Her breasts were heaving with every breath she drew in, dragging his gaze to the firm, tempting mounds he longed to touch. He had feasted his gaze on her body, knew the swelling curves were a creamy invitation to sheer soft satin. Her heat fired his blood, and the scent of her aroused him to a painful need, his jeans stretched taut, his body in rebellion against the dictates of his brain. Maggie's hand trembled as she gripped the counter to support her rubbery legs.

She wanted to hear every word he had to say with regard to her parents. "What do you mean, without my parents poachers would have succeeded in killing off the sun bear?" She made every effort to sound normal. She knew he had to think she was psychotic, one moment trying to seduce him, the next clawing at him.

"With deforestation, plantations, and poachers encroaching every day, the sun bear, like many other animals, are in a tremendous decline and have been for a number of years. Your parents recognized the immediacy of concern."

"Why are poachers after the sun bear?" She was genuinely interested. Maggie had worked hard to learn about endangered wildlife, drawn to the cause from the first time she had seen a large cat.

"Several reasons. It is the smallest of all bears and is marketed as a pet. The largest it gets is about a hundred forty pounds, very small for a bear. And the



bear is beautiful with a crescent-shaped yellow or white mark across its chest.

It's really the only true bear living in our rain forest, and we don't want to lose it."

"My parents were game wardens? Is that what you do?" Somehow the idea of Brandt

being a game warden was even more appealing. She persisted in seeing him as a

hunter, yet in truth he was a protector of the creatures in the forest and a

poet at heart.

He nodded. "All of us in the village have dedicated our lives to the preservation of the forest and the trees, plants, and animals dwelling in it.

Your parents had two particular animals they fought to preserve, and eventually

it killed them."

Her heart beat into the silence. "What killed them?"

"Poachers, of course. Your parents were too successful at what they did. Parts

of the sun bear are worth a fortune." Brandt sat at the table and picked up his

mug of tea, wanting to set her at ease.

"Parts?" Her eyebrows shot up. She frowned at him, rubbing at her arms.

She was

itching again. That strange, uncomfortable feeling of something moving beneath

her skin was back. "Poachers sell off parts of the bear? Is that what you're

telling me?"

"Unfortunately, yes. The gallbladder is especially popular for medicine. And in

some places the conversion of forest habitat to plantations of oil palm have put

an even larger price on their heads. Because the bears don't have their natural

foods, they feed on the heart of the oil palm and destroy the trees.

Naturally

the plantation owners pay money to have the bears hunted and destroyed." Brandt

watched her closely, following the movement of her hands as her palms rubbed

back and forth along her arms.

"That's horrible."

"Leopards are disappearing as well." His voice was fierce now. "We cannot allow



the leopards to become extinct. Already the numbers are dwindling at an alarming rate. Once these species are lost to us, we cannot recover them. We owe it to them, to ourselves, and to our children to preserve these animals." Maggie nodded. "I've certainly done research in the area of saving habitats and I know the necessity, Brandt, but if it killed my parents all those years ago, I would think the danger would be even greater now." "Danger doesn't matter. We accept that as part of our lives. We are the keepers of the forest. It's our duty and it has always been our privilege. Your parents understood that, and their parents before them." His golden eyes moved over her, a brooding perusal. "There are only a few of us, Maggie, carrying on what your parents worked so hard for. It's your legacy." Noting her distress, he stood up slowly so as not to startle her. "What's wrong?" "My skin itches." She bit her lower lip. "Do you think I could have picked up some kind of parasite? It's strange, like something's moving inside of me, running under my skin." She was watching his face closely and saw the fleeting, cunning expression in his eyes. He knew. He was looking at her innocently, but he knew much more than he was letting on. She tilted her chin at him in challenge. "You know what it is, don't you, Brandt? You know what's happening to me." She moved around the counter, putting it between them, the only way she felt safe. "Are you afraid of me, Maggie?" he asked quietly. His tone chilled her to the bone. It was the second time he had asked her that. The silence in the house beat between them. Outside the walls, the forest was humming with life. "Should I be?" "No," he denied quickly, his molten gaze burning intensely, searing her. Branding her. "Never be afraid of me. I'm sworn to protect you. Above all others, above the forest and the animals in the forest. Never be afraid of me,



Maggie."

"Why? Why are you sworn to protect me, Brandt?" His very intensity frightened

her. No matter how hard he tried to look civilized, she saw the hunter in him.

She saw the predator. He could camouflage his savage nature for brief periods of

time, but not from her, not when they were alone together. She felt edgy and

irritated. Why would she know him? Why would she see through him? The ground

seemed to be shifting out from under her feet.

Chapter 4

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The silence stretched between them until Maggie wanted to scream. She could feel

the turmoil raging deep within her, almost as if something wild were struggling

for control. She was aware of so many things. The spacious room, the total

isolation. The fact that few people knew where she was. Maggie was alone in the

rain forest with a man whose sheer power overwhelmed her.

Brandt took a single step toward her. She reacted without thought, without plan,

springing in a swift leap to the tabletop across the room. She landed in a

crouch on all fours. Lightly. Silently. Her lips were drawn back in a snarl. The

pins holding her hair scattered to the floor, spilling her heavy braid down her

back. It took a few moments for reality to sink in, for Maggie to realize what

she had done.

A soft moan of despair escaped as she surveyed the distance from the counter to

the table where she was crouched. It was impossible to have jumped the area in a

single leap. It wasn't humanly possible.

"Maggie." He said her name. That was all. His voice was soothing.

Gentle. Tender

even. He knew what was happening to her—she could see the knowledge in the

molten gold of his eyes.

"Get out now." She bit the words out at him, shaking with fear, with terror. She

jumped from the table and raced out of the room, up the stairs to the



bedroom.

She was leaving, as quickly as possible. There had to have been something in the nectar, something to bring about the change in her. Whatever it was, she was going back to safety. Away from the jungle and far, far away from Brandt Talbot.

Maggie dragged her backpack out from the under the bed and began to stuff her things into it. Her hands were shaking so badly she dropped her clothes on the floor before she could get them into the pack. When she raised her eyes, he was standing there. Looming over her. His thighs were like oak trees, strong columns of power.

He reached out and took the pack from her hands, casually tossed it aside. "How do you think you can find your way without a guide, Maggie?" He touched her face with his fingertips, trailed a caress down her collarbone, then lower to the neckline of her shirt. It felt like a stroke of heat, of flame.

"People know where I am," she told him, her green gaze locked in combat with his golden one. "The lawyer..."

He shook his head. "Is one of us; he works for me. The moment you set foot in the forest, letters—brilliant forgeries I might add—were sent to your work to give notice, and to your apartment. Your things were packed up, some stored and others shipped. No one expects your return; they believe you are staying in your new estate after all."

"I'm a prisoner here? Why? What could you possibly want with me?" Maggie

struggled for control. She needed to be calm, to breathe air and think. Brandt

Talbot was enormously strong and he had the advantage of knowing the forest. She was as good as his captive. Yet even knowing that information, she couldn't deny the chemistry arcing between them, sizzling and alive and potent beyond imagination.

He was close to her. So close she could smell him, feel the heat of his body



right through her clothes. So close her breasts were only a scant inch or two from his chest. His fingers wrapped around her throat, his thumb tipping her head back. "This is your home, Maggie. You belong here. You were born here in this forest. And you belong to me." His hand slipped from her throat, slid over her tank top to cup the fullness of her breast. His thumb caressed her nipple through the cotton and the lace. The breath slammed out of her lungs. Flames shot through her body, from her breast to her deepest core. The strange roaring was back in her head. Need was on her. Not some gentle emotion, not a pleasant feeling, but a raging tidal wave of hunger, of craving. She wanted his hand to tighten, to knead and massage. His mouth to close over her aching flesh, to devour her. Both hands flat on his chest, she shoved him away as hard as she could. "You drugged me. The nectar. You put something in the drink to make me like this." As hard as she shoved him, his body barely rocked in response. "Listen to me, Maggie. I haven't lied to you. I won't lie to you. You're close to the change, that's what's wrong. It took me so long to find you, and you're ready for me. Your body needs mine. Let me help you." He still cupped the weight of her breast in his palm. Intimately. Possessively. His hand slid lower, over her rib cage, over her slender, tucked-in waist, to rest on the curve of her hip. "What the hell does that mean?" Her green eyes glared at him. He couldn't help but notice the way she was breathing, starved for air. Frightened. Resolute. Courageous. Maggie was determined to fight him even in such distress, yet she didn't jerk away from his touch and she didn't become hysterical. His admiration for her grew. He used his voice, a soothing caress, to tame her fears. "Let me tell you about your family. Who they were. What they were." His fingers stroked her



hip
tenderly because he needed to touch her; he couldn't stop himself. "We
can go
for a walk if you'd like. If you would feel more at ease. I'd like to
show you
the beauty of the forest." Your home. The unspoken words were between
them.

Brandt's touch was so intimate, so possessive, so completely right,
Maggie
stilled beneath his drifting hand. Absorbed his touch. Craved more. He
seemed so
familiar, and yet tiny tongues of flames licked at her skin wherever he
stroked.

She wanted to protest, to fight him; at the same time she wanted
desperately to
fasten her mouth to the perfection of his. Sheer sexual chemistry. That
was all.

That was everything.

Maggie nodded. The house was too stifling. And he was too compelling.
She wanted

him more than she had ever wanted anything in her life, and yet she
knew nothing
about him. She would have thought him crazy if she didn't have the
proof of his
words in her own body. The strange sensations, the wild, savage need to
have him
buried deep inside of her.

This was her one chance to get out of the house, away from his
influence. If she
could get to the village, perhaps the others would help her leave.
Brandt shook his head, his white teeth flashing with a small, enigmatic
smile.

"I'm not crazy, Maggie. Really. Let me tell you the story before you
decide."

"I'm listening," she agreed as she pulled on her boots. She didn't look
at him
again. It was the safest thing to do. She would need every ounce of
courage. She
would need her wits about her. One look at Brandt Talbot and good sense
scattered away instantly. She wasn't making that mistake again. "Are
your
parents alive, Brandt?" She wondered what his mother would have to say
about his
behavior.

"My father is alive," he answered softly. "My mother died a few months
after
your parents. Poachers killed her, too."



Maggie shivered at his grim tone. He tried to hide it from her, but she heard it all the same, tuned as she was to his every nuance. She led the way out of the house, watching as he carefully locked the door behind them. "Are you expecting visitors?" she asked with a raised eyebrow. "It pays to be careful, Maggie. That's the first rule you learn here. You must never forget we're in a war. They want us dead, and if they find our homes, they'll be waiting for us. This area has been protected for hundreds of years, but each year the forest shrinks. There will come a day when we will have to leave here and go somewhere safer." He sounded sad. "Our people have guarded here nearly as long as the trees have existed. It will be a terrible loss for all of us and for the forest." She heard the regret, the genuine sorrow in his voice. "I'm sorry, Brandt. I know what you're saying is true. We can only hope awareness of the importance of the rain forests and the various species here on earth is growing." He walked very close to her, protectively, his larger body occasionally brushing against hers. His proximity was exciting. He made her feel feminine, sexy, even seductive, all things she had never considered herself to be. She glanced sideways at him, not wanting him to steal her soul away along with her good sense. It was the way they moved together, as if they had known each other always. The silence stretched and lengthened. A companionable silence when she should have been nervous and afraid. The forest was extraordinarily beautiful. Flowers of every color rained down from the twisting vines and trees. The world hummed around them, a vibrant, mystical paradise. The perfumed scents of so many flowers filling the air were intoxicating. There was movement everywhere around them as birds soared overhead and monkeys flung themselves from branch to branch. The world seemed in



constant

motion, yet as still as the lizards and brightly colored frogs clinging to the trunks of the trees.

Maggie felt a strange peace stealing into her body. As if she knew this place.

Was familiar with it. As if it were home. The thoughts were unbidden but crept into her mind all the same. The wild forest should have frightened her, but the setting was as natural to her as breathing.

"Why aren't the insects bothering me?" She suddenly realized that she heard

continual buzzing around her but not even a mosquito had settled on her skin.

"The scent of the nectar repels them. We use it in the houses also. It makes

life much more bearable here. We mix it in the village and use it daily. It

works best if ingested." He answered matter-of-factly. "There are many properties here in the forest that can be used for medicine and repellants and other worthwhile things."

"Tell me more about my parents." She was enjoying walking with him too much.

Maggie didn't want to take the chance that she might succumb to the attraction

between them. She couldn't see herself having a hot flaming affair with a jungle

lover and walking away unscathed. She was too drawn to Brandt. Too wrapped up in his allure.

He swept a hand through his dark silky hair. "I'd like to tell you a story

first. It's well-known here in the forest. Every villager knows it and it ties

into your parents."

She glanced at him quickly but he was looking at the path, choosing a way

opposite of the direction Drake had pointed out as being toward the village.

Whatever Brandt Talbot was up to, he had the upper hand. Maggie didn't care. She

was determined to glean as much information from him as she could.

"Please do."

He did glance at her then. She felt the power of his burning gaze, but she kept



her face averted and looked as innocent as possible. Brandt shrugged his wide shoulders carelessly. "The village was younger then, with its homes closer together and in a clearing. No one thought they would be in such danger. The village had been large but time and circumstances had dwindled it down to a few pairs. The youngest were already in their thirties. They wanted a child.

Everyone in the village wanted it for them. They were a deserving couple, working hard to preserve the forest, braving the poachers, destroying traps, freeing captured animals, striving tirelessly to keep the creatures under their protection safe. And finally the miracle happened." He smiled as if remembering a wonderful moment.

"The couple was going to have a baby."

He nodded, the faint smile lingering, reaching his golden eyes so that he took her breath away. "They had a beautiful daughter and they were very happy. The people were excited. Most of the pairs were older and had few children, so they were eager for the ritual of promise."

Maggie pushed her hair out of her face. Strands were escaping the braid as leaves and twigs caught it and pulled as she passed by. "What is the ritual of promise?"

"These people were not merely human, Maggie, but something much more, a separate species. They were not wholly animal nor wholly man, but something of a mixture.

These people were of nature itself, using a normal human form but able to become large leopards, prowling the forest to keep order. They had dominion over other creatures, and with that came inevitable responsibility."

She had to sneak another look at his face. He was telling her a story, but he

was implying the story was much more than that. She couldn't believe such a

tale—she wouldn't believe it, no matter how charismatic Brandt was.

"Half-human, half-leopard, like the leopard men in the legends?" She



tried very
hard to keep the skepticism out of her voice. She had spent plenty of
time
reading and researching on the various tribal beliefs on half-human
deities. She
had always been somewhat obsessed with the subject.
"Those of this species are able to change shape at will. Not at first;
when
they're young, they are regular children. The change comes later. It is
known as
the Han Vol Dan. The way of the change. They are not half anything but
all their
own species. They live and work as humans but shift when necessary.
They are the
guardians of the jungles, of the rain forests. A people as rare as the
treasures
in their keeping."
Brandt's fingers tangled with hers as they moved together in perfect
step.
Perfect rhythm. There was no stumbling over the uneven ground. No
rustling of
leaves or snapping of twigs. They moved as a single unit, with natural
stealth
and complete ease. Unexpectedly he stopped, stepped directly in front
of her so
that she nearly ran into him.
Maggie had no choice but to tilt her head back and look up at him. Look
into his
golden eyes. At once she was lost, falling under his spell, her breath
leaving
her lungs in a rush. Rays of sunlight filtered through the heavy
foliage,
casting delicate radiance through the shadows, illuminating the
brilliance of
colors. Birds flitted from tree branch to vine, a flutter of wings
overhead. She
was aware of life pulsing around them, of the ebb and flow of nature
singing, of
the sounds of wildlife and water. Until she looked into his eyes.
Her world narrowed to Brandt. To the mysterious secrets swirling in the
depths
of his eyes. To the burning hunger and need she read there. He looked
at her as
if she were the only woman in the world. His molten gaze moved over her
face
slowly, drinking her in. He brought her hand up between them, so that
her palm



skimmed over the muscles of his chest. Her fingers brushed his chin sending butterfly wings brushing at the pit of her stomach as she felt his mouth moving against the back of her hand. His eyes continued to hold her captive. Maggie was mesmerized, a hunted rabbit caught in the intensity of his stare. He turned her hand over, opened her fingers, and, still holding her gaze, bent his head to scrape his teeth gently in the center of her palm. His tongue swirled, a hot, moist flame, and his sculpted lips completed the brand, pressing, firm yet velvet soft over the pulsing heat.

"I know you don't understand any of this yet, Maggie, and I thank you for your courage." His voice wrapped her in intimacy. "I just want you to know I have the advantage of knowing about you, about your life. I know about the time you fell off your bike and had to go to the hospital for stitches. I know about you caring for your mother while she was so ill, coming back from college to stay by her side for two months, nursing her yourself." Maggie stared at him with wide, shocked eyes, tried to pull her hand away from his. He merely tugged her closer. "Don't be afraid of who you are. I'm not. Of course I investigated; I couldn't afford to be wrong. I know you've always loved the forest and the animals in it. So you see, I do know you. I know what kind of woman you are."

Brandt turned away from her, walking once more, taking her with him, unable to look into her frightened eyes. He kept her hand firmly in his. He had fallen for that tenderhearted young woman he had read so much about. Like a drowning man, he had clung to every scrap of information he could ferret out about her. His emotions were already involved, and each moment spent in her company or simply observing her drew the net tighter around his heart. She didn't know him other



than as a man who tricked her, brought her to foreign soil, and attempted to seduce her into accepting him. He detested the fear and uncertainty in her eyes.

Maggie bit down on her lower lip, a sharp bite to give her courage to spar with him. "Why do you do that, Brandt? Deliberately keep me off balance? I know you brought me here, I just haven't figured out your real motive. I don't have enough money to make it worth your while. I'm not beautiful or famous. Why don't you just tell me the truth?"

"I have been telling you the truth. You aren't listening to the truth."

There was no impatience in his voice. He kept walking, veering slightly along a faint path.

Maggie could hear the continual roar of a large body of water. She glanced back in the direction they had come and saw only forest, no path, no house. She was well and truly lost, dependent on Brandt to return her home safely. Her fingers were tangled with his. She told herself she didn't want to bother with a struggle in the heat and the humidity, but the truth was, she liked the feel of him strong and protective beside her.

"I'm listening," she said, because she could feel the heat wave starting in the pit of her stomach, spreading like a wildfire through her blood. "Tell me about the change." Something was happening deep inside of her. Something she didn't understand or want. She tightened her fingers around his, holding on to the only security she had while her body went up in flames. She didn't look at him, but stared into the trees ahead of them, trying to ignore the sensations assaulting her.

"Let me finish the story, Maggie. The ritual of promise is a wedding of sorts.

Two lost hearts bound together as one. The story goes that cats have nine lives.

The male is reborn remembering what came before. He must find his mate.



No other will do. He must recognize her and lay his claim before the onset of the Han Vol Dan. Before the change overtakes her. The ritual of promise occurs when the two live in close proximity and the male recognizes the reborn female. Or, if the soul is new, when the male recognizes his mate at an early age."

"How can he do that?"

His eyes moved over her again. Moody. Brooding. Dark with some hidden mystery.

"The aura of the woman or child calls to him, melds with his. The elders can see the two colors merge. The little girl was recognized and promised in the ritual.

But the poachers had their revenge. They had been tracking the couple, trying to find their home, wanting to be rid of them. A very clever trap was set."

Maggie could feel the acceleration of her heart. Of his heart. She could hear them both pounding, remembering, reliving the terror. Her mouth went dry and she shook her head. "Don't tell me any more. I don't want to hear."

"Because you know. You were there when they came with their guns and their torches. When your father woke your mother and bundled you up and put you in her arms. When he kissed you for the last time and turned to fight the mob, to hold them back to give your mother a chance to save you. You remember his change, the way his fur felt against your skin. And you remember your mother's sobs as she wept and ran with you through the forest away from the village that was already being burned."

He turned up her hand, brought her knuckles to the warmth of his mouth.

"I remember it vividly, every detail, Maggie, because my mother died that night, too—oh, not right away; she lingered for months before her physical body gave up." He couldn't feign his sadness. It was as real as her own. She saw it in his eyes, and his poet's heart wept.

She did remember the frightening, nightmare images—a leopard leaping,



snarling,
a mass of teeth and claws cutting a path while they ran with dizzying speed. She remembered her mother flinching as a shot reverberated. Her mother ran several yards, staggered, recovered valiantly, and continued. Maggie pressed a hand to her mouth. Memories? Were they real? Could her mother have run through the forest in the dead of night, away from all she had known? Away from her husband and people? Run with a terrible wound draining the life from her? She dragged in her breath. "And she took me to Jayne. Jayne Odessa." "A very wealthy woman who had never had children and had always wanted them. Who was your mother's friend and shared her concerns for the rain forest and endangered species. Who knew nothing about what your mother was, only that she loved her and would do anything to keep you safe. She witnessed your mother's death and she took you back to the United States and legally adopted you."

Chapter 5

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Maggie stood absolutely motionless. It was insanity to believe anything Brandt Talbot said, yet she knew it was true. She did have memories of that night. And Jayne Odessa had spoken often of a friend she loved very much who had died violently, tragically. A woman named Lily Hanover. The two women had worked tirelessly to preserve the rain forest and all the endangered species within it. Saving the environment had been the cause that had brought Jayne and Lily together. But Jayne had never told Maggie that Lily was her mother. Brandt caught her chin. "Don't feel sad, Maggie. Your parents loved you very much and they loved each other. Few people ever have that in their lifetime." "You knew them?" Her green gaze locked with his, daring him to lie to her. "I was a boy, but I remember them, the way they always touched each other and smiled at each other. They were truly wonderful people who always



practiced what
they believed no matter what the danger."
Maggie glanced up into the trees, caught sight of the several frogs
sitting
openly on the leaves. Their eyes were huge, enabling the amphibians to
hunt at
night. Higher up, clinging to the branches of a tree, was a small
tarsier with
its round shiny eyes staring down at her. He looked like a fuzzy,
huggable alien
creature. Her mother and father had seen these little creatures just as
she was
seeing them, perhaps had stood under the same tree.
"Thank you for telling me about my parents, Brandt. I understand better
why
Jayne was afraid for me to come here to the forest. I used to talk
about it all
the time and she would get upset, even cry. I longed to come to the
rain forest
here and in South America and in Africa. When I became a veterinarian,
it was
with the idea that I would be working in the wild to preserve rare
species."
"Jayne Odessa witnessed the poachers murdering Lily. She had no idea of
Lily's
heritage, that she was a shapeshifter." Brandt took a breath, let it
out, all
the time watching her expression carefully for signs that she was
rejecting the
things he was revealing to her. "It must have been so frightening for
Jayne to
know that poachers would murder someone just because they tried to
protect the
animals. And then you had to grow up just like Lily, wanting to save
exotic
animals."
He stroked her hair, the lightest of caresses, but the touch sent heat
spiraling
through her body. She ached for him but did her best to ignore it.
Though he
appealed to her on so many levels, she was leery of the sheer force of
the
attraction between them. "I may have inherited the tendencies from my
birth
mother but Jayne certainly influenced me, too. She surrounded herself
with books
and information on habitats and endangered species, supported the



causes

monetarily, and volunteered for all sorts of things. Of course some of her

passion rubbed off on me."

"Do you believe the other things I told you, Maggie?"

Brandt framed her face with his hands, bent his dark head toward hers as if he

couldn't bear the inches separating them. "Do you believe another species could

exist? A species of shape-shifters? Do you believe you're one of us?"

He was so close, so tempting, his golden eyes glittering with intensity. "I

don't know," she answered carefully. "I guess it wouldn't be all that difficult

to prove." There was a challenge in her voice.

"And have you run screaming from me?"

"I may run screaming from you anyway," she pointed out with a small, self-mocking grin. She was watching his face, saw his sudden resolve, and her

heart began beating overtime in her chest.

In the canopy overhead a monkey screamed; the flutter of wings told of birds

taking flight. Brandt swung his head around quickly, alertly, his eyes suddenly

flat and hard. "James! What are you doing here?"

Maggie looked in the direction Brandt was staring just as the wind shifted. She

caught a vaguely familiar scent. She had smelled that presence a couple of times

now, in the forest as she journeyed on her way to her parents' home and then

outside the house, near the verandah. She could barely make out the man hidden

in the shadows.

"Just curious, Brandt." The voice floated to them, almost a challenge.

Maggie instinctively moved closer to Brandt, feeling that odd "fur ruffled the

wrong way" sensation she didn't like. Brandt seemed to recognize her discomfort

and circled her waist with his arm, drawing her beneath the protection of his

shoulder. Before he could introduce the other man, James had melted into the

bush.

Maggie held her breath, waiting, but she didn't know for what.

Brandt left her side, tracking the other man into the foliage. When he returned



he took her hand, drew her to him. "He's gone. Don't look so afraid."
"Who is he?" Maggie asked.
"One of our people." Brandt sounded grim. "One I would caution you to keep a distance from. He holds a fundamental belief that the rules apply to everyone but him."
For no reason that Maggie could think of, she shivered violently. Her body held an aversion to the man who was hidden in the heavier foliage. Brandt immediately reacted, running his palms up and down her arms in a massage. "Why do you touch me as if you have the right?" And why did she crave his touch?
"You touch me as if it's perfectly natural." As if she belonged to him.
"Does it bother you so much?" His voice dropped an octave, became a husky seduction. The pad of his thumb slid over her full lower lip in a caressing stroke.
Her stomach did a flip of delight. "It bothers me because it feels..." She trailed off, her eyes locked with his. It felt right. Perfect. Exactly what she wanted.
His mouth was a scant few inches from hers. The temptation of his perfectly sculpted lips was more than she could resist.
Maggie honestly didn't know who moved first. She only knew there was magic in the brush of his mouth on hers. He was unexpectedly gentle, his lips moving over hers like the soft drift of the breeze. She felt his ravenous hunger, yet he touched her so tenderly, coaxing her response instead of demanding one. She pressed closer to him, circling her arms around his neck, needing the feel of his body against hers.
At once his lips firmed, hardened. He deepened the kiss, his hands sliding over the contours of her body, shaping her curves, dragging her closer. Brandt pushed the edge of her shirt up to give him access to bare skin. His palms found lace over her breasts, the thinnest skimming of materials to cover luscious treasure.
His touch sent fire racing through her blood. It shook her that she



could have
such a reaction, such an overwhelming need. A tremor ran through her
body, and
she stiffened slightly, something deep within her still fighting.
He abruptly pulled his mouth away from hers, his hands lingering on her
breasts,
his forehead resting on hers. There was the sheen of sweat on his skin
and his
breathing was ragged, his body fiercely aroused. "We can't stay here
alone like
this, Maggie. I don't have nearly the control I thought I did." He
kissed her
again. Gently. Persuasively. "Unless you want me the way I want you."
Everything feminine in her rose up to answer his call. She wanted him.
Craved
him. But as hot as she felt, as much as she wanted to wrap herself
around him,
something deep within her perversely denied them both the ultimate
release.
"I can't, Brandt, I'm sorry. I don't know why. I can't." She curled her
fingers
in his shirt, held on to him for comfort.
His hands reluctantly left her breasts, skimmed over her rib cage,
caressed her
flat belly. "I understand, honey. Don't worry." He kissed her forehead,
breathing deeply to pull himself back from the edge of sexual hunger.
"Let's go
somewhere safe."
"Is there somewhere safe?" She looked up at him, knowing her eyes were
shining
at him. His understanding only served to make him more attractive.
Brandt Talbot
was an incredibly sensitive man and she was falling deeper and deeper
beneath
his spell.
He bent his head to kiss the corner of her mouth, feeling he should be
a
candidate for sainthood or at the very least knighted. He took her hand
and
started off confidently in another direction. "I guess the village
would be safe
enough. We might find a person or two there." He scowled as he said it.
Maggie knew he was thinking about the mysterious James, hoping he
wouldn't be at
the village. "I would hope so. I'd like that. I've wanted to see it."
She
enjoyed walking beside him as he named plant species and pointed out



animals and
reptiles she might have missed. She became aware of how completely safe
she felt
with him. The forest was a dark place, mystical and even haunting, yet
Brandt
moved so quietly, so fluidly, with such complete assurance, she
realized just
how much a part of it he really was. "You took all those photographs
hanging in
the house, didn't you? They're very good." There was raw admiration in
her
voice.
He actually flushed. "You noticed those, did you? I hope you didn't
read any of
that nonsense. I should have taken them down but I didn't think about
it."
"I liked the poetry."
He groaned. "It isn't poetry. I just was trying to find something for
titles but
nothing fit." His excuse sounded lame even to his own ears.
Maggie reached out and touched his hair, tangling her fingers in the
silky mass
for just a moment because she couldn't resist. "Are you a professional
photographer?" He was so appealing in his embarrassment that she was
reluctant
to help him out but she couldn't stop herself.
"I freelance for National Geographic" Brandt admitted reluctantly. "I
write
articles and do consultations for various governments. Along with my
job here, I
try to raise world awareness about the value of the forest."
Maggie stared at him in shocked amazement. How could she not have put
it all
together? "You're the Brandt Talbot, the renowned leading expert on the
rain
forest? Doctor Brandt Talbot. I can't believe I'm talking to you. I've
read
everything you've ever written!" Maggie found herself falling deeper
under his
spell. He loved what she loved. She heard it in his voice and read it
in his
articles. He couldn't fake that kind of passion. "Tell me more about
the species
you say my parents were," she encouraged, uncertain whether she could
believe
him or not. Her body seemed living proof of his revelations. Something
was going



on inside of her, something she seemed not to have control over, yet his explanation seemed beyond the realm of reality. She tried to keep an open mind.

"Are there many of them left?"

"Of us, Maggie—you're one of us—and no, there are not many of us left. Our race has dwindled. We've been hunted and killed nearly to the point of extinction. It was partly our own fault. We don't have the most noble history." There was regret in his voice.

"What happened?"

"In the early days, some tribes worshiped us as deities. Some of our people became obsessed with power. Like any species, there are those among us who choose a life of common good and service, and those who want to reign, to conquer. We have our own diseases and our own problems. We're passionate, a mixture of human and animal instincts that means good and bad from both sides."

He stopped walking. "The village is just ahead of us. Maggie, even today, some of our males are obsessed with power," he cautioned her carefully.

"Leopards don't mate for life, Brandt. The females raise the cubs alone. Do the men walk away after sex?" She forced herself to ask the question without looking at him.

He caught her to him, his arms steel bands. "No, Maggie. We are not leopards, not animals, nor are we human. Our species mate for life. It's how it's done. For nine lives. All of our lives. Over and over. You're mine, I know you are, you've always belonged with me."

Relief and joy washed over her, so much so that she couldn't respond. The thought that he might want her for all their years rather than just a mating made her happy in spite of the fact that she wasn't altogether certain any of it was real. She let him hold her in silence while she looked around her, trying to see through the rain and trees. Sure enough, there were a couple of



small structures woven into the trees and camouflaged by the wealth of plants growing in every conceivable manner. She shook her head. "This is the village? This is where everyone lives? All two buildings?" She was trying not to laugh. She had pictured something much different. A thriving busy hub, at least, like a native village.

"We never live in the village. We simply meet here to enjoy company or get supplies. Homes are scattered in and around the trees. We make certain there are no trails and that we're constantly vigilant, looking for signs of anyone near. The poachers destroyed the village the night your parents died, and since that time we've kept it quite small for protection."

"That makes sense, but it seems a sad way to live."

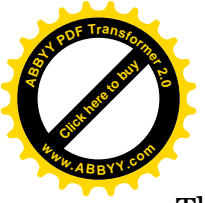
"We have our own community and not all of our people reside in the rain forest. Some have chosen to live on the outskirts. We change at will, with the exception of the Han Vol Dan. The first time shifting occurs is uncomfortable and can't be controlled. It's best to have someone with you to talk you through it."

"So children don't shift shape. Only adults?"

He nodded. "And we don't know what triggers it in each individual. Some are earlier shifters than others." Brandt slipped his arms around her shoulders, needing to touch her, to have her close. He was feeling edgy and combative, knowing the other males were in close proximity. His friends, he reminded himself. Men he trusted. Men who had saved his life a dozen times, as he had saved theirs. They knew Maggie was his mate. They would be just as uncomfortable around her as he would be with them there until he had bound Maggie to him.

And then there was James. Brandt and the others had scented him in the forest, watching Maggie's arrival. Twice Brandt had smelled his spoor near the house.

Brandt didn't trust James and didn't want the man anywhere near Maggie.



Their species had too much animal influence, so much so that they had to fight their very natures at times. They reacted like territorial males until the bonds were fully established. It was dangerous for all of them. Maggie felt the fine tremor running through his body. "What is it?" She slid her arm around his waist, something she might not ordinarily have done, but he seemed to need her. There was a strange kind of power in having a strong man need her so much, to have him so intent on his pursuit of her. "You're uncomfortable with our being here. I can feel it, Brandt." He pulled her back into the shelter of the trees and turned her into his arms, brought her body tightly against his so that she could feel his every muscle imprinted on her. His scent enveloped her. Brandt leaned down to nuzzle her hair aside so he could find her shoulder with his mouth. Teeth scraped back and forth gently over her bare skin. "I want you." He whispered it softly against her ear, his warm breath teasing her senses. "I want you so badly I can't think sometimes." Her entire body answered his whispered confession. Clenching. Pulsing with heat. With hunger. With anticipation. His lips drifted up her throat, his teeth tugged tenderly on her chin, skimmed along her cheek to find the corner of her mouth. His tongue stroked. Lingered. Traced her lips until she opened for him. At once she was lost. His mouth was a mystery of intrigue, of masculine expertise and hot promises. His tongue swept inside, swept her away from her inhibitions. From sanity. From any clear thought. Her arms crept up around his neck. Locked there, held him to her while she moved against him, a slow rubbing of her body against his. Arousing him further. Savoring the way his body hardened in response. All the while their mouths were welded together. His hands moved over her, shaped her breasts,



memorized the
curve of her hips, slid possessively over her buttocks. Kneaded.
Massaged.
Stroked.
His mouth became hotter and silkier, his tongue danced, dueled with
hers. He
trailed kisses over her chin, her throat, leaving tiny flames behind.
His mouth
settled over her breasts, suckling right through the thin cotton of her
shirt.
Maggie cried out, cradled his head, arcing into him while her body
nearly
drowned in a tidal wave of desire. Nothing had prepared her for the
heat, for
the hunger.
"Let's go away from here," he whispered, "right now, Maggie. Come with
me away
from here. I need you so much right now."
She nodded, needing him, needing him to stop the terrible ache, to fill
the
emptiness. "I've never done this before, Brandt," Maggie admitted,
wanting him
to go slow, to let her catch up to his obvious experience.
His entire body went rigid. His golden eyes blazed at her with a
mixture of
consternation and hunger. "Are you untouched, Maggie?" There was shock
in his
voice.
She stiffened immediately, drew away from him. "Not anymore." Her chin
went up
with a hint of defiance. "I'd have to say you changed that."
He had inadvertently hurt her. Brandt shackled her wrist, brought her
resisting
body back to him. "I'm sorry, Maggie, I didn't mean it that way."
"I know exactly what you meant. You wish I were experienced. I'm so
dreadfully
sorry, but I'm not. I've never found a man I loved that much or was so
attracted
to that I wanted to have a physical relationship." She was furious.
Furious. She
was not about to defend her morals to Brandt Talbot. She turned away
from him,
away from his pathetic little village.
Brandt knew Maggie wanted to be angry with him. He was certain she was
telling
herself she was angry with him, but her eyes were shiny and if tears
spilled



over he would have to kiss every drop from her face. Deliberately he dragged her hand to his chest and held it against him, ignoring her halfhearted struggles.

"How could you think I would want another man to put his hands on you? To touch you?" His arms circled her body, held her to him while he nuzzled the top of her head with his chin. "The last thing I would ever want would be for you to believe, even for a moment, that you cared for another man enough to want him to make love to you." He kissed her temple. "I was only concerned for you. You should have told me immediately. What you're feeling, I'm also feeling. I could have lost control. I must take great care with you." He held her to him, waited for the tension to drain out of her. He was beginning to know her. She might flash at him, but she got over things quickly. Maggie tilted her head back to look up at him. Instantly she knew she'd made a mistake. His eyes were dark, liquid, melting her, tugging at her heartstrings. She shook her head, knowing it was too late. The hurt, the anger was slipping away while her insides turned to mush. She took a deep breath, let it out slowly, and forced her hungry stare away from his hypnotic eyes. "Take me to the village. I want to see what it's like." She needed a space from him, breathing room. She needed a semblance of normalcy and a reprieve from the continual sexual assault on her senses. He rubbed the bridge of his nose, looking thoughtful. "All right, we'll go, but just remember I'm as on edge as a male leopard when a female is..." She whipped her head around, glared at him, provoked beyond endurance. "Don't you dare say I'm in heat. I am not in heat!" She flushed a bright scarlet, stepped away from the temptation of his masculine body. "What a thought!" Though she'd been thinking it herself. She had all the signs of a feline in heat, but Brandt saying the words aloud was humiliating. Suddenly her eyes



widened and her hand went to her throat. "Wait a minute. Are you implying I can conceive? Is that it? I'm ovulating and I want to have sex because I can conceive?" She backed hastily away from him as if he might contaminate her. When he started to follow her she pointed an accusing finger at him. "You stay right over there, away from me. Far away from me." He was grinning at her and Maggie found herself staring at his mouth, fascinated. Intrigued. Her mouth curved in an answering smile in spite of her intentions to be serious. "It isn't funny. Stay over there where I know I'm perfectly safe and explain this to me. Do..." What in the world did they call themselves? "Do leopard-people only have sex when the female ovulates?" Brandt burst out laughing. "You're looking disappointed, Maggie, which I'm thankful for. No, we are a highly sexual race and lovemaking is frequent. But, yes, when our mate nears the time of ovulation, the need becomes much more intense. Sex can be rough. That's why I was concerned with your being a virgin, not because it displeased me." His gaze was hot as it moved over her. Possessive. "We'll get around it." "We won't need to get around it! You aren't coming near me! I'm not getting pregnant. I'm not! So you can just stop looking at me like that. Unless you have a box full of protection, you can forget it." She felt wild, upset, needy. Raging hormones out of control. She felt sorry for every female cat she had ever come into contact with. "Weren't you even going to tell me?" "Eventually. I'm taking things slow, letting you get used to the idea of what you are. It carries a certain responsibility with it." He shrugged his wide shoulders, and she nearly groaned at the way his muscles rippled enticingly. "I'll say." She glared at him when she wanted to fling herself at him and beg him to rip her clothes off. The village was the only safe place. They needed people, not privacy, not an exotic rain forest with its flowers and



trees and
steamy assault on the senses. "Get away from me, Brandt. I'm feeling
extremely
catlike toward you just about now, and raking my claws down your face
seems a
good idea." Raking her claws down his body would be better. Over his
back.
Clinging to him. The image the words evoked sent her body pulsing with
need.
He saw it in her expression, inhaled her beckoning scent. Male
satisfaction
gleamed in his eyes.
Maggie rubbed her hands up and down her thighs. "For heaven's sake, do
we have
litters? Cubs? Inquiring minds want to know." She couldn't stand still,
she
couldn't think clearly. Another wave of need was rushing through her
body like a
fireball.
Brandt's gaze narrowed, focused on her completely. He simply reached
out and
caught her hand. "Neither one of us is in any shape to go visiting,
Maggie.
You're going to have to trust me to know what to do."
Night was falling fast as it often did in the rain forest. She felt
tired and
muggy and her clothes felt uncomfortable against her skin. She could
tell she
was getting edgy, wanting to rake at Brandt. The best thing was to be
alone,
somewhere quiet and soothing.

Chapter 6

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Maggie woke unbearably hot, a soft cry of protest on her lips. She
heard the
echo of the haunting sound as she lay in the dark room with her heart
beating
too fast and her mind racing. The room was pitch black, yet her vision
was
remarkably good. Instead of reassuring her, the fact left her curling
her
fingers in the sheets. Her body had awakened her with urgent need,
burning for
relief so that she couldn't control her restless shifting.
It was only then that she thought to inhale. At once she went still,
her stomach
flipping and hot liquid heat surging through her body in instant



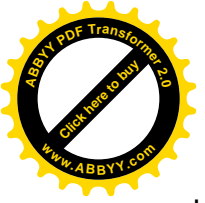
invitation. She smelled fruit and the musky scent of a male. Her male. Brandt. She would know that masculine scent anywhere, a blend of outdoor and spice. She knew immediately he was as aroused as she was. Maggie moistened her lips. "What are you doing here?" "Looking at you." The words were soft, seductive. Truthful. His voice came from the chair positioned in the deepest corner opposite from her. "Watching over you." She smiled in the dark. "Do I need watching over?" The thought of his eyes on her, intense and burning, was a powerful aphrodisiac. She moved along the sheets, trying to get comfortable when every nerve ending was alive and sizzling with awareness. "You were moaning in your sleep. The sound tore me up." Brandt was sprawled out in the chair, his long legs stretched in front of him, his eyes devouring her. He had positioned the chair at the best advantage to watch her. She was so beautiful, so real, lying on his bed, all lush curves and gleaming skin. He ached to hold her. To lap his tongue along her throat and in the deep valley between her breasts, to swirl it in that intriguing little belly button he had such difficulty tearing his gaze from. She belonged in the house. Here with him. The sight and sound of her, the scent of her completed him. He had to clear his throat of the unexpected lump clogging it so he could speak. "There's fruit on the tray there if you're thirsty or hungry. It was hot so I brought ice in the small insulated bucket." Maggie sat up, pushed at the hair tumbling around her face. "You're always taking care of me, Brandt. Thank you, it was very thoughtful of you." She was thirsty and hot, her throat parched. Brandt watched as she reached a slender, bare arm through the mosquito netting and lifted a piece of mango to her lips. She tilted her head slightly, exposing



the long column of her throat, smooth and vulnerable, to him. Her lips parted slightly, and he caught a glimpse of her small teeth, her tongue, before she took the fruit into her mouth. His entire body clenched when she sucked the juice from her fingers. Her tongue darted out to catch the last drop of juice on her lower lip. His hand dropped to his thick, hard arousal pulsing with hunger and urgent demand. A single sound escaped him. Maggie's head went up. "Do you want to share with me?" Her voice sent jackhammers tripping in his head. He thought he would burst from his skin. "Look at me, Maggie," he commanded gruffly. "You're in the shadows. I can't see you." "Yes, you can. Use your eyesight. Look at me and tell me if you want me sharing with you." There was a moody, edgy feel to his voice, one that sent a shiver of awareness down her spine. She pushed the mosquito netting aside and leaned forward, picking up another piece of mango as she did so. It took a moment to make him out, as still as he was in the chair. He seemed to become part of whatever his background was, a highly developed camouflage. Maggie could see him then, his powerful body draped on the chair. Entirely naked. Starkly aroused. He made no attempt to hide the pulsing staff thrusting upward from between his legs. He sat there, motionless, his brooding gaze on her, simply awaiting her decision. Beneath the thin tank top her breasts ached tenderly. A trickle of hot liquid dampened the sheets. He stole her breath. Just looking at him, so hungry for her, robbed her of air. Deliberately she licked at the fruit, knowing his eyes were on her. She sucked the piece into her mouth, followed it with her fingers. Maggie took her time. There was no need to hurry; she could see his reaction as she sucked the juice from her hand. His nails dug into the arm of the chair and his body jerked.



She heard his swift intake of breath as she slowly caught the hem of her tank top and pulled it over her head to bare her breasts for him. "I definitely want you sharing with me, Brandt," she invited. Some of the tension left his body but he remained across the room from her. Maggie's body tightened even more in anticipation. He liked looking at her—she could feel him drinking her in, devouring her with his heated gaze. Deliberately she leaned back on the bed to hook her drawstring bottoms with her thumbs. Carefully she slid the material down the curve of her hip, shimmying a little as she pushed the pajamas from her legs, discarding them beside the bed in an unwanted little heap. Maggie reached for another piece of fruit, but he was there before her, picking up the orange pulp and bringing it to her mouth. He squeezed so the juice ran over his fingers and across his palm. Maggie took a bite, watched him pop the rest into his own mouth, and he offered her his hand. His knee wedged between her thighs, leaving her open, damp, pulsing for him. Maggie caught his thick wrist and brought his fingers to her mouth. Her tongue slid over his skin, probing, teasing, exploring the contours of his hand while she lapped up the juice. All the time she was very aware of his body, silky hot, so close to hers. The sensation of her tongue lapping so delicately over his fingers, tracing the crease in his palm, nearly made him explode. The tips of her breasts skimmed his arm, flashed fire along his skin. The junction between her legs, as he nudged closer, was fiery hot, damp, giving off the rich scent of her calling to him. The hammering in his head became a roar. He was thick and hard, but her tongue was increasing his measurements beyond anything he'd ever experienced. He couldn't imagine what would happen if her hot mouth pulled as strongly



at
another portion of his anatomy.
Brandt curled his hand around the nape of her neck and tilted her head
back,
fastening his mouth to hers. Heat exploded inside of her. Erupted into
a hot
molasses that spread through her body until she was burning up inside.
His mouth
fed on hers, his tongue dueling, tangling, stroking while his hands
explored her
satin-soft body. Maggie couldn't breathe, yet he was providing her air.
She
couldn't think, her mind in a chaos of pleasure, as he guided her
through the
whirling sensations, anchoring her to him with his commanding mouth and
strong
hands.
His hands cupped her breasts, his thumbs gliding over her nipples to
bring them
to two taut peaks. "I need a piece of mango," he whispered into her
open mouth.
Brandt didn't stop kissing her, eating at her mouth while she bent to
get the
fruit. His mouth was hot and masculine and she was lost in his passion.
He
didn't take the mango from her. "Rub it on your nipples for me," he
instructed,
pulling back to look down at her full breasts cupped in his palms.
A small explosion went off in her deepest most feminine core, and moist
heat
seeped and beckoned to him at his provocative words. She could feel
ripples of
fire deep within her. His gaze was burning, possessive, his face hard
and edgy
with need. Maggie nibbled at the fruit so that juice ran down the corner
of her
mouth. Brandt leaned forward and caught the drops with his tongue,
tracing her
lower lip until she opened her mouth for him again. Her body clenched
in
reaction.
Watching his golden eyes grow hotter, almost liquid, she rubbed the
mango over
her nipples in slow, deliberate circles, then in a wider pattern over
the curve
of her breasts. Her breasts seemed to swell with the attention, aching
for him.



She held the fruit to his mouth, watched him suck it inside without breathing. Her lungs refused to cooperate. She pressed her body tightly against his knee, rubbing like a cat, seeking a measure of relief. Brandt leaned in to kiss her again. "Thank you, honey." The three words were said against her throat. Maggie closed her eyes as his teeth skimmed her sensitive skin. His lips traced a path to her breasts. Everything stilled inside of her. Waiting. Longing. Needing. He huffed out his breath, blowing warm air over her nipples. Her body wound even tighter. His hair spilled across her arm, over her skin, brushing tiny flames over her. And then she felt his tongue. A tiny stroke. A light caress. She jumped. Her hips shifted restlessly. Maggie closed her eyes, savoring the pleasure as his tongue began to lick and lap slowly at the fruit juice. It was designed to drive her out of her mind and it did. She caught his head in her hands to hold him to her breast, thrusting into the hot, moist cavern. Brandt closed his mouth around her offering, sucking strongly. She cried out, writhing against him, her body brushing against him, a thousand points of flames. Her arms dragged him closer. Maggie threw back her head, jutting more fully into his assault, while wave after wave of sensation rushed from her breasts to her belly in a fireball. He bent her backward slowly until she was resting on the mattress, sprawled beneath him while his mouth pulled strongly and his hands claimed her body for his slow exploration. His strength was enormous—she felt it in the smooth ripple of muscle beneath his flesh. Unable to resist, Maggie traced her hands over him, each angle and plane, the ridge of his muscles, wanting to feel his thickness in her hands. Brandt had other ideas. "I'm going to shatter if you do that," he admitted, his



hands moving over her rib cage, her small waist to her belly. He loved the smooth expanse, the way her hipbones felt beneath his fingertips. Her curls were nearly as fiery as her core, bright and hot and waiting for him to dip his thumb through them.

She jumped, catching at his hands. Brandt ignored the restraint and pushed her

thighs more fully open. "Let yourself go, Maggie," he said softly.

"There's only

the two of us. I was made for you. To love you, to bring you pleasure."

His

finger stroked over her damp core, swirled inside to find her hot and slick with

need. "Am I bringing you pleasure, Maggie?"

"You know you are." So much so she couldn't think straight.

"Maggie, it's me you want, not just anyone," Brandt said, his golden eyes

suddenly fierce. His finger plunged deep, so that she gasped, her hips bucking

against his hand. "Say it, Maggie, say it's only me you want." He reveled in the

feel of her muscles clenched around him, but he had to know it was for him. She

had to give herself to him fully. Her body wasn't enough for him, it would never

be enough. Maggie was his other half, a woman born to be his best friend, his

companion, and a lifelong partner. Their sexual chemistry was a huge bonus, but

it wasn't enough. She had to want him.

Her green eyes went wide as he pushed two fingers deep, stretching her, wanting

her tight body to accept his easily. "Say it, Maggie, I need to hear you say

it."

"Who did you think I wanted?" she gasped, nearly coming up off the bed.

She was

certain she wasn't going to live through wanting him.

"Say you'll stay with me, live with me, Maggie, learn to love me, here in the

rain forest where you were born." He bent his head to her soft, taut belly, so

firm and flat, his palm lying across her thatch of curls. As he lapped gently at

her sexy belly button, he pushed his fingers deeper inside of her,



closed his eyes as her body clamped down in response. "I want to be here with you, Brandt. I longed to come here," she admitted. He was driving her out of her mind. "Please..." The word broke from her, a soft gasp of need. The waves of pleasure were so intense, Maggie had to struggle to stay grounded in reality. "What about protection, Brandt? You said I could get pregnant." His teeth nipped her belly, his tongue swirled and caressed. "Right here, Maggie. Our child would grow here in your belly. My child." His teeth nipped again. "Would that be a terrible thing for us? To have a child together?" There was seduction in his whisper, a temptation. Maggie had always craved a family and had been so lost without one. His whisper spoke of permanency, of commitment. She was so tempted with her body going up in flames. She couldn't think straight with wanting him. She didn't want him to stop but she needed time with him, to know him inside and out. There was the blaze of possession in his eyes, a ruthless stamp to his mouth and an insatiable sexual hunger in him when he looked at her, when he touched her. He was thoughtful, protective, intelligent, and had a sense of humor—but was that enough to really know him? His fingers slid out of her and his teeth nipped a little lower, his soft laughter against her curls. "Our males stimulate the females into pregnancy, honey; you don't operate exactly like a human. I just wanted you to know, I wouldn't mind my child growing deep inside of you. I wouldn't mind your breasts full with milk." He smiled again, self-assured, no longer looking vulnerable, but intensely masculine. "I'm a cat, after all. But waiting until you know me, until you trust me, is essential. I'll be very careful, I promise." He lifted his head and looked at her, his golden eyes gleaming. "Don't move,



baby, just
lie still for me," he whispered, his hands parting her thighs. "The
first night
you were here, in my bed, I sat in that chair and dreamt of this. Of
how you
would taste." He lowered his head.
A scream ripped its way out of her throat. Her body bucked and
convulsed. His
tongue was relentless, stabbing, probing, sucking at her body, creating
earthquakes and fireworks, shattering her into a million pieces. It
went on and
on, a storm of pure pleasure she was lost in, thrashing beneath him
without
inhibition, crying out for him, pleading with him to be deep inside of
her where
she needed him, where he belonged.
Brandt caught her hips in his hand, pulled her down the bed until her
bottom was
on the edge and he was tight against her. His erection was heavy and
thick, the
head so sensitive as he pushed into her, his body shuddered with
pleasure. She
was like a hot, slick fist, velvet soft but so tight he nearly lost all
control.
He forced himself to take his time, to fill her slowly, to push deeper
and
deeper into her body, wanting her to take every inch of him.
Maggie heard a keening sound, realized it was she. His body was
invading her, a
thick, hard fullness that brought a fiery friction of intense pleasure.
She
could feel her body adjusting, accommodating his size. And then he
began to move
and she was lost to everything but the conflagration he was building,
feeding.
He moved slowly at first, watching her for signs of discomfort. When
she lifted
her hips to meet his, he began to lose himself in the perfect rhythm,
hard and
fast, plunging into her, driving deeper. The little noises escaping her
throat
drove him wild. "Take all of me, honey, all of me." It was a plea, a
demand. She
burned hotter and hotter, gripping him tightly.
He thrust hard, reveling in the way her body trembled with pleasure,
the way her
breasts jutted upward, her stomach rippled, her eyes glazed slightly as



their bodies came together. The sight of her, the feel of her was his undoing. He wanted it to last forever, but he had wanted too long, too much, and his body had other ideas. He felt it start in his toes, rising higher and higher, his belly on fire, hips thrusting ferociously, almost brutally, his hands pinning her to him, while he erupted with jets of hot cream, filling her, triggering an intense orgasm so that her body gripped and tightened, milking his until he collapsed over her, spent and momentarily sated. They were locked together, their hearts hammering loudly, their scents mingling, both so sensitive they were afraid to move. Brandt kissed the corner of her mouth, her chin, the tip of her breast. "Are you all right? I didn't hurt you, did I?" Reluctantly he rolled his weight off of her. His hands tangled in her hair possessively. "You know you didn't hurt me," she assured him. She didn't think her body would ever belong to her again. "It's hot in here. Did the temperature shoot up when we weren't looking?" He laughed softly, deep in his throat. "We had other things on our minds." He sat up, reached past her. His naked body was flexible, a miracle of movement. "What are you doing?" Maggie asked drowsily. She rolled over onto her stomach and lifted her head to watch him. There was something very intimate about the dark night enfolding them in its cloak, yet they could see each other very clearly. She watched him lift the insulated bucket of ice to his mouth. Fascinated, she propped herself up on her elbows to watch his throat work as he swallowed the ice-cold liquid. He was so sexy, the simple act took her breath away. Just drinking water. And how had he managed to get her to trust him the way she did? She trusted everything he said with an instinct, a knowledge, that he was telling her the



truth. Or maybe she just wanted him, burned for him, and nothing else mattered.

Brandt looked at her over the bucket, his eyes so gold they glittered.

A slow, wicked smile curved his mouth, revealed his teeth. Catlike. Wild.

Primitive.

Maggie had no idea of the picture she presented, thoroughly loved, thoroughly sensual. The tips of her breasts swayed slightly as she moved, and the smooth

rounded curves of her buttocks quivered, drawing his attention. She had a

beautiful bottom. Already his body was stirring. He felt the familiar tightness.

Plucking a piece of ice from the bucket, he held it up. "I think I have a way to cool you off."

Her eyes widened. She looked at him warily. "I don't like that wicked look in your eyes."

He lifted her hair and rubbed the ice over her nape, felt her shiver.

At once

her nipples tightened. "Feels good, doesn't it?" He traced her spine in a slow

deliberate caress, lazily watched the heat of her skin melt the small piece,

leaving behind a trail of water. He bent forward to lap at her skin, catching

the little beads, savoring the liquid.

Maggie let her head fall on the mattress and closed her eyes. Her body was

completely relaxed, pliant under Brandt's hands. His heart swelled, knowing she

was his, that she belonged in his home, in his bed. He would wake up and find

her there. He could touch her body, make love to her when and where they wanted.

And he wanted.

The next piece of ice made lazy patterns in the small of her back. The water

melted and pooled into the two dimples there. Brandt sipped it as if it were the

finest champagne. He found a larger piece to rub along the crease of her

buttocks, so that the icy drips trickled to cool the heat at her core.

To mingle

with his cream and soothe any soreness. He bent his head to nip her



gently on
her left cheek. "Are you sore?" He pressed kisses into the two dimples,
his hand
finding her wet entrance.
"I'm sleeping," she lied, too lazy to move, but she pushed back against
his
palm.
He removed it, disappointing her, but then it was back, his fingers
probing
deeply. Maggie nearly came up off the bed as the piece of ice met the
fiery heat
of her core. "You devil! What are you doing?" She could feel the ice-
cold water
melting, trickling deep inside her body. The sensation was intriguing.
Brandt caught her hips as she rose up on her knees and dragged her back
against
him, his body bending dominantly over hers as he took her from behind,
plunging
deep to follow the ice-cold trail through her hot, tight sheath.
"You can't possibly," Maggie objected, grinding her buttocks hard
against him as
flames spread through her and hunger shot up fast and strong.
"Did you know that a male leopard was once observed mating with his
female over
a hundred times in a two-day period? I can live with that; can you?"
At that moment, Maggie thought she could.

Chapter 7

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Brandt answered the knock on the door, waved Drake inside. "It's late,"
he
greeted, knowing there was trouble. Drake would never have interrupted
them
unless it was an emergency. He and Maggie had had only one night and
one day
alone together, not nearly enough time for him to feel secure in
Maggie's
commitment.
"I know." Drake glanced at Maggie. "I'm sorry, Maggie, really. I
wouldn't have
come if we didn't need Brandt."
"Poachers?" Brandt guessed.
"We've been checking the area you were so worried about and sure
enough, one of
the bears is missing. We spotted another trap." Drake paced across the
gleaming
floor. "I know this is a bad time, Brandt, but there's too much
activity. We



think they'll come tonight to try for more. We have a breeding pair we can't afford to lose."

Brandt shook his head. "Maggie is too close to the Han Vol Dan. I won't leave

her alone. You know how frightening it can be, Drake."

"It could happen anytime," Drake protested, shifting his gaze away from Maggie.

"You know we'll need you tonight if we're right. They'll be in force, Brandt.

And they're too close to our people. If we're discovered, if one person was careless and left a trail... Those men read signs almost as well as we do." He

glanced at Maggie uneasily. "And James's scent was all over the poachers' camp.

He's nowhere to be found."

"Of course he'll go." Maggie put a hand on Brandt's forearm, rubbed her palm gently over his tense muscles. "Just go and get it over with. I'll be fine."

Brandt shook his head, his sculpted lips frowning, his golden eyes moody. "It

isn't safe, Maggie."

"You have to go," Maggie said quickly sensing Brandt's hesitancy. "You can't

worry about me. I'm a grown woman; I can handle things here." She said it with

complete confidence. Maggie had been handling the details of her life a long

while before Brandt Talbot had come into it.

"Maggie, you're very close to the change. I feel it. I need to be with you when

you go through it for the first time," Brandt protested, clearly torn at having

to choose between his duty and his mate. He raked a hand through his dark hair,

his gaze dwelling on her serene face.

Maggie produced a self-assured smile. "Go. I'll be right here when you get

back." She slipped her arms around his neck and leaned into his hard frame. "I'm

not afraid, Brandt. This is important, what you do is important."

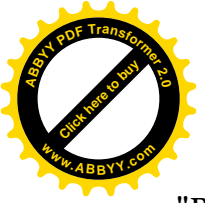
Brandt hesitated, then locked her to him, his mouth finding hers in a hard,

apologetic kiss. "You're my everything, Maggie," he whispered fiercely, "you



remember that. My everything. For you it's all happened too fast and you're unsure. For me, I've known for all of my life that you were my other half. You hold my heart and my soul. Don't destroy me. I'm trusting you not to destroy me."

Maggie feathered a series of teasing kisses along his shadowed jaw. "You need to have a little more faith. Go now." She was glowing at his words and she knew it. Secretly she had been afraid of falling for his dark good looks and the highly charged chemistry between them, his poet's heart and his hunter's eyes. Afraid after hot sex and coming together with such fire, he would simply walk away like the male leopards they so closely resembled at times. Brandt kissed her again. Hard. Possessively. Thoroughly. His molten eyes burned over her. "You be here when I get back. Don't you leave this house and go exploring or trying to save some creature you've heard bleating. I mean it, Maggie. Poachers are dangerous. I don't want you anywhere near them. And while I'm gone, don't open the door to anyone, even if you know he's one of ours." She walked with him to the door, her fingers tangling with his. "I have no intention of allowing anything to happen to me, Brandt." He turned to follow Drake into the night, hesitated, swore softly, and framed her face with both hands. "Maggie, be here. I can't tell you what it's been like searching the world for you, feeling so alone. Afraid for you, alone, without the knowledge of your people to protect you. Don't leave me." Her vivid green eyes searched his golden ones. "What is it? Tell me." He shook his head. "I have a feeling, a premonition if you want to call it that." She went up on her toes to press a single, lingering kiss to his frown. "Then you be extra careful, Brandt. I'll be sitting safe in the house while you're off chasing poachers. Maybe I should be worried about you."



"Brandt." There was urgency in Drake's voice and this time Brandt responded, hurrying down the steps after his friend. Maggie watched from the verandah until they were out of sight; and then she returned to the house, closing and locking the front door. Deliberately she flicked off every light so that there was no telltale glow to lead anyone to the house. Her night vision was extremely acute, much more so than ever before. She wondered at the changes taking place in her body. It seemed as if every hour she discovered something new, her senses enhanced a hundredfold. Her body was wondrously sore from their continual lovemaking, and Maggie wanted a long soak in a hot bath. The air, as always was sultry, but the thought of hot water was more than she could resist. In the bathroom she lit a single candle to fill the room with aromatic spice. The flame produced a soft flickering luminosity that danced on the walls. The water lapped soothingly at her sore body like a thousand healing tongues. She could see a dark smudge on the side of her hip where his fingers had dug into her curves in the deep throes of his passion. Her breasts were tender and slightly burned, matching her chin, from the shadow on his jaw. Even the insides of her thighs held the evidence of his possession. Deep inside her she still felt him. Still craved him. She fell asleep there in the hot water, dreaming of Brandt and his hard, capable body thrusting deeply into hers. Her body clenched, tightened; she thrashed, bumping her head on the tub. Maggie woke, blinked drowsily, and rubbed at her head. As she patted her skin dry with a towel, she noticed how tender she was. Her skin felt raw and inflamed. It was painful to pull on her clothes but she did, worried Brandt might need her. Maggie paced restlessly across the tiled floor. She was feeling sick to her stomach and there was a strange roaring in her head. She clutched her head,



trying to massage her temples. The throbbing was increasing so that her head pounded and ached. Her bones felt too big for the confines of her skin. It felt as if her head might burst to accommodate the expanding skull. Was this what Brandt had worried about? Had it started? Experimentally she ran her tongue along her teeth to feel if they were sharper. Staggering a little under the weight of the pain, Maggie went to the bedroom, certain that when she lay down she would feel much better. She tried to rest, but the pressure of the mattress was too much to bear. As she sat up she felt a strange rippling of muscles across her belly, in her arms. When she looked down at her skin, something moved. Maggie thought she screamed. Her muscles contorted, rippled, and knotted right under her horrified stare. She could see something running beneath her skin, something like a parasite, raising her skin as the thing rushed beneath the surface. Her heart rate accelerated and her mouth went dry. All at once her clothes were too tight, too constricting. The material hurt her skin. Alarmed, she tore off her jeans, flinging them away from her. Fire raced through her belly and her legs went rubbery. She fell to the floor. "Brandt!" She screamed his name, her one hope in the midst of insanity. His name came out somewhere between a cough and a grunt. Her throat was closing on her, swelling, changing, so that her vocal cords weren't working. The Han Vol Dan was upon her and she was alone and terrified. Her body writhed, a rush of adrenaline pumping through her system like an erupting volcano. Her skin felt raw, oversensitized. The merest touch on her body hurt. Maggie struggled to control her fear, to think while she could. She had to rid herself of her clothes before she no longer had fingers. Tears were running down her face as she stripped off her blouse and underwear. She couldn't bear to



look at
her contorting body. She had thought it would be a quick change, not a
vicious
assault on her muscles.
She crawled across the floor to the balcony door. The confines of the
house were
so stifling, she could hardly breathe. Maggie didn't want to look at
her hand as
she reached up to slide the door open but she couldn't help herself.
Her hand
was curved, knotted, knuckles extended.
She managed to get the door open and dragged herself onto the balcony.
A wave of fur broke through her skin as her spine seemed to bend and
crackle, a
thick matting of reddish hair with rosettes stretching endlessly. For a
moment
she was caught between human and beast, half and half. She could only
wonder at
the mystery of such a thing, how it could be that it had never been
discovered,
but then she was absorbed in the takeover of her body by the animal
inside of
her.
She heard the noise of it—bones cracking, muscles snapping, tendons
popping—as
her body was reshaping. The sounds were horrifying, but the wildness
caught at
her, her senses heightening. The night rushed at her, into her, a world
she
hadn't known existed.
There was a long silence while the wind held its breath. Then the rain
fell from
the sky, drops landing on the cat sprawled on the balcony, panting so
heavily.
Maggie lifted her head and looked around her. Without moving her head,
she could
detect motion in the trees in a visual field of nearly 280 degrees. The
shock
was enormous to her, her mind nearly numb as she attempted to
comprehend what
had happened. She could think, but she was trapped in a body not her
own, one
totally alien to her. And deep within her, something wild and ruthless
was
striving to blend with her.
The leopard came to its feet. Easily. Gracefully. Nothing awkward about
the way



the animal moved. The leopard was built for total awareness, with grace and intelligence. Deep within the animal's body, Maggie had only one goal. To get out of the rain forest. To return to civilization where nothing like this could ever happen again. It wasn't interesting or fun—it was terrifying beyond belief. Maggie Odessa would be lost in the forest, but the leopard had senses far beyond her own. Leaping from the balcony, making her way down the network of tree limbs, she ran fast, utilizing the unique radar in the cat's whiskers to help her find her way. She had no idea how to get back into her own skin, her own form. This leopard's body could not be hers. Worst of all, the female was spreading her tantalizing chemical signals throughout the forest as she raced away from the sanctuary of the house to find the borders of the forest. The leopard was in the throes of sexual awareness, rubbing on trees, scent marking, and scratching. Maggie was horrified when she suddenly became aware that the animal and she were both in need of a male. She ran faster, determined to remove herself from the influence of the wild rain forest with its sultry, steamy heat and from the effects of her overactive libido. She ran a long distance, loping easily over fallen logs and up steep embankments. The river didn't slow her down; she plunged in and swam, leaping to shore and shaking delicately. As she continued, she became aware of the mechanics of the leopard's body. The faint sound of shouting, of voices carrying through the forest, nearly stopped her heart. The noise was a great distance away, but she instantly was aware of what it meant. Brandt could be in trouble. She was running like a wild thing and Brandt could be in danger somewhere. The thought was sobering. But what could she do, trapped as she was, imprisoned within an animal



form? She wanted to sob with fear and frustration. Maggie forced her mind away from hysteria and tried to think logically. She had persisted in thinking of herself as two identities. One human, one animal. But she was neither and the creature running through the forest so easily was part of her. She continued to think, to be Maggie Odessa, but now in another form, one that was unfamiliar to her, yet felt as if it fit her. Once she identified that Maggie was still Maggie only in another shape, she felt much calmer. She slowed down, huffing out a breath, looking about her with the eyes of enhanced vision. Her vision. She'd had it all along, she just had never used the ability. She inhaled, drew in the scents of the jungle. She wasn't a leopard, nor was she quite human. She was different, yet still Maggie. Cushioned paws allowed her to move in complete silence. She could feel the enormous power in the body she occupied. Unable to prevent herself from testing the possibilities, Maggie leapt easily onto a thick branch some six feet above her head. It was a simple, easy jump, and she landed perfectly balanced as if she'd been doing such things all her life. Maggie crouched in the tree and thought about Brandt. He had told her the absolute truth. She wasn't two people divided; she was one who would remain Maggie Odessa. She simply could take on more than one form. A feeling of unbelievable power washed through her. What a gift. Her birth parents had given her a priceless legacy. She thought about the things Brandt had told her and she understood the need for discipline. She could control the emotions and sexual tension while she was in the shape of the leopard. Being in the form of a leopard made no difference. She didn't have to act more of the animal, she simply wasn't exercising control over the wild nature rising so



strongly.

The emotions were strong, but not unfamiliar. She certainly had wanted to be

with Brandt, had enticed and tempted and seduced him as much as she would allow

herself. The leopard was feeling those same things magnified by its primitive

nature, the nature that was so much a part of her. Maggie relaxed, allowed the

tension to seep out of her body. She could reason, use her intelligence; she

could think things through, not run like a frightened child. And she could

exercise discipline and restraint on her wilder cravings. The power belonged to

her and she could do with it what she willed.

Brandt had been afraid she would be unable to handle the transformation, had

wanted to stay with her instead of going after the poachers. She was proving him

correct with her childish actions. She needed to return to the house and calmly

wait for him to aid her into returning to her other, human form. If he didn't

come within a reasonable length of time, she would use this form with its

abilities to hunt for him and help him in any way possible.

Maggie thought of Brandt's words. How he had searched the world over for her.

How he had always known she was his mate. How certain he was that they belonged

together. She didn't have that certainty based on years of knowing her heritage.

She'd known him only a very short time, yet she felt it was right in her deepest

soul. He had begged her to be there when he returned. She didn't want to let him

down. She wasn't going to let him down. Brandt Talbot was her choice. Maggie leapt from the tree to land softly on the ground. She had been

more alive

here, deep within the rain forest, than she had ever been in her life.

She had

no intention of allowing fear to take that life from her. Of taking Brandt from

her. Everything she had ever worked toward in her life was right here, in this

wild exotic setting.



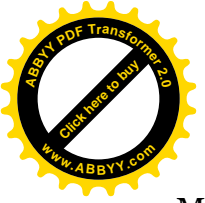
She didn't fear it, she reveled in it. The canopy, the flowers, the abundance of fauna in no way made her claustrophobic, as she knew it often made other people. The heat didn't adversely affect her. She loved the rain forest and everything in it. And Brandt. She loved the poet in him, the unexpected surprise of his gentle side. He was the biggest reason why she wanted to stay and face what she was. Who she was. She would research the history of her species and do what she could to fit into the lifestyle. Maggie began her journey back to the house. The leopard knew the way, padding silently, scenting the wind, her night vision excellent. She was nearing familiar ground when the loud crack of a gun split the night. A volley of shots followed. Animals shrieked, a cacophony of sound. The trees above her head became a riot of movement, wings fluttering, monkeys shrieking and leaping from tree to tree. The warning was loud and insistent in the darkness of the forest. Maggie winced, jerked to one side, curling her lip to expose her canines as she took shelter in the thick vegetation. Her heart pounded out a rhythm of fear. At once she heard the answer of her people, a peculiar drumbeat, as old as time but effective, a kind of Morse code she should have known but had never learned. She couldn't read the message sent by her kind, but she was aware of news being passed. Her first thought was for Brandt. She could taste the bitter edge of fear in her mouth. She didn't want to lose him, now that she had found him. Why hadn't she committed to him? Why hadn't she reassured him that she wanted to be with him? Maggie burst from the foliage and began to lope back toward the house. She would pick up the scent of Drake and Brandt from there and track them to where the poachers had set traps.



To her surprise, the leopard faltered, the front legs wobbling unsteadily. She somersaulted over a small branch, skidding along the ground. Maggie lay flat out, hearing the ominous creaking and pops that accompanied change. "Not now," she groaned, the sound emerging from the leopard's throat as a grunting cough. It wasn't as painful, or maybe it hadn't ever been. Maybe she had been so frightened that it had seemed painful because she had expected it to hurt. She itched, her skin erupting with fur one moment, then smooth and bare the next. She found herself sitting on the ground, stark naked. Maggie leapt up quickly, afraid of insects burrowing into her skin. With a little sigh she began to jog toward the house. She knew her way now—she had the same abilities as the leopard, she had had only to acknowledge them, accept them, and learn to use them. She had to cross her arms over the fullness of her breasts as she hurried, the jolting as uncomfortable in her chest as the ground was on her bare feet. The leopard form was designed for easy movement through the jungle, while her present form was a nuisance. Sharp leaves and bark lacerated her tender skin. She hardly noticed the discomfort as she pushed hard to get back to the house, wanting to track Brandt. The noise stopped her cold. A high keening sound, the moan of an animal in pain. She had heard it many times, but this time she inhaled the scent of blood. Without conscious thought, Maggie turned toward the sound. She had to go to the injured animal—the sound tugged at her. The bear was much smaller than she had expected, with smooth jet-black fur. It had a beautiful white crescent marking its chest. Its long tongue was lolling out of its mouth. She couldn't help but notice the long and pointed claws it used for ripping into the bark of trees to uncover insects and honey. The bear



was whimpering in fear and pain. It swung its head toward her as she emerged from between two trees and attempted to roll to its feet, but instead thrashed dangerously. She could see the thick blood coating the bear's left side. The ground was dark with it. Maggie lifted her hand and went completely still, keeping her distance prudently. "Be calm, little one, I'm going to help you." She needed her backpack, her medical supplies. She could tranquilize the bear and see to the wound, but she wasn't certain the animal would survive while she raced to the house. The sight of the small bear in such distress angered her. She knew they were a rarity even in the wilds. Above her head, some fifteen feet up, she saw the branches of the tree were bent and broken to form a nest. The bear must have tried to make it to its resting place. From the nest the bear would have a good view of the forest floor. She could see the hairless soles of the sun bear's feet and the sickle-shaped claws as it lay panting, watching her with tragic eyes. The bear suddenly reared up, tried to charge, but was prevented from reaching her by the savage wound in its side. It fell back helplessly, baring teeth at her in warning. "I'm going to help you," she promised. "Just give me a couple of minutes to get my things." How far was she from the house? A distance still, she was certain. Maggie swung away from the unfortunate creature, knowing the best thing to do was to get her supplies as quickly as possible. The bear made a second pitiable attempt to rise, this time whining at her, a clear call for help. The sound tore at her heart. The bear was clearly afraid, straining to pull its weight into cover. She caught the scent of another large cat as she turned back toward the sound of the distressed bear. A leopard was in the vicinity, a male, and he was stalking prey.



Maggie lifted her head to test the wind, much as the agitated bear was doing. She knew immediately this animal was more than a beast, he was part of the community Brandt lived in. And he knew Brandt had staked his claim. James. The idea of meeting him filled her with trepidation. His very scent offended her in some strange way. Had he come to help? Maggie hesitated, aware she was completely naked and extremely vulnerable. She hadn't been afraid of the wild animals in the forest, or the dark, or even the wounded bear, but knowing another man, whatever form he took, was stalking her, filled her with fear. She turned to escape. If James was coming to help the sun bear, he didn't need to find her there. She could get to the house and return with supplies, fully dressed. She took two steps, and the large cat broke through the heavy foliage.

Chapter 8

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Maggie's breath caught in her throat. The spotted leopard was large and heavily muscled. It tore through the thick undergrowth no more than six feet from her. Blazing yellow-green eyes focused on her, the pupils dilated and fixed. She could feel danger emanating from the male, see the piercing intelligence. Instinctively she stepped back, recognizing the smoldering tension in the eyes. The animal growled a warning, and Maggie glanced behind her to see where the bear was. Her gaze shifted only for a moment, but the cat had inched forward so that it was only a foot from her. The male stared, wrinkled his nose, curled his upper lip, and grimaced with an open mouth, a wide yawn. Maggie recognized the classic Flehmen response of the male to a female. She tilted her chin in challenge. "You think I don't know who you are? I can smell you. Whatever you're thinking about doing, you can forget it." She took a



breath, hissed his name with disgust. "James. Change your form and help me save this bear." She was almost more furious than she was afraid. Maggie realized he had followed her deliberately. Brandt had attempted to warn her earlier that James wasn't "right." His scent bothered her, as if she detected a depravity within him. "I know you understand me. We're the protectors of the forest. Before anything else we have to help these creatures survive." She could only hope he had been indoctrinated since his birth and would respond. James pushed forward, displaying his savage teeth, his eyes staring at her with a certain cunning viciousness. His head pushed hard against her legs, nearly knocking her to the ground, clearly a signal to go where he wanted. His tongue deliberately licked across her bare thighs, a slow, painful threat. The raspy papillae on the big cat's tongue could draw blood if he chose. Maggie shuddered visibly, his touch making her feel ill. The idea of going anywhere with him was terrifying. The bear lay on its side on the ground, panting. The wind stilled. The rain began its slow, steady drizzle all over again. Maggie and the leopard stared at each other in the darkness, the heavy green canopy and thick layers of mists and clouds overhead blocking out the moonlight. There was complete silence, the hush of expectancy. Maggie's heart beat out a rhythm of fear. Without warning a black panther exploded out of the foliage, moving with the force of a freight train, slamming into the spotted leopard so hard he knocked the cat off his feet. The night erupted into violence. Monkeys shrieked loudly, scrambling from branch to branch overhead. Birds took flight despite the darkness. The spotted leopard rolled, leaping to his feet to avoid the panther's teeth going for a suffocating hold on his throat. The ears on the black panther were twisted so the backs were visible from the



front, signaling aggression as he faced the wary spotted leopard. His mouth snarled, revealing the sharpened canines. Fights between male cats were often to the death, and Maggie backed away, screening her body in the leaves of the ferns, her horrified gaze fixed on the two combatants. The panther attacked with blurring speed. Grace and flexibility combined with strong muscles to twist and turn, leap and rake, change direction in midair. The battle was brief but fierce, each cat going for a death grip on the other's throat. The spotted leopard was knocked off his feet a second time, rolling, shifting shape as he did so, as if the blow had been so hard he no longer could hold the feline form. James ran, his back to her, naked, displaying the same muscular build she was beginning to recognize as characteristic of Brandt's people. Maggie watched as the black panther shifted shape, almost running as he did so, easily and so quickly she could hardly believe her eyes. Brandt caught the fleeing man by his hair and brought him up short. Brandt's lip curled into a snarl of menace. She could see the cold fury on Brandt's face. "Did you think we wouldn't figure out who was helping the poachers, James? Your stench is all over the poachers' camp." "I was investigating them," James denied, his gaze shifting away from Brandt toward Maggie. "I wouldn't betray the animals to poachers!" Brandt's heavy fist connected solidly with James's shoulder. "Don't you look at her. You look at me if you want to live beyond this moment." Maggie shrank at once into the deeper cover of the foliage, not because she was embarrassed at being naked—she seemed to have lost all inhibitions here in the jungle—but because the idea of James looking at her body sickened her. And because it seemed to antagonize Brandt further to see another man looking at



her.

James immediately complied. That frightened Maggie, the swift compliance, as if

James knew Brandt really meant he might end the other man's life. She pressed a shaking hand to her mouth. Conditions in the rain forest were extremely primitive. There were no policemen on the corners, and Brandt and his people had no allegiance to any local government. Isolated, they lived by the swift, lethal law of the jungle.

"I swear to you, Brandt, I wasn't helping the poachers. I should have shifted my shape and helped the woman with the bear but the violence, the scent of her

being so ripe, and the blood kept me from thinking straight."

Brandt cuffed James so hard he rocked back on his heels. "Don't you blame Maggie

for your lack of control. We always can think straight. You wanted something

that didn't belong to you, James. You watched her when Drake was bringing her

through the forest. They smelled you. I smelled you. Your stench is outside our

home. What did you think would happen when you were finished? Were you going to kill her?"

"No!" Maggie was gratified to see the man look shocked, even horrified at the

idea. "I don't know what I thought. That she'd prefer me, want me instead."

"You know you can't steal someone else's mate, James." Brandt cuffed the man a

second time, an expression of disgust on his face. "Get out of here, present

yourself to the council, and tell them what you did, If you don't, James, I'll

consider you my enemy and I'll hunt you down." He shoved the other man away from

him, his golden eyes glittering with menace. "You know me. I'll hunt you down

until I find you."

James stumbled, took a few steps forward, glancing back over his shoulder. "I

swear I wasn't going to harm her, Brandt. I wouldn't do that to one of our

women."



Brandt watched the man go before turning his attention to Maggie. He could breathe again, think again, now that Maggie was safe. He stalked her across the small space. "You said you'd be waiting for me," he reprimanded, caging her body between his hard, masculine frame and a tree trunk. He was stark naked. There was a long, thin, angry red streak across his belly. Her eyes followed the laceration with dismay and she found herself staring at his thick erection. "You can't possibly be aroused," she whispered. "You could have been killed." She was fascinated by him, by the thickness, the shape of him. Without thought she brushed her hand along his shoulder, touched the edge of the wound on his belly, and stroked her fingers over his heavy staff. He caught her chin in his hand, his eyes still glittering. Still menacing. Adrenaline was pouring through his body. She felt it in the fine tremor of his body against hers. "You'll always arouse me, Maggie." He dropped a hard kiss on her upturned mouth. "I'm heading to the house for your medical supplies. I can travel faster without you. Don't you move." She was breathing heavily, wanting him, needing him, strangely affected by the sight of such a terrible battle. "I'm sorry, Brandt. I put you in danger." "We thrive on danger, honey. It's our way of life." His teeth teased at the pulse at the base of her throat. "I'll be back soon, I promise. Don't be afraid." Maggie watched him disappear back into the foliage of the jungle. She wasn't afraid. Not at all. She belonged here in the jungle, belonged with Brandt Talbot. Every moment she spent here, no matter what seemed to be happening, she knew the rain forest was her home and Brandt was her mate, the man she wanted to spend her life with. She had no real idea how it had all happened, but she knew



she wanted to be with him. She was willing to live with the strange differences here in the jungle. There was nothing she had left behind in civilization she wanted badly enough to give him up for. Maggie looked at the bear lying almost quietly now, eyes staring at her without hope. "But I'm going to learn how to change shape fast like he does," she told the animal. "And I'm going to do some research into your little life, too, Mister Bear."

Maggie was crooning softly to the animal when Brandt returned. She was almost disappointed that he was fully dressed. He handed her clothes, jeans and a T-shirt, which she hastily donned while he tranquilized the bear. Working with Brandt was easy. He seemed to know instinctively what she needed. His hands were reverent as they moved through the bear's fur, as he held the head to ensure the animal could breathe properly while she repaired the damage. "He should be caged," she said, wiping her forehead with the back of her hand, smearing dirt across it. "He might not get enough to eat or some other animal might get him, as injured as he is," she explained, moving a safe distance away from the bear where she could watch it wake up. "The injury isn't that bad. No broken bones, and he's lost some blood, but if someone was actually shooting at him, they were a poor shot."

"I think he was hit by a stray bullet. The poachers sprayed the area when they realized they were under attack." Brandt shook his head. "He'll do fine. He'll stay in his nest and I'll drop by each day to make certain he's eating. I don't want him caged."

"What happened to the poachers?" There was a grimness about his mouth and his golden eyes were flat and dangerous looking. He shrugged his broad shoulders with casual carelessness. "I don't think they'll be bothering us again. The rain forest has a way of



dealing with those who violate its trust." His gaze moved over her face, dark and brooding, a certain ruthlessness to his expression. "I left you in the house, Maggie. The rain forest also has a way of dealing with those who are careless." Maggie hesitated, but she was too tired to argue with him. Rays of light were streaking through the canopy, signaling daylight had arrived. She sat down on the forest floor and looked up at him. "I wasn't careless, I was afraid, Brandt, and I ran away like a coward. I'm sorry. I thought I was prepared for the way it would feel, but the change was slow and frightening and I panicked. It wasn't what I had imagined." She looked down at her hands. "I think I just ran instinctively. I thought if I left the forest, it would never happen again. I wanted to be me." The bear grunted, its long tongue lolling out. They watched as the body twitched and the legs jerked. "You were always you, Maggie," Brandt said softly, aching for her, angry with himself for letting her down. Brandt reached out and pulled Maggie to her feet. "Come on, baby, let's go. You're tired." He drew her into the shelter of a large, lacy fern while the bear rolled over, shaking its head. "You're angry with me." She made it a statement as she leaned up against his larger frame. He was solid. Steady. She could feel his anger seething beneath the surface, yet his hands were incredibly gentle. "You scared the hell out of me, Maggie. There's something wrong with James. He's always been off when it comes to women. He's been caught shifting to impress the native women. They sleep with him thinking to gain his power or some such nonsense. He doesn't care about them; he uses them. He wants to control them." "Like the men you were telling me about who wanted to be worshiped as gods." He nodded. "He likes power over women. I really don't think he was involved with



the poaching—that would be a death sentence to him—but he isn't someone I want

you around. Ever. I'll never feel you're completely safe with him in the forest.

I hope the council chooses to exile him."

His fingers tightened around hers as the bear clawed its way up the tree to its

nest. When the bear had settled in completely, Brandt drew Maggie with him,

weaving his way in and out easily through the plants and trees. It was a measure

of the change in her that she knew immediately they were not headed to the

house.

"I'm tired," she objected. "I just want to go home."

"You won't be too tired to see this place; you'll love it, Maggie. And you can

sleep if you like once we're there. There's a small clearing right around a pool

so you can lie in the sun. The forest is your home. All of it."

She glanced up at the sky. "It's sure to rain."

"Maybe," he agreed. "But trust me, you won't care." She did trust him.

She went

with him willingly. The sight robbed her of speech. She stood close beside

Brandt, just staring, enthralled by nature's beauty. Water cascaded from a

hundred feet above them, a white frothy foam pouring over the smoothly rounded

rocks. It fell into a large natural pool, deep, the water almost crystal clear

out away from the falls. It gleamed an inviting blue, the surface shimmering

with a rainbow of colors. Abundant ferns created a living, lacy screen around

the exotic pool. Flowers of every kind cascaded like the falls from the trees so

that colors and perfumed scents filled Maggie's senses and turned the spot into

a magical, mystical paradise.

Maggie was tired, her muscles aching from the unexpected change, and the soles

of her feet hurt from walking barefoot earlier. In the steamy heat of the

forest, the cool water was an inviting sight. Maggie looked uncertainly at

Brandt. There was still a hard edge to his mouth in spite of her



explanation, so she ignored Brandt, not wanting to look any longer at his masculine body, not wanting to inhale his spicy scent. Not wanting to know that she had put that edge to his sculpted mouth. She chose a spot where the massive boulder forming the basin was flat and she could seat herself near the water's edge. Removing her shoes and socks, she rolled up her jeans and without hesitation plunged her feet into the water. She expected it to be icy cold, but it wasn't. Maggie was hot and sticky, the jungle sultry and humid despite the early hour. A bead of sweat trickled along her skin, in the valley between her breasts. She glanced up at Brandt to find him watching her in silence. At once her stomach did a melting flip and her heart began to pound. Naked desire burned in his gaze. Maggie rubbed her hands on her thighs nervously. "It's going to be hot today." Her voice came out a croak. "Yes, it is." His gaze holding hers, Brandt stripped off his shirt in one fluid motion and flung it carelessly aside. She stared up at his chest. The slow burn in her belly began to spread, building into something wild. Without thought, Maggie stretched languidly, her arms above her head, tilting her face toward the sky, exposing the line of her throat, lifting her breasts beneath the thin tee. "It isn't fair that you can do this to me with just a look," Maggie said. "I came back, Brandt. I came back when I didn't have to." But she did have to come back. She was afraid that if she was away from him, she might cease to exist. She would be Maggie, but walking through life, not living it. "It's my fault you were out there alone," Brandt said. He allowed his gaze to drift over her, a slow, lazy inspection of her lush curves. "I'm not blaming you for being afraid. I blame myself for leaving you alone when I knew you were close to the change." He moved to stand beside her while she sat at the



water's
edge. His fingers tangled in her hair, rubbing in the silky strands. "I
didn't
mean to snap at you, Maggie. The Han Vol Dan is a frightening
experience even
for those of us who know what to expect. I'm proud of you that you went
through
it alone and still had the courage to come back to me." It humbled him
as
nothing else could have.
Brandt knew he looked stiff and grim and aloof, but fear for her was
still an
ugly presence in his heart, and he couldn't seem to calm the demons
raging in
him. He had wanted to break James's neck, and the thought of the man
roaming
freely, presenting a threat to Maggie, made him resent his decision to
allow
James to escape the jungle justice.
His hand trembled as he reached down and simply pulled her shirt over
her head
and tossed it on top of his own. "We can change easily and naturally,
fast and
on the run if there is need. It's only another form, not a change of
character."
Her skin gleamed at him, as smooth as silk. She was utterly beautiful
to him, as
exotic as any of the creatures in his care. "I'm going to show you,
Maggie."
His hands were on the waistband of his jeans and her heart pounded as
she heard
the rasp of the zipper. She tilted her head to get a better view as he
pushed
the jeans away from his body without a semblance of modesty. He was
ferociously
aroused, thick and hard and tempting beyond her ability to resist. She
instantly
forgot she was tired.
"I love looking at you." The words slipped out of their own accord.
Honest.
Simple. Life in the rain forest.
For the first time he seemed to relax, some of the tension seeping out
of him.
"It's a good thing, honey, because I'm very partial to looking at you."
He
stepped away from her. "I think about the leopard in my mind first,
Maggie,



before I actually start the change. It takes practice, but you'll be able to do it."

She was sweating. Just looking at him and hearing the sensual note in his voice was making her ache in the most wonderful places. He robbed her of air even in wide-open spaces.

Brandt reached down, locked his fingers around her wrist, and effortlessly pulled her to her feet. "Watch, Maggie." He held his arm away from her while the fur raced over his skin.

Maggie had eyes for other things. She allowed her palm to slide up his thigh, to cup his heavy sac, to linger playfully along his erection.

"I'm showing you something important here," he said, trying to sound stern.

"And I'm looking," she answered truthfully.

"You're doing more than looking." His breath caught in his lungs as her fingers

danced, closed tightly around him, slid, and caressed.

She arched an eyebrow at him, her smile teasing. "Poor baby. And you were

feeling all mean and bad, too. I'm soothing you. You should thank me."

"Mean and bad?" he echoed, every muscle in his body taut with need.

"Snarly. You were snarling. You know, curling your lip and exposing your teeth."

She went up on her toes, pressed her breasts against his chest to nibble at his

lip. "You have wonderful teeth, by the way." Her tongue slid tantalizingly over

his lips. She pushed away from him when he reached for her.

Laughing, Maggie wiggled out of her jeans. Instead of turning back to him, she

jumped straight into the water.

Chapter 9

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The water was cool, bringing instant relief to Maggie's body. It was a perfect temperature in the sultry heat of the morning. She ducked beneath the surface,

wanting to feel clean, wanting the thick mass of her hair wet and cool for a

change. Most of all, she wanted Brandt to play with her. The hard edge to his

mouth, the glittering menace in his eyes were intimidating. She had



made a monumental decision, her entire life changing in the blink of an eye, and she needed comfort. They both did. Brandt watched Maggie's body move through the water, cutting cleanly, a flash of her smooth, inviting buttocks, a kick of her feet. Her head came up out of the water, long hair shaking off droplets of water in every direction. She looked like a water nymph, ethereal, desirable. A mermaid with blazing hair and inviting skin. She was life itself, family—she was worth all the long hours, all the danger and tedium of his job. She was why he did it, why he wanted the environment saved, why wildlife was so important. One woman with more courage than good sense, willing to take him on instinct. Willing to forgive the trap he set for her, to look beyond it to a life with him. Brandt sighed and slipped into the water to rinse the sweat from his skin. She had another life. One in a city, one she had lived for years before he had come along. He swam swiftly, furiously across the pool to the other side, coming up behind the waterfall and off to the side of it. He heaved his weight onto the small shelf he knew was there, fitting his hips onto the smooth rock, his legs dangling down. Water lapped at his thighs and groin, soothing waves when his mind was roaring a protest. "Maggie." He waited until she stood up in the shallows, the water lovingly ringing her hips, droplets running off her breasts and down her beautiful belly to her navel. "This isn't right. What I've done isn't right. It's been all about me, what I need, what I want, not about you and what you want or need." Her green gaze slid over him speculatively, heightening his awareness. Maggie had a sensual, sultry quality that left him hard and hungry and so edgy he sometimes wanted to leap upon her and devour her on the spot. She



tilted her
head to one side, twisted the length of her hair as she looked at him.
"Is that
what you think, Brandt?"
Where had she gotten such confidence, this self-assured woman who was
looking at
him with amusement when he was trying to be noble? She was in the
middle of the
rain forest, had just gone through the Han Vol Dan alone. She had
committed her
life to her mate, accepted her heritage, embraced it even. Where did
she get
such courage? Brandt could only stare at her, the beautiful, sensual
picture she
made standing hip deep in the clear pool.
"I think you haven't heard everything, Maggie," he said quietly. "Our
people
don't always choose to live here. We're a small band, very small, older
couples
mainly and Drake, Conner, Joshua, and James. One female, young Shilo,
not quite
old enough and without a mate. No others. Most of our kind are long
gone or
living and working in the cities. They rarely, if ever, shift shape,
and some do
not have their mates."
She flung her hair back over her shoulder and slowly lowered her body
beneath
the surface of the water until her breasts floated, a temptation of
lush, creamy
flesh. She swam closer to him. "I had the impression there weren't many
of you
left."
He blinked, tore his fascinated gaze away from the perfection of her
feminine
body. "Us. Many of us left," he corrected. "The point is, you had a
life
somewhere else. You can still have that life."
Maggie stopped swimming, stilled there in the pool with the water
cascading
behind her and mist falling softly across the surface. "What are you
saying?"
Her voice was tight, the joy fading from her face, from her eyes.
"I'm saying, if you prefer to live in the city, we can go there. I
expected you
to give up your life for me and that was wrong. I love the rain forest
and



everything in it. But I watched what you did for the bear. You worked so fast, with no hesitation. You're so skilled, Maggie. You have no idea, you take it for granted, but you were amazing." The tension drained from her body and she swam through deeper water to him, nudging his thighs open so she could hook her arms over his legs to stay afloat. Her hair fanned out around her head like silk on the surface of the water. She rested her chin up high on his thigh, deliberately close to the junction of his legs so that her hair teased at the insides of his legs. So that her mouth was tantalizingly close. So that when she breathed, he held his breath. "So much the better for my work here," she answered, and nuzzled his leg. Her teeth teased his skin while her gaze grew hot watching the effect on his body. He thickened, hardened, reaching for her with male ardor. "I love it here, Brandt. And I trained with the idea of working in the wilds." Her tongue collected drops of water from the crease of his legs. She smiled when he shivered, when his hands came down to fist in her hair. Her tongue went on a little foray, exploring, teasing, testing her power over him. "I mean it, Maggie. I'll try living in the city if you want me to. I want you to be happy." His entire body seemed to be suspended. Waiting. Every nerve ending was alive. Screaming. Centered in one place. Her arms slid to his waist, her body wedging closer as she shifted slightly. "I'm happy right here, Brandt. Incredibly happy." Her mouth closed around him as tight as a fist. Hot. Moist. Sucking hard, her tongue doing some kind of dance to drive him mad. His head fell back and his world narrowed. Time stood still while the mist came down and the prisms of color floated in the air behind his eyes, in his blood. His fists tightened, bunching in her hair, and he held her to him. A growl of pleasure escaped from



the back of his throat. Leaves wavered in the breeze. The waterfall thundered into the pool. Life gave gifts sometimes. He had been given one to treasure. Brandt tugged on her, not wanting to lose control, wanting to be inside of her, sharing the same skin. "Come here, baby." He reached for her, hooking beneath her arms and pulling her straight up out of the water with his enormous strength. Maggie was shocked by how casually he revealed his hidden strength. He lifted her as if she weighed no more than a feather. She stood with a foot on either side of his hips while he pressed his hand to her, his fingers testing her desire. "I want you," she assured him, her hands on his head to steady herself. He was making certain her body would accept his comfortably. She should have known he would. That was Brandt, seeing to her needs. Her wants. He thought himself so selfish, when he had given her life. Maggie allowed his hands to invade her body, her mind, to drug her bloodstream and fill her full of sheer pleasure. She pulsed with it, rocked with it, pushing against his hand, her body drenched in liquid heat. As she began to settle onto his lap, taking him into her body, inch by slow inch so that he filled her, stretched her. completed her, she leaned close to find his mouth with hers. No one could kiss like Brandt. No one could melt her the way he did. She was lost in the heat of his mouth, in the strength of his body, in the way he built the fire between them. The rain started, a fine drizzle to add to the mist of the waterfall. Maggie began to ride, rocking her hips, sliding him in and out of her sheath like a sword, clenching her muscles, holding him tightly in her fiery center. His hands were at her breasts, his mouth devouring hers, then her throat. He bent her



backward, his marauding mouth latching on to her breast, his hand urging her to ride harder, faster. The friction was all-consuming, robbing her of breath, of sanity. The rain tried to find their rhythm, coming down faster and harder, but they became frenzied, wild, bucking together in a firestorm of passion. Drops fell on sensitized skin, creating the illusion of tongues sliding over their heated bodies. The passion grew, an inferno out of control. The release was shattering, a fire consuming them, an explosion of senses. They clung to one another for the longest time, simply holding each other. Maggie's head on Brandt's shoulder. His hands stroked caresses down her hair, her back. "I want you to be certain, Maggie, that I'm what you want. That this is the life you would choose no matter what." She pulled back to search his expression. Her fingertips traced the lines etched into his face. "I want to be with you here, right here, Brandt," she assured him, kissing his strong jaw. "I'm choosing to be here with you." He pressed his mouth to hers, his heart still beating too fast, too hard. Something was wrong. It shouldn't have been, but he was uneasy with her decision. Uneasy with the fact that she accepted him when she didn't know what he really was. Who he really was. Maggie saw the man she wanted to see, the poet, the man who brought her flowers. She didn't see the beast raging against the poachers, protecting what should be held intact for the world. She managed to get unsteadily to her feet, her body throbbing and pulsing with aftershocks, singing with joy. He stood up, too, close to her, so that his body touched hers. Their fingers clung. Maggie leaned into him. "You still have that look. What can I do to make you more certain?" Brandt swallowed hard. There was nothing she could do. Nothing she could say. He kissed her. Hard. Possessively. He put everything he felt for her into



that
kiss. Told her everything he couldn't say in words. Poured his heart
and soul
into the kiss.
The wind shifted and Brandt abruptly lifted his head, scenting the air.
At once
his expression changed, his lip lifting in a silent snarl. He shoved
Maggie away
from him so that she stumbled backward and fell into the pool, the
water closing
over her head. He was already in motion, turning toward the thick bank
of ferns,
his form shimmering with fur as a leopard exploded out of the foliage
and hit
him at full speed. It was like getting hit with a battering ram,
jarring his
insides, bones and muscle and tissue. Losing his footing was not an
option—the
spotted leopard already had the advantage—so Brandt took the impact,
absorbed it
in his muscles and sinew, allowed it to rock him, but he leapt in the
air,
whirling to fight, raking claws laterally as he did so.
The spotted leopard's momentum prevented him from avoiding the claw,
and Brandt
scored across the eyes and down the slavering muzzle. The cry was half-
human,
half-beast as James turned and drove in again.
Brandt understood this time he had no choice. James was determined to
get rid of
Brandt for good. It was kill or be killed, a very real way of life in
the rain
forest. He spared a thought for Maggie, how she would react, and then
he was
lost in the fierce battle.
Maggie kicked to the surface, her heart pounding. She dragged herself
from the
pool. The sounds were terrifying, the noise so loud the forest would
carry it
throughout the interior. The black panther and the spotted leopard were
raking
and biting, ramming each other to force the other into submission. She
looked
around for a weapon, anything she could use to help Brandt. James had
caught him
off guard, had torn a gaping wound in his side. He was at a
disadvantage.



The change started in her mind first. He had told her that. With tears running down her face, she tried to block out the sight and smell of blood, the sight of two powerful males in real combat. She knew the leopard inside and out. She was the leopard. Her fur was reddish with beautiful rosettes, her tail long and tipped red. She heard the noises, the cracks and pops, felt the stretching of her skin and bones. Maggie lay on the rock, astonished that she had managed to do such a thing. She stretched, snarled to show her canines. The wildness of the battle was already in her, thickening her blood and pumping adrenaline through her. A warning growl escaped her throat as instincts took over. She trusted that part of her, accepted it. Reveled in it. The threat was to her mate. To her family. To everything she cared about. She leapt on the back of the spotted leopard, sinking her teeth deep into his neck, raking with claws. He shook her off easily, but the distraction was all Brandt needed to gain the advantage. He was on the other cat before it could recover, taking the throat, twisting until the leopard was on his side, the hold impossible to break. Maggie was already inspecting Brandt's injuries, padding around him on her soft cushioned paws. When he let go, backing away, the spotted leopard didn't rise. Brandt could hear the others coming fast, coming to his aid. It was too late for any of them. He'd had no choice but to make the kill, but it sickened him that he had to do such a thing to one of his own kind. He looked at Maggie bleakly, his head down, his heart filled with sorrow. His sides were heaving as his lungs worked to recover. Her tongue soothed a rip on his shoulder, lapped at another along his side. She nudged him to his feet, already aware of the others on their way. She



was
clearly stating her position. His people could deal with the aftermath
of jungle
justice. Brandt was to go with this mate, allow her to take care of his
injuries. Her tongue was busy, and her smaller body continually urged
his toward
the forest, away from the sight and smells of his savage way of life.
Urged him
toward their home.
Maggie had clearly chosen her destiny and Brandt finally accepted she
knew what
she was doing. His heart overflowing, he went with her, basking in her
love and
care.