

USA Today Best Selling Author
QUINN LOFTIS

**ALL SHE WANTED
WAS A BOOK BOYFRIEND**

KINGDOM

A KINGDOM SHIFTERS NOVEL

OF CLAWS

KINGDOM OF CLAWS

BOOK 1
A KINGDOM SHIFTERS NOVEL

QUINN LOFTIS



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For the readers.

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CHAPTER I

A Warm Body Suitable For Rubbing Up Against.

“Reading captivates me because it creates a portal to a new world. The act of getting lost in a story provides an escape from everyday life. It helps me uncover more of what my own life has to offer. It also gives me a way to forget my own issues and insecurities... which, let’s be honest, are many and varied.” ~Lola

“Is the werewolf dude ravishing the damsel in distress yet?” Lola looked up from her book to see Katy strolling into her room, without bothering to knock, as usual. “Or maybe they don’t have time for the ravishing because the leading lady is too busy saving the world. And for some reason, this chick can kick the ass of even the strongest supernatural being, though nobody knows why. And the male lead is really only allowed to be her sidekick because he’s eye candy, and provides her with a warm body to rub up against?”

Lola sighed and dropped her current, literary fix into her lap. The cover landed face up. She quickly flipped it over when she noticed the picture on the front: a shirtless dude holding a hot chick. The woman must have been acting as his

jacket based on how tightly she was wrapped around him. *Good grief, couldn't they just put a flipping wolf on the cover instead?* Such a scene would only spur Katy on in her need to tease Lola over her love of the supernatural— paranormal-romances, to be exact.

“Why are you here?” Lola asked.

Katy flopped onto her bed with an exaggerated sigh. *Please, make yourself at home.* Lola was prone to the somewhat troublesome habit of speaking to herself, and frequently, her face gave away her inner thoughts. This sometimes made for an uncomfortable, and slightly awkward, scenario. “We have to be at work in an hour.” As she spoke, Katy rolled her striking, nearly translucent, gray eyes and casually brushed a hand through her naturally-wavy, mahogany hair. *That I'm totally not jealous of. But if I was, I would never admit it.* Lola's own hair was neck-length and orange spattered through with streaks of blonde highlights. It drew attention to her, but it was her skin that captured more attention. Just not the kind a girl wants. Her skin was a two-tone tapestry of peach and paler pigmentation, courtesy of her vitiligo. “You were so absorbed with Talon Hunter that you've completely lost track of time,” Katy chided.

Lola's brow rose. “Who in the world is Talon Hunter?”

Her friend rolled to her back and pulled her legs up, resting her feet on the bed. “No doubt some hunky werewolf, fairy, or vampire in your book.” She pointed to the book in question without bothering to look away from the spot she stared at on the ceiling.

Why can't I like horror books or rom-coms? “His name is not Talon Hunter.” Lola slapped the book down onto her desk.

“Maybe not, but it *is* some ridiculously masculine name that makes girls want to swoon. Or so the author thinks, am I right?” Katy turned her head and grinned at Lola. “Tell me I’m wrong.” Her voice took on an almost musical quality.

Lola *did not* want to admit to her bratty BFF that she was right. Even if she was. “I need to take a quick shower.” Lola stood, ignoring Katy’s taunting. “You stay out of the bathroom and don’t touch my things.”

Katy gasped, pressing her hand to her chest. “I can’t believe you would assume I would violate your privacy in such a way.”

Lola rolled her eyes. “You would, and you have.” She grabbed clothes from her dresser and headed for the bathroom. Without turning around, she said, “I’m serious, Katy. I will cut you if you touch my stuff.”

“You realize you have anger issues, right? And *you’re* the curious one of our trio. Maddie and I totally mind our own business.”

Lola scoffed. “Mind your own business? You have no boundaries. You seem to think our business *is* your business.”

“That’s because it is, Heifer. BFF Contract, page 215, Amendment 15 (g).” Katy’s voice sounded so serious that a stranger would probably believe there actually was a BFF Contract. There wasn’t. At least, not that Lola knew of. Then again, it wouldn’t be out of character for Katy to draft some

official-looking document and insist that Lola and Maddie comply with its fanciful regulations, or face her fury.

I love my best friend. I love my best friend. Lola silently chanted as she shut the door and turned the lock. Katy was known to simply walk in, sit on the counter and start chit-chatting while she showered. “No boundaries,” she muttered. Lola might be the curious one of them, but Katy was the nosy one. And there *was* a difference.

Lola walked out of the bathroom dressed with her hair pulled up. She sported a light dusting of make-up on her face. She’d given up trying to cover the marbled skin once it moved down her neck and arms. Katy was still laying on her bed, but her friend was no longer simply staring at the ceiling. Instead, she had her nose in Lola’s book. *I can’t kill my best friend. It’s not appropriate and is usually frowned upon by social media sites that do those crime documentaries. Not always frowned upon, but usually.*

“I knew it!” Katy tossed the book aside, threw a fist in the air, and whooped like an idiot. “Xander Felix, otherwise known as Zan to his pack.” Katy snickered as she stood up. “I’ll admit, it’s a sexy name. It definitely has a better ring to it than something like... *Bill* when the damsel-slash-badass chick moans it in the throes of passion. ‘Oh Bill, give me more,’” she said in a high, breathy voice. “Nope, no ring. But Xander? That’s the name of a beast that makes you scream. Paronomasia intended.”

“I hate you,” Lola said dryly. “And your love of ridiculously obscure words.”

Katy laughed, wrapping an arm around Lola's neck. "No, you don't. And you love my Words of the Day because you get to look them up, feeding your Curiosity Monster."

Okay, so maybe I do love the Word of the Day. But that doesn't mean I can't hate her at the same time. I'm great at multitasking.

"Come on, my curious little cat," Katy pulled her through her bedroom door. "Let's go sell some pizza and get hit on by firefighters and construction workers. Maybe one of them will have a dark and mysterious name that you can moan in your dreams tonight. If we meet a Xander today, he's getting your number immediately."

Lola tried to shove Katy away, but the woman held on tighter than a leech while she laughed. "One day, I'm going to maim you. And no one will blame me," Lola said through gritted teeth.

"As long as I can moan a different name while you maim me. Maybe I'll call you Kitty instead of Lola while you touch me. No offense, BFF, but Lola is just not sexy. Your last name, though. That kicks ass."

Lola pinched the skin on Katy's side. "My last name is Katz, not Kitty, Butthead." *Maybe I can put an ad out for a new best friend? That wouldn't be weird at all. SWF seeks another single female for best friendship. No strange sex stuff, please. Okay, so it's totally weird.*

Katy sighed. "Yeah, your parents missed the boat on that one. Kitty Katz would have been a much cooler name for you."

Lola swiveled her head to glare at Katy as they headed for the front door. She didn't need to tell her parents she was leaving because they'd both already left for their own jobs. "That sounds like a porn star's name."

"Right!" Katy finally dropped her arm when Lola turned to lock the apartment door. "You'd be mind-blowing as a porn star, in more ways than one, considering everything you learn from your fictitious boy-toys like Xander the wolf lover. Has he taught you how to make a wolf howl in ecstasy, scratch his itch, pet his pelt—"

"That's it. You brought this on yourself." Lola turned to face Katy, stopping her friend in her tracks. She reached out, grabbed her nipple, and twisted as hard as she could. *It's also not weird that I'm touching my best friend's nipple.* Lie. It was absolutely weird. But desperate measures and all that jazz.

Katy slapped at Lola and then shoved her away as she screeched like a banshee. "Dammit, you little twerp. We agreed boob torture was off the table!" She finally pushed hard enough that Lola stumbled back, releasing her grip.

"If I recall correctly, there was a clause allowing for boob torture in case of extenuating circumstances." Lola turned on her heel and continued walking. "And you're the one who wrote the clause. If the offending BFF doesn't stop torturing the defending BFF, all bodily harm is fair play." *She's lucky I didn't have a knife. I kind of think I would have used it. Thankfully, nipple-twisting is much less bloody, and there's pretty much no chance of causing death. I seriously need to stop talking to myself. It's becoming disturbing.*

“I was talking about real torture, you short-as-shit, Pixie Slut.”

Lola waved her off. “You’re an inch taller than me, so that’s not really an insult.”

She noticed Katy rubbing her chest out of the corner of her eye and smirked. Lola knew all the abuse they dished out to one another was done out of love... mostly. If Katy didn’t tease you, then she didn’t like you. She was kind of like Lola’s cat, named Dog— yes, that was really his name. If he didn’t bite you just for the heck of it, he had no cares to give about you. The harder the bite, the more he liked you. The same could be said for Katy, both literally and figuratively. And just like she had to knock Dog off the bed every once in a while when he bit too hard, she also had to pinch Katy’s nipple occasionally when her friend teased too much. “Your boob going to be okay?”

Katy huffed. “I’ll let you know in a decade when I have a kid and try to boob-feed it.”

“I think it’s called breastfeed, genius.” *Although boob-feed could catch on.* It had a hipster sound to it.

“Tomato, potato,” Katy said dryly. Then she added, “I’m sorry I teased you about your book boy-toys. It’s just so easy. And fun. You know I’m going to get you back when you least expect it. With girls like those,” she motioned to Lola’s chest, “you’re an easy target. But for now, I’ll call a truce.”

“Truce accepted.” *See? I was right. We do love each other.* “Until you decide to retaliate. Then all bets are off. And you

might want to start wearing padded bras.” *But that love definitely has conditions.*

No Name Pizzeria, or NNP for short, was only four blocks from Lola’s apartment. Their boss, Sal, had once told Lola he’d decided to name the place *No Name Pizzeria* because he wanted his pizza to be so good his place didn’t even need a name. Apparently, he’d succeeded because the place stayed packed, becoming one of those hole-in-the wall restaurants tourists went out of their way to visit.

The four-block walk went by quickly with Katy at her side, pointing at people and voicing what she decided they were thinking as they walked passed. She said things like ‘Oh, look at me with my fancy briefcase,’ when pointing at a well-dressed man in a suit, or ‘Oh, no, I think I left the oven on,’ after pointing out a stressed-out soccer mom. Lola reminded her that pointing at people on the streets of New York City was like waving a red flag at a bull. Some psycho would make you their target simply because you brought attention to yourself. Rule one of Big Apple Etiquette: Keep your head down and walk fast. Only tourists looked around, meandering and pointing, making them easy pickings for the less than savory patrons of the city.

Lola pulled the door open to *NNP* and the smell of warm dough, spices, and tomato sauce, assaulted her senses. It was as familiar to her as the scent of her own home. In the three years she’d been working at NNP, she loved the smell, but her taste buds were long ago pizza’d out.

As she and Katy zig-zagged through the checkered tables, familiar faces nodded and hands waved at them. A few patrons even called out greetings. For those twenty seconds it took to get to the EmployeeOnly door, Lola felt *seen* in a way that was not brought on by her skin disorder. Living in a city the size of NYC had a way of making a person feel invisible and insignificant. But living in NYC with a disorder as obvious as vitiligo made her feel like a zoo exhibit. Even with her two best friends, loving parents, and the people she worked with daily, taking up space in her heart, Lola still felt like something was missing. *I need to get past that feeling. I'm just wasting away my life waiting for something to happen.* But the idea of giving up on that *something* made her feel bereft of the thing she somehow knew was essential to her life.

“You’re both late,” Maddie called out from behind the counter. “And fired.”

“You can’t fire us, you closet freak,” Katy hollered back. She was unconcerned about who heard her. “We have seniority.”

Maddie shook her head as she took a few bills from the customer across from her. “Working here a week longer than me does not mean you have seniority.”

“I’m with her.” Lola gestured at Katy. “We’re practically management. You’re a lowly, serving wench.”

“You’re all three lowly, serving wenches. Now, don’t start on each other today, or so help me, I’ll pull whatever hair I have left out of my head.” Sal barked at them through the order window. “I can’t handle it today. I really can’t.”

Lola gestured at Katy and Maddie. “I didn’t even start it.”

“Guilty by association.” He shrugged. “I told you to get new friends, Little One. These two will corrupt your pure heart.”

Lola rolled her eyes. “I work with them every day and they follow me home like stray cats. It’s kind of hard to get rid of them.” *And I sort of like them. Most days.*

“I keep telling you to run away with Antonio.” Sal’s brow bounced up and down suggestively. “He could take you to Italy.”

Hell to the no. Lola mentally shook her head.

Katy pushed Lola toward the employee door. “I wouldn’t let your man-whore of a son, no matter how hot he is, near *my little one* with a fifty-foot pole, Sal. And if you’re so protective of Lola, then you wouldn’t either.”

Regardless of his words, Lola knew Sal adored all three of them, which is why he tolerated Katy’s insubordination. That and she was a hard worker, which was hard to come by nowadays, even if she did get mouthy with Sal and the occasional customer.

“Some women are for fun,” Sal said. “And some women are for forever. Little One is the latter.”

Lola pretended not to hear what her boss had said and hurried into the back room where their lockers were located. She shoved her backpack into the space and then tied her sauce-stained apron around her waist. Sal had been trying to fix her and Antonio up ever since she’d turned nineteen. And

as Katy said, Sal's son was indeed good looking. But the problem was, he knew it. The ladies liked him, and he liked the ladies. Not to mention he was twenty-eight. That just seemed like a bit too big of an age gap. The whole thing would have been harmless, except Antonio didn't dismiss the idea as easily as she had.

At first, she'd been flattered because most guys were put off by her skin. Lola noticed that older men weren't as focused on what made her different. If anything, it made them more intrigued. She only wished guys her own age felt the same. And if Antonio's relentless flirting was any indication, he was completely on board with his father's idea. If his flirting wasn't bad enough, anytime a male customer acted a tad bit interested in her, Antonio would appear out of nowhere, to lay some sort of claim on her. It was irritating, but Lola usually just laughed it off. She certainly didn't encourage or reciprocate it. Antonio, however, wasn't dissuaded. Apparently, Italian men were quite relentless when they'd set their sights on someone they considered a 'forever' kind of woman.

"I swear if I didn't love Sal like a dad, I'd slit his throat with a pizza slicer." Katy huffed as she tied her own apron on, her motions jerky and rough. "He just won't give up with the Antonio thing, not to mention, if you haven't noticed, said Italian Romeo has been showing up here every day you work. He's getting ballsy."

"That word is beneath you, Katy." Lola pursed her lips. "Do better."

Katy laughed, which is what Lola intended. “You’re right, that was completely subpar for my intelligence. How about he’s getting indomitable, or valorous?”

Lola pushed through the door back into the dining area. “That’s more like it. Live up to your full vocabulary potential, Katy Dire. Just because you live in the poor part of the city and work at a hole-in-the-wall pizza joint, doesn’t mean you have to behave like an uneducated street rat.”

“Wow, that’s cold, Lo.” Maddie handed her a tray bearing five glasses of water. “Table eight.”

“I’ve had an irritating morning.” She glanced over her shoulder at Katy. “I’m feeling a tad supercilious.”

“Nope,” Katy said, raising her voice as Lola walked off. “Fancy words are *my* thing. You can’t steal them.”

“Tell that to your nipples,” Lola said. She hadn’t realized just how close she’d been to the table of customers waiting on its drinks until she heard several men burst out laughing. Lola looked down and saw five, very, attractive guys staring up at her. She tried to keep her face from turning red, but knew she failed. *Hot, not attractive. And I mean hot with a capital, ‘Can I Have Your Babies, Please?’ Another note to self, maybe slow down on the number of supernatural-romance books I read.*

CHAPTER 2

I'll Show You Mine, If You Show Me Yours.

“Have you ever had that feeling something big was coming your way, huge and unstoppable, but you didn't know if it was good or bad? Like a built-in radar trying to prepare you for the unexpected, but you don't know how to prepare. No? So, just me then? Fantastic. Good to know.” ~Lola

Guy Number One smirked, Number Two grinned, Number Three winked at her, Number Four simply raised an eyebrow, and Number Five... Well, she didn't know how to describe his expression. She met his shining, gray eyes, and they swirled like liquid silver. Lola kept herself from gasping, but looked away in a hurry. With a shaky hand, she pulled her order pad and pen from the pocket of her apron. It was when she encountered guys at this level of attractiveness, she felt the most conscious of her appearance. Which really annoyed the crap out of her.

“Good after-” *Wow, why is my voice so high?* Lola cleared her throat and began again. “Good afternoon.” *Argh, now why is it so low? I don't talk like that.* She wanted to crawl under

one of the tables and disappear until the men left. “What can I get you...” Lola swallowed thickly, and she knew her face must be showing the most hideous of grimaces. “...gentlemen today?” *And no, I’m not on the menu, but the menu is completely adjustable based on the needs of the customer. Holy crab apples, did I just think that? I have lost my ever-loving mind.*

A faint chuckle resonated, prompting Lola to lift her eyes back to the men. The chuckle came from Guy Number One, the smirker. “We’re far from gentlemen, *Little One.*” He glanced to Sal as he said the words and then back to Lola. His grin stretched wider, drawing Lola’s gaze to his canine teeth. Again, she had to stifle a gasp. The man’s canines were remarkably different from any she’d seen before. Sharpened to a fine point, they were twice the normal size. Lola blinked, trying to dismiss what she saw as a mere trick of the light. *Maybe they’re dental implants? People do all kinds of weird things to their body. Fake, pointy teeth are surely among them. Yes, implants,* she convinced herself. When she reopened her eyes, his lips were sealed, though his playful smile remained. *See? There’s nothing to worry about.* Despite her reassuring words, a sense of unease flooded Lola, sending a shiver down her spine.

“Are you alright?” Lola’s attention shifted to Guy Number Three. A deep dimple peeked from his right cheek as he spoke and his blue eyes narrowed on her. “You seem a bit spooked. Wyatt didn’t mean any harm.” He gestured toward Guy Number One with a nod. “He’s a flirt, though not a very adept one.”

“You just wish you were as skilled with the females as I am,” Wyatt retorted, tossing a rolled-up straw paper at his friend.

Lola attempted to smile, but judging by their concerned expressions, she probably looked more like she was trying to pass a kidney stone. “I’m fine. I just thought I saw—” She started to point toward Guy Number One’s face, then hesitated. It might come across as impolite to draw attention to his teeth. “I thought I saw someone I recognized.” She gestured in Wyatt’s general direction instead.

“Rest assured, if we had met before, you wouldn’t have forgotten me.” Wyatt’s words held a suggestive undertone.

“Seems like you’re not as successful with the females as you think if they forget you so easily.” Guy Number Three chuckled, making the dimple even more prominent.

Lola found it peculiar that they referred to women as, “females,” rather than ladies, women, or even chicks, which were the terms usually uttered by her customers. ‘Female’ seemed unnatural in discussions involving attraction or desire, more fitting for medical contexts... *or possessive, alpha werewolves*. The hero of Lola’s latest paranormal-romance novel flitted through her mind.

“I’m sure he does just fine with the, uh, women. They probably find him quite memorable. Not that I would know... or care,” she finished lamely. Lola silently scolded herself to keep quiet, but her mouth had a mind of its own, particularly when nerves took over. “I mean, I’m certainly not one he’s had any involvement with or anything...” She shook her head as

her tongue tied itself into knots. “I... uh... haven’t been one of the... uh... *females* he’s been...” She cleared her throat. “... fine with or anything. Goodness.” Their low chuckles were growing louder. “What would you gentlemen like to eat?” she blurted out. “Um, food, please. What can I get you?”

“Meat. Rare. But I’m sure you all don’t have that here.” It was Guy Number Two who spoke.

Lola looked up from her pad. He was completely serious. *What a weird thing to say. We’re a pizza joint, not a steakhouse.* “Um, no, I’m afraid not.” A five o’clock shadow and eyes framed by dark eyelashes gave him an air of danger. His firm jaw clenched when Lola met his eyes. They flashed, the pupils becoming as tiny as pin-pricks. *People do not have pupils that small.* At least, not any humans that she’d ever seen. *Are there any other kinds of people other than humans? No. No, there are not,* she answered her own question. *But how cool would that be?* Lola also noticed the shape of his eyes almost seemed to change and become more pinched in the outer and inner corners. They reminded her of the shape of her cat’s eyes. Tilting his head, the light landed in his eyes reminding her of Dog’s eyes and the luminescent quality they processed.

“Do you wear contacts?” Lola blurted out, unable to contain her curiosity. Though she felt uneasy in the presence of these five, stunningly attractive men, her inquisitiveness still got the better of her. Even when her instincts were screaming at her to shut the heck up. One day her insatiable curiosity would land her in trouble. Or, as Katy put it, *‘It’s going to get your cute little mug put on a poster in a grocery*

store.’ “Is that your way of subtly telling me you like my eyes?” The man shifted in his seat to fully face her.

“No.” Lola shook her head. “If I liked your eyes, I’d say, ‘Hey, I like your eyes.’ I mean, they’re not ugly or anything. But I don’t particularly *like* them.”

“Ouch.” One of the other men muttered, though she didn’t know which one.

“But you have tiny pupils, and your eyes kind of glow. Since I’ve never seen someone with such small pupils, or glowing eyes, I can only assume that you must be wearing contacts.”

His eyebrow quirked. “If you’ve already figured out that I wear contacts, why ask?”

Lola shrugged. “When a person has a hypothesis, the only way to prove it for certain is to get confirmation.”

“Rafe,” Wyatt said in a low voice, sounding very much like a warning of some kind, as the other guy leaned closer to her.

“You’re hypothesizing about me?” His voice was almost a purr as he spoke. “Is that a smart girl’s way of flirting? Or were you also flirting with Wyatt when you thought you remembered him?”

Lola lifted her chin and straightened back up. She hadn’t even realized she’d been leaning toward Rafe, A.K.A., Pupil Guy. “I’m not flirting with anyone. He has weird teeth and you have weird eyes. It’s weird.”

“You think my teeth are weird?” Wyatt ran his tongue across the aforementioned pointy teeth and winked. The dude seriously winked. He was taunting her. And, dammit, she liked it. *No, I don't. I need to do my job, and I seriously gotta get out more and socialize. Like with real guys. Not my boss's skeezy son or five random dudes who looked like they stepped off the cover of a magazine.*

“Well, I also think his eyes are weird.” She motioned to Rafe as if that would somehow soften the blow of insulting the first one's teeth.

“You said that already,” Guy Number Four muttered.

She looked at him. Looking away disinterestedly, he turned his head to gaze out over the room. The motion gave her a glimpse of a tattoo on his neck of a black panther. As Lola started to look away, she swore she saw the panther's tail twitching lazily, much like Dog's often did when he was sunning himself on the windowsill.

What the heck? I must not be getting enough sleep. “So, how about some pizza? You know, instead of rare meat?” Lola spoke quickly, knowing that if she didn't change the subject, she might ask the man about his tattoo and tell him she saw it move. These guys already thought she was a brick shy of a load. No sense in embarrassing herself further. “I mean, you can get the No Name Meat Explosion. That's our version of the meat lovers. It has meat. If meat is your thing, which you said it is. It's all cooked though, the meat.” *You can stop saying the word, 'meat,' any minute now.*

Guy Number Three opened his mouth, but Number Five cut him off by thrusting the menus back at her. “We’ll have—” As he spoke, his swirling, silver eyes met hers. Wanting to, yet again, point out this new physical oddity, Lola forced herself to continue to hold his gaze and keep her mouth shut. Who was she to speak of oddities when she had blotchy skin?

“Two of the large meat... explosions,” Wyatt finished for Guy Number Five and took the menus.

Lola pulled her gaze from the silver eyes and glanced down to take the menus. She noticed a tattoo on the back of Wyatt’s hand. It was a similar picture on Number Four’s neck—a large, black cat, a panther, lazily draped across a tree branch. The detail was incredible. It looked three dimensional, as if the animal could just walk right off of his hand. “Nice tattoo. Are you all in some sort of club? Is that why the matching tattoos?” She motioned between Number Four and One.

He frowned at her. “What tattoos?”

She looked back at his hand, and the cat was gone. Then she looked at Four’s neck. His tattoo had vanished as well. *What the hell?* Lola knew she’d seen a tattoo on both of them. Her eyes roamed around the table, as if she could somehow find the missing tattoos under a napkin.

“Now Rafe is messing with you.” Wyatt gave her a charming smile. “He actually has a ton of tattoos. Though,” he leaned forward and said in a conspiratorial whisper, “I don’t think it’d be appropriate for him to show you those. Although,

I'm sure he'd be happy to follow the, 'I'll show you mine, if you show me yours,' rule."

Lola's brow rose as a barrage of questions filled her mind. *How many is a ton? Wouldn't that hurt like hell? Does the person doing the tattooing ever get embarrassed or feel uncomfortable about putting ink on places where the sun doesn't shine? Do you really find me attractive enough for you to want to see 'mine,' or are you just messing with me?* She ignored that last silent question because it made her feel insecure, a feeling which she loathed, and thankfully the only question she managed was, "Don't they hurt?"

"Tattoos?" Wyatt asked.

She nodded. "In certain locations." Against her will—*totally* against her will—Lola's eyes flitted up and down Rafe's body.

"I'm guessing by your questions, you don't have one." Rafe's eyes mimicked hers, running up and down her form. "Are you thinking about getting one?"

His voice was a rumble, broody and serious. He seemed a bit more intense than the other four at the table.

"I've never really thought about it." *Lie*. She'd totally thought about it. Plenty of them were beautiful or interesting, and some were downright ridiculous. Tattoos were a way of embracing her skin and the beauty her friends were able to see in her despite her vitiligo.

"You *should* think about it," Wyatt said. "There's a place called *Wild Ink*. They do the best work in the city. If you get

one, you should go there.”

“You’d look hot with a tattoo.” Rafe’s eyes trailed up her body. Starting at her combat boots, moving over her skinny jeans, and past the apron to her shirt that had, ‘NNP or Bust,’ in bold letters across the front. His lips quirked up. “I’ll take the bust, please.” There was a thud under the table and Rafe snarled like legit snarled— with a raised lip and everything. His head whipped around to look at Guy Number Five. “It was a joke. Damn, Roan. Get a sense of humor already.”

Lola rolled her eyes. “You need new material. I’ve heard that joke a million times since Sal got these shirts.”

“What joke?” Maddie practically slid up next to her. Ridiculously graceful, floating about with her long, willowy legs, she should have been a ballerina, not a pizza waitress.

“The shirt,” Lola said dryly.

“The shirt is the shit.” Katy walked up on Lola’s other side. “Are these weirdos giving you trouble?”

Lola cut her eyes at her protective friend. It was sweet in its own way. Katy was ridiculously protective of Lola because it was common practice for assholes— and bitches for that matter— to make comments about her vitiligo. Her confrontational BFF did not take kindly to it. Despite Lola’s continued insistence that she could handle all the As and Bs herself, Katy still felt the need to ride to her rescue anytime she thought someone was treating Lola with anything less than respect. Or maybe Katy enjoyed putting assholes and bitches in their place.

“Is ‘weird’ the Word of the Day?” Wyatt asked.

Katy looked at him. “Weird?”

“Here we go,” Maddie muttered.

“They’ve got to learn sometime,” Lola said softly. “Especially if they become regulars.”

“If you watch a children’s show about big, yellow birds and garbage can-dwelling puppets while you eat your Fruit Loops in the morning, then yes, ‘weird’ might be *your* Word of the Day. Brought to you by the letters, ‘I’m an idiot,’ and the number, ‘one jackass.’” Katy leaned a shoulder against Lola and folded her arms across her chest. “My Word of the Day is *paronomasia*. I would never be so basic as to pick ‘weird’ as a Word of the Day. Only an imbecile with no linguistic skills whatsoever would do something so ridiculous.”

“Can I marry you?” Guy Number Three smiled, his deep dimple flashing at Katy.

Lola glanced at her friend and saw Katy’s trademark smirk. “Do you know what *paronomasia* means?”

“I have the internet.” He held up his phone.

Katy glanced at Lola. “You’ve been over here for ten minutes talking to *them*?”

Lola nodded. “Guilty.”

Katy looked back at the guys. Their eyes bounced from Maddie, to Lola, to Katy, and then back again.

“They’re hot,” Maddie said without an ounce of embarrassment.

“They *are* hot.” Rather than indicating any attraction to them, the tone of Katy’s voice made it sound like they were a clue to a mystery she was trying to solve. She pointed at Guy Number Four. “What’s your name?”

“Kian.”

“That’s Wyatt, Rafe, and Roan.” Lola pointed at each of them.

“You don’t say?” Katy asked, her voice taking on the mischievous purr it did anytime she was about to make a point.

“Dammit,” Lola bit out through clenched teeth at the same time Katy spoke.

“And you?” She pointed at Guy Number Three with the dimple.

Please be a Keith, or Bob, or—

“Drystan, and I’m still waiting for my answer.”

Katy held up a finger. “Yeah, be right with you.” She turned to Lola, but Lola refused to look at her best friend.

“Wyatt.” Katy held up a finger in front of her face. “Rafe.” Another finger joined the first. “Roan.” A third finger. “Kian.” A fourth. “Aaaaand Drystan. Do you see a theme, here Lo-lo?”

“They all have hot-as-hell names?” Maddie said, nearly making Lola jump because she’d forgotten she was there.

“Exactly.” Katy pointed at their other BFF. “Hot-as-hell names. You know who else has hot-as-hell names?”

“Katy Dire.” Lola turned and glared at her. “I will make you unable to boob-feed for the rest of your life if you say another word.”

“How have we never been here before?” Lola heard a deep voice that she was pretty sure was Wyatt’s.

“Because we didn’t know how hot the waitresses were,” another voice offered.

“They’d be hotter with tattoos.” That voice was Roan’s. Lola knew it because the statement was uttered without any inflection or feeling, as if he was simply pointing out a cloud in the sky.

“I’ll tell you who has names like that. Book boy—” Lola shoved her order pad so hard into Katy’s stomach that it knocked the wind from her lungs, and a gasp of air whistled out.

“Oh, snap.” Lola pasted on a smile and a fake cheery voice. “I think my friend here is getting sick. I better help her to the back. Your pizzas will be right out. Thank you and have a great day.”

Katy tried to suck in air. For a second, Lola wondered if maybe she’d gotten a little carried away. But then she remembered her BFF was about to reveal her obsession with paranormal-romance novels. And she was about to tell those guys that all their names sounded like the names of the characters in the books she read. Now that she thought about

it, their names were kind of hilarious. Maybe later, if Katy didn't kill her, they could laugh about it. The glare Katy shot her as she helped her to the back made Lola think it would be a few days— Maybe a few weeks— before that would happen.

For the rest of their shift, Katy gave Lola the stink eye and only spoke to her if she absolutely had to. Lola was definitely going to have to watch her back, or her front, for the foreseeable future.

CHAPTER 3

Out-Of-Work Porn Star.

“One little change in your life is all it takes for you to question your sanity. Of course, if no one else but you can see the change, your question is probably justified.” ~Lola

Roan tapped the steering wheel of his BMW as he pulled into the underground parking garage of Leonidas Global, Inc. He found his usual parking spot and shut off the engine. Heaving a sigh, the Shaman took a moment to think before exiting the vehicle. Something weighed upon his mind, which is why he'd called this meeting with the Prime. No doubt, his son, Callon, who Roan considered a friend, would also be in attendance, which was prudent. Callon was the leader of feline beastwalker warriors. His input would be important.

Roan pulled out a tablet and reviewed his notes. One of his counterparts had recently alerted him to a string of abductions in the New Orleans area. Unfortunately, all the disappearances shared a pattern which made them his concern— they were all young women in their late teens and early twenties— the exact age that an *animus* came into her powers. The abductions

could be a coincidence, of course. But it could also mean the Kingdom of Venom was back to its old ways, abducting *animi* in hopes of finding a match for their males. “Damn snakes,” Roan muttered as he got out of the car.

“I thought Shaman weren’t supposed to take sides.” Roan looked up to see Callon walking his way.

“We aren’t. But we have loyalty to those who are honorable.” Roan stowed his tablet before shouldering his pack and reaching out a fist to Callon, who bumped it. “And just because I have to stay impartial doesn’t mean I cannot hate the slimy bastards.”

“I’m told snakes aren’t exactly slimy,” Callon said without any inflection that he was joking. Roan wasn’t sure he’d ever known the Prince to joke. For the most part he was a grumpy ass.

“I don’t mean how they feel,” Roan’s nose scrunched, “Not that I would actually touch one.”

He and Callon walked toward the parking garage elevators. “Given your current mood, I’m going to assume the meeting you’ve called with my father concerns the Kingdom of Venom?”

Roan nodded. “You assume correctly. Women are disappearing in New Orleans.”

Callon released a growl. Roan glanced over to see a set of sharp, elongated teeth. For a moment, the man’s face appeared as that of a snarling lion. A second later, it was back to that of a human. Roan knew it wasn’t an actual shift because Callon

wasn't mated. The image was more like a mirage of what the beast inside of him would one day be capable of becoming.

“My sentiments exactly, Callon.”

The pair emerged into the lobby of Leonidas Global. The lobby was huge. The walls of the inner offices were glass, and Roan could see men and women working at computers or talking on the phone. Roan knew only about half of them were beastwalkers or *animi*. The rest were ordinary humans. He chuckled to himself. They would soil themselves if they knew the coworker in the office right next to them could transform into a large cat and decapitate them with a single swipe of its claws. Or, at least, the ones who were already mated. The rest of them, though not able to transform fully, were still damn dangerous.

“I assume business is good?” he asked as he kept the brisk pace next to his comrade.

Callon gave a sharp nod. “Yes.” His tone was every bit as curt as his nod. To Roan's surprise, Callon continued. “The PI stuff is steady. Bounty hunting is always busy, but the bodyguard division has really taken off. Every other day some new social media *celebrity* pops up.” He said, ‘celebrity’ as if it was a disease he could catch simply by speaking the word. “They all think they're important enough someone might want to take them out.”

“To be fair,” Roan growled, “I wouldn't mind taking a few of those annoying bastards out myself.”

The Prince let out a deep rumble as he said, “You'll have to get in line.” The pair entered a glass elevator and Callon

punched the button for the tenth floor.

Roan ran a hand down his face, the centuries of his age settling on his shoulders. “You try keeping the existence of beastwalkers secret from the humans, while simultaneously trying to keep those same beastwalkers from going to war with one another and see what kind of mood you’re in.”

“Fair point,” Callon conceded. “You can move closer to the front of the line,” he said dryly.

Roan almost smiled. That was as close to a joke as the Prince ever got.

They reached the top floor and walked down a long hallway toward the Prime’s office, or, as the human employees working in the lower floors knew him, Mr. Taras Leo, CEO of Leonidas Global, Inc. A secretary sat outside Taras’s door. She was very pretty, and very human.

“Hello, Callon.” Roan guessed the woman was in her mid-twenties. She had the kind of voice that would make men do things. Stupid, stupid things. Callon grunted a response. Roan watched the way the secretary’s eyes drank in Callon’s form, while he barely glanced in her direction. At six-foot, five-inches tall, Callon, like most of their kind, towered over humans, especially the females. Add to that the natural muscle tone he had because of his beast, and Callon was an impressive specimen. Roan also heard human women talk about Callon’s unique hair with all the golden colors and the wild way he wore it. Apparently, this was appealing to human females. His gold eyes were unique enough the Prime’s son was complimented on them *ad nauseam*. The Shaman kept

himself from rolling his eyes. She obviously hadn't gotten the memo, and despite the cold shoulder Callon was giving her, she still didn't understand. It was nothing personal. But Roan had known Callon long enough to know that the Prince didn't like humans. He tolerated them and treated them with respect when he had to interact with them, but romantically? *Intolerable* was the word Roan thought he'd remembered Callon using. Though there were days Roan wasn't sure Callon liked anyone. He respected them, but *liked*... that might be pushing it for the Prince. Roan had no idea what his friend planned to do about finding a mate. There'd been no females born to their kind in over a century, and those females that were mated, bore only male children. The only way a Damarian male could hope to find a mate was with an *animus*—a human imbued with the magic of the Kingdom Shifters. As Wyatt liked to point out on a regular basis, Callon was S.O.L. if he didn't find humans appealing. Without a mate, his inner beast would always be just beyond his reach.

Callon knocked on his father's door.

"Enter," came a deep voice.

Roan followed Callon inside. The Prime's office would have looked like any other CEO's office to the human employees of Leonidas Global. It contained floor-to-ceiling windows that allowed natural light to fill the room, creating a bright and inviting atmosphere. The luxurious leather furniture exuded prestige. To Roan's eyes however, the office looked much different.

The Shaman could see through the glamour to the earthy tones surrounding him. The walls were adorned with textured wallpaper in shades of terracotta, ochre, and deep brown. The floor, which would have appeared as expensive hardwood to a human, was rough stone to Roan's sight. Exotic woven rugs covered much of the ground. A human might have described it as mimicking the African Savanna, but Roan knew the office wasn't meant to imitate anything in the earthly realm. These were scenes from Damara, the realm where the beastwalkers originated.

Sitting behind a large mahogany desk, the Prime wore a finely-tailored suit. He stood and turned away from the window where he'd been watching the city below. Roan saw that the Prime wasn't alone. Sitting in a plush chair to his right, was Lyra, the Prima to the Kingdom of Claws. She had long, tawny-brown hair that fell in a tight braid down her back. The Prima possessed an enchanting allure, her features exuding a captivating grace reminiscent of a feline elegance. Her face possessed a striking resemblance to the sleek characteristics of a lioness, the creature which Lyra could transform into on a whim if she so wished.

Taras inclined his head to Roan. "Welcome, Shaman."

"Thank you, Prime. And what a pleasant surprise to see Prima Lyra." Roan gave the Prima a slight bow.

She, too, inclined her head. "Ah, Roan, our resident Shaman. I wish I could say it was good to see you, Friend. But you never seem to bring any good news."

Roan's jaw clenched as he lifted his chin. "More of the same, I'm afraid, Your Majesty. I bring ill-tidings."

King Taras blew out a breath. "Out with it, Roan. No sense beating around the bush. Which of my enemies is causing trouble this time?"

"According to the treaties," Roan said, "you're supposed to be at peace with the other Damarians. Technically, you don't have enemies."

Taras just fixed Roan with a level stare and waited.

"The snakes," Roan said. "Women have gone missing in New Orleans."

"And the ages of the missing women?" Taras asked, though Roan knew the Prime already guessed the answer.

Roan's stomach twisted at the information he had to share. The missing women were young. They had their whole lives ahead of them. If beastwalkers had indeed abducted the women, they wouldn't be treated unkindly. But that didn't matter. Their right to control their own life had been taken away. "All between eighteen and twenty-three."

The Prima growled a curse. Roan cut his eyes to her and saw claws flex from her hand.

"Say the word, Father, and I'm on the next flight down there," Callon said. "This is clearly a violation of the treaty."

The Prime held up a hand and addressed Roan. "How many women have gone missing?" His brow rose. "Do we have any proof the Kingdom of Venom is responsible?"

“Five, Your Majesty. And, no,” Roan shook his head. “We don’t yet have proof the snakes are behind the disappearances. Though from the information I’ve received from other Shaman, there have been other kingdoms looking into it. I’ve no doubt they have redoubled their surveillance on the snakes in New Orleans. I didn’t want to arouse suspicion with the KOV King by sending our own people down there, at least not yet, despite the fact that we travel in each other’s territories regularly. I’m sure we will have proof soon.”

The Prima spoke up. “The snakes are reprehensible, but they aren’t stupid. They won’t be caught easily. At the very least, they face severe punishment from the Council of Shaman if they are found to be abducting *animi*. At worst, their actions could mean open war among the kingdoms. They wouldn’t risk such a thing lightly.”

Taras rubbed his chin. “You’re right, Love. The snakes wouldn’t be kidnapping *animi* again unless they have some kind of plan in the works. I wouldn’t be shocked if they’d already aligned themselves with some of the other kingdoms. We need to tread lightly.”

Callon growled. “And let more females be taken? We should be forming our own scouts and doing our own hunting.”

Lyra chuckled. “My son, the staunch defender of humans. I thought you didn’t care for the... What did you call them?”

“‘Smelly sons of apes,’ I believe is the term he usually uses, Your Majesty,” Roan offered.

“That’s right,” she smirked. “Why are you so quick to defend the smelly sons of apes, Callon?”

“Whether I like the humans or not isn’t the issue. I don’t believe innocent beings should be hurt. And it’s not only about them,” he replied. “What the snakes are doing threatens all of us. With each *animus* they abduct, the Kingdom of Venom increases their chances of having a bonded pair, which will make them stronger.”

“He’s right, my love,” Taras said. “Not to mention every *animus* they take from the world means a male from one of the other kingdoms cannot come into his powers.”

“Including our own,” Callon said through clenched teeth. Roan noted that despite Callon’s own dislike for humans, he did not begrudge his own pride members finding their mates. Of course, he wanted what was best for their kingdom. All good leaders did, no matter their own personal preferences or beliefs.

Roan pointed at the Prime’s son. “With your disdain for humans, Callon, you’ll never find your mate.”

“Which breaks my heart, by the way. I’m ready for grandcubs,” Lyra said.

Taras and Roan chuckled.

Callon simply stared at his mother, his face completely blank of all emotion.

“Fine,” Lyra held up her hands. “I’ll drop it. You don’t have to yell at me.”

Roan frowned. “Huh?”

Lyra looked at him and obviously noticed the confusion. “He yells with his eyes. Surely you’ve been on the end of one of his glares before.”

“I just thought that was the way his face always looked,” Roan said.

Taras chuckled. He was an even-tempered male, though firm when he needed to be. Roan always wondered where Callon got his stoic nature.

Lyra nodded with a dismissive wave. “It is, but it gets even more severe when I bring up cubs.”

“Can we put the subject of the grandcubs aside for the moment, my love?” Taras asked. “You can start planning our son’s mating ceremony at a later time. For now, we must decide what to do about the snakes. Regardless of the seriousness of the belly-sliders’ actions, we cannot attack unprovoked. We will have to wait until we get proof.”

“Is it even our problem to solve?” Lyra asked. “We are far from New Orleans. There are kingdoms better suited for an assault on the snakes.”

Roan tilted his head. “The closest kingdom is the Kingdom of Silk in the southeast. Obviously, they would be no help. I trust the spiders even less than I do the snakes. The horses control the midwest, they could be a possibility, and the wolves control the west. Though the wolves are steadfast, I’m not sure they are any closer than you all proximity-wise.”

The Prime scratched his chin. “We will put aside the questions of logistics until we know more. It will probably be

your job, Roan, to handle that with the Council.”

“Just send me down there,” Callon suggested, “I’ll find the proof we need and deal with any of the KOV that attempt to get in my way.”

“No, Son,” Taras shook his head. “We have plenty of other warriors who can go, and I need you here. Not to mention, some decorum might go a long way.” Taras stepped up next to his son and laid his hand on Callon’s shoulder giving it a visible squeeze. “No offense, Callon, but there is a reason you are the leader of my warriors, and not an ambassador to the other kingdoms, the traditional job for a prince.”

“None taken. I have no desire to chit-chat with the King of Venom,” Callon said. “So, if that is what you wish, then you are right to send someone else.”

Taras nodded and patted his son’s shoulder before he turned to Roan. “Send Wyatt. He has a friendly disposition. Who is the Shaman assigned to New Orleans?”

Roan cleared his throat before speaking. “Link.”

“What do you know about him?”

“Not much. Our paths rarely cross. If you’re asking if his loyalty to the snakes outweighs his loyalty to the Council, I cannot say.”

“I guess we shall see,” replied the Prime. “Send Callon his contact info so Wyatt can rendezvous with him in New Orleans. Thank you, Roan. If there’s nothing else.” He motioned toward the door.

“Actually...” Roan took in a deep breath and blew it out. “Your Majesty, there is one more thing.”

“Go on.” Taras motioned with his hand.

Roan cut his eyes to Callon and then to Lyra before answering. “I’ve found an *animus* myself.” He paused as he felt the tension in the room go up several notches. “Right here in the city.”

The Prime’s eyebrows rose. “Really? That is excellent news. Who is she?”

“Roan! You’ve been holding out on us,” Lyra leaned forward, practically rising from her seat. “Who cares what those stupid snakes are doing? You should have led with this. What’s her name? Tell us everything.”

“Her name is Lola Katz, and she is nineteen years old.” Roan smirked as he remembered his first encounter with her. “And she can see past our glamour. She even saw our tattoos.”

Lyra looked at her husband pointedly, raised her eyebrows, and jerked her head to their son.

“She’s very attractive,” Roan continued.

“Lola?” Callon said, sounding confused. “That’s an odd name. Probably for an odd female.”

Roan ignored the Prince’s comment. “Wyatt was quite taken with her, as was Rafe.”

“Well.” Lyra held out her hands. “They’ve yet to find a mate even from the *animi* that live within our kingdom. I’m sure they’re both eager to know if she would pick one of

them.” She narrowed her eyes on Callon. “Unlike our son, they see the human females as the gift from our Creator, Visata, that they are.”

“Don’t start, Mother,” Callon muttered.

She sighed. “You must have a mate, Callon. There are no more Damarian females. Whatever hang up it is that you have about the humans, you need to get over it.”

“Well, Son,” Taras said. “You wanted an assignment, here you go. Check out this Lola and see if you can convince her she is no mere human.”

Callon’s lip curled back revealing sharp teeth and made a sound very much like a house cat hissing.

Roan chuckled and clapped Callon on the back. “How do you feel about pizza, Prince? I like pepperoni myself.”



“That’s the fourth group of insanely-hot guys that has been here in a week and a half.” Katy rested her elbows on the counter. It was pouring down rain outside, and the pizzeria was dead, and the girls had a moment to chit-chat.

“Go see if they all have the same mysterious, disappearing tattoos, Lola.” Maddie bumped her shoulder, and motioned toward the three males sitting in the furthest corner from them.

“You said the last two groups did. Maybe they’re in some sort of cult.”

“And why do *I* have to be the one to go look for the tattoos?” Lola refilled the napkin containers. She’d been studiously avoiding the guys. Every time she *had* looked at them, all three had been staring straight at her. The same way the four males that had come in two days prior, *and* the four others two days before that. Part of her wanted to cover up because she wondered if they were staring at her skin, but the looks they gave her were not as if she was a freak, they were looks of interest.

“Because you’re the only one who *can* see them. You, apparently are the common denominator with all these dudes,” Katy pointed out. She hadn’t told them about the weird, animal-like qualities she’d also seen. Already feeling like she needed some sort of diagnosis and medication, Lola didn’t need her friends affirming that feeling by telling her what she saw was impossible.

“It’s your table,” Lola argued.

“Doesn’t matter.” Maddie jerked her head toward the group. “They all seem fascinated with you.” Lola couldn’t detect even the slightest hint of jealousy in her friend’s voice.

A shiver ran down Lola’s spine. She’d been hoping that her imagination was playing tricks on her, that she hadn’t become the center of attention for a bunch of strangers– who were very strange indeed. Her friends only confirmed her suspicions as the curious gazes of the guys remained fixated on Lola. “What’s going on?” she whispered to herself.

“There’s nothing captivating about me. Unless you want to count my...” She motioned to her face and arms where the vitiligo was visible before sweeping her finger towards her BFFs. “Eccentric best friends.”

Katy narrowed her eyes. “Hey, I’m not eccentric. And your ‘v’ makes you interesting and beautiful.”

“I was being nice.” Lola said dryly. “Would you prefer, ‘downright weird?’” She ignored her friends’ compliments because Lola didn’t know how to respond to them. She didn’t think herself ugly, but she knew she looked odd.

“Okay, eccentric it is,” Katy said. “Maybe someone created a fake social media account about you and claimed you’re an out-of-work porn star in need of new clients,” Katy said. “Then they wrote a sad story as you, claiming you’ve fallen so far that you have to wait tables to make ends meet.” She tapped her chin and seemed to seriously consider her own words.

Maddie shook her head. “And you don’t think you’re eccentric?”

“That’s the dumbest thing I’ve ever heard,” Lola said.

“For real.” Maddie rested a hand on her hip. “As long as men exist, porn stars will never be out of work.”

“Okay.” Lola huffed. “That’s not really why I thought it was dumb, but we can start there.”

“Oh.” Katy perked up. “Spiked, Blond Hair is raising his hand. You’re up Lola.” She pushed Lola away from the napkins, causing her to drop the dispenser in her hand. It hit

the counter with a loud clang. Several customers looked their way and sniggered.

Lola turned and shot Katy a glare. Her brunette, mouthy friend just shrugged and then made a shooing motion with her hand. “Dick,” Lola muttered as she headed toward the three guys. Taking deep breath, she told herself not to ask any absurd questions. *Just see what they want and keep your inquisitiveness to herself.* That was like asking the clouds not to rain when they got too full.

When she reached the table, she folded her hands in front of her and smiled. Lola felt like her lips were spread much too wide. She probably looked like a lunatic, but she worried if she stopped smiling, she’d let all the questions in her mind come spewing out. “How can I help you?”

“Hey, Love,” Spiky said. His British accent was stupid sexy. *Why are accents sexy, exactly? Don’t you dare ask him that!* “We’re ready for our check. But before we go, I was hoping I could get your number.”

Lola’s smile dropped, and her eyes widened. This was the first time any of the strangely-hot guys had asked for her number. Some had flirted. Some, like Roan from the first group, had gazed at her as if she was a mystery to be solved. Most had just been friendly. Spikey just removed any doubt about his intentions. Unless he wanted her number for a different reason?

“Why do you want my number?” Did she have self-confidence issues? Yes. But what woman didn’t? The fact Lola had a glaring skin difference from the rest of the world added

to her insecurities. Lola had never been hit on by someone as good looking as the guy in front of her. *Forgive me for being a tad skeptical.*

His two companions chuckled, but Spiky only held her gaze. “Why do you think? Haven’t you ever had a guy ask for your number?”

“Yes.” *But none of them looked as if they’d just been written into existence by a paranormal-romance author and then stepped out of the page.*

“Did you ask *them* why they wanted your number?” As he tilted his head to the side, Lola watched as the skin on his face rippled, briefly changing colors, shimmering in the late afternoon light. Lola could have sworn she saw scales appear, like the skin of a snake or lizard.

Lola blew out a breath in an attempt to keep herself together. She shoved her curiosity, confusion, and slight worry she was hallucinating, down into a box she could later ignore. Or perhaps examine under the guidance of a well-trained therapist. Breaking Spiky’s gaze, she looked at his companion. His eyes did the same weird swirling-thing Roan’s had done. She was starting to notice a pattern. There’d been one swirly-eyed guy in each group. Was there some correlation, or was her mind finally leaping from the edge of sanity?

Lola squeezed her eyes shut before turning back to Spiky. “No, but they weren’t with a group of stupidly, good-looking guys— the fourth that has shown up at my place of employment.” *I seriously did not just say that. Yes, yes I did.* When the man lifted his chin, Lola saw a tattoo of the head of

a snake peeking out from the neckline of his shirt. Lola gasped when the snake's tongue darted out and back again. "What the actual—" she whispered. Lola blinked, and just as before with the other groups of guys, the tattoo was gone.

"Stupidly good looking?" Spiky grinned. He ignored Lola's reaction, though when she looked at the other two guys at the table, their stares were as sharp as daggers.

"American saying." Lola looked away from their intense gazes.

"So only ugly blokes ask you out?"

"Yep." Lola nodded. "By any chance, did you get your tattoo at *Wild Ink*?"

It was Spiky's turn to be surprised. He turned to look at his other friends, and Lola followed his gaze. The one with the shaved head and swirling, silver eyes gave a subtle nod.

Spiky looked back at her. "Yes, actually. Why? Have you gotten ink done there?"

She shook her head. "Nope. But I've had quite a few customers come in with tattoos who have mentioned the place. I've been told they do the best tattoos in the city."

He nodded. "If you're looking to get inked, they're the place to go."

"You'd look good with a tattoo," the third guy said. His hair was dyed green, and seemed to suit his tan skin.

Of course, she had to tell him. "I wouldn't usually think of green hair as good-looking, but yours actually works well." *A*

muzzle. I need to ask my parents for a muzzle for my next birthday. Then maybe I'll keep my big trap shut.



Callon watched the newly discovered *animus*, Lola Katz, move gracefully about the dining area of the pizzeria. Tucked back in the furthest booth he could get from her section, he used the natural glamour of his kind to help eyes avoid him. The magic worked a bit like a bug-repellent. Humans naturally glanced away as soon as they caught sight of him. Though, if Lola stared for more than a minute, she'd pick up on his *otherness*, the same way she had with the previous beastwalkers who'd been there. Thanks to the pouring rain outside, keeping the hood of his jacket pulled over his head, didn't make his appearance suspicious or conspicuous.

Still, there was a part of him that wanted her to spot him, to see him for what he was. There would be shock when he told her about the beastwalkers that lived alongside humans, and he wanted to hurry and get that part over with. Callon hoped she wouldn't be one of those females that freaked out and screamed, or cried, or worse... ran. Running would make the predator in him want to chase her. *Okay, maybe that part would be fun.* If he was considering chasing a pretty female as fun, perhaps it was time for him to take a break from his duties at work and go on a hunt.

It was the eighth day in a row that he'd followed Lola. No, following wasn't what he was doing. Callon was stalking, which was different than hunting. Hunting was to take down prey you intended to keep. Stalking was merely for observation. Yet, Callon had thought of nothing else but Lola, as he tracked her from her job at the pizzeria to her apartment and back. From the minute he'd laid eyes on Lola, he'd been fascinated by her. *Instant attraction? Yes.* He wasn't blind. Despite being a human, the woman was striking.

Lola was petite, with wild, untamed, light-red hair, streaked through with blonde highlights. She had dimples when she smiled, something Callon liked seeing more and more. Though he wanted those smiles for himself. She gazed at the world through bright, sparkling, peridot eyes. When she ate or drank, it was with lush, pillowy lips set below an undeniably cute nose. Callon noticed her skin was different colors— variegated with her natural light skin to a very pale flesh— a bit like some of the beastwalkers of his kingdom when they were in their animal form. Earth had breeds of cat with similar markings. This intrigued him, as he'd rarely seen the trait in humans. After a bit of research, he'd learned the two-toned anomalies came from a condition humans called vitiligo, which caused their skin to lose its pigmentation. The condition was not desirable among the humans, but Callon thought it looked wonderful on Lola, giving her a fierce and exotic appearance. When he'd finally admitted his feelings about the human to Roan, the Shaman laughed for a full minute.

“I told you that one day you'd find the one for you,” Roan told him. *“But you were determined to believe there was no*

way Visata would give you an animus for a mate. Without the animi, our kind cannot survive. We need the females.”

“And I told you to mind your own damn business,” Callon snarled. He wasn’t mad at Roan, he just happened to be the person in front of him at the wrong minute. Callon felt the need to tell someone what was happening to him, and he knew if he went to his father, then his mother would find out. And she would have a nursery decorated by the end of the day for cubs that would likely never be born.

“It’s not a curse, Callon,” Roan said. “It’s a blessing. Deep down you know it. Your beast knows it. Without a mate, you will only be half of what you were destined to be.”

Callon sighed as he looked back at the female who’d turned his world upside down in eight days. It hadn’t taken all eight days to have him rethinking his whole outlook on humans— Well, one human. It had been a moment. A brief look into her mind he’d stolen without her knowledge and yet wouldn’t give it back.

Callon sat outside Lola’s window on the fire escape of her apartment building in what had become his nightly ritual. His inability to stop the practice annoyed him, but he couldn’t deny he looked forward to this time every evening. He particularly enjoyed listening to Lola talk to her cat. She spoke to it as if the animal could speak back and actually cared about what she had to say. The lucky little beast was privy to the inner-workings of her interesting, quizzical mind.

The first night he’d arrived, she’d been talking, and he’d thought there was a person in the room. Callon originally told

himself he wouldn't invade her privacy by watching her through her window like a complete creeper. But that quickly vanished when he'd heard her speaking. He had to know if there was someone in her room, and more importantly to his mind, he had to know if that someone was a male. He'd found Lola laying on her bed, legs swinging up and down behind her while she ran her fingers up and down her cat's stomach. Callon would come to realize this was a common position for the pair. Dog, the ridiculous name she'd given her cat, liked to have his belly rubbed. Who wouldn't? And Lola apparently derived some sort of enjoyment from the interaction. Was Callon jealous of a domestic feline? That was a question he refused to answer. He had to maintain some dignity.

"Tell me I'm not crazy." Lola's voice drifted from the window she often kept cracked enough that Dog could slip underneath and sit out on the sill.

"He can't tell you that," Callon muttered softly.

"The things I've seen, Dog..." She sighed. "They can't be real, and yet I want them to be. At least, I think I do. I'm scared and excited at the same time."

A deep purr filled the silence, as if the cat was responding.

"I know, I know. I should just be grateful for what I have, that I'm healthy. I have a job, two loving parents, yada, yada. You don't have to tell me." Lola sighed. "But just think, if there were such things as magical creatures—people who could shift into different forms—something as silly as two-toned skin would be nothing to stare at. I would be considered normal by comparison."

She was quiet long enough Callon thought maybe she'd fallen asleep. He slipped his head around the edge of the window, staying in the shadow, and saw she was writing in a journal. This was the first time he'd seen Lola do this. His own curiosity burned to know what she wrote about. If she was so open with her pet, how much more would she be in the pages of a book she considered a safe space? Callon watched the emotions filter through her mind to her pen and onto the page. He saw the stern brow of concentration, the pinched lips of annoyance, and then the glazed-over eyes of sadness. There was nothing hidden, and Callon would give just about anything to get his hands on that book.

"Lola." Her mother's voice came from the other side of the closed door. "I've fixed dinner. Come join us."

Lola snapped the book closed and gave Dog a final belly rub. "Coming," she called back and headed for the door.

If he didn't know better, Callon might've thought his Creator was providing him an opportunity to learn more about this female. Breaking into her room and reading something so private didn't exactly align with Visata's principles. Regardless, when Lola closed the door, Callon swiftly lifted the window and slipped inside without a sound. The scent of pizza, mixed with a feminine aroma, filled his nose. The beast inside of him approved of being in her space. It wanted to claim it as his own, to have the right to be there instead of being a trespasser. Callon mentally snarled at himself as he stalked to the bed and picked up the book. Dog leapt to his feet and hissed. Callon knelt down until he was eye-level with the small cat. He met his gaze and let out a low purr. A moment

later, the fierce little beast rubbed his head against Callon's shoulder. "Better," Callon murmured and then stood up.

He opened the book and found the page where she'd left off.

Dear God,

Today has been one of those days when self-pity takes hold of me. I know it's foolish. There are countless more significant issues in the world than how people perceive me. Yet, I can't deny that it stings when someone points out my differences, as if I'm oblivious to them. If You weren't already aware of everything, being God and all, You might assume it was some guy who made me feel terrible about myself. Perhaps even a typical 'mean' girl. Surprisingly, it was neither.

A grown woman who should have known better managed to reduce me to that timid child hiding during recess, trying to avoid prying questions and judgmental stares. She warned her daughter not to touch my skin, as if whatever I had was contagious. She didn't mean for me to overhear, and strangely, that made it worse. When I approached their table to take their order, the woman acted kind and friendly. Had I not heard the disgust in her voice when she spoke of my skin, I might have believed the facade she wore.

I have more respect for someone who can honestly look me in the eyes and admit my vitiligo unsettles them than for someone who secretly finds it repulsive

but treats me as if I'm special. The audacity of that woman! She even had the nerve to compliment my hair and claim it complimented my complexion. Was she trying to ease her own shallowness? Maybe. Or perhaps she's so accustomed to belittling others due to her own insecurities. Not that she had anything to feel insecure about. She was beautiful. Her daughter even more so. I even complimented her because it felt empowering to show kindness to someone who treated me so poorly, though she remained oblivious to my awareness of her true feelings.

As You know, again, being God and all, there was a time when I harbored anger toward You for creating me this way. I couldn't comprehend why I had to possess such an obvious flaw. Why couldn't it be something concealed, like the critical woman's judgment? But I think I've moved past that.

Now, I want to thank You because my condition prevents me from becoming a person who wears a mask, who pretends to lift others up, only to tear them down behind their backs. I don't want to be that kind of person. I recognize that I still have hang-ups about my appearance, but I'm slowly beginning to see the beauty that can come from being different. I can relate to those who struggle to love themselves, even the parts of themselves that they can't change. They aren't flawed, at least not those parts of them. I mean, we all have flaws and areas where we can better ourselves, but not every little imperfection needs

to be changed. It's those things that make us unique. With that addressed, can we now deal with the fact I am seeing things no one else seems to be able to see? And that means I am either losing my mind, or there are greater things in the world than just the animals and humans You created? If it's the latter, God, then I hope I can be a part of that world. Yes, there is the secret part of me that thinks, perhaps the people in that world would find my differences beautiful, instead of something to stare and point at.

Mom's calling. Those are my inner musings for today. Perhaps I've grown a little since yesterday. Hopefully, there's been a change in me from one day to the next. If so, I hope it is for the better of society and not the detriment.

~Lola

Callon scanned the words a second time and then a third. He set the book down on the bed, treating it as the precious object that it was. He felt a moment of guilt for reading it. That was quickly followed by the guilt of being the exact type of person Lola had described.

No, it wasn't her skin that had pushed him away. It was simply that she was human. His own prejudice found all humans to be inferior. At some point in his life, Callon decided his kind were superior, and instead of trying to prove himself wrong, he was constantly looking for ways to reinforce that view point. In a few pages of a journal, Lola had dismantled

his tower of judgment and hypocrisy. What was left? A male who had to look himself in the eyes and admit that he was no better than a judgmental woman who would tell a child to be wary of something simply because the woman didn't understand it. Not something, but someone. And that someone was beautiful inside and out.

And she was human.

“Damn.” He absently ran a hand down Dog’s back. The cat meowed at him and Callon heard the judgment in it. “Yes.” He looked at the little beast. “I get it. She’s special.” The cat walked over and laid down on top of the journal, his tail flicking as he looked up at Callon. It was a clear challenge. Brave little thing. “You will learn to share,” he told Dog, who simply looked away as if Callon was of no importance. “Typical cat,” he said softly. Callon wanted to look around her room, to stay in her space a little longer, but then he heard footsteps down the hall.

As soon as he was out of the room and out of sight, Callon heard Lola’s door open and close again.

“Are you guarding my deepest secrets, Dog? Other than Katy assaulting me in my sleep, I don’t think you have anything to worry about. I’m not that interesting.”

“Oh, how wrong you are,” Callon whispered, settling into the spot where he’d stay the rest of the night while she slept. As her light went out and the sounds of the city acted as her lullaby, Callon contemplated, for the first time, that perhaps he was the one unworthy of her. He felt inadequate in so many ways when compared to the heart of the woman who had

enchanted him. How could he reveal himself to her, knowing all the things about himself that he wouldn't want to expose? But he would be compelled to if they were to become bonded.

He'd gone from not wanting to make himself known to her because of his lack of desire for a human mate to not deserving her. "Make me worthy, my Visata," he prayed. "Make me a mate she can be proud to call hers."

The sound of her voice pulled him from the memory as he looked over at Lola. Her attention to new customers made him want to hiss at the fool who held his *animus's* attention. *My animus?* "Eight days, Callon," he muttered to himself. "She doesn't even know who you are and you're already making claims?" *Hell yes, he was.* He also reminded himself she might not want to claim him back. That thought ticked him off. Finally one he wanted, and she might not want him.

There were dozens of *animi* at the Kingdom of Claws compound. None of them had so much as caused him to look twice, but Lola Katz made him stop and stare like a fool. Never had he experienced the breath being knocked out of him, but the first time he'd seen her smile felt like a fist to his solar plexus. The first time he'd smelled her scent, the animal inside of him roared that she was theirs. Callon fought the animal for control. Being privy to her mind when he'd snooped, he became even more determined to have her. He wanted to protect her, provide for her, give her all the things she didn't have, but he knew he didn't deserve her. He found this both exhilarated and angered him. Callon had never needed anything more than the approval of his parents and

their Creator—Visata. Now, he wanted to see approval in the eyes of a human female.

Laughter from across the room drew Callon's eyes from Lola's form to three men seated together. One of them turned his head and the light caught his eyes just right. Callon noticed the almond with vertical pupils. He quickly scanned the others and saw the scaly-skin covering their bodies. As quickly as they appeared, the animalistic features were gone.

The Kingdom of Venom, he thought. The most disturbing part wasn't the beastwalkers. Beastwalkers passed through each other's kingdoms all the time. It was the Shaman with each group that made their presence concerning. Another of the males glanced his way and recognition filled his face, though he didn't do more than mutter something to his companions. Both gave him a quick glance and decide he wasn't a concern. *Fools*, the animal inside of him pointed out.

Callon took a bite of his pizza— No Name Meat Explosion— and tried to ignore them. His waitress appeared— fortunately not Lola, considering he wasn't ready to make himself known to her. He wasn't sure what he would do if she did give him her attention. At this point, he was liable to break the law and snatch her up just to get her away from all the Damarian attention she'd begun to gain.

“Can I get you anything else?” the waitress asked, pulling him from his thoughts.

“No, thank you,” he grunted, and waved her away, looking beyond her to the three men. He should be more polite, but being polite didn't always get results. He was the leader of his

father's warriors and commands were what he was used to issuing.

"Okayyyyy," she said and walked back to Lola and another girl, which Callon knew from his eavesdropping was called Maddie. He sat for a while, eating and watching the girls talking animatedly, and looking in the direction of the reptile beastwalkers. Then one of the reptiles, some clown with spiked-blond hair, raised his hand and waved at Lola. Next, Callon saw Katy shove Lola, causing her to drop the napkin dispenser she was holding. It struck the counter with a loud clang, causing many of the customers in the diner to snigger.

Callon watched Lola approach the table. Tilting his head, his superior feline hearing could just make out their conversation. "Hey, Love, we're ready for our check. But before we go, I was hoping I could get your number." Callon heard himself growling. Quickly stifling the sound, he looked around. No one seemed to have heard.

"Why do you want my number?" he heard Lola ask.

"Why do you think? Haven't you ever had a guy ask for your number?" Callon gripped the table tightly. He looked down and saw his thumbnails were digging into the wood. *He wants your number so he can convince you to join that third-rate swamp of a kingdom in New Orleans.* A thousand thoughts swirled in Callon's head. If the rumors about the missing girls in New Orleans were true, the snakes weren't above kidnapping *animi*. Now, three from KOV just happened to show up in his territory? Did they mean Lola harm? Callon wouldn't put anything past those belly-sliders.

Callon was ripped from his thoughts when he heard Lola say, “stupid-good looking.” *She thinks these low-lives are good looking.* Callon fought the urge to go over there and punch that spiky-haired, cold-blooded bastard in the face. How could she find them attractive? *She doesn't know who or what they are,* he reminded himself.

“I wouldn't usually think of green hair as good looking, but yours actually works well,” Lola was now addressing another one of the reptiles. He couldn't sit there any longer and listen to her complimenting these forked-tongued assholes. His temper was volatile, and Callon prided himself on his emotional control, yet, there he was acting like a juvenile who'd not managed to reign in the animal that was part of his soul. He couldn't risk attacking other kingdom shifters and provoking a war, at least not without good cause. Talking to an *animus* wasn't cause for a war. Not until she was his. Then things would be different. Callon wouldn't tolerate some other beastwalker flirting with his mate. With that thought filling his head, he growled and began to stand, but her next question had him lowering himself back to his seat.

“By any chance, did you get your tattoo at *Wild Ink*?”

Callon's eyes shifted to the group and he watched as the two Kingdom of Venom beastwalkers and the Shaman glance at each other before looking back at his *animus*.

Spiked Guy spoke again. “Yes, actually. Why? Have you gotten ink done there?”

Lola shook her head. “Nope. But I've had quite a few customers come in with tattoos who have mentioned the place.

I've been told they do the best tattoos in the city."

"If you're looking to get inked, they're the place to go."

Note to self, kill spiked guy first, he told the beast inside him. The longer they were around Lola, the more his beast awakened, as if it had been in a deep slumber.

"You'd look good with a tattoo," said the guy with hair dyed green.

Second note to self, kill them at the same time.

Lola blew their comment off as she complimented Green Hair Idiot Guy. And that was all he could handle. Lola triggered the beast and the man. He wanted her, and he hated the idea of her admiring another male, especially a belly-crawling snake. Callon stood, tossed a wad of cash on the table to cover his bill. Luckily, the scaly Damarians were seated in the corner table, and he didn't have to walk past them to reach the door. If so, he might not have made it out without taking a few scales with him. Lola never looked his way.

How much longer could he go without making contact with her? If he wanted to keep from killing some other beastwalker for giving her attention, it would need to be soon. If she went to *Wild Ink*, that place would be crawling with Kingdom Shifters and not just those of his kingdom. That thought simply pissed him off even more.

Callon ducked into the first alley he could find, tipped his head back, and roared as loud as he could. Any human passing by would have simply seen a lunatic yelling at the sky, commonplace in New York City. Callon wished he could fully

transform into his feline form. Such a hope was common among his kind. Every Damarian wanted his mate so their magical abilities would come to fruition, but this was the first time Callon could ever remember wanting a mate, not for the magic it would grant him, but for the actual woman herself.

Against his better judgment, he found a spot that would allow him to see inside of *NNP* so he could continue to keep an eye on Lola. *To keep her safe*, he told himself. He didn't add it was also because the idea of her being out of his sight for longer than a few minutes made his already agitated state even worse. Callon knew he was going to have to get a grip or he would scare the hell out of her and she'd go running for the hills. Then again, the curious nature he noted in her might override her fear. That nearly made him smile. His mate—he'd given up not mentally claiming her— was inquisitive. No. She wouldn't run. She'd face him head on and probably bombard him with a barrage of questions. It was a moment in time that he found himself desperate to reach. If this was what finding a mate was like, Callon couldn't decide if he liked it, or loathed it. He had a feeling that might not change for a while.

CHAPTER 4

We'd Make Beautiful Babies.

"There are moments in our life that, at the time, feel incredibly scary. But sometimes those moments turn into things that, years later, we will look back on and laugh. I don't think that this is one of those moments." ~Lola

"Oy," Spike said suddenly, "I told you to dye it blue, but I guess you were right. The ladies like the green." He looked back at Lola. "Does this mean you'd rather give *him* your number?"

I'd rather not meet customers with weird, disappearing tattoos, creepy, swirling eyes, forked tongues, nictitating eyes or skin that turns into scales. Not to mention the claws she saw on one of her customer's hands the other day. That guy had a wolf tattoo that sat up to howl at the moon. Nope, I'd rather not see any of those things. Forget giving out my number. I just want to serve pizzas and love werewolf books. A voice in the back of her mind whispered, 'Liar.' Fine. She didn't really want that. A part of her wanted all of these things to actually be happening— for there to be some secret cult of

people who had supernatural powers. But she would never say that out loud, not even to Katy and Maddie. Especially Katy. She'd never let Lola live it down.

"Is that it?" Green-Haired Guy asked. "You want my number?" His words pulled her from her thoughts.

"Nope," she blurted. "I don't have a phone."

"You mean that thing in your back pocket?" Spiky asked.

Of all the times a guy has to actually pay attention to me.
"You're only aware of it because it's attached to my ass."

"Probably," he said with an unrepentant grin. "Won't lie, it's a nice one."

"Not really. It's an older model with a cracked screen. I didn't realize you could see it through my jeans."

"Oh, she's got jokes," Green-Haired Guy said with a smile. Thankfully, his tongue stayed inside his mouth.

"So, no number then?" Spiky asked.

Lola couldn't help but be flattered, even if there was something off about these three. "Sorry." She shook her head. "I don't give my number out to people I don't know. Stranger danger and all that."

"Good policy," he said amiably. Spiky tossed several large bills on the table and stood. "Hopefully that will cover any trouble we caused by taking up so much of your time. Not to mention the glares your two friends keep giving us." He motioned behind her, and Lola turned to see Katy and Maddie staring at them, their eyes narrowed like twin hawks.

“Yeah, sorry,” she said. “We’ve had some interesting customers as of late. They’re just watching my back.”

The other two guys slid from their side of the booth, and Lola took a step back, feeling crowded by their large forms. “Males been giving you trouble?”

“Nothing I can’t handle.”

“Okay then. If you decide you can’t handle them, we’ll be around,” Green-Haired Guy said. “Even if you don’t want our numbers, we’re happy to keep away anyone who’s messing with you.”

Lola tried not to seem suspicious. It was a peculiar offer coming from total strangers. “Uh, thanks?” She wasn’t entirely sure if she should be thankful or not.

“Oh.” Shaved-Head Guy paused and turned back to her. “If you do decide to get a tattoo, really, go to Wild Ink.” His eyes did the swirling-thing, looking like liquid silver.

“Yeah,” Spiky added. “That stuff is on you for life. You don’t want some wanker doing a shite job of it.” He winked at her, reminding her of Wyatt from the first group of too-handsome guys that had shown up, and then strolled off. Green-Haired Guy and Shaved-Head Guy both lifted their chins at her as they followed their friend out the door.

“Sure,” she said, then turned to retrieve the money they’d left on the table. She froze, staring at it.

“Did they seriously just give a three-hundred-dollar tip?” Katy stepped up beside Lola and scooped up the money. “Are you *sure* these guys don’t think you’re a porn star?”

“Ha. Ha.” Lola deadpanned. A shiver ran down her spine and she looked around the room. This had been going on since the day after the first group of guys had come into NNP. The hair on the back of her neck rose, and she could feel someone watching her. This was another thing she hadn’t shared with Katy and Maddie.

“What’s wrong?” Maddie asked when Lola reached the counter. Katy held out a hundred-dollar bill to each of them and pocketed her own.

“Nothing,” Lola muttered, taking the money.

“Really? Because you’ve got that spooked look again,” Maddie said. “Did they say something to you?”

“Did they have tattoos?” Katy asked before Lola could answer Maddie.

“No and yes,” Lola replied, her gaze drifting towards the pizzeria windows. The sun was descending over the New York skyline, signaling the end of her shift. Lola had started an hour earlier than Maddie and Katy, meaning she would leave the restaurant ahead of them. Part of her contemplated staying, aware that those familiar, unseen eyes would likely follow her as she walked. Being alone heightened her sense of vulnerability. However, exhaustion prevailed, and she yearned to return to her apartment.

Do you want to make it there alive, or be the subject of an unsolved mystery documentary on television a year from now? Then again, if the person who’d been following her had not done anything yet, perhaps they had no intention of hurting her. Maybe, like Spiky, they were just interested in her.

Normal people, who are simply interested, don't have unhealthy stalking tendencies, she reminded herself. Dammit, why can't a normal guy be interested in me? She internally sighed and then answered herself, because *she* wasn't normal. Why would she ever expect anything normal to happen to her? *You don't want normal*, said a small voice in her head. *You want adventure and excitement. And apparently, I'm not too worried about becoming some strange person's obsession. My feet hurt, I miss my mom, and I need to spend some quality time with my cat. Priorities, Lola.*

“What’s with the huge tip?” Maddie asked, interrupting Lola’s inner dialogue.

“Lola’s totally a closet porn star,” Katy snickered.

“Laugh it up now,” Lola sang as she headed to clean her emptied tables. “When Kitty Katz is rolling in dough, you two will still be here taking orders.”

“Oh, you’ll be taking orders too,” Maddie said with a wink. “They’ll just be a little kinkier.”

Katy sighed. “I don’t know about that. The trucker I served a mushroom pizza to yesterday had some pretty interesting special orders he wanted me to accommodate.” She frowned as she looked at Lola. “How come you get crazy-hot dudes, but I get crazy-old, trucker dudes?”

Lola shrugged as she wiped down the table. “Crazy is crazy.”

Maddie helped clear another table. “Nope.” She shook her head. “Not true. Crazy and hot is acceptable. Crazy and

passable, but with a good personality is also acceptable. But crazy and not in any way lick-able due to lack of looks and personality is unacceptable.”

“Totally,” Katy agreed.

Lola laughed. “You two need help.” The irony of the comment was not lost on her, considering she was the one seeing things that weren’t there.

“You going to wait on us when you get off work?” Maddie tossed the dirty silverware into a gray bin.

“I think I’m going to head home,” she said, having decided. Lola would make sure she kept her taser, aka Taz, out and stayed alert. Besides, there were still many people out on the streets. “I’m exhausted, and my mom is home by herself. Dad has to work late tonight.”

“Give your mom a hug for me,” Maddie told her.

“Me too,” Katy said. “And tell her you guys are almost out of cereal.”

Lola sighed. “You realize she just bought that box a couple of days ago, right?”

“What?” Katy asked innocently. “All I had was one bowl.”

“The popcorn bowl doesn’t count as *one* bowl, Kat.”

Katy was still attempting to look like she wasn’t guilty of eating half the box in one sitting. “It was the only bowl I could find.”

As she clocked out and hung her apron back in her locker, she called out to Sal, “I’m off, boss.”

“You sure you don’t want to wait on the girls before you head home?” Sal asked.

“No need.” A voice came from beyond the employee door a second before it opened and Antonio stepped through. “I’ll walk her home, Pops.”

Lola’s stomach churned with unease. It had been more than a week since she last laid eyes on Sal’s son, and a small part of her had held onto the hope that he might have forgotten about her. Yet, in light of the peculiar occurrences she had been experiencing, avoiding Antonio would be too good to be true.

“You look great, Kitten.” He grabbed her backpack and swung it over his shoulder.

Antonio had given her the nickname as soon as he’d discovered her last name. Lola despised it. Katy called her the same thing, and it served as a constant reminder of Antonio. The last thing Lola desired was to be associated with the Italian Charmer who had set his sights on marrying her. “Thanks,” she replied, maintaining a neutral tone. She strived to appear disinterested without coming across as unkind. After all, he was her boss’s son, and the last thing she needed was to anger Sal and jeopardize her job.

As she headed out into the main floor, Lola glanced at the counter where Maddie was lining up silverware and wrapping them in napkins. Katy stood directing her as if rolling up silverware was a difficult task and needed to be micromanaged. Both girls looked up at the same time. Katy opened her mouth, but Lola shook her head. Katy’s lips

snapped closed, and she glared at the man walking beside Lola. Maddie pursed her lips and narrowed her eyes. No doubt the Psycho Duo would later be talking of all the ways they'd like to take Antonio out. Hopefully, that conversation would happen out of Sal's earshot.

On the street, the summer air hit Lola in the face and the stink of garbage followed. New York in the winter could be stunning, but in the summer, especially where she lived, was just straight-up gross. Dumpsters filled with trash that sat between buildings sent their powerful stench wafting in all directions after baking in the concrete oven. Even though she got tired of the daily smell of pizza constantly saturating her clothes and hair, it was far better than this.

"You're quiet this evening," Antonio said as they walked down the busy street. People hustled quickly past them, always in a hurry, always somewhere else they'd rather be than where they were. "Just tired. I've worked ten days straight." Lola helped her parents out with money, even though they never asked and often told her not to. They both had jobs, but neither had any more education than high school, and they had gotten married young. They'd constantly been trying to recover from the debt they'd incurred when they'd first married. Foolishly accepted the credit card offers in the mail, as if they'd been Christmas gifts instead of nooses designed to squeeze them out of their hard-earned money. The sad thing was, they'd never used the cards to buy extravagant things. They'd used them for groceries during months when the money they made wouldn't stretch, or for emergencies because there was no health insurance. Her parents hadn't considered using those cards

would just mean another bill added to the ones they already had.

“You shouldn’t work so hard.” Antonio bumped her shoulder in a much too familiar way. “You’re too young to work so much. You should be having fun. Going out to clubs and shopping.”

Lola snorted. “You gotta have money to do those things.” She wasn’t sure where Antonio got his money, granted Sal’s business did very well. Antonio had his own life, and she never asked what he did. He was always dressed in expensive clothes. He actually owned a car, which was only something wealthy people could afford in NYC.

They reached a stoplight and the red hand glared at her, daring Lola to keep going even though it was obviously safer to wait for the walk symbol. She was tempted. If it meant spending less time with Antonio, then it was almost worth running into traffic. It wasn’t that he was unpleasant to be around; it was his audacious presumption that she already belonged to him when she had never consented to such a claim.

“If you’d let me, I could take care of you.” He took a step closer to her.

Lola’s head snapped around, nearly hitting Antonio in the face, when she heard a low snarl. It sounded exactly like the one Rafe, had done in the diner. Her eyes roved over the surrounding area, sifting through people and down alleys she could see. Lola even looked at the slow moving cars, especially those with open windows. What was she expecting

to find? Rafe, or one of the other guys, standing there watching her and Antonio?

“Why do you play hard to get, Kitten?” Antonio’s voice lowered to a seductive purr. “You know how I feel about you.”

The snarl grew into a louder growl. She looked at Antonio to see if he heard the sound, but he seemed oblivious.

“Are you listening to me?”

Lola tuned out his words, her focus consumed by the quest to pinpoint the source of that mysterious sound and the unseen gazes fixated upon her. Her heart sped up as she waited for anything that might give their pursuer away. Of all the times she’d felt the eyes on her, this was the first time she’d actually felt afraid. Other times, she’d merely been nervous. She’d managed to convince herself that, like the weird things she’d seen in the diner, with the strange groups of guys, she must have been imagining her stalker.

She turned to look at Antonio she stepped closer to him. He was in shape and gave off the tough-guy vibe, and she hoped he’d protect her if needed. The growling escalated, sending a shiver cascading down her spine. She took a step back, and the growling subsided somewhat. She stepped closer to Antonio again, and the growl once again increased in volume. As soon as she moved away from him, it once again died down. *Interesting, whoever they are, they don’t like me being close to Antonio.* That wasn’t a bad thing. She didn’t *want* to be close to Antonio.

As she glanced back around, Lola saw the walk sign had appeared and people were moving across the street. She began

walking, and as she put a little more distance between her and her companion, the growling disappeared.

“You didn’t answer my question.” Antonio easily caught up to her with a few long strides. Her short legs took three steps for every one of his. *Stupid, tall people*, Lola mentally grumbled.

“I’m not playing hard to get,” she told him, trying to keep the annoyance out of her voice. “I’ve never said that I wanted anything more than friendship with you.”

Antonio laughed as if she’d just said something funny, *and* a bit ridiculous. “Lola, we’d be perfect together.”

She rolled her eyes, turning her head so that he wouldn’t see it.

“You’re beautiful, smart, and sweet,” he said. “And I’ve got the means to take care of you and your parents as well. Not to mention, we’d make beautiful babies.”

Lola could almost sense the scorching intensity emanating from her relentless pursuer. In all honesty, there was no denying the truth— this person was undeniably a stalker, ceaselessly observing her every move. A chill coursed through her veins, causing goosebumps to prickle upon her arms. Though she couldn’t fathom how she possessed this knowledge, her instincts roared, affirming that this enigmatic figure, undoubtedly male, had his eyes locked upon her. *Why would a woman have any interest in pursuing her, anyway? And did women even emit such guttural growls? Did humans, for that matter?* There was no denying the visceral reaction her stalker had to Antonio’s words.

“I don’t even know what to say to that.” Lola picked up her pace. “I’m nineteen, Antonio. I’m not ready for marriage and definitely not ready for kids. And you and I barely know each other.”

“We’ve known each other for three years,” he argued.

“What’s my favorite food?” she asked. “Or my favorite color? What do I like to do when I’m not working? Do I have any siblings? What’s my cat’s name? What are my parents’ names? Where do they work? What do they do?”

Antonio chuckled. Lola looked and saw he wasn’t the least bit put off. “Your favorite food is ice cream, which I’d argue isn’t a food, but a dessert. Your favorite color is black. You read pretty much anytime you can. And yes,” –he held up his hand when she’d started to speak– “I know the books you like. Supernatural romances with werewolves and stuff. You don’t have any brothers or sisters. Your parents’ names are Rick and Andi. Rick works at a law firm as a courier, and Andi works as a receptionist at a dentist’s office.” He glanced at her as they stopped at another light. *Why are there so many dang lights in this blasted city?* “Any more questions?”

“Yeah,” she snapped. “How the hell do you know all that?” After the words were out of her mouth, Lola wondered if she really wanted to know the answer. What if he was a part of the mafia and had the means to get all sorts of information about her and her family? Was the mafia still a thing? Why wouldn’t it be? Lola made a mental note to research that later.

“I have my ways,” he answered cryptically.

That’s what I’m afraid of. What are your ways?

“The point is, I know you, Lola Katz.” He reached for her hand and slipped it into his. “And I want to get to know you better.”

As the signal shifted to the walk symbol, Lola propelled herself forward once more, exerting every ounce of self-control to avoid breaking into a full sprint. The mere act of running ignited an innate sense of vulnerability within her, and she adamantly refused to be anyone’s prey. She wasn’t physically gripping Antonio’s hand, but he clung to hers as if his very existence hinged upon it. With resolute determination, Lola practically dragged him along, propelled by an unyielding force. If the threat emanating from her relentless stalker, wherever he may be lurking, held any validity, then Antonio’s survival might indeed hinge on staying by her side. However, Lola couldn’t shake the nagging suspicion that the danger lay in his tightly clutching *her* hand, rather than letting it go.

“Why are you in such a hurry?”

“My mom is home by herself and I haven’t seen her much over the past week. I’d like to spend some time with her,” she said. Which wasn’t a lie, though she would happily tell him one to get him to leave. “Not to mention, I’m tired. I have tomorrow off.” *Dammit, why did I tell him that?*

“Well, that’s fortunate, because I’ll be in town for the next few days.” Mercifully, they’d finally reached the door to her apartment building. “I’d like to take you out tomorrow. On a proper date.”

A *proper* date? They hadn't been on any improper dates. Why did he make it sound like they'd been out together in some sort of romantic capacity? They reached the door to her building and Lola held out her hand for her bag. "I don't think that's a good idea," she said. "I work for your dad. That's like a conflict of interest or something."

He smiled at her. She couldn't deny he was handsome, but that didn't matter. Antonio did absolutely nothing for her. There were no butterflies or excited jitters that she'd read about in her books. Zero chemistry. "I assure you it's not. Considering my father has already picked out the wedding venue, and my mother is naming our children."

Lola swallowed awkwardly, a cough escaping her lips as his words landed like a punch to her throat. *What on earth was wrong with these people?* Mapping out her entire existence as if she had no say in the matter. "You must be joking," she blurted.

"You obviously haven't been around many Italian families." Antonio released her hand and held out her backpack. Then he reached up and tucked some stray hair behind her ear. The growling was back, and it was louder.

"Okay, well." She fumbled with her backpack and reached behind her to push on the silver bar of the door to enter her building. "Thanks for walking me home. And thanks for the offer of the date, and marriage and um, kids, I guess." Lola cleared her throat. "But it's going to have to be a firm no."

Antonio ran a finger down her jaw. Her first instinct was to shudder, but a second urge to chomp down on it almost

overwhelmed her. Somehow, she managed to tame her feral instincts and not maim her boss's son.

“I won't give up, Kitten. You were made for me.”

Lola's last thread of dwindling patience snapped. Without uttering another word, she pivoted on her heels and practically leapt through the door into her building. Grateful she lived on the second floor, and not the seventh, she rushed to the door to the stairs and flung it open. Taking two stairs at a time, her senses acutely aware of a lingering gaze haunting her— from eyes that did not belong to Antonio.

Retrieving her key, Lola swiftly unlocked the door, a sense of urgency propelling her movements. With a forceful push, she swung the door open, threw herself into her living room, and slammed the door behind her. She leaned her back against the door, grateful for the solid wood separating her from Antonio, and whoever, or whatever, else was out there. Lola panted, her breaths escaping in rapid succession

“Rough day?” Lola's mother, Andi, came around the corner of the small kitchen.

“Antonio.”

Andi laughed. Lola loved it when her mother laughed. It was the kind of sound that made others want to join in, even if they had no idea what she was laughing about. “He's still at it?”

Lola tossed her pack to the side and dropped her keys on the counter as she walked past her mother. “His mom is

naming our kids, and his father has picked out the wedding venue.”

Andi gasped. “Without consulting us? That’s very inconsiderate. It isn’t just *their* son that is getting married after all.”

“You’re a riot, Mom,” she deadpanned. “You should take your show on the road and do some standup.”

“It’d probably make more money than I do now.” Her mother sighed as her smile softened. “But I’d miss you and your father, so I think I’ll keep my comedy routine local for now.”

“Shame.” Lola shrugged.

A couple of hours later, Lola heard the door to their apartment open. “You two still up?” Lola’s father, Rick Katz, stuck his head around the corner.

Lola glanced at her mom and saw that she’d fallen asleep. “Just me, apparently. Mom must’ve called it a night without letting me know.”

“I’ll get her to bed.” He leaned down and pressed a kiss to Lola’s forehead. “Looks like you two had some mother-daughter time.”

Lola grinned. “We bonded over shifters.”

He rolled his eyes. “Of course you did.” Her dad liked to tease her about her fascination almost as much as Katy did.

He nudged her mom and whispered, “Come on, Love, off to bed with you.”

“Did the bear get the girl?” her mom mumbled.

Rick looked at her with his brow raised and mouthed, “Bear?”

“Yeah, Mom,” she said softly. “She accepted him as her mate.”

“A bear and a woman?” Rick shook his head. “You two need your heads examined. Sleep good, Lo.” He helped her mom to her feet and led her to their bedroom. “Love you.”

“Love you, too, Dad.” Lola released a large yawn. As she headed to her room, Lola thought about the guys she’d met and the tattoos she’d seen on them. In the show she’d just watched with her mom, the shifters had tattoos that represented their race. Bears, lions, wolves, etc. It was ludicrous, but now she couldn’t get the idea of visiting this *Wild Ink* place out of her head. No doubt, there was a logical explanation for why the tattoos she’d seen on the guys had somehow disappeared. Maybe it was a new kind of ink that disappeared under the right kind of light? But wouldn’t something like that have been talked about, especially amongst the people who came into NNP?

Nevertheless, Lola’s insatiable curiosity had already planted a seed in her mind. She was off tomorrow. She definitely didn’t want to hang out with Antonio, who would undoubtedly make an appearance at some point, so she’d just go on a mini-adventure and look into the whole tattoo thing. Who knew? Maybe she’d finally act on the itch she’d been having to get a tattoo. *Although my fear of sharp, pointy objects could be a problem. Am I really going to let the fear of*

a tiny needle get in the way of something I've thought about doing for such a long time? Mind made up, she shot off a text to Maddie and Katy to meet her at their favorite coffee shop at nine the next morning. Regardless of her adventurous spirit, no heroine goes it alone. She'd need to have her trusty sidekicks with her. If nothing else, those two could help her watch for disappearing tattoos while they were in *Wild Ink*. If her friends saw them, too, then maybe Lola wasn't going crazy after all.

Just before she fell asleep, Lola felt again the eyes of her stalker watching her. She fought the urge to duck under her blanket. Taking a deep breath, Lola mustered her courage and crept to her bedroom window and peered out. New York was the city that never slept. Sure enough, there were people still milling about on the streets, a few homeless people and some rowdy frat boys stumbling home from a bar, but none of them seemed to be looking at her bedroom window. Lola was relieved, but she couldn't deny feeling a hint of disappointment.

As Lola dreamed, images of the strange guys from the pizzeria, along with scenes from the show she'd watched with her mom, filled her dreams. She saw intriguing and mysterious fantastical beings. One after the other, men changed into various animals. Then Lola saw golden eyes watching her from the shadows. The creature peering at her through those eyes was unmistakable—a lion.

CHAPTER 5

A Weird Spa Where They Massage You With Needles.

“When you have one of those best friends who takes an idea and runs with it, you might want to be absolutely sure that you want to participate in said idea. Or, be ready to stab a bitch when she won’t let you back out.” ~Lola

“Just think,” Lola said. “This will be an adventure.”

“Adventure is good,” Katy offered. “Until you’re left lying in an alley without your kidneys.”

“Thank you for that, Katy.” Lola rolled her eyes. “You’re always a breath of fresh air.”

“And the voice of reason,” Katy added.

Maddie shook her head. “Nope. Sorry, Kat, but you’re as far from the voice of reason as I am from Whitney Houston.”

“Wait.” Lola paused, her feet stopping on the sidewalk. “You *know* you can’t sing?”

Maddie made a dismissive wave with her hand. “I’m not deaf. Of course, I know I can’t sing.”

“So, why do you do it all the time?” Katy asked.

Maddie smirked. “Does it drive you crazy?”

Lola snorted. “Why is she the way she is?” Lola followed Katy into *Wild Ink*.

“Because she wasn’t spanked enough as a child,” Katy offered.

Lola sighed. “Hopefully her husband will be more diligent in that matter.”

The door closed behind them, shutting out the sounds of the city. Lola hadn’t been completely sure of what to expect. Perhaps loud rock music and a haze of cigarette smoke? But not *this*.

“It looks like we’ve walked into a weird spa,” Maddie said, voicing what Lola was thinking.

They were met with the sounds of nature emanating from hidden speakers in the ceiling and a plethora of wood paneling. “A weird spa where they massage you with needles,” Lola pointed out.

“Okay, Lo, let go of the needle obsession.” Katy stood nearly in the center of the room.

Lola had been expecting the chairs where the tattoo artists worked to resemble barber chairs, but they looked more like overstuffed recliners. Lola’s brow rose. “This is the most bizarre tattoo parlor I have ever been in.”

“Also, the *only* tattoo parlor you’ve ever been in,” Maddie pointed out.

Lola nodded. “True. I shouldn’t be so judgy.”

“Why are there no people?” Katy asked. “This place is supposed to be *the* place to get inked.” The shop wasn’t just devoid of patrons. There were no tattoo artists to be seen, either.

Lola looked at her phone. It was only 9:55 in the morning. “It’s a little early.”

“Tattoos do seem more like an after-dark activity, or something done after having a few too many drinks.” Maddie turned in a circle, seeming to take in their surroundings.

Lola shrugged. “Can’t disagree.” She walked forward, her head turning this way and that, taking in the kaleidoscope of magnificent illustrations adorning the walls. A frown creased her forehead as she observed the stark contrast between the displayed artwork and the images that enticed passersby from outside. “We’re definitely not in Kansas anymore, Toto,” she muttered under her breath, her eyes tracing the intricate details of the captivating artwork. “Did you two happen to notice the storefront window? It showed a bunch of burning skulls, hearts pierced by arrows, and the always-cliché barbed-wire bicep bands?”

“Yeah...” Katy looked around. “These are... *something else.*”

“My thoughts exactly.”

One particular illustration captivated Lola’s gaze, its allure undeniable. Intrigued, she approached, yearning for a closer look. “Now, that’s what I call imagination,” Lola whispered in

awe, her eyes fixated on an image depicting a male figure—not merely human. His entire body was enveloped in rich brown hair, his eyes an abyss of jet-black intensity, while jagged fangs dripped with saliva from his menacing mouth. His hands were massive, boasting unnaturally elongated, razor-sharp nails. Broad and muscular, his chest emanated power, and his thighs were sculpted and sinewy beneath a thick layer of fur. “What in the world?” she questioned aloud, momentarily losing herself in the enthralling artwork. Before she even realized it, her hand hovered mere centimeters away, almost instinctively drawn to touch the mesmerizing image.

“Whoa,” Maddie said, making Lola jump and pull her hand back. “I’ve never seen ink like this on anyone.”

“Me either.” Lola breathed out as she continued to stare at the lion man. The tattoos on the guys she’s seen were intricate and incredibly lifelike. But they looked like actual animals. Not this... *in between* thing.

Katy stepped up beside them. “Is this how the guys in your novels are described? Because I won’t lie. That’s hot... in a barbaric, alpha kind of way.”

“Mmm-hmm,” Maddie agreed. “Dude looks like he’d wield a wicked paddle.”

Lola rolled her eyes. “I swear I can’t take you two anywhere.”

“Can I help you?”

The three of them whipped around, and Maddie’s hair slapped Lola in the face. Lola’s heart pounded painfully in her

chest.

“Mother of peacocks, you scared me.” Katy leaned forward, resting her hands on her knees and taking deep breaths.

Lola rubbed her chest, trying to calm her beating heart.

Perched upon a lofty stool behind the counter, an elderly woman greeted them, her eyes curious.

“Maybe make some noise next time before speaking and scaring the bejesus out of us. Like, I don’t know, ring a gong or something,” Katy said. “It would fit with your whole relaxation theme.”

“She doesn’t mean an actual gong,” Lola jumped in.

“What?” Katy snapped her head around to Lola. “What other kind of gong is there? A metaphorical one? No, I absolutely meant a gong.”

“It’s just a suggestion,” Maddie said, her voice much less accusatory than their brunette friend’s. “Businesses like customer suggestions, don’t they?”

Lola quickly agreed. “Yes, that.” She pointed at Maddie. “She’s just offering a suggestion, but it’s obviously not something that we’re going to give you a bad review over. I mean, it was just a little startling, and that was just because we were so engrossed in the amazing artwork on the wall. You can get a gong if you want one, or you could just toss that suggestion out the door with yesterday’s bathwater. But it could add to the ambiance of the place. Not that it’s not

already great. A little different. Definitely not what we were expecting. I mean there's—"

"Lola," Maddie bit out.

"Yeah?"

"Shut. Up."

Lola nodded. "Thank you. Shutting up now." *What is wrong with me?* She scolded herself. *I just went off on a tangent about gongs. Gongs!* Okay, it was official. She needed therapy. Lots of therapy.

"She does have a point," Katy said. "A gong could totally liven up the place a bit. Make it feel a little less sleepy."

"You could make gongs cool again," Lola offered.

"Yes." Katy nodded emphatically. "You could bring them back to the forefront of the tattoo industry."

"Because I'm sure they could have been involved in the tattoo process in some ancient culture," Lola continued where Katy left off. "Like every time a gong rang, a new warrior received his victorious battle tattoo. Or maybe the gong was rang when it was time to bring the next generation of warriors into the clan and that was the call to get their warrior ink." *What happened to shutting up?* "Or maybe a woman received a tattoo once she reached puberty, and the gong was rang as a way to signify the moment."

Katy's eyes lit up as she looked at Lola. "Nice. I like it. What else do you got?"

“Somebody kill me now,” Maddie muttered and ran a hand down her face. She held up both hands. One in front of Katy and one in front of Lola. “What my two idiot friends are trying to say in their weird, never been discovered, and never should ever be used again, language, is hello, it’s nice to meet you.”

Lola snapped her lips shut. Her arms tucked behind her, fingers fidgeting with one another as she begged for a hole to appear and swallow her up. She blinked, and was sure she looked comical as she stared at the woman, who stared silently back at them. Lola took a small amount of comfort in the fact that the elderly woman’s lips were turned up in a small smile.

Ancient was actually a better word than elderly. The woman had wrinkles on top of wrinkles. *Just imagine all the things she’s probably experienced in life. She was probably around long before televisions. She might not even have had a phone line in her home.* This woman probably had a wealth of knowledge.

Katy pushed Maddie’s hand out of the way. “*Maybe,*” she began, and Maddie cursed under her breath. “No offense, but you’ve got to be rocking some serious digits, and you know more about the gong than even our diligent reader here.” She motioned to Lola who really, really wanted to disappear. “I mean, I’ve not seen anyone with hair as white as yours since that crazy dude with the messed up hair in Bram Stoker’s Dracula.”

“You mean Dracula?” Lola deadpanned.

“Yeah him, and I definitely haven’t seen anyone with so many wr—”

“Laugh lines,” Maddie blurted. “So many beautiful laugh lines.”

The woman actually did laugh at this. She raised an arm that was covered in spider tattoos and gently patted her white hair. *That’s odd. I’ve never seen a grandmother with so much ink. And why so many spiders?*

“I have been around for a decade or two,” she said. The woman’s voice did *not* match her appearance. Lola had expected to hear the creaky sounds of a throat stretched long past the manufacturer’s warranty date. But the lady’s voice was smooth and velvet, almost seductive. It was hard to reconcile the buttery sounds with the wrinkled face from which they were issuing.

She wore a short sleeve, button-up shirt, but Lola could still see more tattoos covering her neck, collarbone, and hands. The woman’s face, though, was unmarked. The tattoos on her neck were bright and encompassed every color of the rainbow, instead of the faded blues and greens Lola would have expected. Despite her age, the old woman’s eyes were still a bright blue, and they stood out against the white background of her skin.

“Your tattoos are lovely,” Lola said and then looked at her two best friends to see their reaction. They both frowned but were slowly nodding their heads.

“Uhh-huh.” Katy rocked back on her heels. “You look great for your age. And the, uh, tattoos, totally work, even though you’re, ya know, old.”

“Let it go, Katy,” Maddie, the only one of them at the moment with an ounce of decorum in their group, gritted out. “She’s a senior citizen. We’ve established that fact. Move on.”

The woman still didn’t seem annoyed or offended. She looked at Lola and then at the picture on the wall that Lola had been staring at.

Remembering that her hand had been mere centimeters away from the artwork, Lola felt the need to explain. “I wasn’t going to touch it.” Lola pointed to the lion man. “It’s just so different. That’s not what I was expecting to see in here. I’ve always wanted a tattoo.”

“Liar,” Katy and Maddie said at the same time.

Lola rolled her eyes and blew out a breath as she shook her head. “Okay, they’re right. That’s not entirely true. I mean, I’ve more recently been considering it because of...” She looked down at the pure white marks that mingled with the pinker pigment on her hands and arms. “Well, I’m trying to embrace this. I always worried a tattoo would just draw more attention to my condition.” Lola noticed the woman’s gaze move over her skin. The vitiligo had turned her skin into what resembled a map, but instead of green and blue, it was pale skin with even paler patches mottling her flesh. Lola gave a wave of her hand over herself. “I don’t want to let it continue to control my life. I want to own it. I know a tattoo would draw even more eyes to me, but I don’t want that to be a reason to prevent me from doing something that I have secretly wanted to do.” “Why haven’t you shared all of this

with us?” Katy’s eyes were tinged with a hint of hurt. “You know we have your back.”

“Because you would have tied me up and forced a tattoo on me,” Lola answered.

Maddie nodded. “Yes. She would have. Good call on keeping that crap to yourself, Lo.”

Katy sighed. “Do you mind if I sit down? I’m sort of having an emotional trauma moment over my BFF keeping secrets.”

“By all means.” The woman motioned to some chairs that lined the wall. Katy walked over and plopped down on one, throwing her legs over the side. She was super lady-like.

“It wasn’t a secret, per se.” Lola took a step toward Katy. “It’s just my stuff, Katy. It’s something I have to accept on my own. No one can do it for me.”

Katy waved her off. “I know that, Lo, but that doesn’t mean you can’t talk to us.”

Lola chastised herself for keeping those crucial matters hidden from her friends, feeling a surge of guilt within. She berated herself further for neglecting to mention the looming presence of her stalker. Secrets were not part of the BFF Code, and she had knowingly betrayed it.

As Lola shifted her gaze back to the woman, her breath hitched in her throat. The woman’s eyes completely transformed into a deep shade of red—like legit, full-on, no-more-pupils-in-sight red. Then, *something* unfolded from the women’s sides. At first, Lola thought they were wings, but

then she realized they were even more disconcerting—legs. She fought to contain the gasp that threatened to escape, clamping her lips tightly sealed as her eyes widened in astonishment.

Lola quickly made a count of the legs. There were eight of the hairy appendages, stretching, curling around the old woman's shoulders, encircling her arms, and disappearing beneath the counter.

A rational part of Lola's mind urged her to flee, to head for the safety of the door, to leave this place and never look back. But two things kept her standing in the middle of *Wild Ink* tattoo parlor. The first was that she wouldn't leave her friends behind. She was quite certain neither Katy nor Maddie had seen the strange, spider-like legs extend from the old woman's body, mostly because neither of them were screaming in terror. And Lola didn't know how to explain it to them without seeming like a lunatic.

Second, if Lola wasn't crazy—and that was a big if—that meant this woman was some kind of... what? Magical creature? Lola had no idea. Questions swirled within her, demanding answers. And she wouldn't find those answers by running out the door, fleeing in terror. Lola had to know what was going on. This place, *Wild Ink*, had been recommended to her by the guys whose features shifted before her very eyes. And now, the first person they encountered here showed a similar phenomenon, though the legs appearing were far more dramatic than any of the changes she had seen in the guys. *Were these people somehow connected? Was it some sort of*

club for weirdos? Or a gang? A gang of what? she wondered as her eyes narrowed.

She tilted her head to the side as if that would somehow change her perspective and maybe understand what the hell was happening. *Nope. Nothing.* She was just as confused as when her head was straight. *Sometimes you're a dumbass,* Lola told herself.

“Lo.” Maddie’s voice penetrated her racing thoughts. “You good?”

“Yep,” Lola said, popping the ‘p’ on the end of the word. She quickly glanced at her friend and gave her a smile. She was pretty sure it looked like the one that Jack Nicholson gave when he busted through the door in *The Shining*. When she looked back at the woman, the legs were gone. *Of course they are.* “Can I be completely honest?” Lola blurted.

“You haven’t been in the past. Why start now?” Maddie asked dryly. Apparently, she too wasn’t happy about Lola’s sort-of-secret concerning the tattoo and vitiligo stuff.

“I didn’t come here just because I want a tattoo.” Lola ignored Maddie’s snarky remark. She’d have to deal with the wrath of both of her friends later. “I came here because I was told this was the best place to get a tattoo, but that’s not really the reason, either.”

The woman’s head tilted, just as Lola’s had done moments earlier. “Curious.”

“Just wait,” Maddie said as Lola saw her step into view and lean against the counter, only a few feet from spider

woman. “Once she really get’s going, she’s like —”

“A bottle of soda that’s been shaken, not stirred,” Katy interrupted.

“Boom,” Maddie said, making an exploding motion with her hands. “She just pops with all that ‘need to know.’”

Katy pursed her lips and nodded. “We’re convinced one day we’ll find her guts all over the concrete after they’ve burst with inquisitiveness.”

“You two aren’t helping,” Lola said dryly. She was trying to formulate a way to ask the questions burning in her mind without sounding like the Mad Hatter, and also mentally preparing herself for more grief, which she would inevitably get from Katy and Maddie.

Katy snorted. “We’re definitely not making it any worse.”

CHAPTER 6

That Makes You A Queen.

“At some point you just have to embrace the crazy.”

~ Lola

The woman still seemed amused by them. Lola noticed her eyes were sparkling a little, but they were no longer red. She took a deep breath and gathered all of her pretend bravery, which was really just the compulsive curiosity that had plagued her all her life. “There’ve been some strange guys coming into where we work—”

“No Name Pizzeria,” Katy tossed out. “You should come by. We’ll hook you up with a free pie. We might even throw in dessert if you bring along a mini-gong. Lola makes a great peanut butter and chocolate chip pizza.”

The woman nodded, but her eyes stayed on Lola. “I’ve heard of the place. I’m sure I have a mini-gong somewhere in all of my centuries of collecting.”

“Centuries.” Maddie laughed. “Because you look so ol—”

Lola cleared her throat loudly. “I came because these guys had some weird tattoos. But not just weird, like, *really* weird.”

The words tumbled out of her mouth like monkeys from a barrel. *Did monkeys tumble out of barrels? No. But they probably tumbled down trees every now and then. I mean, they can't have great grip all the time, right? Focus.* She barked at herself. "The tattoos were so weird they kind of..." Here she goes. There was no coming back from this. It was one thing to tell her friends she saw disappearing tattoos. It was a completely different thing to tell a total stranger. "... disappeared."

The blurred vision that often happened when Lola got lost in her thoughts cleared as she glanced at Maddie and Katy. Both girls stared intently at the old woman. They were probably waiting for her to declare Lola a nut-job so they could then tackle the poor lady and beat her with the cane she had leaned against the counter next to her. Maybe her BFFs were a little overprotective, but Lola wouldn't trade them for anything.

"Disappeared?" the woman said slowly as she slid off her stool. She grasped her cane and leaned on it for support. "Did all of you see this?"

Katy leaned further back in her chair. "Before this, we thought Lola was the sanest one of all of us, but she's the only one who has seen the mysterious disappearing tattoos."

The woman looked at Katy, her eyes taking on the sharpness of a hawk searching for prey. "And you believe her?" Lola had the urge to stand in front of her friend, as if she needed to protect her from this little old lady. *Little old lady*

with badass, spider tattoos, red eyes, and spider legs that grow out of her back, she reminded herself.

“Of course, we believe her,” Maddie chimed in. “If that’s what Lola says she saw, then that’s what she saw.”

The woman must have heard something in Maddie’s voice that piqued her interest because her scrutinizing gaze turned on Lola’s blonde friend. “But you don’t really believe it happened.” Her brow rose, causing more wrinkles on her face to form, which seemed impossible. “You might believe that Lola saw this thing, but that doesn’t mean you also believe that it actually happened.”

Maddie gaped, clearly unsure of what to say. “We don’t...”

It was clear her friends didn’t know exactly what to think about Lola’s story, but that didn’t make her angry. They *wanted* to believe it had actually happened. They’d even told her so. And that was enough, Lola understood their skepticism.

“They didn’t take me to the nearest psychiatrist for an evaluation,” Lola said, drawing the woman’s attention. “That’s enough for me. They listened and—”

“Told her to lay off the paranormal-romance books she likes to read,” Katy cut Lola off and winked at her.

“Well, I’d say you’ve got good friends,” she told Lola. “I wonder, did you see anything else besides the disappearing tattoos?”

Lola’s heart sped up, and her palms began to sweat. “Um...” She hadn’t known how to tell Maddie and Katy about

the impossibly strange features appearing on the men, not to mention spider lady right in front of her, and she didn't think now was the time to try. She needed to make sure she had room to move in case Katy decided to attack. The girl was as unpredictable as the ocean during hurricane season.

"Nope," Lola finally said, leaning back on her heels in a rocking motion. "Just the tattoos."

"Hmm, interesting." The woman gave Lola a smile that made it clear she didn't believe a word Lola was saying. She didn't have a clue Lola had just seen spider legs grow out of her ancient as hell back. Maybe, because it was just hallucinations. "Well, I hate to disappoint you, but I don't have any sort of disappearing magical ink. A tattoo is just about the most permanent thing in the world. Once the ink gets under your skin, it doesn't disappear. There is some ink that will show up well under a black light, but it's still visible on the skin, just very pale."

"That's cool." Katy swung her legs down, stood and clapped her hands. "That is what I want. A black light tattoo."

"Of course you do." Maddie groaned. "Because we're around soooo many black lights. It's like the black light district at NNP in our brightly lit dining room."

"We could get Sal to get some black lights," Katy suggested. "It would set a cool atmosphere. The NNP needs updating anyway."

Maddie shook her head. "And the night club look is *so* in for pizzerias."

Katy rolled her eyes. “Ignore her. She gets mad when something wasn’t her idea first.”

“If you’re going to sit in one of our chairs, it’s only appropriate I introduce myself.” The woman walked gingerly with her cane around the counter. “I’m Jaxine.” She bowed her head. “I’m afraid the things you’ve shared with me are much more interesting than the things I can share with you three.” She looked at Lola, her eyes landing briefly before moving back to the other girls. Maybe Lola was imagining things, but she felt like Jaxine was trying to secretly convey some type of information to her. “My family has owned this parlor for generations, and now it’s mine. I’m not the curious sort. I typically keep to myself, but I enjoy listening to the stories of others if they offer them freely. That’s me in a nutshell, short and sweet.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Jaxine. I’m Lola. Lola Katz.”

“Cats? Interesting last name.”

Lola chuckled. “I’ve heard that many times. It’s spelled K-A-T-Z.”

“You should totally get a cat tattoo.” Katy’s face was animated.

“A cat?” Lola and Maddie said simultaneously, and Lola heard the ridiculousness in Maddie’s voice that she felt.

Katy blew out a sharp breath. “Not a freaking house cat, Lo. Like a jungle cat. You know, lion, panther, cougar, something sexy. Cats are sexy. That’s why they call older

women who chase younger males, cougars. Cuz they be hot, older ladies.”

“Are you saying ugly older women don’t chase younger men?” Maddie frowned and crossed her arms in front of her chest.

“Obviously.” Katy snorted. “Because ugly women are married to ugly men and have ugly kids that they tell everyone are adorable because it makes them feel less crappy about the fact that they brought ugly people into the world.”

Lola bowed her head, shaking it slowly as she pinched the bridge of her nose. “Son of a biscuit, why do we ever bring you out in public?”

“I’m just saying what no one else will.” Katy shrugged one shoulder. “Now, back to your cat tattoo.”

“Would it be alright if I bring in my other two artists?” Jaxine interjected. “You could each take a seat, review some of our existing designs, and either choose from them or collaborate with the artist to modify a design to your liking.”

Lola’s eyes grew wide.

“There’s no obligation to get it today,” Jaxine quickly added. “Consultations are free of charge. You can take your design and mull it over.”

Freak out moment averted. Before anyone could respond, Jaxine was already at the back of the room, pushing a door open.

“She’s quite spry for an ancient lady with a cane,” Maddie observed.

That's because you didn't see her six other legs, Lola thought, keeping the smile on her face. Jaxine seemed so nice it was hard to see her as anything but an old lady.

As Jaxine returned, she was accompanied by two others. One of them, Lola instantly recognized as one of the guys from the four groups that had been into *No Name Pizzeria*. Black hair tied up in a man-bun and golden eyes, which sparkled with recognition, and made his full lips curl into a smile. “Waitress Lady.” He sounded happy to see her. “I’m Kian, do you remember?”

“You’re one of the book boyfriends.” Katy slipped her hands into her back pockets, a move that subtly lifted her chest. Lola had seen her friend employ this strategy on men before, but only those she believed had potential to keep her interested. Despite her casual demeanor, Katy was incredibly selective when it came to her dating life. “How could we possibly forget you?”

Kian’s grin got bigger as he looked at Katy. “And you’re the one Drystan wants as a m—”

Jaxine suddenly burst into a coughing fit, drawing everyone’s attention. Lola hoped the old woman wasn’t about to collapse in front of them. She didn’t need to add ‘watched old woman drop dead’ to the list of traumatic things already plaguing her life.

When the coughing finally subsided, Kian continued. “You’re the one Drystan... was interested in.”

“Ooh, hear that, Loles?” Katy said, a smile filling her voice. “Someone is *interested* in me.”

Lola narrowed her eyes at Kian. That wasn't what he'd been about to say. She looked at his neck for the panther tattoo. It was there, but while she stared at it, the animal never moved. The three-dimensional quality was still incredible.

“Well,” Jaxine spoke up swiftly, “it’s fantastic that you’ve already met one of our artists. Kian, you can collaborate with Lola.” She gestured to the man on her right. “This is Zephyr.” The guy was seriously channeling a Machine Gun Kelly vibe. He had piercings everywhere, black-painted nails, and his hair was blond at the tips but darker at the roots. It seemed too soft to be bleached hair, but then again, who naturally had hair that grew blond at the tips? *And who had disappearing tattoos.*

Zephyr tilted his head at them. “Welcome to *Wild Ink.*” His eyes were an unusual shade of green, almost the color of limes.

“I’ll take him,” Katy said with a salacious grin.

Maddie pursed her lips. “Try not to molest him, please.”

Zephyr simply chuckled as he held out his hand to Katy. Lola noticed a tattoo on the back of it—a chameleon. Again, the lifelikeness and three-dimensional effect of the image was incredible. She stared at it until he walked away with Katy in tow to a chair on the right-hand wall.

“You’re Maddie, correct?” Jaxine said, pulling Lola from her tattoo-induced trance.

She smiled. “Yep, I’m the normal one.”

Jaxine grinned and patted her friend’s shoulder endearingly. “Sure you are.” The old woman winked. “What

are you thinking about getting?”

Lola leaned in, anxious to see how Maddie would respond, but she never heard the answer.

“You ready, Lola?” Kian asked.

Lola’s head snapped back around, and she looked up at him. “This is weird.” He was already walking away, and she hurried to follow. He kept going until they were in the farthest corner of the room, well away from her friends, who were both sitting in stations at the front.

“There’s that word again– weird.” He gave her a grin. “Have a seat.”

Lola stepped around the back of the chair and then lowered herself slowly down, as if the seat might explode as soon as her butt hit it. “I just mean it’s strange to be here, seeing you. You didn’t bother to mention that you worked here.”

“I just started,” he said absently, grabbing a pad of paper and pencil. “You’re my first.”

Lola froze, her hands gripping the armrests of the chair and her backside hovering in mid-air, nearly touching the seat. “Umm, what?”

Kian’s head tilted back as he laughed. “Kidding.” He sat on a rolling seat and faced her. “I tell all the nervous ones that. Makes them panic every time.”

She let herself fall into the seat. “Funny,” she said, the tone of her voice showing it was anything but.

“Well, I did just start working at *Wild Ink*, but I’ve been doing tattoos for as long as I can remember.

“Do you make them look 3D, like the ones your friends had? And that one on your neck?” She motioned to the location, her eyes wandering down his torso wondering if he had any other ink considering his arms were bare.

Kian must have realized what she was thinking because he unbuttoned his black shirt.

“Oh, um, no, don’t,” she began, but stopped when he pulled his shirt aside just enough for her to see the tattoo there. It was a another black panther, just like the ones she’d seen on his friends, and similar to the one on his neck. She narrowed her eyes. The color of the panther’s eyes were not the same color as the one on his neck and it seemed to have a more feminine quality. “Are you guys in some sort of gang? You all have the same tattoo. Why panthers?” She leaned forward, her hand reaching out before she knew what she was doing.

A loud crashing sound, came from behind a door bearing a sign that read ‘Employees Only’. Along with the crash came a vicious-sounding snarl. Lola jerked her hand back as her head whipped around.

She felt it again, the eyes that had been tracking her for days. She hadn’t sensed the watchfulness at all today, but now she could practically feel the person’s breath on her neck. “Is someone back there?”

“Just my cat.” Kian’s voice sounded a bit shaky. “He’s a little possessive. Doesn’t like anyone touching me.”

Lola felt her face heat over the fact that she *had* been about to put her hand on his bare skin. Then her mind focused on his other words. “Your cat made that noise? And it’s possessive of you?” She looked back at Kian, but she still felt the eyes on her.

“He’s a strange cat. And bossy. And he’s been acting a tad unhinged lately.”

There was another snarl, but this time there was no accompanying bang.

“See?” Kian nodded. “Unhinged.”

Lola’s mouth opened then snapped closed when he started drawing. Apparently, he was finished talking about his odd cat. She watched in awe as his pencil moved quickly over the page, but she couldn’t see what he was drawing because he had the pad tilted away from her. She hadn’t given him any indication of what she wanted, but that didn’t seem to be an issue for Kian.

After a few minutes, he stopped, looked at it, tilted his head from side to side, and then started drawing again.

“Are you gonna show me what tattoo you seem to have decided for me?” Lola’s fingers tapped on the arms of the chair.

“One sec,” he muttered.

“Why are you even drawing when we haven’t even discussed what I want?”

“Sometimes I just get a feeling of something that I think a person will like.” His focus stayed on the page. “Call it a gut

feeling or sixth sense.”

“At this point, it wouldn’t surprise me,” she mumbled, leaning back in the chair and resisting the urge to glance back at the door from which she could swear the intense gaze emanated.

“Okay,” Kian said after several more minutes of silence. He appeared perplexed as he stared at the page. His brow furrowed even further, and his eyes flickered up to the door behind her, where the crash had occurred, and then back to the page. “By Visata” he muttered, his gaze fixated on his drawing.

“Is something wrong?” she asked, getting a little worried his sixth sense had led him to draw a picture of his own emotionally unstable cat that apparently had attachment issues. *Is that why he looked at the door? And why is he looking at it again? Dude, stop looking at the damn door.*

“No,” he replied with a shake of his head. “It’s just that this reminds me a lot of a tattoo I did on a friend—a tattoo I’m quite proud of. So being able to recreate something similar now is rather surprising.”

“Isn’t it common to do the same tattoo on different people?” She thought about the panthers she’d seen on him and his friends in the pizzeria.

“Um, I’ve done similar ones,” he said. “But not identical.” Then he nodded toward the pad. “What do you think?”

He held out the paper to her, and Lola’s hands trembled slightly when she took it. It was a lion, a beautiful, majestic

beast, alert with piercing eyes that seemed to stare right at her. His mane was large and looked as if the wind was blowing through it. He stood proudly, his strong muscular body outlined perfectly with the lines from Kian's pencil. "He looks like he could just walk right off the page." She breathed. "How can you draw like this?"

She looked up at him. He simply gave a dismissive head tilt. "Been able to do it for as long as I've been able to hold a pencil."

Lola looked back at the drawing, and her heart beat faster. Something about the image called to her. The correlation to her name? *No, that's stupid.* She dismissed the idea. But there was something about the lion that made her want to keep it. She didn't want someone else to have this beast on their skin. He was hers. She didn't like the idea that Kian had drawn something even similar for a friend. Her fingers ran along the page, over the form, brushing it as if she could feel his fur. She swore she could practically feel the strands against her flesh. "I've lost my damn mind," she whispered softly.

"Why do you say that?" Kian sounded genuinely interested.

Lola let out a sarcastic laugh. "Hmm, no. I'm not about to get into the giant bag of crazy I'm lugging around. But a lion?" She looked at him with a raised brow. "Why would you think I wanted a lion?"

He reached for the pad. "I can draw something—"

"No." Lola pulled the pad closer, pressing it to her chest. There was no way she was giving it back.

He narrowed his eyes at her. “So you *do* want it?”

Did she want it? Lola pulled the pad down and looked at it again. It sort of reminded her of one of the shifters on the new TV show she and her mom had started watching. It also reminded her of a character from her most recent paranormal books. Though she'd known in the back of her mind she'd either be getting some sort of animal tattoo because of her love of shifter books, or a literary tattoo, or both, she couldn't have imagined a lion would have been at the top of that list. But now, she couldn't fathom putting anything else on her skin.

Finally, she nodded. “Yeah.” She smiled, gaining confidence that this was *exactly* the tattoo she was supposed to get. “Yeah, I do.”

Kian's eyes lit up. “Cool.” He motioned to her body. “Where do you want it?”

Lola considered the lion and imagined where she could have it. The first thing that came to mind was over her heart. Like a sentry standing guard to the most sacred part of her that she could ever trust someone with. Her lion would protect her heart. Her lips turned up in a small smile. It was time to embrace the crazy. *Why the hell not?* “Over my heart,” she told him and pointed to the place just above her left breast.

The snarl was back, but this time, it sounded like a feral beast. The door shuddered as something hit it, causing Lola to jump.

“Jaxine.” Kian jumped to his feet. “I've got hers drawn up. You'll have to take over while I deal with the Prince.”

“You have a psycho, feral cat and you named him Prince?” Lola’s eyes bounced between him and the still shuddering door.

Kian smirked. “Yeah, because he’s a royal pain in the ass.” With that, he jogged to the door and kicked it open, hard. Lola wondered if he was hoping the door would hit the feline and knock his feral ass out.

Jaxine walked around her. “What are we working with here?” She pulled a curtain that separated the station from the rest of the room. “I heard you tell Kian where you wanted it.”

Lola nodded and then pulled up her shirt. She was glad Kian’s cat had thrown a fit. She’d never had her shirt off in front of a guy, and she wasn’t keen on undressing in front of him. Lola hadn’t considered the embarrassing process of actually getting the tattoo when she’d chosen her location.

“Ready?” Jaxine asked.

Lola swallowed and nodded.

“You chose the king of beasts,” the old woman said as she prepped Lola’s skin. “I wonder if that makes you a queen?”

CHAPTER 7

What The Heck Is A Body Positivity Coach?

"I've always hungered to destroy my enemies. But lately, killing my comrades is beginning to sound like a good idea as well." ~Callon

"A royal pain in the ass?" Callon hissed at Kian as he stepped further into the back room of *Wild Ink*.

"If the crown fits?" the panther shifter said with a toothy grin. "You usually *are* a pain in the ass, but that's just because you're moody as hell. This," he motioned to the room around them, which was destroyed. "This is something else entirely."

Callon ran a hand through his wild hair and felt rippling beneath his skin.

"Whoa," Kian said as his golden eyes widened. "Your skin actually shimmered, like on a bonded male before he shifts." Kian looked back at the door and then to Callon. "Is she, that's," he pointed at said door. "You've chosen a mate? You? Her? What—"

"Could you stop sounding like a toddler who's just learned to speak?" Callon snapped.

Kian rubbed the back of his head as he looked back and forth between Callon and the door that led to Lola. The woman who was driving him out of his mind and she didn't even know it. "How do you expect me to react?" Kian asked. "You've always made it pretty damn clear that you wouldn't take a human as a mate. Of course we all took bets on how many centuries you'd last." He ran his fingers across his chin as he looked at Callon. "I gotta admit. I lost. I thought you'd go at the very least an entire century."

Callon bared his teeth as he clenched his hands into fists. He could feel deep claws stabbing into his palms. He paced the small back room of the tattoo shop as he considered his options. "You were going to put your hands on her," he growled, his voice nearly on subvocal levels.

"I'm a tattoo artist," Kian pointed out. "It would be hard to tattoo someone if I didn't touch them."

Callon sliced his hand through the air wishing it held a blade. "I don't want your excuses. You don't touch *her*. No one touches her."

"Then maybe you should go snarl and hiss at Jaxine, because she's currently getting intimate with the flesh over your female's heart." Kian's tone was dry, but the wariness in his body was obvious as he took subtle steps away every time Callon paced close to him. He knew he wasn't dealing with just a comrade, or friend. Callon was his Commander and the son of the Prime. He wasn't just any Damarian. He was royalty with powerful magic in his lineage. Of course, that power was limited until he had a mate.

“Why should we need a mate in order to shift?” he asked, though he wasn’t really speaking to Kian. Mostly he just needed to vent before he tore any more holes in the walls, or broke anymore of Jaxine’s things. As it was the arachnid who was going to be web-spinning mad over the destruction he’d caused.

“Um, was that, like, a question you actually wanted me to answer?”

“No.”

“Good. Got it.”

Callon cursed under his breath. “She’s just so damn chatty, and curious, and—”

“Unique and beautiful,” Kian added, almost absently.

Callon stopped pacing and folded his arms across his broad chest. “So you’ve picked out your tombstone then?”

The panther shifter threw his arms up. “I’m an artist, Callon. I notice skin. Her’s is unique because of the pigmentation, but it’s beautiful. She doesn’t think so. And she doesn’t think others think it is.”

Callon mentally counted to ten as he reminded himself that as the future leader of their kingdom he couldn’t go around killing pride members just because they called his female beautiful. It was the truth.

“Have you even talked to her?” the other male asked.

Callon looked away, his jaw tense as he thought about how he’d stalked her like the cat he was to know everything about

her. “Not exactly,” he mumbled.

“So that’s a no,” Kian sighed. “Not that I’m surprised. It’s not like you even talk to people you know. I’d say people you *like* but I don’t think there are any of those around, anywhere.”

Callon turned back to the man and dropped his arms. “I’m not good with people.”

“No way?” Kian frowned. “I would have never guessed.”

“I need to talk to her,” Callon continued, ignoring the male’s sarcasm.

“Yes, you do.”

He blew out a sharp breath and then brushed some of his wild hair out of his face. “If I don’t, then another shifter could win her heart, and then I’d have to kill him and that would probably make her angry.”

“Pissed,” Kian argued. “That would make her pissed. And probably homicidal.”

Callon tilted his head back and looked at the ceiling as if the answers he sought were up there, then dropped it back down. “And then I’d have to kill something for her as a peace offering.”

“Nope,” Kian shook his head. “That wouldn’t do it.”

“And even then,” Callon huffed, “she’d still probably make me pine after her for a few months just to make her point.”

“A few months? Make her point,” Kian said slowly, “that she loathes you for all eternity for killing her one true love?”

Callon pinched the bridge of his nose. “Who knows how long it would take before she’d even let me near her, let alone bond with her.”

Kian snorted. “Oh, you think she’d let you *bond* with her after all that? You think the female whose male *you* murdered because he won her heart before you did, would *ever* let you in her bed?”

Callon narrowed his eyes on the male. “Once she realized I’m the better male, she’d move on and forgive me.”

Kian shrugged. “Next pride meeting I’m totally recommending that classes be taken by the single males in regards to human females and what they expect from a mate.”

“I know what a female needs,” Callon rumbled.

“But do you?” Kian’s lips pursed. “And even if you know what they *need*, do you know what they *want*. Because, sometimes the latter is more important.”

Callon stepped closer to the door in hopes of hearing Lola’s voice. “What makes you such an expert on human females?”

“I work with them everyday,” Kian answered confidently. “A tattoo artist isn’t just the person giving someone a tattoo. We’re also their venting person, their therapist, their relationship advice expert and body positivity coach.”

Callon glared. “What the hell is a body positivity coach?”

“Exactly my point,” Kian pointed at him. “You need information. You need to know what *your* female needs and wants, so that *you* don’t screw up and wind up sleeping on the

steps of her porch all your long life, forever unable to shift because you killed the male who *did* know what she wanted.” He paused, then tilted his head to the side and glanced at the door. Callon couldn’t help the growl. *It’s a damn door, pull yourself together.* But his female was just on the other side of that door with her shirt up exposing her skin. His growl got louder. “Although, it might be different for you,” Kian added.

“Of course it is,” Callon lifted his chin. “I’m not those other idiot males you keep referring to who don’t know what their female wants.”

“Okay, you just learned absolutely nothing,” Kian said, his voice filled with exasperation. “But that’s beside the point because something different happened. I was totally side tracked by first,” he held up a finger, “your ridiculous tantrum, and then second,” he held up another finger, “you’re incredibly dimwitted– no offense, Your Majesty– view of how to win your mate over. But now I remember.” He snapped his finger. “Something happened with Lola that’s never happened before.”

Callon took a long step towards the panther. “Choose your next words carefully, Kian.”

To the male’s credit, despite the slight tremble he didn’t step back, he didn’t act like prey. “I mean with the ink I drew for her. I got a feeling, like I do”

“Like you do,” Callon said, motioning with his hand for the other male to get on with it.

“And so I started drawing before we even discussed what she wanted.”

Callon's eyes widened as he remembered part of the reason he'd gotten angry. Not just because Kian had been about to touch Lola, but because he said he'd drawn a tattoo that matched another one, a previous one Kian had done. Kian never draws the same tattoo twice. There are always variations. Always. "What was it?" he snapped. "Whose was it?"

"Lift up your shirt and look in the mirror," Kian motioned towards Callon's chest. "She's even getting it in the exact same spot."

The beast inside Callon roared. If he'd let the sound out, it would have shaken the walls with its intensity. "Identical?" he asked Kian.

Kian nodded slowly. "Every single line. It was as if I had gone back in time and was drawing yours again. But I didn't even realize it until I was finished and stared at the final product."

Callon headed for the door again. He started to push it open but a strong hand wrapped around his wrist. "You can't go in there. She's not clothed."

"She's mine," Callon snarled before he could censure his reaction. That was an idiotic argument. Of course he shouldn't see her in such a state before they'd been mated. But he wanted to see her. He wanted to see the image Kian had drawn. "Go get your notebook," he ordered. "I want to see it."

Kian started to go around him, but they both realized at the same time that he couldn't go either. The panther pulled his phone from his pocket and tapped the screen. Less than a

minute later the door pushed open just enough for an old, wrinkly hand to come through, tossing the notebook without care. Callon managed to catch it before it could hit the ground as the door slammed shut behind Jaxine. Then he heard the click of the lock. Callon looked at Kian. “Did she just lock us out?”

Kian smirked. “You know better than to piss off Jaxine. You’ll be lucky if she lets you back in her shop in the next decade.”

The panther wasn’t wrong. Jaxine could hold a grudge and seemed to enjoy them. Callon wondered if that was a spider thing. Felines liked laying in the warm sun, perhaps arachnids enjoyed spurning others. It seemed like a spider thing to do.

“Are you going to look at that or just stand there looking perplexed?” Kian asked, pointing at the notebook in Callon’s hand.

He looked down and was met with a blank page.

“You have to flip it over,” Kian said, sounding like he was talking to a young cub. Perhaps, Callon could just give him a good swipe with his claws. Callon chose to ignore the other male’s tone and slowly flipped the notebook over. His eyes roamed over the drawing on the page. It was like looking at the image on his chest, only done in pencil instead of the black ink put in his skin. Every single line, every hair, every shadow. Identical.

“By the creator, Visata” he said softly as the possessive feelings he had for Lola magnified to an unhealthy level. Perhaps they were already unhealthy but he could only deal

with one emotional revelation at a time. Asking more of him was just ridiculous. “She bares my beast over her heart.” His voice sounded hoarse to his ears as he tried to puzzle through what it meant. *How had this happened?* Mates were chosen, not fated. Their own kind courted in a similar fashion to humans. *Sort of.* Okay, not really, but it still wasn’t something that was predestined by Visata. Had something changed? Or *had* they always been fated, designed for their mate not even realizing it, simply falling in love naturally? Callon looked up from the book and his eyes met Kian’s.

“Whoa,” the other male took a step back. “Your eyes look like your father’s just before he lets his beast take over.” Kian took another step away, and when his back hit the door that stood between him and his female, Callon snarled. He couldn’t close his mouth and he realized his teeth were too large. “O-o-okay, that i-is new.” Kian pulled his phone from his back pocket. “Just, hold on, Callon.”

“Move,” Callon didn’t even recognize his own voice.

“Can’t do that, royalty, Commander, warrior or not,” Kian said as he put the phone to his ear while he held up his other hand as if his measly arm could keep Callon from getting past him. “Hey, we have an issue.”

Callon heard Roan’s voice through the phone as if the male was standing in the room.

“Other kingdom’s beastwalker giving you problems?” Roan asked.

“Nope,” Kian bit out. “They’ve been behaving when they come in. This problem is in the form of a large pissed-off lion

who is in nearly a mid-shift. He's not mated so don't ask me how the hell he's able to do this. But I'm pretty sure he wants to rip my head off," Kian paused and narrowed his eyes, "And possibly eat it. I'm not sure. I'm not versed on the looks of the lion-version Callon."

"Callon?" Roan snapped. "He's at *Wild Ink*?"

"Weird, right?" Kian asked. "He's not really the social type and since this is a place that a lot of beastwalkers hang out you wouldn't think that he'd be here, but in walks this little spotted kitten and like a stray he followed her in."

Callon felt his bones rubbing against each other as he hissed at Kian's words. "Spotted kitten?"

"No offense, I already told you I think she's beautiful."

"Kian, shut up," Roan growled through the phone. "You obviously know how he feels about her, so how about you not antagonize the unstable lion."

"See, here's the problem, when faced with certain death, I tend to think of all the things I've wanted to say and never did, and then I think damn, I might not get to say them, so I should just say them all now."

"You're not going to die." Roan sighed. "Give Callon the phone."

Kian scrunched his face up as he seemed to examine Callon. "I don't think that's a good idea. He'll probably crush it. I just got it. It's the latest model."

"Kian," Roan barked.

“Fine, I’m putting you on speaker phone. It’s not like he couldn’t hear you already anyways,” he muttered as he held the phone up between them.

“Callon, you need to calm down and step away from the situation,” Roan said calmly. “Take a rest from your guard detail and let someone else keep an eye on her.”

Callon swiped out a clawed hand that almost looked like a paw, but Kian pulled the phone back just before he could hit it. “Wrong thing to say, Ro. He doesn’t like anyone touching, looking, being in the same breathing vicinity, of Lola.”

“Do not say her name,” Callon said in a deadly serious voice.

“Oh,” Kian’s brow rose, “and you cannot mention She Who Must Not Be Named.”

“How are you still alive?” Roan asked the panther, sounding like a tired parent.

Kian shrugged. “I’m a cat. I got nine lives.”

“If you keep talking, you’re about to be the cat to go through all nine lives the fastest.”

“Good point,” Kian nodded. “So, are you going to come deal with this, or send the Prime?”

“One second,” Roan answered and there was some shuffling on the line.

Callon was trying to talk his beast out of killing Kian. He was fighting to hold on to the rational side of his brain, but the lion inside of him, that was a part of him, was so present, more

than he'd ever felt before, and he wanted one thing— to get to Lola.

“Son,” the Prime’s voice came through the phone and Callon’s eyes snapped down to the metal object. “Leave *Wild Ink*, that’s an order from your Prime, not your father. Disobey and you *will* suffer the consequences.”

Callon’s chest filled with a rumble, the sound that came just before the roar of a lion.

“Do. Not,” his Prime said in such a calm tone someone else might not have thought to listen. Those of their kingdom knew when Taras spoke in that tone, you were one swipe away from claws across the throat. Kings didn’t stay in control of their kingdoms by tolerating *any* form of insubordination.

He took a deep breath and stood up straight. Callon felt his beast’s frustration, but he was able to think clearly again.

“Okay, he looks less like *Mufasa* and has his usual RBF on,” Kian said. “Now, who’s going to actually make sure he leaves without destroying any more of Jaxine’s shop?”

“How much damage has he done?” Taras asked.

“I’m standing right here,” Callon gritted out. “You can ask me.”

He heard the deep growl in his father’s throat. “The question is, *why* are you standing there when I have already ordered you to leave.”

Callon glared at the phone as if he could see his Prime. Though if his Prime had been in his presence, his glare would have been seen as a challenge to his father, especially since

Callon's beast was making itself known. Without a word, he spun on his heel and forced himself to walk in the opposite direction of Lola.

"Can I have my notebook?" Kian called out.

Callon looked down, tore the page out that had his lion on it, and then tossed the notebook over his shoulder. He heard Kian curse and the fumbling sound of hands attempting to catch something.

"Once you've calmed all the way down," Kian continued. "It would be a good idea to show that to our Prime."

He didn't bother to respond as his shoulder hit the exit door out into the late morning sun. His pupils immediately reacted to the bright light to help shield his superior eyesight. Callon took deep breaths through his nose and turned to look at himself in the glass window he was walking past. His face was completely human, his glamour firmly in place. His father had ordered him out of the building, but he hadn't ordered him to *stay* away from Lola. Which was a good thing because it was an order he didn't think he would be able to obey. That was a first for him.

He jogged across the street, dodging cars and people. Callon ignored the annoyed honking of the taxi drivers. Even if they did hit him, he'd hurt the car more than they'd hurt him, especially at the slow speed they were forced to use because of the city's congestion. Once across the street, Callon found a spot in the shadow of an alley where he could see the front door of *Wild Ink*. She was in there getting his lion tattooed on her flesh. Right over her heart, just as his was on

his own skin. He wanted to roar with some ancient ferocity that urged him to take his mate. To protect her and keep her from anyone who could take her from him.

His skin felt raw and he couldn't stand still. Callon paced, just as he had in the back room of the tattoo shop, his eyes bouncing from the street to the door. It was a dumb question. The ink going into her body wasn't just normal ink. This was ink specifically for *animi* and the Kingdom Shifters. It would bring the magic that had laid dormant in her blood to life, giving her the ability to bond with one of their males and lend his magic the power he needed in order to shift. Their kind rejoiced in moments like this, it was almost sacred. In some ways it could put her in danger, but there'd been laws put in place by their Shaman to protect the *animi*. That didn't keep Callon from looking around to see if any other beastwalkers lurked near by.

He wasn't really worried about Kian, now that he'd made it very clear Lola was his. And Zephyr had a mate, so he knew he was no threat or competition. "Dammit," he snarled as he looked back at the door for what must have been the hundredth time in fifteen minutes.

An eternity later Callon's head whipped around as he heard her laughter. It was like sun parting clouds. He stayed just inside the shadows where her human eyes wouldn't see him, though if she did look his way, she might see past his glamour, because she was *his*.

Callon watched as Lola pressed her right hand over her heart, her lips turned up in a grin and her eyes filled with

satisfaction. She looked proud. As the girls walked down the street, he noticed she held her head higher than usual. His female seemed less reserved as if the tattoo had somehow given her confidence she'd been missing. Maybe that shouldn't make him feel proud, but it did. It was his mark on her body that was making her feel something different, something that made her obviously happy.

He trailed them as they walked, laughing and talking. He caught snippets of their conversation, but mostly, he was too entranced in watching Lola. The way her body moved, her facial expressions he could see, and the way her red hair sparkled when the sun hit it. She was practically glowing. He heard the crinkle of paper and looked down realizing he still carried the drawing in his hand. Callon carefully folded it and slipped it into his back pocket. He kept on the girls until they hailed a taxi. Even then, he was able to jog, using glamour to keep eyes off of him, keeping up with their ride easily.

When they reached Lola's apartment building, Callon wasn't even winded. He was however, ravenous to be closer to her. The three girls hurried into the building. He waited until the taxi drove away before he headed to the fire escape ladder and easily climbed to her floor. Taking the familiar spot right next to her window, Callon leaned his back against the brick. His eyes focused on the dirty, red building fifty feet across from him while he listened to her door open and then close.

"I can't believe we got tattoos," Lola said, her voice scandalous but also filled with excitement. "Well, me and Katy," she amended. "What happened Maddie? Why didn't you get one?"

“Yeah,” Katy’s voice filled the room. “What happened, Mads?”

“I don’t,” she answered, her voice crestfallen. “I just didn’t find anything that I could honestly say I wanted on my body for the rest of my life.”

“Fair enough.” Lola accepted her friend’s answer without judgement. “I still can’t believe Katy and I went through with it.”

“Why can’t you believe it?” Katy snorted. “We totally look like the type of chicks that would get tattoos.”

Lola made a derisive sound. “*I* look like a chick who would hide in a book for hours on end and say weird things at awkward moments.”

“And yet,” Katy declared, her voice getting louder. “You got a 3D portrait of a lion on top of your boob. That makes you a hot, book nerd-slash-out-of-work porn star. By the way, is he supposed to be a warning to any guy who comes near your girls? If so, then you should have had him put lower so he could guard the gates to the secret garden.”

“Good grief,” Maddie, Lola’s other friend, huffed.

“Please don’t ever refer to any part of my body as ‘the secret garden’,” Lola said. He imagined she had her hands on her hips as she gave the order.

“What do they call it in your books, ‘the cozy den,’ ‘the bowl of cream.’ Oh, but for a failing, out-of-work porn star it would be more like, ‘the Sahara Desert,’ and much less like a secret garden, cozy den or crea—”

“Dammit all, make her stop,” Lola practically yelled. “You’re killing my ink buzz.”

Callon chuckled. *Ink buzz*. He’d have to ask her what that felt like.

“Fair is fair, Kitten,” Katy sang. “You kill all my buzzes.”

“It’s that, or I kill you, which would you prefer?”

My female has claws, he thought with a smile. She’d be able to hold her own. And she’d need to be able to. One day she’d be Queen, or Prima, as his people called his mother, to the Kingdom of Claws. Visata had picked her for Callon for a reason. He couldn’t deny it. Not with the pull he felt for her, something he’d never felt towards *any* female. Having his lion on her flesh only solidified what he felt—she was for him. And he was hers. *Whether she wanted him or not*. That thought made him laugh again.

“Did you guys hear that?” Lola asked.

Callon snapped his mouth closed and stilled. *How had she heard him?*

“What?” Maddie asked.

“It sounded like laughter.”

“It’s the universe,” Katy said, her tone full of humor. “Laughing at your lion boob.”

“You’re just pissed that my lion could eat your wolf,” Lola shot back.

“Don’t go hating on my wolf, he’s sexy.”

“What made you get a wolf tattoo?” Lola asked. “You make fun of my shifter books every second of the day.”

“Zephyr showed me a book of drawings and this one just, I don’t know,” she answered, her voice changing from the playful tone to more introspective. “It just felt right.”

“That’s how I felt about the lion,” Lola said. And then softly added. “He’s guarding my heart.”

Callon leaned his head back and closed his eyes as his lips turned up in a smile. He was pretty sure all of his warriors would think something was seriously wrong with him. He wasn’t exactly the smiling type. But then he wasn’t sure that up until that moment he’d ever really had a reason to smile. “*He’s guarding my heart.*” Her words seeped into his skin, past his tissue, muscle and down into the marrow of his bones as the man and beast accepted her role for them. She had no idea she’d just claimed Callon as hers.

CHAPTER 8

I'm Not Freaked Out. You're Freaked Out.

"Have you ever felt like there was something big happening in your life but someone forgot to give you the memo? You think you've sort of got it half way figured out, or at least, you're doing a good job of faking it 'til you make it, and then boom, the bottom drops out from under your feet. No? So just me then. Fantastic. Good talk." ~Lola

"It's been two weeks," Lola said as she filled the parmesan cheese shakers for the tables while she, Katy and Maddie waited for the lunch rush hour to start. "Have you told your dad about your tattoo, Katy?"

Both of her friends looked at her like she was crazy.

"What?" she asked, trying to keep from grinning. She'd known Katy's dad wouldn't be okay with her getting a tattoo. He was a bit overprotective at times, though to be fair, Katy had always been a bit of a free-spirit and keeping her reigned in was not a task for the faint of heart.

"I figure I'll just hold off on that for the rest of my life," Katy said. She rolled silverware in napkins while Maddie

dried cups and stacked them next to the trays she'd just finished with. "No need to give my dad a stroke. Mom would think it's cool as hell, but she'd have to pretend to be upset about it, so I'm not telling her to keep her from doing a horrible acting job."

"What about you?" Lola looked at Maddie. "If you'd have gotten one, would she have cared?"

"No, not about the tattoo so much as she would the money," Maddie answered. She turned the cup in her hand in a circle, using the towel in the other hand to twist inside and get all the water droplets. "Her hours have been getting cut at work, so things have been a little tighter than usual."

"Why didn't you say anything?" Katy asked. "You know Lo and I would help."

Lola nodded. "You know Mom likes to feed you guys anytime you'll let her, that would at least help a little with groceries."

Maddie rolled her eyes. "As if you guys are in better situations."

"We have two parents, Mads," Katy said. "And I'm not trying to be an ass that your mom is a single parent. She's a super hero in my book. But sometimes you just have to ask for help. Goodness knows that we will have times, and *have* had times in the past, when we did. And by the way," Katy tossed down the fork she held. "What's with all the damn secrets? We discovered during the bizarre tattoo experience that Lola's having self-esteem issues and general crisis of identity and—"

Lola frowned and cut her friend off, “I don’t think *that’s* exactly what I said.”

“And now you’re telling us that you’ve been living on an even tighter budget than the pennies we all already live on,” Katy continued, not paying Lola any mind. “I thought we were a tribe, ride or die. What’s up with that?”

“Sometimes we just don’t want to burden each other,” Maddie argued. “It’s not that I was trying to keep a secret, Katy. It’s just the cost of living here is so damn high, we’ve been born into loving families, but poor ones. It feels like we’re on a damn hamster wheel running and running and not getting anywhere. Complaining about it doesn’t really get us anywhere.”

Lola couldn’t argue. Sometimes it felt hopeless. “We’re going to go to the community college,” she said, forcefully setting down the shaker as if it was a gavel and declaration of a judge. “Get an education that affords us more opportunities so we can make more money, and help our parents, and even ourselves, out. Then we’re going to haul our butts from this melting pot to someplace with cleaner air and cheaper everything.” Moving out of New York had been something they’d all dreamed of. It was all they knew, but all three of them felt like there had to be a better way to live than hand to mouth.

“Until then, we hang on.” Katy curled her hand in a fist and dropped it firmly onto the counter. “No matter what that looks like. Our best bet would be to find sugar daddies. But

we'd need to waitress somewhere other than NNP. It's not like we get executive types in here.”

Lola glanced around at the current customers filing in as lunch time approached. Construction workers, low-level job-types that looked as tired as she felt. Students from the local community college, nurses from the free clinic up the street. No, there weren't any prospects of men who could provide a much better financial situation than they currently had. Just as she was about to return to her task, the door open and the guy with green hair walked in, followed by Spiky. Two of the guys from a couple of weeks ago were back.

“Look who's returned,” Katy nudged Lola, as if she hadn't already noticed. “Maybe they're rock stars and we just don't know it. They look like they could be in some sort of band.”

“So they're either ridiculously rich or starving artists?” Maddie tapped her chin thoughtfully.

Katy gave Lola another nudge. “Only one way to find out. Go give him your number, Lo, and get the goods. Pun intended.”

Lola's gut tightened as she watched the two men find a table and then immediately turn to look at her.

“Oh snap,” Maddie muttered, and then subtly pointed towards the door, grabbing Lola's attention. “Looks like they've got competition.”

“What the,” Lola said as she watched the guy named Roan, with the silver eyes, and Rafe, with the unnatural, cat eyes, come strolling through the door next. They immediately

noticed the first two guys that had walked in. Roan and Rafe froze and glared –like seriously glared– at GreenHair and Spiky. All they needed were some tumble weeds to roll by and some of that Western movie music they played right before a shoot out, and the scene would be set.

“Rival bands?” Katy asked.

“Let it go,” Maddie said, shaking her head. “Neither of those dudes are in bands. They’re probably gang members or bikers with vendettas against one another.”

Lola snorted. “You’ve been watching gang documentaries again.”

“Dude, it’s an epidemic in this country that everyone ignores and some of them are into some scary crap like sex trafficking,” Katy pointed out. “For all we know those hotties are scoping out potential women to take into their harem of sex slaves. Oh, snap,” Katy gasped. “That means they’ve set their eyes on Lola. It’s because you’re beautiful and exotic looking. They’ve probably got a client who likes women with unique attributes. Like a foot fetish only his is a skin fetish.”

Lola turned her head slowly and looked at her friend who was staring at the group of guys in question. “And you think I have an overactive imagination?”

“Unlike your scenarios, mine,” Katy pointed at herself with a knife, “have merit. There are no sexy, shifter men who are looking for their mate to claim, and give ridiculous amounts of pleasure simply because of some magical connection. That’s not a thing. Though I will admit that sounds much more preferable to the gang-sex trade scenario.”

“There is seriously something wrong with you,” Maddie sighed. “Lo, you going to take one of the tables?”

“They’re both seated in her section,” Katy pointed out. “She’s going to take both of them, and she’s going to get a date with one of them, and find out which category they fall into.”

“I don’t even know what to say to that,” Lola said as she snatched up a pen and headed for Roan and Rafe. Neither of them had asked for her number so they felt like the safer bet.

“Take one for the team, Kitten,” Katy whisper-shouted.

Lola ignored her and pasted a smile on her face as she reached the table. The two guys who were, thankfully, no longer glaring at Spikey and Green Hair. “Welcome back to NNP,” she said, her voice sounding much too chipper because she was suddenly very nervous. Their gaze ran up and down the length of her, giving her the distinct impression that they were looking for something. Or maybe they knew she’d gotten a tattoo. That was impossible, of course. But unless they’d been at *Wild Ink* when she had, how could they possibly know? Was one of these two her stalker? Or maybe both?

“Stalker?” Rafe asked, a frown marring his too-handsome face. “Someone’s been stalking you?”

Lola’s eyes widened “Did I say that out loud?” *What the hell. Am I ever going to get control of my mouth?* Short of that muzzle she wanted her parents to buy her, the answer was a resounding no.

“Psht, no,” she waved dismissively. “I was just thinking about a show I’ve been watching. The girl has caught the attention of some members of a sex-trafficking gang, and they’ve been stalking her because she’s what some rich, old guy has decided he wants, and she feels like she’s being followed, like she feels eyes on her, you know? That feeling you get when you just know you’re not alone? Anyways, it’s just an intense show and tends to stick with me. I binged watched it last night.” She totally didn’t and there was no such show. At least, not one she was watching, and what the hell was she doing making up a scenario from Katy’s conspiracy theory?

“Wow,” Rafe said. “Sounds a tad creepy. Maybe it’s not the best thing for a beautiful, single female to watch, especially if it freaks you out as much as it seems to.”

Lola pursed her lips. “Who said anything about being single? Or about being freaked out? I’m not freaked out. You’re freaked out. Probably not single, but, I’m totally fine. No stalkers, no weird things. No rich, old men who want to make me their sex slave, and hold me captive because of some weird, skin fetish. Holy jackrabbits I’m going to shut up now.” She took a deep breath and pasted her smile back on. “Would you two like the No Name Meat Explosion pizza again?”

Roan’s intense gaze hadn’t left her since she walked up, and though he hadn’t spoken a word, his attention was one hundred percent on her. As if he was trying to decipher if she was lying. She glanced at her pad, waiting for her answer.

“How many times have the two males in the booth twenty-feet away been in here?” Roan asked, surprising her enough that Lola’s head snapped up and her eyes immediately looked at the men in question. They were staring right at her.

“How do you know they’ve been in here before?” she asked, looking back at Roan. His eyes were swirling like a silver hurricane, and it was much more vivid than it had been even from the first time she’d seen them.

He tapped the finger in a steady, staccato rhythm as he stared at her. “They’re not far off from what you just shared about your T.V. show.”

“And how would you know that?” She pulled her order pad to her chest and rested it against her, as if it could somehow shield her from the information Roan shared. “Are you cops or detectives?”

“Not like you think,” Rafe answered. “We work for a bodyguard firm. And do the occasional work for law enforcement to help them with groups like those two are involved in.”

Lola was surprised at his forthcoming answer. “Oh.” That had not been what she’d been expecting them to say. She wasn’t going to say she wasn’t a tad freaked out over some possible sex traffickers asking for her number. Chills ran up her arm as a shiver moved down her spine. How close had she come to being taken into the very scenario that Katy had laid out?

“They’ve definitely been in here before,” Roan shifted in his seat, leaning back slightly. “Even if I hadn’t seen them

once, I can see it by the fear in your eyes.”

“Not to mention the way you smell,” Rafe said so low she barely heard it.

“I stink?” she asked, feeling heat fill her cheeks.

Rafe’s eyes met hers. “That’s not what I said.”

She worked out his words in her mind and then narrowed her eyes. “You can smell my fear? Is that what you’re saying?”

Rafe’s brow rose as his lips tilted up in a curious smirk. “What would you say if I said yes?”

Roan cleared his throat and shifted in his seat. It was an odd move because he looked a little nervous. She didn’t get the impression from the quiet guy that he got nervous easily.

“I’d call B.S.” Lola lifted her chin. “Humans can’t smell fear.”

Rafe didn’t respond. He simply stared up at her as if he didn’t feel the need to argue with her. As if he knew he was right, and his confidence in that knowledge was enough that arguing meant nothing to him.

“Can you just try and stay away from them,” Roan spoke up. “Get someone else to wait on their table.”

“I’m not going to put one of my co-workers in danger,” Lola said quickly.

“But you’d put yourself in danger?” Roan practically snarled as he leaned towards her. His eyes grew even more intense with the silver color.

“I’m no more important than anyone else here.”

“That’s where you’re wrong, Lola Katz,” Rafe said. “You’ve no clue of your value, and we’re telling you that you’re in danger. This is what we do for a living. We track that kind of scum,” his head nodded in the direction of Spiky and Green Hair. “They’ve set their sights on you and you need to be careful.”

“Why are you telling me this?” Her heart beat faster as her palms began to sweat. Call it some weird sixth sense, but she believed them. And it scared the crap out of her.

“Because we don’t want anything to happen to you,” Roan answered, his voice sounding completely sincere.

She held his gaze and he seemed determined to get an answer out of her. “Okay,” Lola found herself saying. “I’ll ask Sal to deal with them.” If she told Sal those guys made her uncomfortable, then he’d make them leave.

Lola jumped when she felt an arm come around her waist and familiar cologne fill her nose. “Hey, Kitten,” Antonio’s voice broke the silent stand off and his warm breath brushed against her cheek just before he pressed a kiss there.

You have got to be kidding me, Lola internally groaned.

Roan’s eyes zeroed in on the hand pressed to Lola’s stomach and she could feel Rafe’s glare. Both guys seemed to be radiating some serious pissed-off vibes as they looked ready to take Antonio out. Was he involved in the whole sex thing? Lola had always gotten the feeling that Sal’s son was into some shady business because he was as close to a sugar daddy as she’d seen in NNP. But she’d never gotten the vibe that he was sinister or *that* kind of criminal.

“Who’s this?” Roan asked, his eyes narrowed on Antonio and if looks could kill, her unwelcome suitor would be not only dead, but ash, at her feet.

Lola tried to surreptitiously squirm out of Antonio’s hold, but he just tightened his arm. “I’m Lola’s—”

“Friend,” she blurted out. “This is Antonio, the owner’s son, and a friend of mine.”

Antonio’s body tensed and she knew he was not happy with her answer. “These guys giving you problems, Lo?” he asked. “You looked a little uncomfortable.”

“If she looked a *little* uncomfortable before you made your presence known,” Rafe said, “she looks downright disgusted now.”

Lola briefly closed her eyes and wondered if she could feign sickness and just take the day off.

“I’m fine, Antonio. And no, they’re not giving me any trouble.” She turned to look up at him and wished she hadn’t. It put their faces much too-intimately close. His eyes were filled with a possessiveness that made her more than uncomfortable. It freaked her the hell out. “I’ve got to get back to work,” she told him and finally managed to dislodge his hold.

His jaw clenched. “Of course. But, I’m taking you out to lunch today. So let the other girls know you’ll be off at noon for a couple hours.”

“I can’t,” she started, but he shocked her into silence as he leaned down and brushed his lips to hers.

Lola heard low growls coming from the two guys sitting at the table beside her.

“You’ll still get paid, Kitten,” Antonio whispered, his lips still practically touching hers.

He smiled at her and then glanced back at Roan and Rafe. His look beyond smug as he strutted away like a predator who’d made it clear that she was *his* and would take out anyone who got in the way of him.

“That your male?” Roan asked, his voice tight.

She turned to look at him. “My male?” she asked slowly.

“Your boyfriend,” Rafe quickly corrected. “Lover?”

Lola choked as she attempted to swallow. “What? No.” Lola suddenly felt the urge to get as far away from not just Antonio— Spikey and Green-Haired Guy, but Roan and Rafe, and NNP— for that matter. She wanted to hide in her room and escape into a book, pretend weird things hadn’t invaded her life. No matter how curious it all made her. Her idea of adventure hadn’t included bodyguards, sex traffickers, and an Italian guy who couldn’t take a hint and had freaking kissed her in front of customers without her permission. She was so going to kill Antonio. Or Katy would maim the hell out of him, then tell Sal, who probably would kill his son. He might want Antonio and her together, but he wouldn’t put up with his son taking liberties that weren’t his to take.

“Okay, I’m going to put your order in, and I’ll grab your drinks,” she said. Quickly turning away, she walked as if her

ass was on fire and she needed to find some water to sit in like yesterday.

“Did I just see Antonio kiss you?” Katy hissed as soon as Lola reached the counter.

“Yes, and I’m going to murder him, so plan to see me in prison and bring me books,” Lola said as she headed for the break room. “Sal, I need a large No Name Meat Explosion,” she called out. As she began to take her apron off.

“What are you doing?” Katy and Maddie asked at the same time. She hadn’t realized they’d both followed her.

“I’m seriously not feeling good, and in the spirit of honesty so Katy doesn’t lose her shit, I just need to get away from here.”

“Did those guys do something?” Maddie asked, her spine stiffening.

Lola grabbed her arm. She needed to keep her friend from running at Roan and Rafe with who knows what intentions. “No. They didn’t do anything other than inform me that Katy suspicions were freakishly accurate. I mean what the hell, Katy?”

Her friend’s eyes widened. “They are in a gang?”

“Do you have some sort of psychic ability that you’ve never *told us* about?” Lola asked, her voice sounding unfairly accusing. Of course, Katy wasn’t a psychic. Lola didn’t even believe in such a thing.

“I was just blowing smoke,” Katy said. “In what freakish universe would I be even remotely close at something like

that?"

"Stranger things have happened," Lola said as she thought about the things she'd seen. It was all too much. "Can y'all cover for me? I'm sorry," she said as she grabbed her bag. "I just, I don't know. But I can't be here right now."

"We get it," Maddie said and gave her a hug. "Should you walk home alone?"

"It's the middle of the day," Lola pointed out. "And those other guys said they're bodyguards and have been keeping an eye on those other guys. Just tell them I don't feel well and I'm headed home. I have a feeling they'll make sure Spikey Spiky and Green Hair don't leave and follow me." Roan and Rafe gave off some serious 'we will take you down' vibes and seemed sincerely worried about her. *Why?* Other than just maybe they were those type of guys who really did want to remove bad guys who posed a threat to anyone, not just Lola.

"We got you," Katy told her. "But call us the minute you get home."

Lola nodded. "I will."

"I will hunt you down if you don't, Lola Katz," her feisty friend warned. "Don't make me come after you."

Maddie shoved their friend. "Dude, she's already got people after her. She doesn't need you on that list."

Katy looked at her. "I'm not hunting her down to make her my sex slave. No matter how hot she is. Even I have morals."

Lola rolled her eyes. Leave it to Katy to attempt to make the intense situation a little less stressed. "I'll be fine and I'll

text.” She grabbed her bag and went out the back door so she wouldn’t have to see the four guys weirdly interested in her. Seriously, she was nobody. Yet she had a stalker, a gang of freaks and two bodyguards, suddenly very interested in her. Maybe she shouldn’t have wished for excitement in her life?

“Love you guys, thank you.”

“You know you don’t have to thank us,” Maddie called back.

“Just don’t get your fine ass abducted,” Katy added.

“On it,” Lola said as she pushed the door open and headed out into the noonday heat.

Lola made it two blocks when two forms stepped out in front of her causing her to stumble back in order to keep from running into them. It was Spiky and Green Hair. Her heartbeat sped up as Roan and Rafe’s words ran through her head like a news alert. In her mind’s eye, she saw her face hanging up on one of those cork boards with all the missing people, her eyes vacant and her hair a mess. Why did those pictures always make the missing people look like it was their mugshot, even if they’d never had a mugshot taken?

“Can we have a word with you?” Spiky asked in his stupid, British accent. Stupid because it was still attractive. *Focus, Lola.*

“Considering you’ve nearly knocked me over in order to do so, I kind of get the feeling I don’t have a choice in the matter,” she answered honestly.

Both guys frowned at her as if she'd just spoken some foreign language. "Why wouldn't we give you a choice, Love?" Spiky asked.

Okay, I'm done with the damn nicknames, Lola thought as she folded her arms in front of her and began to tap her foot. "What are your names? And why do you look like that? Why are you following me? Are you sex traffickers, because I'm totally not going to make it easy on you. And if you are, are your mothers aware of what you've chosen to do in life? Can you imagine how incredibly sad and disappointed they are at your determined profession, if you can even call it a profession? And whatever happened to just stealing *things*? Did we really have to throw people into the mix? What about just good ol' theft of crap that doesn't belong to you?" Lola shook her head as she glared at her two might-be abductors. "What?" she snapped when they blinked at her like stupid, cartoon characters.

"Nothing." Spiky held up his hands. "I was just being polite. Making sure you were done."

Her brow rose. "Oh, so you're considerate sex traffickers? How progressive of you."

"First," Green Hair held up a hand. "I'm Tag," he pointed to himself, and then to Spiky, "And this is Cam. That's to your first question."

"Tag?" She almost smiled. "Like tag you're it?"

"I'm not much into chasing things," he shrugged. "I leave that to the cats and dogs."

Lola's foot paused in its tapping rhythm, and she sighed. "I don't even know what to say to that."

"Second question," Cam said, "you live in New York city. Our appearances can't be that odd to you."

"Not to mention, your own sk—" Tag started, but grunted when Cam elbowed him in the solar plexus.

She tilted her head, and shifted her weight to her other leg, letting her hip pop out. "No. Go on. Let your friend say what he was going to say."

"I wasn't," Tag wheezed as he sucked in a breath, "saying that you look weird or bad. Your skin is cool as shit."

Cam closed his eyes briefly as if he was attempting to gain his composure. "I think what my companion means is you're quite lovely and the vitiligo only adds to it."

She took a step back. "You know what it is?"

"I can be quite curious when I find something I'm interested in," he smiled. "Or someone."

Her foot began tapping again. "Uh-huh, and what about my six other questions?"

"I can answer all of them with one," Cam said as he slipped his hands into his pockets. Tag rubbed his abdomen as he continued to stare at her with an intensity that made Lola want to hide from. "We're not sex traffickers. Is that what those two other gentlemen told you?"

"What two gentlemen?" she asked, attempting to sound clueless.

“We know who they are.” Cam tilted his head down and gave her a reproofing look, as if to call her out on her obtuseness. “And they’ve just pulled a classic maneuver on a potential victim.”

She took a step back. “Potential victim?”

“We’re not the threat,” Tag said quickly. “They are. Cam is saying they’re trying to convince you we’re the bad guys so you’ll trust them.”

“When they,” Cam picked up, “are in fact the ones you should be wary of.”

Lola’s hands began to sweat. She grabbed the straps of her backpack, pulling them forward so the bag pushed against her back. The resistance gave her something to focus on while she tried to process what Cam and Tag were telling her. She didn’t know any of these men and had no idea which of them was telling the truth.

“Look,” Cam took a step back. “I don’t want to scare you.”

“Too damn late,” she muttered.

“We just wanted you to know we’re not the enemy,” Cam told her. “And like I said, we’ll keep an eye on you if other males are bothering you.”

“Why?” she practically gasped. “Why would you keep an eye on me? You don’t know me. You’ve been in NNP twice and asked me for my number, which I totally shot you down, if you recall. So, why on earth, do I matter to you?”

“Do you believe in fate?” Cam asked. Tag still watched, his eyes never leaving her. *Was he even blinking?*

“I believe in a lot of things. Most of all,” she released one hand, held it up and made a flicking motion. “I believe in the right to walk home without being followed by possible sex traffickers, narcissists with body morphing addictions, or both.” Okay, so she hadn’t meant to say that last part, but her eyes had jumped to Tag, and that damn forked-tongue had made an appearance again.

“Body what?” Cam frowned.

She started forward, her short legs moving briskly. “Please let me be on my way, I’m tired and I just want to go home.”

“Wait,” Cam made to reach for her but she pulled back.

“Do not make me yell *fire*,” she warned. “As you pointed out it’s New York City. And in a place where buildings are literally stacked on top of each other, we take the ‘f’ word very seriously.”

Cam held his hands up and took a step back. “Noted. But we’re not going to hurt you. We noticed those guys bothering you and want to help.”

“I don’t need help,” Lola said as she continued walking. “Thanks for being a concerned citizen, or whatever, but I’m good. Great actually. Bye. Have a great day.” She kept walking, not bothering to look over her shoulder. “Have a great day? Lola? Seriously?” she muttered as she kept walking. But she didn’t go home. That’s the last thing she needed, to lead those two nut-jobs to her apartment. She made a right, three blocks down, and then a left, heading for a coffee shop. She’d caffeinate herself up and make her thoroughly shaken up nerves, even more so. Lola sent a quick text to Katy

and Maddie letting them know she was going to grab a coffee and would text them when she got home.

When she reached the coffee shop, she hurried inside. She could feel eyes on her again and she knew it was the eyes of her stalker. It was as if her body was in tune to him. *How? Hell if she knew. How was it that Tag had a forked tongue and Cam had scales on his face?* Nothing made sense and she was too frustrated to attempt to figure it out. So instead she got a delicious caffeinated drink and plopped her butt in a chair that faced the entire coffee shop and a wall at her back. Lola leaned back in her chair and tried to relax. *When hell freezes over,* she thought as she sipped her drink.



“She’s being watched,” Cam said as he sat in the black SUV a block down from *No Name Pizzeria*.

“There hasss to be a minute when she’ssss alone,” Azure, the King of his kingdom, hissed.

Cam knew he’d be pissed, but short of taking the *animus* female in front of any of the Kingdom of Claws cats, there’d been no way they could snatch her.

“It’s not just the Shaman that’s watching her,” he gritted out. “She’s got the attention of Callon. We managed to talk to her outside of her place of work but I could feel the damn cat’s

eyes. I'm surprised he didn't confront us." The rage rolling off the Kingdom of Claws Prince had been palpable.

There was a low humming sound from the other end of the phone and Cam knew his King's hood was probably fully open. As a king cobra shifter, even his mid-shift was scary as hell. "The Prince wants to claim her."

"He's never wanted a mate," Cam argued. "It's been the talk of many kingdoms. They all are waiting for Taras to die so that the Kingdom of Claws will weaken under the rule of an unmated ruler."

"You underestimate the appeal of an *animus* once a male has found one he wants. Even something as ridiculous as a bias towards another species cannot compete against our natural instinct to find a mate." Cam would argue with the King of Venom simply because he seemed to be a heartless bastard, but even he had a mate. He practically worshiped his Queen though she was just as twisted as their King. Maybe that's what made it work between them. Maybe it was why they were drawn to one another.

"Well, whatever he's decided, he's glued to her ass," Cam said with a hiss of frustration, running his hand over his spiked hair. His scales were showing when he dropped his arm. Though a human wouldn't see it thanks to the glamour of their kind.

"I want her," Azure said. "I have a buyer who is paying a fortune for her."

"What's so special about her?" Cam could admit she was beautiful with her unusual skin and striking multi-colored red

hair. Yes, she was definitely an *animus*, but other than that, he couldn't pick up on anything that set her apart from any other *animi*.

“All are ssspecial,” Azure snapped. “We haven't been finding near as many as we did six months ago. Every single *animus* we get means mates for us or money. Both of which mean power.”

Cam didn't need the reminder of how important mates were. He'd been waiting for over a century for his own mate. None of the females they'd retrieved over the years had caught his attention. Once they realized the female had to actually love the male in order to unbind the magic that kept them from being able to shift, they could no longer have what essentially equated to arranged matings.

“Continue to pursue the female,” his King continued. “Just because Callon has chosen her doesn't mean she will choose him.”

And wasn't that the kick in the balls? A male could fall for a female, and yet, she could turn to another and he'd be wondering if he'd ever feel that way again with his beast locked tightly away. He could feel his own snake beneath his flesh. “As you wish,” he answered.

Azure ended the call and Cam leaned his head back against the headrest. The door opened and Link slid into the passenger seat. The Shaman's face was pinched as his swirling, silver eyes brimmed with barely contained rage.

“What's your problem?” Cam asked.

“I did what you asked and distracted the KOC Shaman and cat in the pizzeria.” His jaw clenched tightly. “You owe me some answers. Why are we here?” Link asked as he shifted in his seat so he could look at Cam directly.

“I think that’s pretty obvious.” Cam pinched the bridge of his nose. Though Link was a Shaman, he was the Shaman assigned to the Kingdom of Venom and therefore had some loyalty to them. Although, his duty would always come to his oath to Visata first. Just like the other Shaman. “Word of Lola got around quickly.” He glanced out the window. Humans scurried about rushing to wherever it was they needed to be, barely paying enough attention to keep from getting hit by a taxi or city bus.

News of an animi could never stay hidden because there were other Damarian in another’s territory all the time. It was a part of the peace treaty the Shaman put in place when they came to this realm eons ago. Segregation bred distrust and dislike, and so they didn’t want to keep kingdoms from interacting with one another freely. There were, however, rules. Which considering they were predators, was a good idea.

“We’ve been here for three weeks. We’ve been in the pizza place twice,” Link said. “It’s obvious the Kingdom of Claws Prince has taken a shine to her. Considering we’re in their territory, it is *us* that needs to back down. If she doesn’t want him, that news will travel just as fast as the news of her being found, and we can be back to try and—”

“We talked to her,” Cam interrupted as Tag climbed into the back seat. “That’s why I texted you to come and distract the cats. We just needed to talk to her and get a sense of how she feels. Is she really as standoffish about males or is it a front?”

“She’s gone to a coffee shop,” Tag spoke up. “Callon is tailing her. He was torn between following me or staying with her.” He chuckled. “I almost tempted him, but he’s damn protective of her.”

“We need to go back to our territory,” Link said with an exhausted sigh. “I’ve been called in for a meeting. And I’m not leaving you two here with Callon on edge. You both seem to suddenly have a death wish.”

Cam gripped the steering wheel tightly. He couldn’t say no to Link if the Shaman had called a meeting. It would be suspicious, and despite Cam’s own loyalty, he didn’t want Link getting caught in the crossfire of what the Azure was doing. Not that he could stop it. He was just as desperate for a mate as the other males in his kingdom. And there were so few *animi*. It seemed like Visata was working against them. *But why?*

“Fine,” Cam finally said. “But as soon as the meeting is over, we’re returning.”

Link closed his eyes and leaned back against the headrest. “Just get us home.”

CHAPTER 9

Rabid And Mangy.

"With every paranormal book I've read, you'd think I'd be prepared for meeting a shifter. I mean, I'd already toyed with the idea they were real, right? Yet, when I was slapped upside the head with the reality of it, my mind couldn't grasp it. It's like the rational side of us just can't grasp something so irrational. If it doesn't make sense, our minds want to naturally dismiss it. Of course, fear probably has something to do with it as well. After all, if something we're naturally afraid of doesn't exist, then we can't really be afraid of it. I know. It makes no sense, and yet, you're currently nodding your head in agreement. Welcome to the club." ~Lola

Lola's breathing grew shallow as her lungs tightened and her heartbeat pounded out the rhythm to *I'll Be Watching You*. Yes, she knew the old stalker anthem because Maddie had a thing for 80's music. The song had been running through her head since the first time she felt watched. She still hadn't managed to get a look at whoever her stalker was, but she'd felt his stare

on her the entire time she was in the coffee shop. The longer she sat there, the more pissed off she became.

She wanted to go home, but she was too scared to get up and move. Okay, so part of her really hoped she'd see him. She wanted to know who it was. But the day just wore on as she drank cup after cup of coffee. She finally made herself get up to pee, because it was either that, or pee on herself. She wasn't quite ready to let fear make a complete ass out of her. She trekked her short legs back to her chair and continued to bounce her gaze around the room, out the window, and back again. Looking for anyone who stood too still, or stayed in the same spot for too long. Nothing. At some point, she'd literally drifted off to sleep. Who can sleep with that much caffeine in them? *Apparently I can.* When she'd woken up, the sun had set and it was dark outside.

Now here she was, walking home like a fool. She hadn't called or texted either of her friends because she was going to get an earful. Her parents would probably just think she was working a double. *Idiot*, she admonished herself. *Why didn't I walk home while it was still daylight?* Because of Cam and Tag. At least, they were half the reason.

The hairs on the back of her neck rose and goosebumps popped up on her arms. She took a deep breath and blew it out. She was done with this. She sat all damn day in a coffee shop like a scared rabbit. It was time to stop walking and face the person who wouldn't leave her alone. Also, her curiosity was completely unhealthy and it would most definitely be the death of her. *Gotta die sometime*, she thought as she stopped in her tracks and slowly turned around. She walked home from the

NNP every single day and up until the past few weeks it had never felt unsafe. Usually she had Maddie or Katy with her, or both of them, but sometimes she was by herself. NNP was only a few blocks away from home, but it was further from the coffee shop. Currently, it felt like miles, though that was hardly the case.

She slipped her backpack from her arms and reached into the side pocket that was supposed to be for a water bottle. But she used it for Tazmina, Taz for short. And yes, she'd named her taser. It seemed appropriate that it might very well save her from being abducted, and something that useful deserved a name. Lola blew out a breath causing her cheeks to puff out as her eyes wandered around the street.

"I know you're following me," Lola said, trying to sound bold but falling short because her voice cracked like a boy going through puberty. She cleared her throat and tried again. "You might as well show yourself. I'm not going to move until you do." Okay, so that was the *dumbest* threat she could have made. It was like screaming, '*Here I am! Take me, I'm yours!*' and not in a sexy way that a girl might say to a guy she had a crush on. "Dammit all to hades and back again," she muttered under her breath. She debated on whether she should stick to her non-threat, because seriously, it *wasn't* a threat, or if she should just tuck tail like a chicken and run. Something told her that she wouldn't be able to outrun her pursuer. It made her feel like prey, and Lola was not okay with feeling like a scared rabbit. Hence being pissed off for hiding in the coffee shop. Even if deep, deep down she actually did feel like one, but was too proud to admit it. "Pride comes before the fall, Lola," she

said as she continued to scan her surroundings for any movement. “Also, standing in the dark talking to a stalker comes before losing organs, or taking a trip to some secluded barn with a meat hook hanging from the ceiling, and all sorts of torture devices laid out on a wobbly, old table.”

“Why do you do that?” a deep voice rumbled, sending shivers down her spine. The voice couldn’t be more than fifteen-feet away. Which was crazy because she couldn’t see anyone and there wasn’t anywhere for someone to hide that close to her.

It was too late to turn tail, especially since she knew how close he was. *Why, oh why, did she have to be so damn curious, even to the point of stupidity.* Because that’s what it was to be curious about a person who’d been following her for weeks. *Weeks, Lola,* she mentally kicked her own ass. *What the hell are you thinking?*

“You have challenged me, but you won’t answer my question,” the man said in a taunting voice.

A tiny bit of her fear was snuffed out by her annoyance at being mocked. Not that he was wrong. Lola *had* challenged him to step out of the shadows and finally face her. Taz suddenly felt very inadequate as a weapon. Just his voice alone intimidated her.

“Why do I do what?” she finally asked. Perhaps, if she made him see her as a person, and not as the object of his fascination, or his prey, he would be less inclined to abduct her. *Isn’t that what you were supposed to do when faced with a kidnapper?* Lola was pretty sure she’d seen that somewhere on

one of those crime documentaries Katy made her watch on occasion. “Okay, it’s not really smart to think about *any* of those shows. Especially considering your current predicament.”

“You talk out loud, even though there’s no one to listen to you. You do it all the time.”

Lola narrowed her eyes as she still tried to find him, though all she had were the street lights to help her out. “Which you only know because you’ve been following me.”

“Yes,” he said simply.

“That’s all I get?” Lola frowned. “Yes? No explanation?”

“You’ve yet to answer my question,” he pointed out.

“Quid pro quo, huh?” She folded her arms across her chest, Taz still gripped tightly in one of them. “Fine.” Maddie and Katy were going to slap her into next week for doing this. If she survived the encounter, that is. “I talk to myself when I’m nervous, or stressed, or annoyed, or excited, or –”

“Basically any reason,” he interrupted. *Rude.*

Lola bit her bottom lip and then said. “What can I say? I’m a great listener.” Dropping her arms as she attempted to prepare herself to use her taser if he attacked her. “I answered you. Now, it’s your turn. Show yourself and tell me why you’ve been following me.” She waited for his reaction to her demand. Lola’s fear ratcheted up a notch when the air around her thickened. The scurrying sound of cats, stray dogs and rats were oddly absent. Considering New York was never quiet or

still, it was the eeriest thing she'd ever experienced. Other than being followed for weeks, that is.

“Look up,” his voice said, now even closer.

Lola's head slowly tilted back, and she gasped. A form, a very large form, crouching on the edge of the escape ladder on the apartment building she'd been walking past. He was two stories above her and looked as if he might fall off at any moment. “So not only is he creepy, he's also crazy,” she said softly. Then added, “Those two things are pretty much always a pair.”

Lola screeched as the crazy man pushed from the ladder falling to the ground, but instead of going splat, he landed on his feet with freakish ease and grace. His feet didn't even make noise when they hit the ground. “I'm hallucinating,” she said as she took a step back. “That's the only explanation. Some pissed off coffee employee drugged my coffee because I sat there too long and I am hallucinating.” She glanced around to see if anyone else had seen him, but the few people scattered on the sidewalks didn't pay them any attention.

He tilted his head to the side in a completely non-human way. It reminded Lola of the way her cat sometimes looked at her when she spoke to him. Though she knew Dog couldn't understand her, it often felt like he tried to.

“You know you're not,” the man said as he pushed up from the crouched stance he'd landed in. His body kept rising until she had to tilt her head back to look up at him. He had to be at least six and a half feet or taller. Considering Lola was barely five-foot-one, many people were taller than her, but this dude

towered above her. “You’ve been noticing things about my kind for a while now. Does that mean you’ve been drugged all this time?”

“Yep,” she answered without thought. “Maybe I’ve been eating moldy cheese and it’s causing the symptoms. It’s totally possible.”

“What do you see when you look at me, Lola?”

Oh, snap. That voice, deep and velvety, with her name rolling off his tongue, was much too sexy. *Definitely eating moldy cheese.* Or again watching too many documentaries, thanks to Katy and her damn demanding ways, on Stockholm Syndrome. No one should be attracted to their stalker-slash-possible-abductor who has freakish abilities and was inhumanly handsome. “You’re eyes, they’re like Dog’s,” she said without thinking. “They glow when they catch the light.”

He scowled at her, which was actually kind of cute. *Snap out of it, Lola. You do not think Stalker Dude is hot.* But she did, dammit.

“My eyes do not look like your cat’s.” He sounded completely offended as his face scrunched up as if disgusted by the very idea.

“How the hell do you know I have a cat?” she snapped back, as both anger and fear rippled down her spine.

He took a step towards her, his body leaning forward, to which she retreated with a step backwards. “You already know how. You said yourself that I’ve been following you for a while now.” He paused and frowned. “Speaking of which, why

would you name your cat, Dog?” He sounded completely offended.

Lola rested a hand on her hip, momentarily distracted by the fact he'd obviously been watching her at her apartment. It was her turn to tilt her head as if to get a different angle of him. “Are you upset on behalf of my cat?”

Creepy Dude stood up straight, no longer leaning nearer to her space and crossed his very muscular arms in front of him. “It's not a respectable name for such a majestic creature.”

Lola pressed her lips together in an attempt not to laugh. *A cat. Majestic?*

“They're in the same classification of lions,” he said so matter of fact, it almost didn't sound ridiculous. “You know, the king of the animal kingdom.”

“So, you're not only creepy and crazy, you're also mentally unstable?” Lola asked.

He sighed and rolled his golden eyes. “That's redundant. Crazy and mentally unstable are the same thing.”

Lola shook her head. “I beg to differ. Crazy is the absence of sanity. Mentally unstable is the lack of the ability to think reasonably about something.”

His lips quirked up in a crooked smile. *Ugh. Why were the nutty ones always hot?*

“There's no need to beg. There will be plenty of other opportunities with much more pleasurable outcomes.”

Lola's mouth dropped open, and it would have hit the ground, if her jaw wasn't hindered by a connected bone. *No. He. Didn't.* "Did you just make a pass at me? Or was that some weird, abductor lingo for, 'I'm going to torture you, and I will like it and pretend you like it, too?'"

"I have no intention of torturing you," he said. And then Lola could have sworn she heard him mutter, "At least, not yet."

"Then why have you been following me?" she asked again.

He took another step closer to her as his arms dropped to his side. Lola held up her taser and shook her head at him. "Take another step and Taz will zap your ass."

"Taz?"

She shook the item in question. "My taser."

"You named your cat, Dog. And your taser, Taz." His tone of voice made it clear he was beginning to think that perhaps she was the less than sane one in the current situation. "Do you name all of your possessions?"

She shrugged, but kept her arm up with Taz ready. "Maybe. Do you follow girls around all the time?"

"No, Lola. Just you." His upper lip rose a tad in a near smile, but dropped quickly, his face going back to the inquisitive look he'd been wearing their entire conversation.

Lola swore she saw sharp incisors, like fangs, behind those plump lips. *His lips aren't plump, Lola Katz, you shameless hussy, and if they are, you shouldn't be noticing.* "Okay, well,

this has been odd. And usually, I'd let my curiosity get the better of me and continue to have a conversation with a man that has strange eyes, is as big as a professional football player, inhumanly handsome, and also batshit crazy. But, I really need to wash my hair, paint my toenails, organize my sock drawer, and color-coordinate my bookshelf." She laughed nervously. "Just, crazy busy. But less crazy than you. So, just busy. I'm sure you have tons to do as well."

He matched her backwards steps with his own, his movements were fluid and graceful for someone so large. He actually reminded her of her cat with the way that his head dropped in his pursuit, his eyes narrowed and flashing eerily. "The only thing on my agenda is talking to you."

"Then I'd say you need to revise your agenda."

"We can talk and walk," he offered as if it was the most reasonable solution. To let her stalker walk her home.

"Let's not," she said, and held Taz up again.

"You got a tattoo two weeks ago," he said, changing the subject to something she'd totally not been expecting.

"You followed me to Wild Ink?" Why she felt the need to ask him that when she'd felt his eyes on her was ridiculous. Her mind just needed confirmation of all the times she'd felt him watching her.

"Are we going to keep having to re-establish that I've been following you?" he asked dryly. "Do I need to qualify it with, 'everywhere,' and pretty much all of the time?"

Why she wasn't running, or zapping him, or at least, throwing the taser at him so she'd have at least a little bit of a head start. Instead, she stopped moving, *again*, because she wanted to know *why*. Always, she wanted to know why, or how, or what, or where. She was like a freaking Dr. Seuss character.

"I'm still coming to terms with your level of psycho. Give a girl a break." Lola rubbed her brow with her free hand. "Why?" she asked. "I don't understand."

"To keep you safe," he answered, sounding completely sincere. "And because I have to be near you. I have to see you, and know what you're doing, that you're okay."

Her eyes snapped up to his. "You do realize that you're not making me feel safe, right?"

He nodded. "I hope to change that. Once you know everything."

"What's *everything* entail?"

He let out a deep breath and seemed to be considering his options. Hopefully, one of those wasn't simply throwing her over his shoulder. "We can start with the tattoo. Which, by the way, you shouldn't have been about to let a male tattoo over your heart."

"How do you know where my tattoo is? Okay," she held up her hand. "Dumb question. You were there. But that means you saw me undress?" These words were not a whisper, but very close to a shriek. One of those shrieks that comes from a

woman on the verge of going into eye-scratching and hair-pulling mode.

“No,” he practically snarled. “I heard you tell Kian where you wanted it. If you will recall, I didn’t take it well. Not to mention, he undressed in front of you, and you’d been about to touch him. Do you just go around touching men that take their shirts off in front of you?”

Lola’s brow furrowed as she thought back to that day. Then it dawned on her. The noise that caused Kian to leave her sitting there in his chair. “You’re his cat?” She couldn’t help the burst of laughter as Kian’s words filled her head. “You’re the unstable, possessive, royal pain in the ass?” She grinned. “Man, he hit the nail on the head.”

“Kian always has had a way with words,” he grumbled.

Lola had given up holding Taz out. Her arm was tired and she was too interested in what she was learning. “You were the one making all that racket? Not a rabid cat? Why? And what the hell were you doing?”

“As I said, you were with him with his shirt off and your hand millimeters from his skin. Not to mention, he was going to put his hands on you,” he hissed. “He knew that was unacceptable, and yet, he started to do it anyways.”

“He’s a tattoo artist, a professional. He was showing me his ink because I asked. That’s the only reason he unbuttoned his shirt. It’s not like we were about to jump each other, or he was going to feel me up,” Lola pointed out, though she had no idea why she’d explain herself to this complete stranger.

“He’s still a male you don’t belong to, it was unacceptable,” he slashed his hand through the air as if to punctuate his words. “And you shouldn’t allow another male to touch you in such an intimate way.”

“You’re a freaking stalker and *you’re* lecturing me on *my* decisions?” she growled back. “I can let whoever I want touch me, wherever I want, however I want.”

“Not if you don’t want that someone to die,” he bit back. “Friend or not. I will kill any male who puts his hands on you.”

“If I could reach your damn face I would slap the ever-loving crap out of you right now,” she said without thinking. As if she could take on someone his size.

“Would you like me to bend down?” Sarcasm laced his voice as his jaw clenched.

“You’re actually angry at *me*? I don’t even know your freaking name, you stalking, dog-hating, peeping Tom, Creeper!” Lola was yelling by the time she finished, and literally stomped her foot. *Who does that?*

“It’s Callon Leo, and yes, I’m angry.” His hands rested on his hips as he seemed to grow in size. “You put yourself in a risky situation. What if it hadn’t been Kian? What if it had been some sleazy male with ulterior motives?”

She laughed. “A sleazy male? Like the damn stalker I have? And surely, you,” she motioned to his whole form. “Could deter anyone else away. Even a sleazy tattoo artist.

You scared Kian away, and as I said, I'm pretty sure he wasn't about to fondle me."

Something like a rumble, or growl, rose up from his chest as he was suddenly in front of her. His face was so close, she could feel his warm breath. "I *have* been deterring others away. I will always deter them away, you're mine," he snapped. His lips pressed together tightly as Callon took several deep breaths. This time he was much calmer as he spoke. "I will always deter them, because you're mine," the words were just as firm, but not growled, "I want to keep you safe."

I'm his? What the hell does that mean? I'm his? I mean, I know what that means in my books, but is what he's saying the same thing? Lola didn't move away from him, even though her mind was screaming at her to do so. There was another part of her that wanted to lean closer, and rub her face against his impressive chest. Listen to his heart beat, and see what he smelled like. "I have lost my freaking mind," she whispered.

"No you haven't," Callon said just as softly. "It is normal for you to feel this way." He stepped back, and she felt bereft at the distance. That quickly changed as he started to lift his shirt.

"Umm, what are you doing?" Lola glanced around again to see if anyone else was noticing the massive man undressing on the sidewalk. But just like all good New Yorkers, their heads were down and their feet were moving at ridiculous paces. "Seriously," she huffed. "I can't get one single night tourist determined to get mugged for the entire Big Apple

experience?” Her eyes turned back to Callon whose shirt was midway up his stomach, revealing quite impressive—okay, really, *really impressive*—abs. *His abs are not important, the fact that he’s stripping is.* “But they’re sort of important.”

“You’re talking to yourself again,” he said in a teasing tone.

“And you’re stripping like the batshit crazy person you are, but by all means, let’s focus on *my* issues.”

His shirt continued to rise. “I want to show you something.”

“You forgot to ask if I wanted to see it first.” Lola shook her head. “And I most definitely do not, no matter how fantastic your abs, and chest, and —” Lola’s mouth froze in mid sentence as she stared at the flesh over his heart.

She might have continued to enjoy the view if she hadn’t been so shocked to see the tattoo there. The same tattoo she had over her own heart. “You, you, your,” she pointed as her eyes widened, “That tattoo. Why is that tattoo like mine?” she squeaked. “I mean that is taking things to an incredibly high level of unstable. I think we should get you some help. There’s doctors who can prescribe medicine that will help you control your urges.” She ran her hands up and down her thighs, and took several deep breaths as she attempted to keep herself together. Dude seriously stood there looking way too damn impressive with his matching tattoo. “All I wanted was a book boyfriend,” she muttered. “I mean, did I want him to change into some cool animal? Maybe. But did I want him to be a nut-

job?” She shook her head. “Preferably no. But then, I live in the false reality of books, what can I really expect to attract?”

“Are you done talking to yourself?” He asked and then pointed to his chest. “I’ve had this tattoo for twenty years, Lola,” he said gently. “It’s *you* who got the matching tattoo.”

Her head was shaking before she even began speaking. “No. I didn’t even know you. How would I know what kind of tattoo you have? That’s insane. All of this is completely, ridiculously, out of this world, insane and I really need to go but dammit, all I want to know is how in stalker-hell you have *that* tattoo. You could be lying. In fact, I’m sure you are. Stalkers aren’t known for their honesty.”

“Known many stalkers?” he asked, his lips twitching as if he was fighting a smile. She got the feeling he didn’t smile much. Maybe because his face lacked the lines that were a result of lots of grins and laughter. Callon’s face was smooth, other than the natural ruggedness, he looked like he’d been sculpted from marble.

“My BFF makes me watch crime shows with her,” she huffed. “Not once has there been a stalker that was like, ‘Oh, I’m telling the truth, officer. I wasn’t stalking her, I was just doing a public service by watching her to keep her safe.’”

“I’m not lying, Lo. Take a deep breath and just focus. Think back to what Kian told you about the tattoo when he drew it up for you.”

“Only my family, friends and the voice in my head, get to call me Lo.” She narrowed her eyes at him. “And don’t tell me

what to do. I'll take shallow breaths if I want to, thank you very much."

"Even if it makes you pass out and I have to resuscitate you?" The smug look was back as was the flirtatious tone that made her gooey inside.

"You don't resuscitate a person who has passed out, you crazy ass-hat. And put your damn shirt back on. You're distracting me from thinking rationally." Lola ran a hand across her face as she tried to remind herself that regardless of how handsome he was, how intriguing he was, and strange—Yes, she was drawn to strange things. Regardless of those things, she needed to walk away. Callon Leo was trouble, and possibly a threat, even if she hadn't felt threatened by him since the moment he began talking. She attempted to convince herself he was, and that's why she'd done her own threatening with her trusty Taz. In reality, she'd only felt drawn to him. *Don't forget attracted*, she reminded herself, *you're totally leaving that one out.*

"What did Kian tell you about that tattoo, Lola," he pressed again.

She scrunched up her face as she tried to think back to that conversation. She remembered the surprise on his face. The way he'd looked at the door where his 'unstable cat' had supposedly been. "He said he'd only drawn one other tattoo that was similar a long time ago." She looked at the lion on Callon's still-bare chest. "But he said it was a long time ago. Kian didn't look a day over twenty-five." Lola's brain felt like it was going to explode. Her life had changed so much in three

weeks and it didn't look like it was going back to normal anytime soon. "Was he tattooing people when he was in kindergarten? And you said you got it twenty years ago?"

"Not exactly," he answered evasively. "Look, I know it's a lot. I can see it all over your face," he took a step towards her. "But you're also a curious one. So, give me a chance to show you that I am not dangerous to you. To help you understand why you've been seeing strange things. Explain why we have the same tattoo, and," his voice dropped into dangerous bedroom territory, "why you want to purr as you rub up against me."

This time Lola didn't stop herself from laughing, "I so do *not* want to rub against you and purr. I don't purr. It's not humanly possible to purr. Like, that's not a thing. Besides that I have no idea where you've been rolling around or with whom. I don't rub up against random people. Purr?" she flicked her hand at him as if to brush away his comment. "I mean who says stuff like that?" Lola laughed again and silently asked God to open a hole and let her fall into it. God did not grant the request.

Callon did that moving fast thing again. This time he didn't just stand close to her, he touched her as well. His very large hands cupped her face and Lola stopped breathing. She'd never had a guy hold her face, or even touch her, for that matter. Well, not in a way that made her feel like this. Like she wanted to purr dammit. *I do not want to rub against him. I do not want to rub against him.* But she totally did.

“Good,” Callon growled. “I’d hate to have to gnaw some poor male’s hands off.”

“Did I say that out loud?”

He nodded and smiled. This time she did see fangs. He didn’t bother to try to cover them as he had the first time he’d smiled. “I don’t share and I don’t like the idea of anyone having touched you, even in the past.”

She stared at him, unable to speak as his words ran through her mind on repeat. Not to mention the pearly-white, pointed canines she couldn’t seem to take her eyes off of. The sound of her phone ringing broke the silence. “Hold that thought, please,” she told him. She pulled her phone from her back pocket, slid her thumb across the screen and placed it to her ear, all without ever looking away from Callon’s eyes, or his hands dropping away. “Hello?” Her voice sounded strained as if her vocal chords were being squeezed.

“You were supposed to call me when you got home,” Katy barked without preamble. “You texted hours ago and said you’d call me.”

“And me,” she heard Maddie in the background.

“You got off work hours ago and the text from the coffee shop was hours ago. We thought we’d give you some space because we’re the shit as best friends, but obviously, that was a dumb idea. Did you get abducted?”

Lola laughed nervously as Callon leaned closer and pressed his forehead to hers. He relaxed at the touch, and she

was pretty sure she heard him sigh. “If I had, do you think my abductor would let me answer my phone?”

“Abductors are cray-cray,” Katy responded. “Perhaps, he’s not all there in the head and forgot to take your phone away.”

He’s definitely not all there in the head, Lola thought as she tried to ignore the way Callon’s thumbs gently caressed her jaw. She was in no way being affected by his touch. It was as if her mom was touching her face. *Okay, no. That’s just wrong.* The way she was feeling because of his touch could in no way be in the same context of her mom touching her face.

“Hello? Earth to Lola,” Katy’s voice jerked her out of her head space. “Where are you? And what is that sound? Is that purring? I’ve never heard Dog purr that loudly.”

Lola felt Callon’s body move and she realized he was laughing. He could hear her conversation, not that it was surprising. Katy was as loud as a bull horn even on her quietest days. She put her hand on his chest and pushed, but she might as well have been shoving a tree. Dude wasn’t going anywhere he didn’t want to. And he was purring, or it sure as heck sounded like purring, only much louder than her cat’s. And dammit, he still had his shirt off. His skin was warm and fleshy. *What the hell is fleshy?* She didn’t know, but Lola knew she liked it. A lot.

“It’s not Dog,” Lola said. “It’s a stray cat I found wandering around. He looks like he might be rabid, and he’s all mangy-looking.”

Callon pulled back and raised a brow at her. His perfectly, symmetrical face, strong jawline and high cheekbones giving

him a regal look. “Mangy?” he asked, not even bothering to lower his voice.

“Is that a man?” Katy practically yelled.

“What man? Where’s a man? Since when does she have a man?” The questions flew from Maddie’s mouth, each one getting louder, making Lola think she was probably getting closer to the phone.

He smirked at her as if he’d won some secret battle she didn’t even know they were playing. “I’m not rabid either, though ravenous might be a different story.”

“He sounds hot,” Katy blurted, “Is he hot?”

“What’s he look like?” Maddie asked and then there was rustling from the other end of the line.

“Give me my damn phone, you thief,” Lola heard Katy say, and then a shrill yell which had her pulling her phone from her ear.

“I can’t believe you just pushed me off your bed,” Maddie snapped back. “I could have broken my neck.”

“One can only hope,” Katy muttered. “Now, back to the man,” she seemed to refocus on Lola. “You still there, Lo?”

“Nope. I’ve hung up and I’m calling Animal Control to pick up this disease-ridden feline,” she answered dryly. Lola was acting a lot more nonchalant than she felt.

“Put him on the phone,” Katy ordered. “Now or I will hunt you down, and torture the information out of you.”

“This I have to see,” Callon chuckled. “Don’t put me on the phone. I’d like to meet this friend of yours.” He pulled away and began to put his shirt back on, *finally*. Lola tried not to be sad over the loss of the lovely view, but also, if Katy showed up, the last thing she needed was her BFF slobbering on Callon.

She saw the curiosity in his eyes and Lola felt her ire rise at his interest in Katy. Why in the world she would be jealous of his wanting to meet one of her best friends? She had no idea. *Okay, that wasn’t true*. Callon was *her* stalker, dammit, and she didn’t want to share him. “Shut the front door,” Lola hissed. “I’ve jumped off the deep end. I am jealous of my freaking creeper.” Her eyes widened so wide she knew she had to look comical. “I can’t believe I just said that out loud.”

“Creeper?” Katy asked. “Okay Chick, you’re beginning to make me worried, and that’s saying something considering how weird you are. But even this is a bit much for you. Are you telling me the guy with you is a creeper? Do I need to call the 5-O? Or is it more serious? I know a guy who knows a guy. He does some night clean up.”

“Is she offering to have me killed?” Callon asked, his voice full of humor and not the least bit worried. His eyes danced with mischievousness and it was cute as hell.

“Damn straight, Creeper Dude,” Katy yelled. “I will gut you like a dead fish, only you will be very much alive when I do it, and so you’ll flop around like a live fish. Until your entrails pour out of your body. Then you’ll stop flopping. It will be very disturbing.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Maddie said again in the background. “We’ll gather our gear.”

Callon’s face completely changed as a huge grin appeared on his face. *He needed to never, ever smile. That crap was lethal.* He seemed completely delighted at her friends’ very real threats. Her BFF’s were batshit crazy.

“Stop smiling,” she pointed at him with a glare. “Don’t ever smile like that again.” Lola turned her attention back to the phone. “And you don’t have any gear, you two psychos,” Lola sighed. She’d gone from being worried about a stalker, to being attracted to her stalker, to needing to get away from her stalker, being jealous about her stalker— which damn, that is messed up— and now she was talking her friends out of saving her from said stalker. *What the actual hell?* “A pocket knife on your keyring doesn’t count as gear, Maddie,” she said before her blonde-haired friend could bring up the tiny blade. “Look, I’m fine,” Lola pinched the bridge of her nose. “I’m talking to someone that saw us in the tattoo shop a couple weeks ago. He’s a friend of Kian’s, the guy who drew my tattoo. And no, I haven’t been holding out on you.” She totally had been. Lola hadn’t mentioned a thing to either girl about her feelings of being watched. Katy and Maddie were going to lose their crap. “I’ll call you back in a little bit when I get home. If you don’t hear from me in fifteen minut—”

“Twenty-five,” Callon cut her off.

Lola glared at him. “Fifteen,” she said through gritted teeth.

He tilted his head in that weird animalistic way, “Twenty, or I might show up while you, Katy, and Maddie, are on your way to work to have a chat.”

“Of course, you know who they are,” she huffed. She’d been jealous, and he’d already seen Katy and Maddie when he’d been creeping on her. “Fine, if you don’t hear back from me in twenty minutes, call your people.”

“Umm,” Katy drew out. “You realize that I don’t really have people, right? It’s kind of like the whole gear thing. But,” she quickly added. “I’m sure I can find someone on the internet. There’s got to be a website for that. Hit-Man-R-Us? The internet has everything.”

“Okay, hanging up now,” Lola said. “Talk to you two in twenty.” She ended the call to the shouts of her two best friends telling her to be careful, and use protection. She loved them. She just had to keep telling herself that.

“Now,” Callon stepped close to her again. “Where were we?”

CHAPTER 10

I Need You To Stop Petting Me.

"Captivating. It's not a word I use often. I have a feeling it will be a common word in my mind because that is what she is to me. With one look, with one word, with one touch, I am her willing captive. Nothing and no one will ever have the hold she has on me." ~ Callon

Callon couldn't believe he was standing in front of his mate. He'd been following her for so long that he'd gotten used to being in the background, unable to get too close, let alone touch her. But now, here she was. She smelled better than anything he'd ever scented. Her skin was softer than silk and he wanted to soak up her warmth. It had taken everything in him to drop his hands after he'd cupped her face.

So far, he was sure he hadn't impressed her in any way. *Other than his chest*, he inwardly smirked. Judging by the look in her eyes, Lola thought he was completely insane. Unfortunately, she wasn't too far off the mark. Especially when it came to her. Callon thought he was dangerous before

he'd met his mate. Now? Now, he was the most deadly beast, in not only his territory, but probably any kingdom.

He hadn't planned to introduce himself to her today, but after seeing the two snakes talking to her and then the green-haired one followed her to the coffee shop, Callon realized he couldn't wait any longer. They were getting too bold, and in *his* territory. He could no longer just be a spectator. Callon had been trying to wait for the right time to approach her. He wanted to do it in a way that was more natural, the way humans met and dated. If the snakes were the ones behind the women being stolen, then Lola was in danger. That was unacceptable. Callon would protect her at all cost as would the Kingdom of Claws.

"We were saying goodbye," Lola answered, her brow furrowing as she wrestled with what her head was telling her to do, and what her soul needed her to do. As much as she was his, he was hers as well. The image of the lion they both bore on their flesh sealed their fate.

"You asked me why I've been stalking you," he reminded her. "I've yet to give you an answer. Not to mention how I know exactly *what* your tattoo looks like. Don't you want to know *how* I knew that it looked like mine?"

"I've formulated some answers." She held up a finger. "One, you're insane. And two," second finger, "Kian is obviously a friend and he probably showed you the drawing of the tattoo he did. Which means he's as insane as you are because crazy people stick together. "What I don't know is how neither of you, or any of the others with the weird things I

can't explain— like Jaxine and her spider legs— haven't been put in a mental hospital yet. There's no way there's so many of you running around without someone calling the mental police. Not that there are mental police. Though there really should be. Sometimes you don't need to call the regular police because it's not criminals that are terrifying you. It's just people who need to have their heads examined. Like hot dudes who take their shirts off to show you their matching tattoos that they got when they were still sucking on a pacifier.” Her quick wit made him laugh and her curiosity made it clear she was indeed a feline *animus*. After all, the saying, ‘curiosity killed the cat,’ wasn't totally wrong. “So, no. I don't need any answers. I'm good. Going to go on about my life and you're going to go back to yours and that's that. I'm totally good.”

“Liar,” he said with a slight purr. She brought out his inner lion and soon, he would finally be able to take on the full form of his beast. And Lola would discover that she was more than human. “You're dying to know more. Admit it.” His lip rose slightly showing off a fang. “You saw Jaxine's legs.”

“That sounds so disturbing without even knowing that there were eight of them,” she said on a sigh.

“That's just more proof that you're exactly who I say you are.”

“You haven't told me anything other than the fact that I'm *yours*,” she growled.

“Which is the most important piece of information you need to remember, even after I tell you the rest of it,” he warned.

“You have,” she looked at her phone. “Eighteen minutes left. You better get to talking.”

“What if I told you that what you see is real?” he asked. “The times when you thought you saw animal characteristics in the appearance of different people you’ve come in contact with over the past month, are not a figment of your imagination. There’s a secret world, Lola. A world of shifters—beastwalkers— that live right here among the humans.” He paused, letting her digest his words.

“You’ve been following me and spying on me through my window. You know I read paranormal books, so this is what you come up with? Seriously?” She shook her head as if she was disappointed in him. “I was actually expecting the truth from you. I don’t know why. I had a feeling you were different. But I guess I was wrong.”

He reached for her but she took a step back. “I am different. That’s exactly what I’m telling you.” He wanted to touch her again. To feel her soft skin against his own. “Look at me, Lola,” he growled, attempting to keep his composure. “*Really* look at me. Please.” He needed her to see his beast, to believe what her eyes were telling her despite what her human brain believed to be true. Callon felt the animal inside of him stretching. The skin on his hands tightened, and he looked down to see sharp claws had taken the place of the human nails. The wind rustled his hair, and when it touched his neck, he realized that it had grown longer and felt fuller. He nearly grinned. He wondered if his mane in his lion form would be as blond as his human hair? The darkness around him lightened as if nearly day time. His feline eyesight had grown even more

acute as his pupils dilated to grasp as much light around him. Even his canines felt larger than they'd already been.

Lola's mouth dropped open and then closed. She repeated this over and over as she stared at him. Her eyes jumped from his face, to his hair and then down to his hands. She started to shake her head but then seemed to collect herself. "What are you?"

"I just told you. I'm a beastwalker." The animal inside of him reached for her, not in a physical way. It was deeper than skin. As if his soul called to hers. Lola gasped as she pressed her hand to her chest, just over the tattoo. "You felt that?" he asked, the desperation in his voice as high as what he felt in his soul. "I don't fully understand it," he admitted. "Usually our kind mates with whom they choose. Both male and female choose to love each other, but somehow this is more. *You* were made for *me*. Please," he pleaded. "Believe me."

"I don't know what to believe," she answered. Her brow drew low and he hated the confusion he saw there. He wanted her curiosity, not her worry or fear.

"I won't hurt you. I would never hurt you," he promised. "Every cell in my body, my spirit, and soul, are yours." Perhaps that was a little too intense, but then he didn't really have the luxury of taking it slow.

"Okay," she breathed out in a high-pitched voice. "That was weird, not that I expect any less from you considering your history, but you have to understand how this sounds. No matter what I *want* to believe."

“It’s true, and I can prove it to you,” he promised, instilling as much honesty and sincerity in his voice as he could. “I’m a member of the Kingdom of Claws. My father is the Prime, the leader of our kingdom.”

“Mmm-hmmm, and what do you shift into?” she asked slowly, still sounding unsure of what he was telling her.

He couldn’t help the slow smile that formed on his lips. “What do you think?”

Lola met his gaze and stared at his eyes. “Your eyes are like my cat’s. So you’re a cat?”

Callon tried not to be offended. “I’m a lion, Lo. Not a house cat. Big difference.”

“Is there really?” she asked, her face pinching up. “Because you both purr, you both have claws, and you’re both creepy as hell.”

Using his beastwalker speed, he was in front of her before she could retreat from him. Callon took her hands in his and pressed them to his chest.

“You also move fast and gracefully like a cat,” she muttered.

“I’m of the feline family, but I’m far from tame, and I don’t meow.”

To his surprise she laughed. And then kept on laughing. Callon wasn’t sure if he should be offended or not. After a minute, she finally sighed. “Sorry, I got a mental picture of you as this massive lion opening your mouth to roar, but then a little meow came out.”

Callon snarled, and the sound that came from his chest was anything but human, and definitely not a 'meow.' "Have I changed your mind?"

"Son of a biscuit, you're really not human, are you?" The light bulb went on in her mind, as if she was actually seeing him for the first time. The human ideas were being replaced by the reality of what she believed to be impossible, what every human believed to be impossible. Beastwalkers were real and she was actually speaking to one.

"Okay, okay," she breathed out as her small hands fisted his shirt. Callon released her hands, but she didn't let go of him, which he liked. A lot. He ran his hands up and down her biceps hoping he could keep her calm. "This is happening. I mean, what other explanation is there? Those aren't contacts, are they?" She lifted up on her toes to get closer and Callon obliged by leaning down. She smelled incredible, all warm and inviting, calling to his lion to nuzzle against her.

"And those," she released one of her hands and lifted it up, poking at his lip, pushing it up to look at his canines. "Those aren't veneers. They're actually yours." Lola tugged at it and tried to move it. Callon forced himself not to laugh.

"And this," she reached up and ran her fingers through his hair. He couldn't have stopped the purr that rattled his chest even if his life depended on it. The intimacy of having her practically pet him was a heady sensation. "I watched it grow and thicken and it looks very much like a lion's mane. Even the individual strands are thicker than human hair." She continued to run her fingers through the strands, and even gave

it several tugs, which had his beast growling with the need to pounce. That probably wouldn't go over well.

“Lola,” he said her name through clenched teeth as he attempted to reign in his lion. “I need you to stop petting me.”

“I'm not pet—” her hand froze at the same time her words did. Then she lowered it. “My bad. I totally was. That probably felt violating, but to be fair, you've violated a lot of my boundaries.”

He smiled at her and it was all teeth. “You can violate me any time you'd like, but I'm pretty sure you're not ready for that next step in our relationship.”

“Umm, what?” she blurted, and started to pull away, but he quickly snatched the hand still fisting his shirt. “Relationship?”

“Did you not hear the part where I said that you're mine and I'm yours,” he asked, leaning closer. “Literally all of me is yours.”

Lola frowned. “Buuut, that doesn't mean I'm yours.”

“Sorry, Beautiful, but it absolutely does.” Callon noticed her phone on the ground. Neither one of them had realized she'd dropped it. He noticed eighteen minutes had passed. “You have to get home or your friends are going to send someone to kill me.” He smirked.

“Would you hurt them if they did?” The question was a challenge.

“I will never hurt someone you care about,” he paused as the smile left his face. “Unless they try to hurt you or take you

from me.”

“Mm-kay,” she patted his chest with her free hand, “you’re being weird again, and yes, I need to get home.”

He released her hand and leaned down to grab her phone. As she tried to take it, Callon held on. “I’m going to walk you home, then I’m going to guard your apartment. This is non-negotiable. There is still so much you need to know, Lola. But I think maybe tonight you’ve had enough.” Callon had not. He’d never get enough of her. He would crave her for the rest of his existence. Now that she knew what he was, he didn’t want to be separated from her, not even by a wall. He felt his beast’s annoyance. It was interesting to feel more of the animal now he’d met his mate. He didn’t understand why her tattoo was an exact match to his. He didn’t know why their situation was different, but he sure as hell wasn’t complaining. Yes, she was human, but she was remarkable, and she was *his*. The bond between his animal soul and human soul would merge as his ability to shift took root. More and more, they would become one. His lion was annoyed by human dating customs. They belonged to each other. Their souls paired. His lion thought that was enough and the rest of their relationship— the getting to know one another part— would come as they lived their life together.

“Alright then,” she said curtly. “You may walk me home and you will talk as you do.” He released her phone and watched as she swiped the screen and began to text. The top of the screen were Katy and Maddie’s names. She texted: ‘I’m almost home. He hasn’t abducted me. Don’t send in the kill squad.’

Callon snorted. “Kill squad?” He walked back to the backpack she’d abandoned and forgotten, snatched it up and slung it over one shoulder. Then returned to her side.

“Shut it, Puss ‘n Boots,” she huffed. “You don’t get to tease me considering the bomb you just dropped on me. You’ve spent the last few weeks freaking me the hell out with your intense gaze constantly on my back. You drop two stories to the ground and make me think you’re falling to your death, then you flirt with me and make me think I have Stockholm Syndrome, then you tell me you want to get to know my friend—”

He glanced at her as they walked side by side. Her tone of voice suddenly sharp. “Jealousy becomes you.” He liked that she felt possessive of him.

“I’m not jealous,” she said quickly. “I mean, maybe a little.” Then threw up her hands. “I don’t know what I am other than possibly losing my mind. Shifters— or beastwalkers— whatever you called yourself. Callon, really? Do you know how that sounds?”

“Considering you’ve told me I’m crazy more than a dozen times, I’d say yes, you’ve made it perfectly clear how it sounds.” He let out a deep breath. “But no matter how unbelievable it sounds, that doesn’t make it untrue.”

As they walked he fought the urge to reach over and grab her hand. He wanted to touch her, but forced himself to behave. “Do you think you can get a couple of days off from work?”

She glanced at him, her brow worried. “Why?”

Unable to stop, he lifted his hand and brushed her strawberry-blond hair from her face, letting his fingers trace over her cheek. He loved her two-toned skin. Loved even more that she didn't shy away from his touch. "Because I have much to tell you and show you."

She seemed to think about it a moment, chewing on her bottom lip. Finally, she nodded. "I'll send Sal a text. Although, that means Antonio will probably show up at my house wanting to know where I am. I've been avoiding him as much as I can." She seemed to be talking more to herself than Callon, which he didn't like. He wanted her to share and confide in him.

"He has a death wish," Callon said, feeling his anger rise. "He takes too many liberties with you."

"So, that was you snarling the day he walked me home?" She smirked at him.

"He touched you, with his lips," Callon snapped. "He was lucky I didn't follow him after he left you."

"Whoa," she breathed out. "You're eyes are doing some seriously non-human things, and your face keeps shimmering. For a split second, I see a lion and then your face is back." Her lips turned up in a small smile. "That makes my vitiligo seem downright boring."

"Your vitiligo isn't what makes you interesting, though it is a part of what makes you who you are," Callon said, trying to get his words to convey what he felt when he looked at her. "This," he ran a finger down her exposed arm, "makes you unique. It draws the eye, and for some, yes, it's because they

think it looks strange. But then for others,” he continued trailing his hand down until he reached her palm. He entwined their fingers and then lifted it to his mouth, “like me, it makes you stunning.” He watched her cheeks bloom, causing her flesh to be two different soft shades of red. He pressed a gentle kiss to the back of her hand and pulled her to a stop as she stared up at him. Her mouth having fallen open a bit.

“As promised,” he motioned behind her. “I’ve delivered you home and answered your questions.

“I only asked one question,” she said, sounding a bit dazed.

Callon reluctantly released her hand that she’d forgotten he held, slipped the bag from his shoulder, and held it out to her. “You can ask me more in a few minutes. I’ll be out on the fire escape ladder outside your window.”

Her eyes widened. “What?”

He rolled his eyes and pointed at himself. “Stalker, remember? I wouldn’t be a very good stalker if I left you alone while you slept.”

She tilted her head to the side. “That *is* true. Watching someone while they sleep is like Stalker 101.” Having regained her composure, she slung the bag over her shoulder, and turned towards the apartment door. Despite knowing he’d be able to speak with her in a matter of minutes, Callon didn’t want her out of his sight. He’d finally gotten to speak with her, touch her. A small taste and he was addicted.

“Wait,” he took two large strides and reached her as she pushed the silver bar down on the door to her building. “Can I see your phone?”

“Why?” Lola asked as she slipped it from her pocket and handed it to him.

Callon quickly added his information to her phone and then sent himself a text. “Because I want you to be able to get a hold of me if you need me. And,” he gave it back to her, letting his fingers graze her skin. “I want to be able to track— I mean— reach you.”

This made her snort out a laugh and Callon found it ridiculously adorable. What the hell was she doing to him? He was making jokes now? And flirting and attempting to win her affections. And if he was really honest, he was hoping she’d invite him inside to meet her parents. But then, maybe it was too soon. *She just met me*, he reminded himself, though he felt like they’d known each other much longer because of his stalking.

She turned back to the door and pushed it open. Once inside, she turned to look at him. Her pale-green eyes took him all in, and Callon wondered what she thought. “You’re really going to sit on my fire escape all night?”

He gave a sharp nod. “Your safety comes first.” He chuckled as he shook his head. “I always thought it would be the good of my kingdom that came first. But then I saw you. No kingdom compares to your worth.”

She sucked in a breath and their eyes held. Callon didn’t even know if he was breathing. All he knew was whatever was

happening between him and Lola was powerful. It was changing him and by Visata, he liked it.

After another minute, she gave him a bashful smile and pushed the door closed. He wasted no time before jogging around the side of the building. He didn't pause in his steps as he launched himself into the air and grabbed hold of the fire escape railing next to her window. Callon easily hoisted himself up and then took his usual post. Only this time he wouldn't just be a spectator. This time she knew he was out there and he'd get to be a part of her life. "Make me worthy, my Creator," he prayed. It was a daily, sometimes hourly, prayer he offered up. Callon closed his eyes as he stretched his hearing to see where his female was in her apartment. He'd try to wait patiently for her, but he couldn't promise he wouldn't decide waiting inside was a much better plan.

"Patience," he told his beast. "She knows us and hasn't gone running. That's a good sign." Now, he just had to convince her to be his before any other beastwalker could get in his way. And he'd have to manage to keep from killing her boss's son, no matter how badly Callon wanted to. He didn't imagine Lola would approve.

He pulled out his phone and sent Lola a quick text.

YM: Hurry up.

The response didn't take long and it made him laugh.

MF: I don't know who YM is, but I'm just going to move slower now.

YM: Your Male, Callon. Your bed is comfortable.

MF: Your creepy alarm is blaring. Get off my bed, out of my room, and I'm changing your name to Callon in my phone. Weirdo.

YM: I'll just change it back. Hurry up. I want to look at you.

The dots appeared on his screen, then disappeared, then reappeared as if she was having a hard time knowing how to reply.

MF: Intrusive. Bossy. Creepy... Kind of sweet.

YM: Add captivated to that word list. That is what you have done to me. I will wait for you for as long as it takes. Though I might get hungry and Dog is looking very tasty.

MF: If you eat my cat, I will let Katy declaw and neuter you.

Callon winced. *Note to self, don't tease Lola about eating her cat.*

YM: I know you have more questions. Come talk to me. Please.

There were no dots this time. He sighed and set the phone on his lap and let his mind wander to all the possibilities of the future he and Lola might have.

CHAPTER II

Precious Things Are Coveted.

“I feel like a child on Christmas morning. I want to rush down the hall to see the presents under the tree and see how beautiful they all looked in their wrapping paper. But I don’t want to start tearing into the packages because I know then it will be over. I’m never ready for it to be over. I want to savor the experience. That’s how I feel about going to my room, knowing Callon is waiting. I want to savor it, even though I am freaking out inside.” ~ Lola

“You okay, Honey?” Andi, Lola’s mom asked as she emptied the dishwasher. “You got in later than usual. I mean,” she held up a hand, “you’re an adult and you don’t have to tell me your every move. But, you also seem a little frazzled.”

Lola crammed the last bite of peanut butter sandwich in her mouth as she tried not to act like there was a hot, non-human guy waiting for her. Callon had said he’d be waiting outside her window, but then had texted and made it sound like he was in her room. She got the feeling he wasn’t one to break his word. If he said he’d wait outside of her window,

then that's where he probably was. She paused her chewing and then mentally smacked her forehead. How the hell did she know if he'd keep his word? She'd known him all of half an hour. But something inside of her trusted him. Something about him called her to him, she found his presence comforting.

"Lola?" Rick, her dad's voice, interrupted her mental musings. "You're mom's right. You seem a little off. You okay?"

Her phone buzzed again, indicating she'd received a text. Most likely, it was one of her girls wanting to know more about Callon. They'd just have to wait. Though making Katy wait too long would more than likely mean she'd end up banging on her apartment door demanding to see him. "I'm good. It was a long day. That's all." She took the offered glass of water from her mom, swallowed down the final, sticky bite of her sandwich, and took a big drink. When she was done, she rinsed the glass as she continued talking. "I'm going to take a couple days off from work. And—" she paused. She wasn't going to lie to her parents, it wasn't the type of relationship they'd ever had. She also couldn't just tell them that she'd met a guy who believed he was a lion shifter—beastwalker—whatever. She'd have to work her way up to that level of openness. And this whole thing was still very, very new. She took a deep breath. "I've met someone, and we're going to hang out tomorrow." She turned and looked at both her parents who were staring at her with wide eyes. "I mean, it's really, really new. I'm not dating him. He's just a friend. But I'd like to get to know him better. I mean, that's how good

relationships are built, right? Friendship. That's what you have always told me, Mom," she rambled nervously as they continued to stare at her. "You can meet him." *No they can't.* She cringed. *He's huge, and not exactly normal looking. How will I explain why he looks like a mix between a model, MMA fighter, and honestly, a little bit of Tarzan going on,* she thought.

"Friendship is a great place to start," her mom finally said, saving Lola from her mental freak out. "I think that's a smart decision. Where did you meet him?"

"Through work," she answered. It wasn't a total lie. She'd started feeling his eyes on her when she'd been at work, so that was maybe more of a lie by omission. *Dammit,* she mentally chastised. She really didn't want to lie, but how the crap was she supposed to explain to her parents she'd befriended her stalker, and she definitely had the hots for him? She wasn't. That's all there was to it. It was going to be bad enough when she told Katy and Maddie.

"Just be sure to meet in public places," her father said as he pressed a kiss to her forehead. "And when you're ready, if you think things are going to progress past friendship, then yes, we need to meet him."

Lola nodded and snapped her fingers. "Sounds like a plan, Stan. Mm-kay, I'm just gonna," she tossed her hand up motioning with her thumb over her shoulder. "Skidaddle on to bed. Gotta get my beauty rest." *Why am I so weird?* Thankfully, her parents were used to her brand of weird. Andi just shook her head with a small smile and Rick, just chuckled.

She turned on her toe and made a beeline for the hall. Thankfully, her room was at the end of the hallway where her parents' was at the front. So maybe, with her sitting out on the fire escape they wouldn't hear her talking to Callon. Her stomach did some weird flip-thing she'd read about in books, but had never experienced in life. *So this was what the characters feel like. The characters, Dummy.* Lola's giddiness at something new, exciting, and intriguing was all too real. All of that typically pertained to the main male lead. She'd never had a main male lead. "Okay, you're going to have to stop comparing him to book boyfriends, Lo," she muttered as she reached her closed door.

She took a deep breath and blew it out, causing her cheeks to puff out. Lola straightened her shirt, for some reason, feeling the need to make herself presentable, though he'd already seen her. She probably smelled like a mixture of coffee and pizza. "Eww." She pulled her shirt to her nose but all she smelled was pizza. *Well, that was better than both.* "Quit stalling." She walked into her room, which suddenly felt unfamiliar. Instead of a bedroom, it now was a place that would forever hold the memory of the first night she spent with Callon. It would be the place she looked back on years from now and either feel joy or heartbreak. She had the distinct feeling that whatever was happening between them would either bring her indescribable happiness, or drop her to the depths of hell like she'd never known. She looked down as she closed the door and found her hands were shaking. That was the sucky thing about anything new, it might be amazing, or it might be the worst thing to ever happen.

Her bed was only occupied by Dog, which meant Callon kept his word and remained outside on the fire escape. She walked slowly over to it, her heart pounding in her throat, and sweat beginning to form on her neck and back. Lola pushed the glass up and stuck her head out. She turned to the left when she saw movement out of the corner of her eye. She was met with gold eyes with large black centers. *I bet they let him see in the dark.* The more she looked at him, the more she saw the parts of him that were clearly *not* human. The air rippled around him, and for a brief second, she saw his handsome face morph into that of a stoic lion's. He had nearly white fur and a black nose. His lips pulled back, revealing wicked fangs. She blinked, and once again, there was only the incredibly handsome, though still stoic, Callon.

“Took you long enough,” he said in that deep, gruff voice.

Lola suddenly felt speechless. “Well, that’s a first,” she said absently.

Callon cocked his head to the side and blinked. “You’re talking to yourself again.”

“If that annoys you, then I’m probably not the chick for you.” She shrugged, climbed through the open window and leaned against the rail of the ladder.

“I’m sure there will be many things about you that annoy me,” he said with ridiculously, sexy smirk. “That doesn’t mean you’re not my female. It just means I’ll need to remind myself of all the things that overshadow the annoying parts.”

Lola didn’t know if she was offended or impressed. She was offended because he didn’t deny she did indeed annoy

him. Not that it was realistic of her to expect him not to be annoyed by *something* about her. She was impressed he could acknowledge that things that were annoying weren't enough of a reason to give up on a relationship. If that was the case, Lola would have kicked Katy and Maddie to the curb a long time ago.

"I've no doubt I'll annoy you, frustrate you, piss you off, and most likely, make you want to hit me—multiple times in a single day," he said casually. "I'm not a human male, and I do not think like a human male. There are some things you need to know about me before we go any further with this." He motioned between them.

A brow rose on Lola's face. "Who said there was a 'this?'" She mimicked his movement.

"You haven't called the cops, or told your parents, there's a male claiming to be part animal sitting on your fire escape." He pointed out as he leaned forward and rested his forearms on his thighs. Even sitting, he wasn't shorter than Lola. He was about eye-level, which was a nice reprieve for her neck.

"Fair enough," she admitted. "But that doesn't mean we're getting hitched or jumping into bed together." *Shut up now, Lola.* And because she can never take her own advice, her freaking mouth just kept moving. "I don't know what your past relationships have been like, but I'm not a casual dater. I'm really not a dater at all. I don't know why. Oddly enough, I have been asked out, even with the vitiligo. Even though I haven't really dated, I know if I get into a relationship with someone it's because I believe it's going somewhere. My

parents have a beautiful relationship,” she held up a hand and added quickly, “not perfect. But they love each other deeply. I’ve gotten to watch that love, and have the security of that love my whole life, and that’s what I want. It’s what I want for our kids.” Her eyes widened, and she blurted, “*My kids*. I mean that’s what I want for my kids.”

Callon’s lips twitched. “Are you telling me you have the ability to get pregnant without my help? Because, that would be impressive, albeit very disappointing. Though, it wouldn’t make them any less mine. You are mine, and that means what’s yours is mine and what’s mine is yours.” His chest rumbled with a deep sound that made Lola shiver.

She folded her arms in front of her. “You know what I meant.” She glanced away from his face, needing to break the intensity of his gaze. “I just don’t want to encourage this idea you have that we are a foregone conclusion.”

“Lola,” Callon said, his voice much gentler. “Come sit by me.”

She snorted as she looked at the stair where he sat. His shoulders nearly touched the building on one side and the stair rail on the other. “Where?”

He scooted toward the rail and angled his body leaving a small amount of space between him and the old brick of the apartment building. “If that’s not enough space, my lap has more than enough.”

She rolled her eyes. Her arms dropped, and she took the few steps to the empty spot. “I’m really beginning to think you’re a patient escaped from a psych ward at one of the

hospitals. I probably should have called around and checked to see if any of them were missing a patient.”

“You’re a riot,” Callon told her as she sat down beside him.

She angled her body towards him and there was no way for their knees not to touch. The heat emanating from his body quickly seeped into hers. Lola cleared her throat. “So, tell me. What do I need to know before I spend anymore time getting to know you?”

“My kind are from a place called Damara,” he began.

Was he pressing his knee tighter against hers? *Focus, Lo*, she admonished herself.

“It’s a different realm,” Callon continued. “And as I told you, we are called beastwalkers. There are ten kingdoms that represent the different types of species we make up.”

“How did you end up in the human realm? Why are you in the human realm? Kingdoms? Like actual kingdoms with kings and queens?” The questions bubbled out of Lola, an erupting geyser and her imagination ran wild. “Are all ten kingdoms here in New York? How many of you are there? When you say species as in plural, what kind are we talking? All mammals, or are there water shifters? Insects? Birds?” Her head spun and spun with all the possibilities.

“Are you done?” he asked when she finally stopped talking.

“My bad.” Lola twisted her fingers together, clenching them tightly.

He gently grabbed her wrists and pulled her tense hands apart. He entwined their fingers together, his thumb drawing circles on her palms. “You’re curiosity, at times, is very endearing. Though things would move a lot faster if you’d just let me talk.”

“At times?” She pursed her lips. “I’ll remember you said that. And I make no promises,” she said with a half shrug. “My mouth does what it wants.”

Callon smirked. “Noted.”

Lola lifted one of their joined hands to cover her face as it heated with a blush. “So even non-human males have dirty minds. Good to know.”

He ignored her statement. “Shall I continue?”

She nodded.

“We came to the human realm because our Shaman found—”

“Your what? What’s a Shaman?”

“The Shaman are like religious leaders, they act as a governing body over all beastwalkers.”

“Politics and religion. Those never go together well,” Lola murmured.

He gave her a bland look, but just kept talking. “They found a way to connect our realms and open a portal. Our home was being destroyed by war. The kingdoms were constantly fighting for more territory, over females, or even just prejudice against another kingdom. If we had continued

down that road, eventually, there would be nothing left of any of us.”

Before she could remind herself she was supposed to just let him talk, Lola asked, “How long ago was this?”

“It would have been the fifteenth century in your world, if I remember my schooling correctly,” he answered. “I never lived in Damara. Many of the originals from the migration have gone on to live with the Visata, our Creator.”

Lola’s eyes felt like they were going to bug right out of her head. “Many of them? Not *all* of them?”

His lips turned up revealing long fangs. “We’re a long-lived race.”

“Fifteenth century, Callon,” she gasped. “That’s not long lived. That’s ancient.”

He shook his head. “No, ancient would be fifth century.”

Lola pursed her lips. “Don’t get cute.”

“Can’t help what I already am.”

Her eyes narrowed. “You didn’t seem so playful an hour ago when I met you.”

His golden eyes softened. “You bring out a different side of me.”

Lola wanted to ask what he meant, but she also wanted to learn more about the history of his people. It was more fascinating than any book she’d ever read. She sealed her lips closed and knew she probably looked like an eager child waiting on an ice cream cone. She was practically salivating

for the knowledge he had. And she wanted it to be true. “Just so you know if this turns out to be a hallucination, or some elaborate hoax, I’m going to cut you.”

He ignored her threat and continued. “The Shaman convinced members from every kingdom to come through the portal. The ones that did come were the ones that wanted peace. They knew that the future of our species depended on it.

“One of the first things the Shaman asked the rulers to do was to find new territories for their kingdoms. Spread out in this new world, and take some time and figure out what was important to them. How all of the kingdoms could learn to live in peace.”

“No kingdoms live in peace forever,” Lola said. “Peace is like a season. When it happens, it’s inevitable that it will eventually end. What caused your people’s peace to end?”

He chuckled. “Curious cat.”

“I’m not a cat,” she pointed out.

“Not yet,” he said softly.

Lola shook her head. “I’m not touching that with a fifty-foot pole. Continue please.”

“Our kingdoms did as the Shaman requested. We established homes all over earth. And as the world evolved, we evolved with it. We integrated ourselves into society with humans. The Shaman sealed the portal so we’d never go home. This was now our home. We had to adapt in order to have any kind of life.

“Other than mostly minor disagreements, the ten kingdoms have managed to keep peace.” He paused and looked away briefly, almost as if he wasn’t sure if he wanted to continue.

“What?” Lola asked.

“The peace was strained about a decade ago.”

She frowned. “What changed?”

“Over time, for some unknown reason, the birth rates of our kind began to decline. And the children that were born to our kind were predominantly male. In fact, there have been no females born to a Damarian in over a century.” He looked her in the eyes. “This has caused the males old enough to have a mate to become quite... tense.”

“Why do I have a feeling that it made them tense for a reason other than some romantic desire for a wife?” Lola asked. She felt like whatever Callon was about to reveal to her was huge.

Callon ran a hand through his untamed hair. “Because having a mate for one of our males is much more than simply a partner to share a life with. We share the soul of the beast inside of us, but that beast is locked inside until we have a mate and the bond between us is completed. Then, and only then, can a male of my kind shift into their full animal form, as will his female.

“It’s then that we are at our strongest and most powerful. The more fully-shifted beastwalkers a kingdom has, the more powerful a kingdom is and therefore safer.”

Lola's chest was tight as she breathed. She could hear the worry in Callon's voice as he spoke. "So your kind is again in jeopardy of becoming extinct, but this time not because of war?"

"Yes, we were. There simply weren't enough females."

Lola's brow furrowed. "*Were?*"

He nodded slowly. "I mentioned that the tension between the kingdoms started to grow about a decade ago. There is a reason for that. Something changed."

Lola found herself leaning closer to him. "What? What changed?" She wanted to shake him and tell him to spit it out. Callon wasn't a book that she could simply read faster in her eagerness to know more of the story. She had to wait on him to tell her. *Another reason to like books better than people.*

"We discovered *animi*," he said, his voice filled with reverence.

"Okay," she said slowly. "If I have to pull every ounce of information out of you piece by piece, I'm going to get violent. There are some things you need to know about me before we go any further with this." She motioned between them, using his earlier words. "I need to know all the things. And I need to know them yesterday."

Callon chuckled. "Believe me, Little Cat, I know how curious you are and how desperately you long for answers to things you don't understand."

"Stalker," she muttered.

"Yes," he responded without an ounce of shame.

“What is a damn *animi*?” She practically growled at him. Her face was less than four inches from his. Lola hadn’t realized that she’d continued to move toward him while she’d been talking.

“You are,” he whispered, leaning closer until she could feel his warm breath on her face.

Lola blinked, attempting to clear the fog of lust that rose at his proximity. “I’m a human woman,” she argued.

“And an *animus*,” Callon said.

Lola leaned away, needing a little distance before she did something completely embarrassing, like kissing him until neither of them could breathe. “Which is what, exactly?”

“An *animus* is a human female who has been imbued with the magic of our kind, and therefore a compatible mate for a beastwalker. *Animi* are able to complete the bond and bring out the beast laying dormant within a Damarian male.” Callon reached out and ran his thumb across her jaw. “You are precious. You are the answer to our survival. But precious things are coveted by many... and fought over.”

Lola’s stomach was doing somersaults. She found herself leaning into Callon’s touch. His last statement threw open some seriously worrying doors. She decided to ignore them for now. Callon’s claims about her were too outlandish. “How can I have magic in me? Why me? How is a woman chosen to be an *animus*? Are they chosen? Is there a requirement like a blood type, or race, or something about them that’s odd, which then in turn makes them able to mate with one of your kind because, let’s be honest, you are about as odd as they come.”

He didn't seem offended by her assessment. His fingers continued to skim across her face, down her neck, and then her shoulder. They ran down her bare arms where he began to trace the different patterns of her vitiligo. His touch was reverent. His gold eyes followed the movement of his hand. "Breathe, Little Cat." The deep timbre of his voice made her shudder. She finally sucked in a deep breath, not realizing that she had even stopped.

"Maybe you shouldn't touch me." She attempted to pull her arm away.

Callon shook his head as a low growling sound. Much like Dog made when he was unhappy, only this was a hell of a lot scarier. "That's not an option." His eyes slowly rose to meet hers. "I keep telling you that you're mine, and I am yours. But it's not getting through that thick, curious skull of yours."

She wanted to scream, 'then make me understand!' but that seemed like a rash decision considering she wasn't sure that Callon wouldn't just abduct her.

She blew out a breath, and rotated her arm as he continued to map out her two-tone flesh. "Then keep talking 'til it does get through my thick skull."

His lips tilted up a crooked smile.

Before he could say anything, the words, 'Oh, she's sweet, but a psycho,' broke the silence. Lola pulled her phone from her pocket and saw Kay's contact image on the screen—her friend's tongue was stuck out and her hands were lifted in the universal 'let's rock' sign. The ring tone wasn't Katy's choice;

that was all Lola. She swiped the screen and then put the phone to her ear. “I texted you.”

“Yes, but that wasn’t sufficient,” Katy said. “Not after we heard a male voice standing close enough to you that we could hear him through the phone. Did you honestly think that we’d wait until tomorrow to get more info?”

“One can hope,” Lola said dryly.

“Lo, put yourself in our shoes.”

“Yeah, Lo.” Maddie’s voice came from the background. “What if we had dudes and didn’t tell you?”

“Yeah, Little Cat.” Callon’s voice rumbled. “What if they had dudes?”

“HE’S THERE!” Katy screeched so loudly that Lola wondered if everyone in her building heard.

“WHAT?” Maddie yelled as Lola pulled the phone away from her ear. Her mouth dropped open when Callon deftly took it from her.

“*I am* here, Katy.” Callon’s voice was a purr.

Lola narrowed her eyes on him. “You’d better change that tone, Lion King, or I’m going to go Scar on your ass.” Lola’s words did not have the effect she wanted. The jackass just gave her a bland look as he continued to talk to her used-to-be BFFs.

“No, I have no intention of hurting her.” His lips pressed together as if he was fighting a smile. Lola wondered again if it was because he wasn’t used to smiling. At times, when he

did, there was confusion in his eyes, as if he couldn't believe the action was actually happening on his face.

“No,” he said again. “I have no intention of abducting her. I am hoping she will go with me willingly.”

“Put those fools on speaker phone.” Lola reached for the phone. Callon simply leaned away from her. She had the choice between crawling into his lap to get it, or standing up and leaning over him, which would effectively put her chest right in his face. He looked her straight in the eyes as if he knew both options, and was daring her to do either one of them. Lola folded her arms in front of her and tried not to look like a pouting child.

Callon pushed something on the screen. Then Katy's voice blared like a damn bull horn.

“Go with you where? Who the hell are you? What do you want with her? What's your last name, I'm totally looking you up on the FBI's Most Wanted List.”

Lola shook her head and pinched the bridge of her nose. “He's not on the list, Katy.”

“How do you know?”

“Because there's no way this fool could hide from anyone. He's like Tarzan's cousin or something.”

“And yet, you never saw me coming,” he said so softly she figured Katy and Maddie hadn't heard him.

“Tarzan?” Katy's voice said, her tone suddenly switching from suspicion to interest.

Lola glared at the phone. “Hands off, Katy.”

“Ohh, possessive,” Maddie sang. “How long did you say you’ve known this...” she paused.

“Callon,” he said. “My name is Callon Leo.”

“Wow, he even has the book boyfriend name.” Lola heard the smirk in her best friend’s voice.

“How long have you known *Callon*?” Maddie asked again.

Lola met his eyes, and he held her gaze with such intensity that she wanted to squirm. “Not long, but I want to get to know him better.”

Katy chuckled. “I bet you do, Jane.”

Lola groaned. Katy was not going to let the Tarzan-thing go. She should have never compared him to the book character.

“I’m taking the next couple days off work,” she told them. “I’ll send Sal a text, but will you let him know I’m fine? I just need a break.”

“We’re all due a break,” Katy said.

“Nope, nu-uh.” Lola shook her head. “You can keep your curiosity a little longer, Psycho.”

“Ugh, fine.” Katy sighed. “Keep him to yourself for a couple of days, but after that, he’s ours.”

Lola bit the inside of her cheek to keep from snapping back something ridiculous like, ‘Bitch I will cut you.’ In her rational mind— which obviously she didn’t have much of left— she knew Katy meant they wanted to meet him. Not that she

actually *wanted* him. *And why the hell did that thought make her so angry?* “I’ve lost my damn mind. I mean I keep saying that, but I truly am beginning to believe it.” She was talking to herself, not even paying attention to the fact that Callon’s voice continued beside her as he talked to her two best friends. “I mean, I’ve never wanted to hurt my friends. Okay,” she held up a finger, “rephrase that. I’ve never wanted to hurt them over a guy. To be fair, any time I have wanted to hurt them, they’ve totally deserved it. Shut the front door.” She blew out a breath and ran a hand through her shoulder-length hair.

“You really do like to talk to yourself,” Callon held her phone out to her. The screen was now black, indicating the phone call was over. Her caring, albeit nosy, best friends had hung up.

“How’d you get them off the phone?”

“Promised to send them a shirtless photo later.”

Lola’s head snapped up so fast she was surprised she didn’t give herself whiplash.

Callon’s eyes flashed with a wicked gleam, and she saw the humor in them. “Possessiveness looks good on you.”

What was she supposed to say? She *did* feel possessive of him, even if that was completely insane. Apparently, that was her new M.O.

“It’s late, and you look tired.” Callon lifted her chin, his eyes roaming over her face. “I should let you sleep.”

She smirked. “Let me?”

To Lola's surprise, he leaned forward, and like he'd done on the sidewalk earlier, pressed his forehead to hers. "You've no idea the amount of self-control it's taking not to throw you over my shoulder and take you with me. And I could, Lola Katz. I could take you, and you'd never be able to get away from me. And I would make sure that you never *wanted* to."

She could feel her heart racing in her chest as his hand wrapped around the nape of her neck, sending a firestorm cascading through her veins. His touch an inferno, consuming every part of her, forcing her body to bow to his will as if she was magnetically drawn to him.

"The intensity you feel right now is only going to grow. The need I have to see you, to be near you, to touch you, will become your need as well. There is no escaping this. There is no escaping us. So, yes, I'm going to *let* you go to sleep, instead of crawling through your window and joining you in your bed. A bed where I could hold you safe in my arms where you belong. Instead, I'm going to sit out here making sure you're safe, as I have done for the past few weeks, and as I will do for the rest of our lives."

"You're going to sit on my fire escape for the rest of our lives?" Maybe it was because he broke her brain when he used such a commanding voice that she asked such an obtuse question. Or because he touched her so gently, yet, firmly. Or maybe it was because he said all the things she'd always wanted to hear.

Callon's warm breath fanned out over her face as he let out a low chuckle. "I'll tell you this, Little Cat. Life with you will

never be dull.”

They sat like that for several minutes before he pulled back, but just far enough to press his lips to her forehead, giving her a soft kiss. “Go to bed, Lola. I’ll still be here when you wake.”

She swayed toward him as he moved further from her. “Is that a promise or a threat?”

“Both.”

Lola shook her head, and her lips turned up in a small smile. She scooped up her phone from her lap and stood. As she backed up toward the open window, her eyes stayed on him. She worried that if she looked away, he’d disappear. “I’m only going to bed because I’m tired. Not because you told me to.”

“Whatever you need to tell yourself, *Sazzi*.”

It was a testament to how tired Lola was that she didn’t ask him what he’d just called her. After crawling back through the window, she turned to ask, because how could she *not*? He simply shook his head at her, his too-handsome face back in its stoic form. “Tomorrow.” That was all he said. And based on the determined look in his glowing eyes, Lola figured she wasn’t going to get an answer out of him.

“I didn’t want to know anyway,” she muttered, and pushed the window closed. She forced herself not to stare at him while she did it. She turned toward her bed muttering the whole time until she collapsed, not even bothering to change into her sleep clothes. “And if I do want to know, which I don’t, I can just go

hit up the internet. The internet knows all.” Lola could have sworn she heard a dark chuckle just before sleep took her.

CHAPTER 12

A Gilded Cage Is Still A Cage.

“Balancing two loyalties is difficult, especially when I’ve grown to care deeply for those that I represent. I am beholden first to my own kind and the laws we stand for. It makes me wonder if any of my kind would choose the kingdom they are ambassadors for over their calling as a Shaman and the oaths they took.” ~ Roan

Roan surveyed the circle of the Shaman Council, noticing Link, the Kingdom of Venom Shaman, was still absent. He wondered if Link had managed to go home before coming to the meeting since he and two other KOV members had been in New York earlier that day.

Feeling fatigued, Roan took a deep breath and ran a hand down his face. He had finally received a call from Wyatt, after the male spent the past couple of weeks in the Kingdom of Venom territory, and the information he had gathered was disturbing. It was one of the reasons why Roan and Rafe had returned to NNP – they had been following the two males from the Kingdom of Venom.

Link had approached him while the other two males were in the restroom, asking if Roan was aware of the Shaman meeting. It struck Roan as odd, but he later learned from Callon the KOV Shaman had been keeping him and Rafe occupied while the other two males cornered Lola. He planned to discuss this with Link as he couldn't fathom the male purposely endangering an *animus*. According to Wyatt's findings, if those two snakes were involved, Lola had indeed been in danger, though Callon had been diligently watching over her.

His thoughts were interrupted when Link walked through the door of the large warehouse the Shaman used as their gathering place. The interior had been completely remodeled to resemble the gathering place back in Damara. Black marble walls, a shiny, dark-grey, wood floor, and a grand, round table made of gold and black marble adorned the center of the room surrounded by leather chairs. The place was illuminated by large, torch-like lights hanging from the high ceiling, casting a warm glow over the room. Along the walls, ten statues representing the ten kingdoms were on display, with the Kingdom of Chaos statue being the most intriguing. It had the head of a human, the body of a great cat, the legs of a bird of prey, a serpent tail, and the arms of a silverback, creating a captivating sight that left one pondering its unique form.

Link took his seat opposite Roan, their gazes briefly meeting before scanning the other Shamans gathered around the table. His distinct shaved head made him stand out among the rest, but his silver eyes fit perfectly with his kind. It had been almost six months since their last meeting. Normally,

they convened once a year unless major issues arose. News of women going missing, and disturbing reports from other kingdoms that had visited New Orleans, called for a formal search of the kingdom, requiring a majority vote.

As the room fell silent, all eyes turned to Link. After all, it was his territory that was being questioned.

“We’re all aware of why we’re here,” Link began, frustration evident in his voice and his brow furrowed. “I wish I could say with certainty that Azure is responsible for the disappearances, but I can’t. I don’t know for sure that all of the women taken are *animi*. And if they aren’t, then it is likely the Venom King isn’t at fault. However, given our suspicions, we have the right to push for a formal investigation.”

“There are human auctions happening in New Orleans,” Roan interjected through clenched teeth. “And *many* of these women *are* confirmed *animi*. Is that a coincidence? You honestly don’t believe your King is involved?”

“He isn’t my King,” Link retorted, his silver eyes flashing dangerously. “I am the Shaman for the Kingdom of Venom, not a member of the kingdom itself. Do I need to remind you of that?”

“That doesn’t mean your loyalties haven’t been compromised,” Roan said, his hands clenching in his lap. “Especially, if your King has threatened you in some way.”

Link leapt to his feet, arms raised menacingly, his expression fierce. “Do you truly believe the empty threats of a snake-tongued monarch hold more sway over me than the loyalty I have sworn to our Council and our Creator?” His

voice reverberated through the room, filling it with an unsettling chill, as his disdainful glare locked onto everyone present.

“Sit, Shaman Link,” Crew, the Shaman for the Kingdom of Silver, intervened calmly, diffusing the tension in the room with his deep voice.

Roan leaned back and raised a conciliatory hand. “My apologies,” he grumbled. “I am frustrated, and I took it out on you. I wouldn’t appreciate having my loyalty questioned either. I’m just...” He sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. “Worried.”

“As we all are,” Isla, the female Shaman of the Kingdom of Tides, chimed in with a soft, lyrical voice.

Roan looked at the familiar faces around the table, Shamans he had known for centuries since their arrival from Damara through the portal. They had sworn the same oath, and he trusted them, but that didn’t mean he knew them on a personal level.

“No one wants things to go back to the way they were ten years ago,” Ada, the Kingdom of Wings Shaman, spoke, meeting Roan’s gaze. Her long, multifaceted hair cascaded in waves over her shoulders, and despite her age of over five-hundred years, she appeared as a woman in her late twenties with flawless, lightly-tanned skin. “The consequences would be too great.”

Atticus, the Shaman for the Kingdom of Hooves, scoffed. “Not to mention it’s not fair to the human females.”

“Of course,” Ada nodded respectfully. “I didn’t mean to imply that they are any less important than preserving the secrecy of our world.”

Atticus’s dark skin tightened across his face as he brushed a long braid of his hair away from his eyes, keeping his gaze fixed on Ada. “There’s a reason why dozens of females currently live in the territories of different kingdoms, under constant watch,” he said, his voice soft, but firm. “It has nothing to do with the fear of exposure, and everything to do with the desires and needs of our race over those of the humans.”

“You make it sound like they’re treated as slaves,” Crowley growled. As the Shaman for the Kingdom of Fangs, he exuded an almost intimidating aura, similar to the canine species he lived among. “The *animi* in our territory are cherished and cared for.”

“A gilded cage is still a cage,” Reese, the Shaman for the Kingdom of Fur, finally spoke up. His quiet demeanor commanded attention, and all eyes turned to him. He didn’t raise his voice often, but people listened when he spoke. “Atticus is right,” Reese continued, his wavy, brown hair framing his face. “We cannot allow more *animi* to be taken against their will, regardless of how well they are treated. Whatever is happening in Azure’s kingdom must be stopped.”

Atticus scanned each of them with his silver eyes and asked, “Who will go with Link to conduct a full investigation?”

Lyric, the Shaman of the Kingdom of Silk, cleared her throat and lifted her chin, letting her black hair cascade away from her face. “I would volunteer, but Azure and I have had our difficulties in the past,” she said, her red lips pursed. “My presence would likely aggravate him further.” She offered no further explanation, and no one dared to question her.

“I’ll go,” Roan stepped forward, volunteering himself. He felt compelled to do so, knowing that Taras, Prime of the kingdom Roan was ambassador to, would expect it. As he locked eyes with Link, he sensed a reproachful look from the other Shaman, as if asking, “What were you saying about loyalties?”

“I’ll join them,” Nico, the Shaman for the Kingdom of Chaos said, his voice pulling Roan’s attention away from Link. Nico grinned, his silver eyes matching the silver piercings he’d added to his features over the years. A lip piercing, two ears, nose and eyebrow; not to mention the tribal tattoos that covered his neck and arms. The Shaman was like a physical portrayal of the kingdom he was a representative for. “I like to rile up Azure. He’s a self-serving ass who only thinks of himself. It’s taken this Council long enough to acknowledge that.”

“Tell us how you really feel,” the Kingdom of Fangs Shaman mumbled.

Nico’s eyes snapped to Crowley. “The kingdoms have pretended to get along for all these centuries, but those at this table know that some of those rulers have simply been putting on an act. They’ve been biding their time and since we are so

long lived, they have the patience of every apex predator out there. Waiting, watching. Some of them feel like we doomed them when we made the ruling to ban all *animi* abductions. Did you really think they would go along with it forever?” His eyes bounced around the table and Roan felt the intensity of his gaze. “We meet at this table once a year and act as if everything is grand, when in reality we all know the embers left behind from the constant fighting followed us into this realm. They’re being stoked. The wind is stirring them up, and if we’re not careful, the flames of war will return. The fire that burns inside the rulers of the ten kingdoms, to protect their own, and bring strength and power to their territories, will burn this realm to the ground, just as they did our own.”

“Damn,” Atticus cursed. “Way to take a somewhat concerning situation and turn it into something catastrophic.”

“Kingdom of Chaos, Atty,” Nico winked. “Like recognizes like.”

The Kingdom of Hooves Shaman pointed a finger at Nico. “Never call me that again. And, you are not a member of the Kingdom of Chaos. Didn’t Link’s outburst, and Roan’s accusations, just make that clear?”

Nico simply shrugged and said, “To each their own.”

“Then it’s decided,” Ada said. “Roan, Nico and Link will do the investigation and report back to this Council as soon as they have sound proof Azure is to blame for the missing females.”

“And if he isn’t?” Link asked, though his words held no conviction.

“Then we will bring the issue to the attention of the police,” Roan spoke up. “Leonidas Global, Inc. has worked with law enforcement all over the U.S. It wouldn’t be out of the ordinary for us to bring them something like this.”

“That takes care of the females being returned, but with regards to Azure?” Lyric asked.

“His fate will be decided by the Council as per the Old Laws.” Reese said as he rested his palms on the marble table.

“Alright,” Link nodded. “Then let’s get this done before more women go missing.”

Before anyone could stand, the room became deathly still. Roan closed his eyes as soon as he felt the presence of Visata, their Creator. He knew everyone else in the room had shut their eyes because none could look on the holiness of Visata and live. To be in His presence was hard to explain. There was awe, humility, joy, love, shame and grace. How could One so great love *them*— a flawed species— so much? And yet, Visata did love them.

“My servants,” the Creator’s voice rumbled, filling the great room and reverberating against the walls. Roan felt it all the way to his bones. “You have gathered with the intention of seeking to bring justice where there has been corruption. What you desire to accomplish is honorable, but I ask you this, what about the injustices you allowed to be committed a decade ago?”

Roan’s fists clenched as he remembered when the kingdoms discovered the first *animi*. How excited they’d been to know their species was not doomed! That they hadn’t left

one death sentence only to trade if for another. And in their exuberance, they'd foolishly thought they could somehow make these women care for the males of their kind.

“Did you seek My guidance then?” Visata asked. There was no accusation in His voice, but sorrow. Roan's own guilt over what had taken place resurfaced, though, he was able to keep himself busy enough to ignore it. They'd been trying to right their wrong in the only way they knew how: by giving the females they had a life where they wanted for nothing.

“Did you think I could not help you?” the Creator continued. “Do you think anything is too great for Me? Did you think I did not care?”

Roan's tongue felt frozen in his mouth. He wanted to plead his innocence, to give his side of things, but really, they would all be excuses. The truth was the Shaman had not put a stop to the kingdoms taking *animi* immediately, as they should have. “I have seen the fighting that has gone on between My children. I see it all,” Visata said, as warmth filled the air. “I see every worry and I feel every fear you have. I have not left you to your own devices, but I wait for you to call on Me for help. I wait for you to recognize that I did not create you because I wanted to be a spectator of My creation. I created you because I love you. Each, and every one of you, from the ten kingdoms, to the Shaman before Me. You are Mine.”

Roan felt warmth wrap around him as his shoulders slumped forward. The heaviness that had been was suddenly gone.

“And because you are Mine, you must endure the consequences of your actions, and the actions of those who you lead. You made a law to stop the atrocious action of taking humans, and for that there is a blessing. But you let them be taken in the first place. And for that there is punishment.”

Droplets hit his face. First, just a few, and then it was as if the sky opened up and the rain poured out. He didn't give a second thought to the fact they were *inside* a building. This was Visata. Making it rain inside a building was nothing. The rain washed over Roan, and he turned his face up letting the cool water stream down his face as it flowed over all of him. He felt cleansed. How many times had he opened his mouth to ask for the Creator's forgiveness, only to snap it shut, because he didn't feel he was forgivable?”

“This day, I wash you clean of your past transgressions,” Visata told them. “You will go forward as My voice to the ten kingdoms. You will tell them what you have heard this day. The human females who have become possible mates for the Damara will no longer simply find a male and fall in love. They will be preordained. Each male will have one mate that is theirs and theirs alone. I will not strip the *animi* from them because it is not my desire to see My children perish, but I will make them have an even greater appreciation for the gift that a mate is. The mark she bears will match his own, this is how you will know to whom each belongs.

“The females you have cared for all this time, will be given their mark and sent to the kingdom for which it matches. Their mates might be there, or might not have been born yet. To this end, I will grant them the lifespan of their future mate.

As long as the *animus* chooses to stay with the kingdom she is destined for, she will be healthy and live beyond a human life span. If she chooses to leave, then her life span will be that of a human, and her mate will have to accept her choice. She will be made a Null, no longer able to bring forth the soul of the animal in a male. Therefore, no beast-walker will be tempted to take her. The male that would have been her mate will forever live without the full ability of his beast. “I hear each of your thoughts. I know your hearts. And I am not unsympathetic to your plight. For that, you will receive a mercy and a lesson. Those that bond will be known as the *Erossazzi*– the *Only Beloved*– as you are My Only Beloved. The beastwalkers and the *animi* who complete the bond will carry the essence of the other in their souls, as you carry Me in yours. They will be a beacon to one another for healing and feeding each other’s souls with emotion and touch. Just as I ask you to come to Me for guidance, love and spiritual nourishment. Should the males be forcefully separated from their mates, they will wreak blind havoc on the world until they are reunited. As you would do should you leave My presence. The *Erossazzi* will bear male *and* female children, just as I wish for you to bear the fruit of My love.

“You have my forgiveness, but there is always consequence to wrong doing.”

The rain stopped and Roan’s clothes dried an instant later. His head lowered once again, and he felt a gentle hand on his neck. Peace flooded his body along with energy.

“Go now,” Visata said. “Deal with those who are still choosing the wrong path. Help those who need it. I am with

you every step of the way.”

The oxygen left the room just long enough for Roan to gasp. His eyes snapped open as he raised his head and looked around at his fellow Shaman. Their eyes were all as wide as his own. It had been a long time since Visata had joined them physically in their midst though He was always there, present inside each of them. He wasn't sure about the others, but Roan had found ways to drown out his Creator's voice when he felt he knew better or wanted to go his own way. He heard a sniff and turned to see Ada wiping tears from her eyes. Her gaze met his and she visibly swallowed.

“I felt them,” she said through trembling lips.

“Them?” he asked.

She nodded. “The human females. I felt their fear.” She covered her mouth as she let out a small sob. “Fear we caused by allowing them to be taken.”

Roan felt bile rise in his throat. Had they really become so desensitized that they hadn't even considered how the human females would feel? The answer was, *yes*. They'd been so blinded, so eager for a solution of a problem that scared them. The abductions had become a necessary evil they'd managed to reason away.

“We will do what we can to make it right,” Roan told her.

“And what if some choose to leave?” Isla asked, her voice shaking with the worry that filled her eyes. “What happens if they tell human authorities?”

“We must trust our Visata,” Crew spoke up. “He has not only our best interest at heart, but that of the *animi* as well. We cannot control everything. Even if we may want to. We lay it at the feet of our Creator and trust Him to take care of us.”

Roan stood with the rest of the Shaman. He felt shaken to his core. Though there was peace, there was still a lingering doubt he knew came from his own failings. His own fear he would fail Visata and his people again.

“Don’t worry about what you cannot change,” his Creator’s voice filled his mind. *“Instead, focus on what you can do to right your wrong. Focus on not allowing your own nature to separate yourself from Me. For it is My conviction inside of you that points you in the way of righteousness.”*

Roan closed his eyes and nodded. He let out a deep breath and headed for the door. His eyes met Link and then Nico’s. “Let me report back to the Kingdom of Claws and then I will meet you in New Orleans the day after tomorrow.”

“Ready to be the sword of Visata?” Nico asked, his eyes gleaming with eagerness.

“How about we be slow to draw the blade and quick to listen?” Roan suggested.

Nico shrugged his broad shoulders as he turned walking backwards towards the door. “You do your thing and I’ll do mine. As long as both result in saving innocent victims.”

“Why do I have a feeling his idea of saving innocent victims and my idea of saving innocent victims varies greatly?” Link muttered.

“Could it be the fact that he looks a tad deranged?” Roan suggested.

“That could definitely be it.”



“You’re getting too bold,” Zeena said, as she walked slowly around the room staring at the monitors on the walls.

Azure, King of the Kingdom of Venom hissed as he turned to look at his Queen. “I am being exactly as bold as I need to be, my love,” he said as he moved towards her. He knew he walked with much more grace than any earth being, they were clumsy compared to his kind. Though he much preferred to be in his animal form, it wasn’t conducive to doing business when around humans. So much of the time he was stuck in the flesh with his snake just below the surface, always waiting to be set free.

She stepped back before he could wrap an arm around her. “You’ve taken too many women. Many of which aren’t *animi*.”

“We couldn’t only take *animi*,” he told her. “Then it *would* look suspicious to the Shaman. We had to take a blend. You know this.” Azure didn’t add that he needed the human women to experiment on. He had yet to mention to his mate he’d sought out humans that used magic to help with a plan

he'd formulated. Over the past couple of months, Azure had been thinking of *how animi* were created. They knew, based on what Shaman could see in the females, that they were altered by the magic from the beast-walkers. It stood to reason that if he had a concentrated amount of his magic, then he'd be able to create an *animus* without waiting for whatever amount of time it took for her genetics to be changed.

Zeena lifted her chin, and pulled her shoulders back. She'd always looked so regal and proud. It was one of the first things that drew his eye to her. She was also one of the most stubborn females he knew, which at times Azure found attractive and at other times, vexing. "Regardless, you shouldn't have taken them in such close intervals. Taking our time and being careful means less of a chance of getting found out."

"We can't just take our time," he snapped. "The more mated pairs we have the stronger we will be."

"That may be," Zeena said coolly, "but if you're found out by the Shaman Council then it won't matter the number of *animi* you've captured. They'll take them and there will be consequences greater than just losing the *animi*."

"You forget, my love," Azure stepped closer and wrapped an arm around her pulling her tightly against him. "We're not the only ones that have some of the *animi* we've found. So, even if they do take the ones we have, there are still the others we've sold to the other kingdoms."

She looked up at him and pursed her lips. "If you get caught and something happens to you, I will spend the rest of this life and the next making you miserable."

Azure smiled. “Is that your way of telling me you’re worried for my safety?”

She glanced away and rolled her eyes. “I shouldn’t have to tell you. We’ve been mated for centuries.”

“It’s still nice to hear.” He pressed a kiss to her forehead. “Worry not, my love. I’m taking care of everything.”

CHAPTER 13

Depends On The Size Of The Spiders.

"Before I met her, my life was a monochrome of duty. I didn't realize I was walking in perpetual darkness with no hope for anything else. I thought I had everything I needed, letting my responsibility act as the only thing that mattered. Then she appeared, and from one breath to the next, she illuminated the shadow world I'd been living in. Abruptly, my life had new meaning, a reason to keep going, something more valuable than mere obligation. I know with her at my side, each moment has greater significance than ever before." ~ Callon

"Where are you taking me?" Lola asked, her excitement evident as she bounced in her seat beside Callon. He shifted the car into second gear, but due to the NYC traffic, he had to downshift moments later. "I can't believe you have a car, not to mention a car this freaking nice," she continued, not waiting for him to answer. "Who has a car in New York? I mean, where do you park it? How can you afford to park it? Do you

know how expensive it is to pay for a parking place in this city?”

Callon’s lips curved slightly. Earlier that morning, Lola opened her window and practically jumped out to make sure he was still waiting for her, as he had promised. He had winked at her, which had made her cheeks blush a delightful two-toned shade, something he found adorable.

“I do live here,” he reminded her. “So, yes, I’m aware of the expense.”

“So, you’re rich,” she said simply, without judgment, merely stating a fact she learned.

He stole a glance at her, noticing her taking in the interior of the vehicle before settling on him. Her gaze traveled from his black-booted feet, up his dark pants, to his gray shirt. To the human eye, there would be nothing special about them. To someone like him— or to an *animus* paying attention— they would notice something different about the clothing.

As they stopped at another red light, Lola reached over and ran her fingers over the fabric of his shirt. “What is your shirt made of?” she asked, almost absently.

He clenched his jaw, trying to resist leaning into her touch. He needed to focus on driving and not get distracted. “The fabric was spun from a blend of several different types of spider silks,” he explained. He had no idea if she would believe him, but she would find out soon enough. So, he decided to answer her every question truthfully, no matter how outlandish it might sound to her. “It’s stronger than any human-made material. Essentially, it will never wear out, no

matter how many times it's worn and laundered." He glanced down at her hand, still caressing the fabric. "It will look as good as the day it was created." Then, he turned his attention back to the car in front of him, which had started moving forward. "What do you see?"

"At first your shirt looked gray," she began, "now, I see silver strands when the sun hits it just right." Pausing for a moment, she chuckled. "It does resemble a spider's web with thousands of threads twined together, but it shimmers just like a web does in the sun."

From the corner of his eye, he noticed her shaking her head, a small smile on her lips. "What?" he asked, intrigued by every curious thought that crossed her mind, no matter how small.

"What do you mean, what?" she laughed. "You just told me your shirt is made of spider silk. Do you know how many spiders it would take to make a shirt like that?"

Callon smirked. "Depends on the size of the spiders."

Her eyes widened, and suddenly a realization dawned on her. "Jaxine? She had, I mean, I saw her," she said.

Callon nodded. "You saw her beastwalker form, or part of it. That's what *animus* can do. They see past our glamour *and* to their future mate's beast."

"She had spider legs growing out of her back," she whispered, not in horror, but in awe. "How is that possible? I mean, it shouldn't be possible, but then neither should your eyes, or the lion face I keep seeing when I look at you at

certain times. Then there's the tattoo situation, which, I don't think even you know what the heck is going on with that."

You got that right, Little Cat, Callon thought to himself as he took a right turn. Managing to cover multiple blocks, they reached the entrance to an underground parking deck. He pulled into the drive, and waited for the camera to recognize his vehicle and open the gate.

Lola read the words on the side of the building as he drove into the garage. "Leonidas Global, Inc.," she said, glancing over at him. "Leonidas, as in the Spartan King?"

"He was a great protector of his people," Callon nodded. "So, we named our protective service business after him. LGI provides bodyguards, security, and PI skills to people all over the world."

"It also has your last name in it," she pointed out.

Callon smirked. "A happy coincidence."

"So you're a bodyguard?" she inquired.

He parked the car in a space with a plate displaying his initials on the wall, then turned to look at her. Her eyes were guarded as she briefly glanced up before looking down to pick at her yellow shirt. "I have been at times."

"Who do you guard?" This time, Callon was watching her when she asked the question. He noticed her shoulders tighten and her lips purse.

And I'm worried she'll think I'm too possessive. He reached over and unlatched her seat belt. Leaning close to her

cheek, his lips were next to her ear. “I don’t guard any bodies but yours. Not anymore.”

Her breath shuttered as her hands gripped her shirt as if she needed to hold onto something. Callon wanted her to hold on to him. He wanted her to feel the confidence to claim him, just as he did her. *It’s been less than fifteen hours, Fool,* he reminded himself. *Be patient.*

With a low growl, Callon climbed out of the car and quickly opened her door before she could. He offered her his hand. “Come, I want to introduce you to my parents. The Prime and Prima of the Kingdom of Claws.”

Lola’s eyes widened, and her mouth dropped open. She let him pull her out of the vehicle, then looked down at her clothes. “I can’t meet your parents.” Her words were whispered, as if someone might overhear them.

He frowned. “You’re my mate. Of course, you’ll meet them.”

“First, stop saying that,” she held up a finger, pointed it at him before poking him in the chest with it. “I haven’t decided I’m your anything. I am simply along for the ride and information.”

Callon couldn’t help the grin that curved his lips up. “It’s gonna be a long, long ride, Little Cat. Not to mention, a lot to learn. And you don’t have to decide anything.” He tapped the spot over his heart, then motioned towards the same place on her. “It’s already decided.”

She completely ignored his words as she held out her arms. “I’m not dressed to meet your parents, dammit,” she stomped her foot. “Let alone a prime and prima of anything. And don’t you think it’s a little early in our relationship for the whole, ‘meet the parents,’ thing?”

His smile faded as he realized what the real problem was. She found herself lacking, worrying about what they would think of her. *Silly little kitten*. “Lola, my parents are going to adore you. You could walk in here in a burlap sack and they’d think you were the most amazing sight since the last female born to our kind. You’ve got nothing to worry about.” He entwined their fingers together and began to pull her alongside him. “Besides, I still have much to tell you.”

She glanced at him, the eagerness in her eyes pushing aside her worries. “So.” Callon decided he needed to keep talking to keep her distracted. “Let’s see, we left off last night with... oh, that’s right,” he reached for his phone. “I’m supposed to send a shirtless picture to your two friends.”

“Oh, I’m glad you said that.” She pulled out her phone. Since he hadn’t let go of her hand, she started typing with her thumb. “I was supposed to send Antonio a picture. He asked for one a while back, but I totally forgot.”

The sound of the male’s name hit Callon’s ears like a resounding clang. Before he realized what he’d done, he dropped his phone, planted his feet, and pulled Lola closer to him. She hit his chest with a thud, and a rush of air escaped her parted lips while the hand holding the phone bounced off his chest. He needed to calm down, but the idea of *Antonio*

having anything of Lola's, even just a picture on a phone, filled him with animalistic rage.

"Your face." Lola gasped. Her tone might have made someone think she'd step away, but instead, the little cat moved closer. Her hand reached up to touch him. "There's fur... and damn, those are some big teeth."

Callon's chest vibrated as he growled and hissed at her. The hand wrapped around her wrist was no longer fully human. It had transformed into half-lion paw with massive claws at the tips. He forced himself to loosen his grip, worried he might hurt her. Then he remembered why he had grabbed her in the first place, and he hissed again. *What the hell is wrong with me?*

"Did you just hiss at me?" A smile turned up on Lola's face. A 'v' formed on her brow, though her smile didn't fade. "I thought you weren't supposed to be able to shift until you were mated."

"I found my mate," he snapped.

"Hmm, maybe." She nodded, and still didn't look the least bit afraid. Callon could feel his teeth stabbing into his bottom lip, yet Lola acted as if nothing were amiss. "But we're not technically 'mated.'" She emphasized the last two letters.

"What do you mean by 'mated'?" Callon couldn't keep the suggestive purr out of his voice.

She tilted her head and lifted a brow. "If you're trying to embarrass me, it's not going to work."

Callon chuckled. "Is that why you're two shades of red?"

“Butthead,” Lola muttered under her breath. She straightened her shirt and pushed her hair from her face. “Well, if you’re determined to do this, let’s go.”

Callon reached up and cupped her face. He probably shouldn’t touch her so much, considering she was so new to him, but he couldn’t help it. He loved the feel of her soft skin against his. He loved the warmth that infused his own. The way his beast moved inside of him, as if trying to climb out of his body to get closer to their mate. “Please don’t be upset,” he implored softly. “I wouldn’t have brought you to them if I thought you would be harmed, even emotionally.”

Lola stared into his eyes, her pale-green ones mesmerizing him. Her plump lips turned up slightly. “I’m a big girl. I can handle it. I just had a momentary freak out. I’m good. Besides, when will I ever have the opportunity to meet the king and queen of a supernatural race of shifters?”

“From this point forward?” He smirked. “Actually, quite often.”

She blew out a breath from puffed cheeks. “Okay, I’m not sure if I should be nervous or excited about that.”

Callon dropped his hand from her face and wrapped his much larger one around hers. “Come on. My parents are waiting.”

“They know we’re coming?”

“Yes. I texted them this morning.” He pulled her along with him. “They’re eager to meet you.”

Lola remained quiet as they stood in the elevator. Callon knew his mother would be there, waiting to meet his mate. Lola had no idea how crucial she was to their species, not just as an *animus*, but as the mate to the next in line to rule the Kingdom of Claws. From the time he'd spent observing Lola, he had no doubt she would make an extraordinary Prima.

As the elevator doors opened, Callon kept Lola at his side as they stepped into the lobby of his father's floor.

"Fancy," Lola murmured, glancing around the space. Then her eyes widened. "Wait." She tried to stop, but Callon gently tugged her forward.

"You're seeing through the glamour," he explained. "An environment that suits my family more than a stuffy office."

"So, this isn't really a tree-lined pathway, with a field of high-grass plains beyond the trees?" she asked, her voice filled with awe.

"No, *Sazzi*. It's a normal office building, albeit, an opulent one. We like to be surrounded by a working environment our beast prefer. Felines in Damara live in wild places similar to those in this realm."

"Hello, Callon," a female voice interrupted his thoughts. The human female, employed as his father's secretary, grated on his nerves even on the best of days. The intimate way she addressed him caused his beast to snarl.

"What's wrong?" Lola gave his hand a gentle squeeze. He looked down at her, and she pointed to her mouth. "You've got snarly teeth."

“Snarly teeth?” His teeth must have elongated without his realization. Lola could see it, but the secretary would not. She would only see the handsome face she seemed to be infatuated with.

The secretary eyed Lola with disdain, her face unyielding as she spoke. “May I ask if she has an appointment with Taras?” Her voice was clipped, like the sound of scissors cutting through thick fabric. Callon disliked the weight of the woman’s gaze on his mate, the way it seemed to crawl over her features, examining every inch. The expression in the secretary’s eyes was one of disgust, examining Lola and finding her wanting. After what felt like an eternity, the woman’s lip curled up in distaste and she looked back to Callon.

Lola turned away from Callon and looked at the blonde woman. “Taras?”

“She means Mr. Leo,” Callon corrected. He couldn’t even remember the secretary’s name – didn’t care to know it—especially now as the female looked at his mate with disdain.

The blonde cleared her throat and tried to appear neutral. “Yes, that’s what I meant. Does she have an appointment with Mr. Leo?” The female didn’t even bother to address Lola, but instead continued to look at him.

“She’s with me,” Callon snapped. “She doesn’t need a damn appointment.”

“Sorry.” Lola stepped toward the secretary, causing their arms to stretch. Callon wasn’t getting any closer to the human

who always smelled of pheromones that he had no desire to inhale. “He’s cranky. I’m Lola.” She held out her free hand.

The secretary stumbled back, nearly losing her balance as her hip hit the side of her desk in an attempt to get away from Lola, as if she’d been threatened rather than offered a handshake. “Don’t, I mean,” the secretary stumbled. “Are you contagious?”

Lola dropped her hand. “Only in days that end in ‘y,’” she said in a voice that was way too chipper for someone who’d just been insulted in such a disgusting way.

It would be wrong for him to kill his father’s secretary right? Or was that a morally-gray area, considering she’d just insulted his mate by acting disgusted by her vitiligo. *No one would have to know*, his beast suggested. It had become much more vocal lately since finding Lola. Callon continued to watch the two females interact while trying to talk himself out of ripping the secretary’s throat out.

Lola dropped her hand. “I apologize that I don’t have an appointment. I didn’t even know I was coming here today.”

“Dammit all.” Callon snarled under his breath. “You don’t need an appointment to see my father, your future father-in-law.”

The other female’s eyes widened, and her mouth tensed. “I apologize,” she said curtly. “I didn’t realize you had a fiancée. She’s...” There was a pause before she looked back at Lola. “Lovely.” The word came out tight, as if she’d nearly choked on it.

“It’s not really your business,” Callon informed her. “So you wouldn’t have known. And she’s more than lovely, she’s stunning. Now if you’d kindly get back to your job, we will continue on our way.”

“Callon,” Lola snapped as she whipped her head around to glare at him. “Seriously?”

“My father and mother are waiting,” he said, ignoring her obvious irritation at him. Just because he’d decided he adored *his* human, it didn’t mean he was suddenly going to like them all. He didn’t bother to spare the secretary another look as he continued on, pulling Lola with him, towards his father’s door.

“Sorry,” Lola called out. “I’d say he’s not usually an ass, but I honestly don’t know. I’m going with yes. He’s definitely, usually, an ass.”

Callon walked faster though that didn’t stop Lola from talking.

“Have a great day,” she said.

“You don’t have to apologize to her,” he said as he pushed the door to Taras’s office open. “And she’s the one that was an ass.”

“I can apologize to whoever I please,” she said, her voice filled with irritation. “I mean, what was that? I’m used to people responding to my skin like that, Callon. I don’t need you offended on my behalf.”

Callon turned to look at her. He stepped closer until she backed into the now closed door they’d just entered. When she couldn’t go any further, he placed his hands on either side of

her head and looked down at her. “I *can* be offended, and more than that, I can be pissed off at anyone who treats you as if you’re a leper. Especially someone employed by LGI.” His voice was tense and deadly serious. “That female has flirted with me every time I’ve come into this building, letting off pheromones only her male should scent. It’s offensive to my beast. Then she dared to attempt to show she had some sort of claim over me in front of you simply because she works for my father. It’s revolting.” His breathing had increased until Callon practically panted. He didn’t know why he was so worked up. The more he talked about how the secretary had behaved for as long as she worked for Taras, the more it agitated him.

“I’m going to ignore some of that reply because it just pisses me off. However, this might be a good time for me to point out that human men can’t smell pheromones, nor does a human woman know that she’s putting any off.” She chewed on her bottom lip briefly before adding, “Though it’s good to know, and embarrassing at the same time, that you can smell them. So, thanks for that.” She poked him in the chest. “ You can’t really blame her for being attracted to you. You’re hot. She doesn’t know you’re not human, or at least, I’m assuming that.”

“You assume correctly,” he said curtly.

“You probably draw her in with some sort of animal magnetism you don’t realize you’re putting off. Which means it’s your fault.” She raised her brow at him.

He frowned. “It’s *my* fault the human female desires me.”

“Yup,” Lola said, her head giving a little scooping motion as she spoke. “Don’t be so animalistically attractive and she won’t hit on you.”

“You know that’s ridiculous right?” he asked as he leaned down closer.

“No more ridiculous than you getting angry over her acting like I’m a freak when she probably was raised by asshole parents who taught her to act like a snot when she was afraid of something, instead of just asking what it was. Or for having a crush on you for that matter,” Lola pointed out.

“Are you going to continue standing there trying to intimidate your female, or are you going to introduce us?” Lyra, his mother, asked from somewhere behind him.

Callon’s chest rumbled, his animal sounds becoming more frequent. Definitely more beast-like. He didn’t want to share Lola. Especially, when she was obviously irritated with him. Shouldn’t she be mad at the woman who’d hit on him right in front of her? Not to mention treated her as if she were a leper?

“If it doesn’t bother you that she responded to you the way she did, doesn’t it bother you that she was hitting on me?” he asked her softly.

Lola tilted her head to the right, and narrowed her eyes on him. “Callon, we just met. I’m still trying to wrap my head around all of this. And you have repeatedly told me that I belong to you and you to me. Do I need to be jealous?”

“You were jealous over your friends,” he pointed out. He had no idea why he was goading her. “And they’re people you

trust.”

She rolled her eyes. “My emotions are all over the place. I guess, standing there with you holding my hand, acting so rude to the snotty secretary, I didn’t feel the need to be jealous. But when you offer to send my friends a shirtless picture, I get a little irritated.”

“Noted,” he said, his lips nearly touching hers. When had he gotten so close to her? “So, I’ll be an ass to your friends, and not offer up pictures to them, even in jest.” His beast was slightly appeased at her response. He no longer felt like he needed to rip the secretary’s throat out. Maybe he needed to talk to his father about the intense emotions he was feeling before he did something so rash.

He felt heat on his face and his attention was pulled from the war waging inside of him. He stared down into her green eyes that always seemed to sparkle with mischief. Lola stole all of his attention and held him captive. How could that be good for his people? But how could a life without her be good for him?

CHAPTER 14

The Best Threat She'd Ever Received.

"For the first time in a long time I had no desire to rush home and submerge myself into the fantasy world of a book. I didn't have to. I was actually living out my own story. Excited didn't begin to explain what I was feeling. And yes, a little terrified. A little. Okay, that's a lie, I'm hella scared." ~ Lola

Lola rose up on her tiptoes, her lips brushing his as she spoke quietly. She hadn't forgotten that a woman had spoken which meant they weren't alone. "If you're mean to my friends, I'll cut you." He'd been lost in thought for a moment, but her words appeared to have brought him out of whatever had held his attention.

"For someone with no claws, you sure threaten to use them a lot," he said, his lips also intimately rubbing hers. "I should warn you, our kind find a strong female, very, very appealing."

Lola swallowed as she looked into his golden eyes. Their lips barely touched and everything inside of her screamed to get closer.

“If you keep looking at me like that, I’m going to kiss you,” he threatened.

It was the best threat she’d ever received.

A throat clearing had her pulling back so quickly that she bumped her head against the door behind her. Her eyes snapped closed at the bite of pain. “Ouch,” she muttered. Before she could reach up and rub the back of her head, Callon’s hand was there gently caressing her hair.

“You okay?” he asked, his mouth now next to her ear.

“I’m fine,” she said, her face heating. “Could you step back? You’re making me claustrophobic and I don’t like it.”

He pulled back and looked down at her. His lips formed a crooked smile. “Liar. You like me making you claustrophobic.” When he took a step away, he tapped his nose. “I can smell it.”

“Son of a biscuit,” she snapped, trying not to turn any brighter than the shade of red that was all over her skin. Lola quickly glanced around, and tried not to be surprised it didn’t look like any kind of office she’d seen. Earth tones and textured wallpaper ran down the wall to the floor that looked like stone. the rugs seemed to look like dirt and dry grass. Somehow it all worked.

“Callon,” a deep, male voice spoke. “Step aside and quit teasing your female. Introduce us.”

Her eyes widened as their bubble popped and reality came rushing in. Lola’s stomach dropped to the tips of her toes as the powerful voice filled the room though the owner of the

voice hadn't even spoken all that loud. It was one of those voices that commanded attention. Kind of like Callon's.

"It's going to be fine," Callon said gently as he ran a finger across her cheek.

Lola slapped it away and glared at him, which only made him grin and wink at her. "I don't like you right now."

He tapped his nose again as he stepped to the side. He tugged her up beside him, then rested his arm around her waist.

"Father, Mother, this is Lola Katz, my mate." Lola couldn't see his face. Her eyes were closed, but she could hear the pride in his voice.

He nudged her and whispered. "Open your eyes."

"I'm good," she whispered back.

"Lola," a kind, warm voice said just before she was pulled into a tight hug. "It's so wonderful to meet you."

"It is?" Lola squeaked out. Her arms were trapped at her sides as Callon's mother, at least, that's who she assumed hugged her, pulled her in even tighter.

"Of course, it is," the woman practically sang. A moment later, she released Lola to grab onto her shoulders, as if she needed to keep Lola from running away. Which to be fair, she might. She didn't know how to talk to a Prima. She'd never met someone's mother, not that she'd ever been in a relationship long enough to reach that stage. Then again, she'd known Callon less than twenty-four hours and here she was, meeting his parents. *How's that for speed dating?*

“Let me look at you.”

“Lola, this is my mother, Lyra,” Callon said, his arm still wrapped around her waist, holding her snugly as if, he too, was afraid she’d make a break for it.

“That’s good, because it would be really awkward if some strange woman was hugging me that you didn’t know,” Lola said as she took in Lyra, the Prima of the Kingdom of Claws. “Not to mention it would bring up a lot of questions as to why your father had some strange woman in his office and not your mom.” *You can shut up at any moment, Lo*, she told herself as she watched Lyra smile. *The Queen of Claws*, as Lola had just then dubbed her, was incredibly beautiful. Her eyes were the same bright-gold as Callon’s and had the same shape, like that of a cat. The outside tipped up giving her a very exotic look. Her hair was long, reaching her waist and was twisted into a braid that ran over one shoulder. As Lyra tilted her head, her facial features shifted, and Lola was staring at a stunning lioness. She sucked in a breath and blinked, then it was the woman she was looking at in the next breath.

“You do see us,” Lyra said with a kind smile. “I know this all must be very overwhelming for you. I talk to the other *animi*, though many of them aren’t ma—”

“Mother,” Callon said, his voice sharp. “I’m still explaining our world to Lola. We’ve only spent a handful of hours together.”

Lola glanced up at him and noticed his cheek bones had sharpened and his eyes seemed even more angular. His feline features became more pronounced when he was emotional.

“Of course,” Lyra said without missing a beat and not bothered by her son’s snappiness. “I’ll have to ask you to be patient with my son, Lola,” the Prima said as she gave her shoulders a gentle squeeze before releasing her. “He doesn’t often show what he’s feeling and so when it slips past his shield, sometimes it’s not tempered.” Her voice was teasing, but Lola saw the deep love shining in Lyra’s eyes as she looked up at her son.

“Yeah, I’ve sort of gathered that,” Lola said, smiling back at her. She didn’t know what she’d been expecting a Queen of Claws to be like, but she was pretty sure it wouldn’t have been Lyra.

“Why?” Callon asked.

“Snap,” Lola huffed and glanced away. “I said that out loud, didn’t I?”

Callon chuckled. “Queen of Claws?”

“Okay,” Lola said as she started to turn. “Can I just go out and chat with Bitchy Barbie now?”

Lyra laughed. “I told you Tamara didn’t fit here.”

“She had the credentials and she didn’t babble when I interviewed her,” the deep voice she’d heard earlier said dryly.

Lola turned back to find a man who looked incredibly similar to Callon standing a couple of feet from her. He had a stern face, but kind eyes. His hair was shoulder length, wavy and unruly, as if it defied him on principle.

“Lola, this is my father, Taras,” Callon told her.

“King of the Jungle,” she whispered and then slapped her hand over her mouth as her eyes widened so big she was sure they’d pop out of her head. *What the ever-loving hell is wrong with me? I was dropped on my head as a child. That has to be it. I’ll have to ask my mom why on earth she let my dad hold me because it totally would have been him that dropped me. Dammit, Dad, really? You couldn’t have dropped me on my butt where there was a diaper padding it?*

“You’re going to be good for my son,” Taras said, his face morphing into a lion-like features, though not completely. He maintained a humanoid form that was quite fascinating to look at. High cheekbones broadened like a lion, even fur. His brow narrowed and his mouth protruded a bit as his jaw lengthened, but that’s where the transformation stopped. “Does it bother you?”

Lola blinked several times, waiting for his face to go back to a completely human state. After several seconds, she realized he was doing it on purpose. “You’re doing that?” she asked, because, of course, she did.

His lips spread into a smile showing large fangs. “I’m a beastwalker. And though Callon has probably explained it to you, sometimes you need to see something to really accept it to be true. Shall I shift completely?”

“Dad,” Callon said but snapped his mouth shut when Taras snarled at him.

Lola didn’t flinch though her ears might have. “Aren’t you worried people in the building will hear?” She snapped her fingers before he could answer. “Oh, wait, is everyone in the

building like you all? Are they all lions? If you're a feline species does that mean there's others like tigers, bobcats, panthers?" Her eyes widened as she remembered the guys from the diner. "Panthers," she nearly shouted. "Wyatt, Rafe, Drystan, Kian, and Roan, they're all panthers, aren't they?" She looked from Taras, to Lyra and then Callon.

"Roan isn't. He's a Shaman," Taras explained. "That's something Callon can explain to you."

"He did mention Shaman," Lola looked at each of them as she spoke, "he fits right in with all you beastwalkers because you're all incredibly good looking. Is that a beastwalker thing?"

Callon's chest rumbled against her as he made a sound, like Dog did— though this was much bigger— when he was ticked at her for accidentally bumping him while he slept. On *her* bed, she might add.

Lola pursed her lips. "What's got your tail in a twist?"

"You called other males handsome," Lyra told her with a grin. "Our males tend to be a tad possessive." She held up her hand, pinching her thumb and forefinger together.

"You do realize that really just makes me want to poke that thorn a little more, right?" Lola asked, unable to keep her trap shut.

"And that's why I like you, Lola Katz," Lyra said, her smile growing. "My son needs a strong female. One that will stand up to him, but also stand up for him."

Lola's heart skipped a beat as the conversation went from playful to serious in a span of a sentence. "How do you know I'm that woman? You just met me."

"Do you believe that things in life are left to chance, Lola?" the Prima asked. "Do you think we're just walking around with happy accidents falling at our feet, or is there something more going on?"

Lola considered Lyra's words as she looked up at Callon. His golden eyes searched hers. She thought about all the times she'd sat on her bed, pouring her soul out to her diary feeling like there was something missing from her life. "Until," she muttered as she tilted her head taking in all that was Callon's handsome features, even when she saw the animal characteristics, "until you." The vacancy that had been a deep void inside of her— was no longer there. "It's gone," she said as the air whooshed from her lungs, still looking into his gaze. "The emptiness is gone."

Callon's hand cupped her chin as he leaned down and pressed his forehead to hers. "I know, *Sazzi*. Mine is too."

Lola swallowed hard as her eyes brimmed with tears, the wetness spilling down her cheeks and catching in her lips. She desperately wanted to hide away, but couldn't move, feeling paralyzed by the moment. Some great revelation had suddenly dropped onto her. The room was closing in on her, suffocating her until she thought she would collapse under the weight of the gazes of people she didn't know, but felt she belonged with. Desperate for relief, she tried to draw in deep breaths to

steady herself, but each gasp only made her feel more lost and exposed.

A hand squeeze hers. It was small, unlike Callon's, so she figured it must be Lyra's. "This isn't an accident, no matter how happy it may be, Lola," the Prima of Kingdom of Claws said, her voice gentle and warm. "You belong with Callon. I don't fully understand it myself, but I see it. An energy that pulls you together like magnets. I know, maybe, it doesn't feel like it, but it's going to be okay."

"Let's not overwhelm her more than she already is," Callon said. Like the look in his eyes, his voice seemed to hold some sort of censure.

She pushed away the doubt and focused on trying to pull her crap together. "I don't usually just randomly break down in tears," Lola said as she wiped at her face with her free hand. Callon's thumb stroked ever so gently against the side of her cheek before he pressed his lips firmly to her forehead. Like a million volts of electricity surged through her veins, Lola felt the heat of his kiss radiating down her face, neck and shoulders, until even the tips of her toes tingled with pleasure. She placed her hand on his shoulder and pushed. He backed away, only because he allowed it. There was no way she could actually move him. "You're not helping." He started to raise his hand and she smacked it. "Do not tap my nose."

Lyra laughed, as she gave her hand one more squeeze and then released her. "I'm sorry if I made things intense. That wasn't my intention."

Lola turned to face Lyra. “No, it’s— you didn’t do anything. I think things are just sort of sinking in. Instead of a slow descent, it sort of plummeted into my brain and hit my emotional center at the same time. I’m pretty sure that makes no sense at all.” She made a dismissive motion and sighed. “I tend to ramble when—”

“All the time,” Callon interrupted.

Lola shot him a glare. “I’m nervous,” she finished her sentence. He winked at her and she felt a little irritated with herself that it made her want to smile.

“Well,” Taras spoke for the first time since before Lola’s little epiphany— Well, big epiphany. “Why don’t you let Callon take you to our home and show you around? You two can spend some time getting to know one another and hopefully that will put you more at ease.”

“Thank you,” Lola said, meeting his gaze.

“Lola,” Taras’ voice suddenly became stern. “We won’t force you to be a part of this world, or Callon’s life. I need you to understand that.”

“Father,” Callon hissed from beside her causing her to jump.

She turned and looked at him. Once again his animal features were prominent, but this time it was nearly as complete as his father’s had been. Lola glanced back at Taras and realized his features were back to human.

“I am your Prime, Callon,” Taras said, his voice a deep rumble. “Mate or not, I will not hold her against her will.”

Lola sensed something more profound, than whether or not she would stay with Callon, was happening. She looked from Taras, whose chin lifted as he narrowed his eyes at his son, to Lyra, her lips pressed in a thin line, and her brow furrowed. *Note to self, do not attempt to go toe-to-toe with the Queen of Claws.* She looked like the fierce lioness she no doubt was. Then Lola looked at Callon. His face was an emotionless mask, but the tightened muscles in his jaw revealed the violent storm raging inside him. The air around them thickened, Lola feared that any second it would shatter, and all hell would break loose. He obviously did not appreciate his father telling him that she wouldn't be forced to be with him. She didn't really think that Callon would keep her against her will.

Suddenly his eyes snapped to her. "Don't be so sure." His words were a little difficult to understand as the incisors grew longer in his mouth.

"Did I seriously say that out loud?" she sighed and rolled her eyes. She wasn't about to acknowledge the veiled threat. She wasn't afraid of Callon, no matter what he said. He wouldn't hurt her. She could feel it in her bones. So, she'd been wrong about kidnapping her. *Can't be right about everything,* she told herself.

"I won't hurt you," he said, his voice tight. "As for the other, we will cross that bridge if we come to it."

"Callon," Lyra snapped, her voice like a whip against the stone floor.

Okay, she needed to get him out of here. He obviously wasn't backing down, and neither were his parents. Sometimes

the best thing to do was step away from the argument and cool off. “Callon,” she said as she reached for his hand. He grasped onto it and pulled her tightly to him. She could practically feel the deadly vibes radiating off of him. “Why don’t you take me to your home, as your father suggested. Show me around, wine and dine me, and maybe you won’t have to worry about kidnapping me. Okay?” He started to look away from her, but she reached up and grasped his chin. “Okay?”

Callon closed his eyes briefly. His shoulders lowered and the tension in the room dropped a little. Enough Lola no longer felt like his parents were about to tackle him, or vice versa. “Okay,” he finally said. “But we’re taking my father’s elevator. I will not subject you to that vile woman again.” He started towards a wall that seemed solid at first but when they were within a couple feet, it separated, opening into the interior of an elevator.

“This place is so freaking cool,” she said under her breath. When they turned around, she smiled at Lyra and Taras. “It was really nice meeting you. I mean, scary as crap, but nice. I really wasn’t sure what to think but you didn’t hate me on sight, say a word about my skin, or make me feel unwelcome, so I’m going to say that this was a win.”

“It was definitely a win, Lola,” Lyra said, her face no longer severe, but now resting in a kind smile. “We are so thankful Callon found you.”

“Father, Mother,” Callon said sharply before pushing the button.

The doors started to close and she shot him a look. “That was rude.”

“I’m done being nice.”

“At what point *were* you nice?”

He shrugged, his face staring at the metal elevator doors. “I was nice to you.”

“You should be nice to your parents. They love you. It’s written all over their faces.” Lola knew because her own parents looked at her the same way. Taras and Lyra were proud of their son and they genuinely wanted the best for him.

“They want to take you from me,” he said, his body tensing up beside her. “That is not their choice to make.”

“Hey,” Lola snapped her fingers in front of his face. “I’m here. That’s what matters. Right?”

He took her hand and pressed his lips to it. “You’re here right now,” he agreed.

Lola didn’t understand why he tacked on ‘right now.’ Perhaps he was thinking about the fact that she’d have to go home tonight. She blew out a breath causing her hair to fly away from her face. “Crisis averted,” she muttered under her breath as she tried to pull her hand away. Callon wasn’t having it. He entwined their fingers, and shrugged at her when she raised her brow at him.

“I like touching you,” he said absently as he continued to stare straight ahead.

I liked it too, a little too much, she told herself, making sure her lips were firmly pressed together so the words didn't come yapping out of her mouth.

By the time they were back in his car, Lola felt much less tense and Callon was more relaxed as well. He turned the music on low so it was background noise, then rested one hand on the steering wheel while holding hers in the other.

“So where's home?” she asked as she watched the people on the New York streets walking quickly to wherever they were headed. “Long Island,” Callon answered. “Our kingdom owns a large estate there.”

Lola's mind tried to work through all the estates he could be talking about. It's not like there were tons of places in NYC where there were large amounts of unoccupied land. Wouldn't beastwalkers need a large place to run free, for lack of a better term? “Does everyone live there?” she asked as she continued to watch the passing scenery.

“Not the entire kingdom, but a large amount,” he answered. He was lost in thought when she glanced at him. Callon's fingers tapped mindlessly on the steering wheel as his eyes stayed completely focused on the road.

“Where do the others live?”

“My father has purchased large warehouses that have then been gutted and turned into homes with interiors that appeal to our feline nature,” he told her as he glanced over and gave her a quick smile.

Lola's Curiosity Meter was dinging like crazy as she considered what, 'appeal to their feline nature,' might mean. "Are there lots of indoor trees?" she asked before she could think to sensor herself. Then mentally rolled her eyes. As if she'd ever actually *thought* to sensor herself. There was no sensor, only a second of time, if she was lucky, where she managed to snap her lips closed before the thoughts could leave her mouth.

"More like high places with ledges to lounge on," Callon answered. And then added with a smirk, "Not all cats climb trees, in fact, the larger cats species couldn't get their large asses up a tree even if they wanted to."

Lola worried her bottom lip as she contemplated all the questions that had been building in her mind.

"I can practically feel the questions welling up inside of you, Lola," Callon said, his voice low and teasing. "Your head's going to pop off if you don't go ahead and get them out. Besides, we've got an hour drive, not including the twenty-minute ferry ride until we arrive to my home."

Lola's leg began to bounce up and down, and she felt her palms beginning to sweat, which wasn't cool because one of her hands was still in his. Sweaty palms were not attractive. She knew that if she started asking questions she'd never stop. How could she? It was an entire new world with fantastical things, and they lived right here in New York, not to mention the other kingdoms and wherever else they were located.

She took a deep breath and decided that if he got sick of her questions, he only had himself to blame because he was

the one who asked. “Just so you know,” she warned, “You brought this on yourself.”

Callon simply chuckled. “Bring it on, *Sazzi*,” his voice was a deep purr that did things to her.

Focus. Hormones later, she told herself. “Okay, here we go.” She pulled her hand from his, and ran both of her palms up and down the tops of her thighs. “In Damara, do all of the species look like our species? And did you call yourselves the same things? Like you’re a lion, so in Damara, is that what you would have been called? Or is there another language with different names, but you use the names of the animals in our realm that most closely resemble your animals? Can you communicate with animals when you’re in your animal form, or even in your human form, since you’re obviously very much in-tune with your animal nature? And speaking about having an animal form, what’s it like living in a world that’s not your home? I mean, is it stifling to have to act human? And, if,” her question was stopped with a finger over her lips. She looked at Callon.

He wasn’t looking at her, but he was grinning. “I can’t answer any of your questions if you don’t give me the opportunity, and though our intellect is superior to humans, I can’t remember fifty questions all at one time.”

She frowned. “Superior intellect,” she mumbled against his finger which was still pressed to her lips.

“Let’s start with your first question.” He pulled his hand away and rested his palm on her thigh. “Remember, as I answer these questions, I was born in this realm. Earth is my

home, even if it isn't where my species is originally from. But those of us who were born here go through our own schooling and learn about our world."

"Okay, so you're telling me from a third-person point of view," she nodded. "Got it."

"From all the drawings I've seen of Damara, the beasts there all very closely resemble those that are in this realm. What's more interesting is as time went on with Damarians living in the human realm, our animals sort of changed to resemble the earth animals more until we looked identical."

"Seriously?" Lola exclaimed. "That's amazing."

Callon nodded. "I think it was Visata's way of helping us fit into this new life. We brought it on ourselves, and yet, He did not forsake us. He gave us a way to adapt and live in a new home."

"Visata?"

"Our Creator," Callon said, his voice full of reverence. "The equivalence of who you call God."

"Whoa," she breathed out. "I hadn't even considered where you actually came from," she shook her head, "I mean, *how* you came to be."

"Let's deal with one topic at a time," he teased. "So, yes we looked similar while in our own realm, but now you wouldn't be able to tell a Damarian tiger from an Earth tiger. As for the names," he paused as he slowed at a light and flipped on the blinker. Callon looked both ways and then

turned right. “We do have a different language, and so, yes, our beasts were called something different.”

“What were you called?” she blurted out.

He chuckled. “So curious. We’re called *Vottaris*.”

“Vo-tar-us,” Lola said, letting the strange language roll off her tongue. “Say more,” she demanded like an eager child. *Okay, tamp down your inner five-year-old*, she told herself.

“Do you want me to answer your other questions?” he asked as he pulled up to the ferry dock. They waited until it was their turn for him to drive his car forward.

“Yes,” she nodded. “But answer them by speaking in your language.”

“Okay,” he agreed. “Can we communicate with animals? Yes, but probably not in the way that you’re thinking.”

Lola held up her hand. “I said to answer in your language.”

Callon’s brow rose as he put the car in park, rolled down the windows and then turned the engine off. He turned so his body was angled towards hers. “Demanding little cat, aren’t you.” His gold eyes narrowed and flashed with something Lola could only describe as wicked delight.

She held his gaze, a rabbit that had caught the attention of a hungry predator. The air thickened in the car even though the windows were lowered, and Lola felt a trickle of sweat run down her spine. “Sorry,” she said when she realized she had sounded very much like a bratty kid. “I just get excited.”

“I know,” Callon said softly as his hand brushed her hair back from her face. “It’s refreshing. I don’t get excited about things.”

“Really?” she asked casually. “I’d beg to differ. You showed plenty of excitement in your dad’s building. Maybe not excitement in the traditional sense of the word.”

“I wouldn’t call that excitement,” he said, his finger tracing the shell of her ear.

Lola found herself leaning into his touch. “What would you call it?” Was that her voice that sounded so breathy?

“Intense,” he answered. “I’m intense and you make it a hundred times worse.”

Lola sucked in a shaky breath. “That sounds very dangerous for anyone around you.”

“Everyone but you, *Sazzi*,” he whispered. “Always everyone but you.”

Her eyes slipped closed as his fingers threaded through her hair. The heat from his skin against her scalp was comforting and familiar. How was that possible? How could she feel familiar towards a man she barely knew?

“You might want to check that,” Callon’s voice had her eyes snapping open.

“What?” she gasped.

“You’re phone,” he motioned to it sitting in her lap. “It vibrated about twenty times in the last thirty seconds.”

“Phone, vibrated, seconds,” she sputtered like an idiot. She scooped up her phone and swiped the screen. There were fifteen texts. Seven from Katy, five from Maddie and three from Antonio.

She quickly responded to both Maddie and Katy in a joint text.

Lola: I’m alive, he’s not crazy—
mostly— and I’ll respond more later.
Quit blowing my phone up.

Dots appeared and Katy responded

Katy: Antonio came in wanting to
know where you were.

Lola: What did you tell him?

Katy: That you’d found your book
boyfriend, had run off to elope, and
that you’d be spending your
honeymoon at Disney’s Animal
Kingdom so your new hubby would
feel more at home.

Lola couldn’t help but laugh. Katy didn’t know how right she was.

Lola: Well, maybe he’ll get the idea
that I’m not interested.

Katy: Don't count on it. He seemed very agitated. Sal and him got into a yelling match that ended up with Sal throwing Antonio out.

Lola: What? They never fight.

Katy: Something was off about Antonio. I mean he's hot, but he's always been a little on the skeezy side."

"Antonio?" Callon's voice hummed in her ear.

Lola jumped and pressed her hand to her chest. She hadn't realized he'd leaned close to her. Hadn't even noticed his hand was gently wrapped around the back of her neck in a very possessive manner.

"Good grief, Man," Lola huffed. She focused back on the screen, and tried to ignore his close proximity and what it was doing to her senses.

"This is the male who walked you home?" Callon asked, his voice eerily calm.

"Mmm-hmm," she said as she texted Katy back.

Lola: What was Antonio yelling about?

Dots appeared as she waited for her friend's response.

Katy: He said that Sal should have let him know that you'd called in. Sal told him it wasn't his business what his employees did. Antonio claimed that anything that had to do with you was his business.

"What the hell?" Lola muttered.

"Now I *know* he has a death wish," Callon murmured. She could feel the tension rising in him though his touch remained gentle. "And he's lucky that I like to grant wishes."

Lola snorted. "Yeah, I'm sure you're like a fairy godmother. Tossing out wishes like candy on Halloween."

He gave a lazy shrug. "I help where I can."

Katy: My advice, avoid Antonio if you can. I'm telling you Lo, something about him wasn't right.

"Hey," Lola squawked as Callon plucked the phone from her at the same time his other hand left the back of her neck. Both his large thumbs moved deftly over the screen as he texted. She leaned over so she could see what it was he was sending to her friend.

Lola: This is Callon. You don't need to worry about Lola. I will keep her safe. But please keep me apprised of the situation with the male who thinks he has a claim on her.

Katy: Do you have a brother?

Lola snorted. "I swear my best friends have no shame."

Katy: Wait, Maddie wants one, too. Do you have two brothers?

Lola grabbed the phone back.

Lola: He's not something you can just order off a freaking menu or out of a catalog.

Katy: Well, maybe he should be. He sounds hella saner than Antonio. And that's saying something if I'll trust a stranger with you over someone we've known for years.

Lola agreed. Antonio had always been pushy, but she'd never felt like he was dangerous.

Lola: Thanks for keeping me posted. Love you both. I'll check in later.

Katy: Cool. Be safe. Callon, take care of our girl or we'll be forced to take you to meet our pet pigs. They're hungry.

Lola chuckled.

Lola: Quit watching the Silence of the Lambs movies.

She dropped the phone in her lap and sighed. "I wanted excitement in my life. Guess I got it." There was a loud, long whistle from the ferry, indicating they'd made it to Long Island. Lola looked up at Callon and the small smile that had been on her lips slipped away as she met his blank face.

"This is the life you were destined for, *Sazzi*. That's why you longed for it."

CHAPTER 15

Looking Way Too Happy For A Wet Cat.

“We are taught from a very young age the importance of a mate and what the bond does. I grew up thinking I understood what it would mean if I ever choose a mate. Nothing prepared me for the feelings that have taken my body hostage. I’m questioning whether or not I am safe, not only to others, but to her.” ~ Callon

Callon pulled through the gate of the large estate and glanced in the rearview mirror to make sure it closed behind them. The gate wasn’t what kept strangers out, it was more decoration than anything. What kept strangers out were the large cats that roamed freely on the property. Cats that the locals thought were just exotic pets owned by the eccentric owners of the estate.

“Are those white tigers?” Lola asked, her face nearly smashed against the window. “And orange tigers? And a cheetah?”

As they drove slowly, a loud thud sounded on the roof and then a large, black panther walked casually down the front

window to the hood of the car.

“Dammit, Bane,” Callon growled at the panther who was lying lazily on the hood, his tail flicking back and forth, his green gaze settled firmly on Lola.

“Bane?” she squeaked and leaned as close to the front windshield as her seatbelt would let her.

“You know Bane?” Callon asked, trying very hard not to slam on the breaks so the panther would go flying off the hood. Especially since the feline wouldn’t quit staring at his mate.

“No, it’s just weird you’re calling him a name because of the man you know him to be. Not because he’s an animal you’ve given a name,” she answered, her eyes pinned on the male in question. “Not that anyone could mistake this creature as *only* an animal. Not with those eyes.”

“What about his eyes?” Callon asked as his gaze darted back and forth between the two.

“They’re full of intelligence. There’s definitely much higher thinking going on behind them,” she said. Looking away from Bane, she looked at him, *where her eyes belong*, his beast pointed out. “Like yours,” she added.

“Do you find him attractive?” *Why the hell had he asked that?*

“He’s a beautiful cat,” Lola said, but her gaze stayed on Callon. “But since I’m not into bestiality, regardless of the fact that he’s a man, right now, all I see is a panther.”

Callon’s beast was slightly mollified. Slightly.

“So, are all of these cats beastwalkers?” Lola asked, her eyes once again roaming over the expanse of the property. “And good grief, how long is this driveway?”

“Yes,” Callon said to the first question as the steering wheel creaked under his grip. He bared his teeth at Bane who simply yawned and threw himself back until he laid completely on his side. *The bastard.* “The house is closer to the water,” he told her, explaining why the driveway was so long. It was a huge piece of property for the area, at sixty-three acres, though not big enough for all of their pride members. Many of them traveled to less densely populated parts of the U.S. for short stints to stretch their legs.

As the main house came into view Callon heard Lola suck in a deep breath. “You live here?”

“Along with two hundred other pride members,” he said, hoping that would take away the shock of the size.

“How big is this place?”

He glanced at her. She was more shocked by the *estate* than she was by the beastwalkers running around.

“Big enough for a small kingdom,” he joked.

As soon as he made it to the front of the circle drive, Callon slammed on the brakes. He took a little too much satisfaction when it caught Bane off guard and had him sliding backwards off the hood, despite trying to catch himself with his claws.

“That wasn’t nice,” Lola said as she continued to stare up at the huge mansion.

“It wasn’t nice of him to drape himself across my hood like an ornament for you to admire,” Callon bit out. “Not to mention,” he narrowed his eyes on the hood. “He scratched it. He’s lucky I don’t run him over.”

Lola looked away from the house. Whatever she saw on his face had her relaxing a bit, for which he was thankful. “You were jealous of Bane?”

Callon sighed and pushed the door open. “Wait for me,” he told her. “I’ll get your door.”

He climbed out of the car, his large frame thankful to be out of the cramped space. Although, he liked that it forced him and Lola to be close. As he walked around the front of the car, he let out a low snarl to every cat that started towards him. All curious as to who was inside his vehicle.

When he reached Lola’s door, she’d already started to open it. “You don’t listen very well, *Sazzi*.”

“I listen just fine,” she told him as she took his offered hand and stepped out of the car. “What I don’t do is obey like a dog.”

“Well that’s understandable,” Callon said as he lead her to the front door. “Considering, you’re a cat.”

“You’re going to explain that as soon as I’m done staring at these massive animals like a kid at the zoo for the first time.” As she spoke, several of those massive animals came trotting towards them.

They stopped five-feet from them. Faith and her mate, Tack, both white tigers, were the closest. Next to them was

Granger, an orange tiger and beside him was Bane, the panther who had draped himself on the hood.

“This is Lola,” Callon introduced his mate. “She’s mine. Spread the word.”

He started to pull her towards the door, but she wasn’t on board with that idea. “How offensive is it for me to ask to touch one of them?” she asked, shuffling from foot-to-foot as she rubbed her free hand up and down her jean-clad legs.

There were several huffing sounds that Callon knew were his pride mates laughing. They found her amusing. None would ever be offended by the future Prima of their kingdom asking to touch them, not in the capacity she was asking. To them it was a great honor. But Lola didn’t know that yet. The problem wasn’t her wanting to touch them. It was that Callon did *not* like the idea of her hands on another pride member, mated or not, female or not. She was his. Not even he had had the pleasure of feeling her hands run over his beast form. Granted he couldn’t fully shift, yet. The animal inside of him stretching, getting ready to be let loose.

“Faith,” Callon said, as he glanced at Tack. He made a rumbling sound in his chest and Tack responded with a similar sound.

“Did you guys just talk to each other?” Lola asked, her voice full of wonder.

“Yes,” Callon said as he looked down at her, a smile tugging at his lips. He saw movement out of the corner of his eye and motioned towards the white tiger who’d stepped up to Lola. “This is Faith.”

“Whoa,” Lola breathed out as Faith lowered her huge head. “You’re beautiful,” she told the tigress.

“That’s her mate,” he nodded to Tack. ” I was making sure he was fine with me asking Faith to allow you to touch her.”

“Isn’t it up to Faith whether or not she’s okay if I touch her?” Lola frowned. “Anyone hearing this conversation without knowing the context would totally think we were a bunch of freaks.”

More huffing sounds.

“They’re laughing at me, aren’t they?” Lola asked as she looked at the cats around them.

“They find both of us amusing,” Callon told her.

Lola jumped when Faith nudged her stomach. “So, it’s not just domesticated cats that are demanding?”

She ran her hand over Faith’s head and the massive tigress made a rumbling sound in her chest.

“That’s the closest thing to a purr that a big cat can do,” Lola said. “At least ones from the human realm. None of the big cats can purr. They only roar and rumble and hiss.”

“Why do you know that?” Callon asked her.

“I went through a brief obsession with Animal Planet,” she said, sounding a little embarrassed. “Back when I was in junior high.”

“Sounds like your love of animals didn’t start with shifter-romance books.” His hand twitched to pull her hand off of Faith who was beginning to rub her huge body against Lola.

Marking her as a Kingdom of Claws member. Now to everyone she wouldn't only smell of Callon, she'd smell of their entire pride. Faith had just claimed Lola as her future Prima.

"Funny guy," Lola said dryly, her attention focused on the white tiger.

"Faith," Callon said, trying to keep his voice gentle. "Thank you."

She lowered her head to him and then turned, walking back to her mate's side. Tack nudged her with his head and blinked at him, then made another rumbling sound.

"Yes, my parents know," Callon answered using human words.

All four cats bowed their heads. They started to turn to go, but Callon called out to Bane. "You owe my car a polish for the scratches and a wash."

The panther made a hissing sound.

"That will teach you to drape your heavy butt across my vehicle treating it like a scratching post," he told the panther as he took Lola's hand and turned her towards the door. "Please have it ready by this evening."

As they entered the door Lola glared up at him. "You're seriously going to make him wash your car just for laying on it?"

"And scratching it," Callon added. "But no, not for those reasons," Callon shook his head as he continued to lead her deeper into the house. "I'm making him wash it for draping

himself out like a centerfold, and staring at you like you didn't belong to me."

She was silent for a heartbeat, then forcefully yanked his hand to make him stop. "I thought you said that to fully shift you must have a mate," she challenged.

"Correct." His voice had gone steely.

"Bane is fully shifted, which means he has found his mate. Are you jealous of him?" Her frown deepened as an accusation crossed her face. "Or do beastwalkers behave like human males and cheat on their mates, too?"

Callon's body tensed with barely suppressed rage at the suggestion as he whirled around and stalked away from Lola. The emotions rolling through him threatened to overflow and overwhelm him. His response to her from the get-go had been intense, and with the depth of his feeling for her, his nerves were stretched to the breaking point.

"Mates are not unfaithful," he told her.

"Then why are you acting jealous of a guy who's already taken?" she challenged.

Callon forced himself to get a grip. Lola was his mate. She bore the proof on her flesh. The changes in himself and his beast, just from being around her, solidified this. Still, he had this ridiculous need to prove to her— and everyone they came in contact with— that she belonged to him, but Callon didn't have to act on the instinct.

"It's been a while since you've been to the estate, Callon," a deep voice said from behind him. "I'd be happy to show

Lola around for you if you've forgotten the way.”

Lola clucked her tongue. “You're a bad kitty. I'm going to go out on a limb and say you must be Bane.”

Callon hadn't allowed himself to turn around. He wasn't sure that once his eye landed on Bane, he wouldn't rip the fool's throat out.

“And I'm just basing my guess off of some very loose logic considering I don't know you,” Lola continued, “First, you're shirtless, and soaking wet, though looking way too happy for a wet cat. Second, obviously you have more beauty than brains. Only a half-baked, dim-witted kitty would think it wise to provoke the guy who so clearly wants to dismember you.”

“Why is that so clear?” Bane asked, his voice even and seemingly unbothered by Lola's words.

“I can feel the rage coming off of him and it's not directed at me,” she said.

Callon turned just enough to see Lola. Simultaneously, his eyes landed on her face and her hand wrapped around his wrist. Immediately, Callon felt peace rush into his body. His frazzled nerves immediately calmed. The tense muscles that had been strung tighter than a bow were, all at once, relaxed. Callon's lungs expanded as he took in a deep breath, drawing in Lola's sweet, familiar scent. She grounded him. Seconds ago he'd been ready to do as she said, and tear Bane limb-from-limb. But now? Now, he'd settle for just the hand that was currently held out towards Lola, waiting for her to take it. *Yes, that hand will do just nicely,* the beast said coolly as Callon

pulled Lola to him until her back was pressed against his chest and they both faced Bane.

“Why are you here, Bane?” Callon asked the black panther.

“I washed your car,” the male responded with his arms held out wide as if to emphasize the water running down his arms and torso. “I came to let you know it was done. When I saw you hadn’t made it very far into the building, I realized that maybe you’d forgotten your way around.”

“We’ve been inside this house all of four minutes,” Lola spoke before Callon could. “There’s no way you washed his entire car.”

“It was more of a quick rinse,” Bane said with a bland shrug though his gaze remained trained on Lola. “He’s always been a tad dramatic—”

“Enough,” Callon snarled. “Lola is mine. I am sorry for the pain you’ve endured and for how you must endure in this life. But we take the good with the bad, and we praise Visata in both scenarios. Do not provoke me any further. Leave for the day and come back this evening once I am gone.”

Bane’s eyes narrowed to thin slits as he glared at Callon. The other male was dismissed. Though it was what Callon’s intentions had been, he didn’t take pleasure in reminding the male of his circumstances. After several heart beats, Bane cleared his throat, took a step back and bowed his head. “Of course, my apologies.” He turned on his heel, and walked briskly out of the room.

“Okay, that was weird. I’m guessing there’s a bit more going on than I realized,” Lola said as she tried to pull out of his arms.

“Not yet,” Callon said as he leaned forward and buried his face in her hair. “Just one second.” He took slow, deep breaths, letting her scent saturate every part of him.

“Are you okay?” Lola asked as she rested one of her hands on top of his, which was wrapped around her waist.

Callon took one more breath before nodding his head and quickly pulling away from her, though he made sure she was steady before releasing her. He took a few steps back and looked at her. *Damn, she was beautiful.* Her lovely, two-tone skin was flushed and her bottom lip was swollen from where she’d been biting it.

“Callon?”

He cleared his throat. “Yes, *Sazzi*,” he finally said. “I’m fine. Just a lot of emotions I’m not used to.” He angled his head to the side as he looked at her. “What did you mean you can feel the rage coming off of me?”



Katy slipped the phone into her back pocket as she turned to head into the dining room of NNP.

“You know where she is.”

Her hand, which had been out stretched ready to push the swinging door open, dropped to her side. Katy didn't scare easily and she wasn't about to start today, even if the man she thought she knew was suddenly a stranger.

“Antonio,” she said as she turned to face him. “You know Lola only sees you as a friend. Let it go.” Katy's eyes widened briefly as she took in his frazzled state. Antonio was typically impeccably dressed and put together. He'd been in only an hour ago, and while he'd looked a little ruffled around the edges, it wasn't anything like now.

Antonio's dark dress shirt was untucked, his hair a wind-blown mess and even his dress shoes were untied. He looked like a child who'd been forced into nice clothing, then gone and thrown a fit about it.

“I can't let it go,” he said as he ran a hand down his tired-looking face.

Katy sighed and crossed her arms in front of her. “Why? Did you really believe that you two would run off into the sunset together and make pizza-loving babies?”

He let out a tired-sounding laugh as he shoved his hands into the pockets of his slacks. Antonio leaned back against the wall behind him and tilted his head up as he looked down on her. “What if I told you she's in danger?”

“I'd call B.S. No offense, Tony, but you seem a little bit unhinged and so I'm taking what you say with a grain of salt.” Katy leaned her shoulder against the wall beside the door that

would lead into the dining area. She didn't want to get smacked with the door when Maddie came looking for her, which she would be doing very soon unless Katy got her butt back out there. "What's going on, huh?" she asked him with a chin nod. "Since when do you look like a man whose wife kicked him out because he went on a twenty-four-hour bender?"

Antonio chuckled as he shook his head. "Since, I fell in love with a woman way out of my league."

"Well, I can't disagree with you there," she held up a hand. "No offense. But Lola's really out of everyone's league. She's just one of those people. Kind, funny, beautiful, and oblivious to all of it. So yeah, she's definitely out of your league." She watched him as he stared at her across the room. Initially, when Katy had heard his voice, she'd been afraid, but Antonio didn't appear to be a danger. If anything, he looked defeated. Perhaps the fight with his dad had knocked some sense into him, and he'd gotten whatever weird, possessive feelings he'd been having, out of his system.

He cursed under his breath in Italian, something that once upon a time, Katy would have found hot, but all she saw was a desperate man. Desperate wasn't hot.

After another beat of silence, he spoke. "Will you just ask her to call me when she gets a chance?"

"I don't know that you're what's best for Lola," Katy said. "And I only do what's best for my friends."

"Katy," Antonio sighed. "You've known me for years. You know how I feel about Lola."

“I know how you feel about women,” she corrected. “Lola happens to fit into your favorite category.”

“Yes, I’ve always liked the ladies,” he shrugged. “But I was just waiting until Lola was old enough for something serious. There is no one, but her, now.”

Katy didn’t bother to point out how disturbing that sounded. It was obvious Antonio already made up his mind about Lola, and he wasn’t changing it. “Look, just leave her alone until she’s ready to reach out to you, okay?”

He scoffed. “What do you think I’m going to do? Kidnap her?”

Katy pushed away from the wall and shrugged. “People in love do crazy things. I’m just encouraging you to keep your crazy under control.”

“I wouldn’t ever hurt her, Katy,” he said, his voice firm. “You have to know that.”

Katy started to push the door open. She glanced over her shoulder at the forlorn-looking Antonio. “I don’t *know* any such thing. Three days ago, I would have sworn you wouldn’t come in here screaming at your dad about having a right to know where my best friend is. But here we are.” Without another word, she left the break room and Antonio behind, heading back to the NNP dining room. Katy immediately found Maddie’s white-blond hair as her tall, BFF moved around the room like a graceful ballerina. Smiling, pouring water, and picking up trays, with such ease it was a near art form. Sometimes, Katy seriously wondered if their teal-eyed BFF was human, or one of those creatures out of Lola’s books.

“Don’t think I didn’t notice how long you were gone,” Maddie’s voice jolted Katy from her thoughts. She’d been so lost in them, she hadn’t even realized Maddie’d made her way across the whole room. “What’s up? You’re looking a little worse for wear.”

“Antonio came into the break room,” Katy responded. “Wanted me to tell him where Lola is.”

“Dude has gone off the deep end,” Maddie muttered as she glanced around the room, as if he might appear.

“He said he would never hurt her,” Katy said. The words sounded just as lame from her mouth as they did when uttered desperately from his.

“He may not think he would,” Maddie said. “But people who get desperate, do desperate things.”

“Agreed,” Katy nodded. “I’m going to let Sal know Antonio was here.” She started for the kitchen. “No walking alone, Maddie,” she told her BFF. “If he cornered me alone, without the result he was hoping for, he’ll no doubt attempt to do the same to you.”

“He’ll meet the zappy-end of my Tasmanian Devil if he corners me,” Maddie chirped happily.

“You and Lola have *got* to stop naming your weapons,” Katy said as she sauntered off. “Y’all totally kill the badassery of them by naming them.”

“That’s not even a word, Dork,” Maddie called back.

Katy waved her off as she smiled at some of her regular customers as she continued past the back counter until she

stood next to the open window to the kitchen.

“Why do you look like someone found a hair in their pizza?” Sal barked.

“Antonio came back,” Katy started. Before the words were out of her mouth Sal had thrown down his pizza cutter. “Wait,” she hurried, “he didn’t do anything. He just asked me where she was. I didn’t tell him and he remained calm.”

Sal rested his hand on his hips, his chest rising and falling with quick successions. “What is going on with him, Katy?” He shook his head. “He’s always been crazy about Lola, but not crazy like a psycho. He’s never acted like he did earlier.”

“Do you think he’s into drugs?” Katy asked. He’d looked exhausted earlier, but maybe it was more than exhaustion. Maybe Antonio was on something.

“A week ago and I would have said no way,” Sal admitted. “But now,” he lifted his large shoulders and then let them drop. “I don’t want Lola coming back into work until I’ve talked to Antonio again. I’ll call her later and let her know.”

“Okay,” Katy nodded. “Thanks, Sal,” she said, hoping he heard the sincerity in her voice. “I know it’s got to be hard to see your son like this. And I really hope he’s okay.”

“Me too, Katy,” Sal said as he walked over to a sink and quickly washed his hands. “Me too.”

CHAPTER 16

A Wildness Waiting To Be Unleashed.

“Something inside of me is changing. Or awakening, maybe? I’m not really sure the best way to describe it. I just know that I’m not the same person I was before I met Callon Leo.” ~ Lola

“I mean, I can feel it,” she answered, shuffling her feet under his intense gaze. “It’s like heat— literal heat— coming off your body but it’s mixed with an energy.” She reached out a hand and held it just above the flesh of his arm. “It feels like my hand is hovering over a burner on a stove that’s been turned on low. And I really wish I could tell you *how I know* this, but I can’t. It’s more like a feeling but when I said it, when I told him there was rage rolling off of you, I knew I was right. Like it just sort of settled into place. Gah, that sounds insane.”

“It doesn’t sound insane,” he said gently.

“So, this is normal?” she asked quickly, rising up on her toes as she leaned towards him. “Other couples, or whatever, feel this stuff?”

Callon frowned. “Not that I’m aware of.”

Her shoulders dropped forward as her heels hit the floor.
“Not normal.”

“But not insane,” he said with a tight smile. “But something is definitely different. My parents have talked about the bond between a mated pair. It’s intimate, and the pull to be together— to be close— is strong. But they’ve never said that they felt each other’s emotions.”

“Do you sense what I’m feeling?” Lola asked. She did an internal search to get a read on her own emotions. There was some apprehension, excitement, attraction, *you need to lock that down right now*, she barked at herself.

“You want me,” he said with a deep purr, as he ran one of his large hands down her back. The touch was slight, and yet, Lola felt it all over every inch of her flesh, though he wasn’t even in contact with her skin. Lola shivered as his hand reached the bottom of her spine. As she felt his hand slip around to her hip, she took a large step to get out from under his reach and turned to face him. She met his cool, gold gaze and narrowed her eyes.

Lola’s eyes widened at his words. “That is not polite, Sir,” she stomped her foot and pointed at him. “There’s many other emotions going on and *that* is definitely *not* the strongest.”

Callon reached out and tapped her on the nose. “I know, but it made your beautiful skin blush, so I couldn’t help myself.”

“How is it fair that you can not only smell my emotions, or whatever it is you do, *and* you can sense them as well? A little privacy would be nice.”

“Well, at least I can’t hear your thoughts yet.”

“Yet,” she yelled as she lunged forward and grasped his shirt in both hands. “What do you mean YET?”

Instead of answering, he threw his head back and laughed. It was loud. So loud, several people came running into the sitting room. Callon continued to laugh as more people entered the room until there was fifteen— Lola counted— people openly staring at them. Well, no, she realized, not *them*, him. They were staring. Actually more like gawking at Callon.

Lola released his shirt and straightened out the material. She smiled and gave a small wave as she started to take a step back, but Callon snagged her around the waist, his laughter suddenly gone. His eyes held hers as he spoke. “Leave us.”

Lola frowned. “Aren’t you going to introduce me to anyone?”

He gave a single shake of his head. “I don’t want to share you.”

Lola tried to lean around Callon so she could see the people, but he shifted his body with her, blocking her view.

She frowned. “What’s going on?”

Callon held her stare for all of three heartbeats before he sighed and looked away. “I want you to myself. I feel like you are mine and mine alone.” His brow formed a deep ‘v’. “How is it that I feel like I’ve known you forever, and I’m as comfortable with you as I am my own skin, and yet at the same time, I want to hide every weakness I might have?”

She was caught off guard by his words. Lola watched as Callon's body shuddered, his skin rippling with fur before returning back to human flesh. He dropped his chin down until she couldn't see his face.

"Are you okay?" The pull between them was growing in intensity. The rational part of her brain was screaming at her. This wasn't okay, something was wrong. Then again rational had sort of been thrown out the window when she learned about the beastwalkers. So, who was she to say what was, or wasn't, okay?

"No," Callon rumbled. "I'm not okay." As his chin rose, she could see his face was no longer human, but a mixture between the man and animal. It was oddly beautiful, but also terrifying. Callon's form got taller as his body rippled again. His shoulders grew broader causing the seams of his shirt to rip.

"Are you Hulking-out on me?" she asked as she started to take a step back.

"Don't," he snarled, his face flashing nearly to a full lion form, then back to the in-between state in a blink. Callon took a deep breath, and let it out slowly, then spoke again. This time he managed not to go full lion head. "Don't be afraid of me."

"I'm not afraid of you," she told him honestly. "I am, however, afraid for you because you seem confused. As if you're not sure what's going on. And considering we're in your domain, you really shouldn't be clueless." She reached up, and up some more, until her hand rested on his fur covered face. "What's going on?"

“I don’t know,” he said with stark honesty, his large, gold eyes staring intently at her, as if the sun rose and set with her. Lola could feel his need for her.

“How do I know that you are desperate to touch me?” she asked, her voice breathless as an ache formed in her chest. She felt warmth on her cheek as she traced the pads of her fingers over Callon’s cheek. It took a second for her brain to register the warmth she was feeling on her face, were the same places her fingers touched on Callon’s face. “What the—” she whispered as her eyes widened.

Callon pulled his face back away from her, and after several breaths, he managed to return to his full-human form. “I’m sorry I didn’t introduce you to anyone,” he said, his tone light as if they hadn’t just had some serious moment that shifted both of their lives.

She stared at him, and tried to decide if she should pursue what had just happened, or follow his lead, and let it go for now. Lola decided that they could deal with whatever the heck happened later. Callon stared at her with eyes that said he was truly interested in her response. She shrugged. “I just wanted to say hi.”

He shook his head, a small, crooked smile on his face. “You wanted to ask questions.”

She bounced her head from shoulder to shoulder. “And say hi.”

He smirked. “You can say hi to *me* and ask *me* questions.”

“You’re weird,” she sighed as she wiggled in a pathetic attempt to get out of his grasp. “Why did they look so shocked? At first, I thought it was me they were staring at, but it was you.”

He gave a dismissive shrug, his face suddenly blank. “I was laughing.”

Her brow rose. Lola had guessed when they met, yesterday- Good grief, had it really only been a day since they met? It felt like so much longer. She shook her head to refocus. *Laughing, right*, she told herself. She remembered thinking when they’d met, he didn’t look like the type of man who smiled much, let alone laughed. But he’d told her that he was different around her.

“Why?” she asked as he continued to stare at her with that blank look that suited him much more than a smile— though she did *really* like it when he smiled. “Is your life really so bad that you have nothing to laugh about?”

He actually seemed to think about it, which she appreciated. Lola liked that he didn’t just spit out some pat answer. As he stood there something in him shifted. Lola felt the change in his countenance. The abruptness was as sharp as the New York winter wind that smacked a person in the face when they walked around the side of a building.

Callon rolled his shoulders back as he stood a little straighter, putting distance between them though they still touched. “I can’t say I’m unhappy with my life; I just have a lot of responsibility. My kingdom depends on me. Our males need mates to bond with so their animals can fully manifest.

Having pride mates who possess the full power of their animal forms makes our kingdoms even stronger.”

Callon paused and his eyes had that conflicted look in them. He stood, a commanding figure as he lifted his chin. His strong jaw set in determination. His dark eyes were sharp as he continued. “The *animus* must be protected. The moment one is discovered, it is vital that our members get to meet her in case she chooses one of us instead of someone outside our kingdom. I am the leader of the warriors and though we have not gone to war recently, I need to maintain myself and all of my warriors at the peak physical condition. And those without mates have to work twice as hard compared to those who can fully shift.”

A commotion behind them had Callon pulling her to the side of the hall. He kept one arm around her though his body felt like a steel post.

“What happened, Gavin?” Callon said loud enough they would hear him.

Lola watched as two men assisted a third that was very obviously injured judging by the blood running down his leg. He had on a pair of workout shorts that were torn in several places and there was a huge chunk of his flesh missing just above the knee. Her face pinched up as she imagined the pain he must be in.

“It’s Ciarian’s second day training,” the man on the right of the injured guy, who must have been Gavin, said. “He got a little too close to Shane’s mate who was taking a break from training with the females.”

“As you can see,” the other male said, nodding his head to the mangled leg, “Shane politely asked him to back away from Aliyah.”

“Why would females be training any where near new warriors?” Callon asked, his voice sharp. “They don’t think about their surroundings when they’re fighting. They haven’t learned that the end goal isn’t just to win a fight. It’s to win with as little damage as possible.”

“Kian talked to me about that,” Ciarian said through gritted teeth. “I just got too focused on beating Shane.”

Callon snarled. “Shane has been a warrior for nearly a century. *He* should have known better.”

All three guys looked thoroughly chastised. Lola found herself wanting to say something, but the tension radiating off of Callon had her lips glued tightly together.

“I can—” Callon began, but another man stalking down the hall interrupted him.

“I will take care of him.” He was huge with auburn hair and piercing gold eyes.

“Shane,” Callon said. “Let—”

He cut him off again. “You’re busy, Callon,” his eyes darted to Lola and back to Callon. He motioned the three men to follow him. “I can take care of a foolish, injured cub.”

Then four men walked past them. Lola stared until they rounded a corner and were out of sight. “Is he going to be okay?” she managed to ask. Lola felt rage fill her veins and she knew it wasn’t her own. “Callon?”

Abruptly, he released her and stepped back, and Lola felt a chill as if she'd been plunged into an Arctic winter. A mask of detached indifference had settled over him like a frozen shroud. The emotions that had radiated off of him were immediately gone, replaced by the walls of any ordinary stranger. She could see him, but not feel him.

“What just happened?” She asked, taken aback by the sudden shift in his demeanor.

“Nothing,” he said. His eyes were guarded and his voice had turned to ice. “Ciarian will be cared for by our healers. It's nothing for you to worry about.”

Confusion clouded her mind. In the fifteen or so hours that she'd known him, he'd never acted so indifferent towards her. In fact, it had been the opposite right from the start. She gathered her wits around her like a shield, and offered up a shaky smile. “So, can you still take me on a tour of this huge place?”

He glanced distractedly around the room before striding toward the hall without so much as an invitation for her to follow him.

“Okay then,” she muttered under her breath as she hurried after his brisk pace.

As they walked Lola's eyes widened and her mouth dropped open as she noticed that the walls had paintings of beastwalkers in various states of shifting all over them. They resembled those that had been in Wild Ink. They were depicted in different backgrounds. Some in city streets, some in wooded areas, or open fields. There were some beasts in

battle with ferocious snarls on their faces. Others simply stood side-by-side, dressed in what looked like medieval battle gear with their shoulders pulled back and their chins lifted proudly. As if they'd been the victors in the battles depicted.

“Are these the wars that happened in your realm?” she asked, attempting to pick up her pace in order to catch up with him. She hadn't even realized that he'd gotten so far in front of her.

Callon didn't turn around as he spoke. His voice was low and serious. “The beasts are a reminder,” he said, “a reminder of what could happen if we let our primal nature take over. Yes, we have learned to look like humans part of the time, but beneath our human skin there is a wildness waiting to be unleashed. We must always remember that.”

Lola shivered at his words. She thought of all the times she'd seen his animal form manifest on his features. There was definitely a part of Callon that was primal and untamed.

His steps moved even faster, the tatters of his shirt fluttering as they turned down another hall. “This is a library,” he pointed to an open door. She just had time to glance inside. It was a reader's dream. Lola wanted to go inside and bask in its tall walls filled with books, but Callon wasn't slowing down.

“Most of these doors are apartments where members live,” he continued. “There are more upstairs. There's a full gym with everything we need to train. School rooms for the young, a dining hall, kitchen, and various living rooms for the pride to gather.”

Lola hadn't even considered there were kids, though he'd mentioned them the night before. She hadn't thought they might not be able to go to human schools.

"Please, can you slow down?" she gasped as her feet struggled to keep up with his long strides. Sweat gathered on her forehead and a stitch in her side began to form, growing stronger with each step.

He turned down another corner, his shirt flaring into a cape behind him. "We don't have time to take a leisurely stroll," he finally bit out tersely. "I'll take you out to the grounds and then we need to go."

"Go?" Lola's feet stumbled as she spoke. *What happened to spending the day together*, she wondered. She didn't ask because she didn't want to sound like a clingy girlfriend. She *wasn't* his girlfriend. Despite what he'd said multiple times before, she didn't know what she was to him. The way he was treating her made her seem like she was nothing more than an annoying guest that he didn't have time for.

"I just remembered that I have some pressing matters that require my immediate attention," he said in a chilly tone. "I've been distracted by following you around, and have ignored my duties long enough."

Lola's mind raced as she processed his words. They felt like shards of glass, sharp and cutting. No emotion was attached to his statement - he might as well have been talking about the sky or the weather. She had to blink back tears as Lola questioned if the man she had met was just a figment of her imagination. Had she desired the ideal hero from one of

her books so deeply, she conjured him into existence? Anything was possible, given the presence of supernatural beings in this world. Perhaps she had conjured the perfect, book boyfriend because he happened to be a shapeshifter, and now her life was everything she had always hoped it would be— more exciting than the mundane existence she lived before.

“Don’t worry about showing me the grounds,” she told him, raising her voice to reach him now that he was over fifty-feet in front of her.

He stopped, but didn’t turn around. Fear and confusion bubbled up inside of her as she watched Callon’s back muscles tense beneath the shreds of his shirt. She saw his fists clench at his sides, and he took several hefty breaths. *What was going on?* Normally, she would be filled with curiosity and demand answers, but due to the strange connection between them— the rapidly developing feelings— she kept her tongue still, not wanting to expose her vulnerabilities until he had earned it.

“Callon?” Lola despised the way her voice sounded small and uncertain, as if needing reassurance from him. *Had she done something wrong?*

He slowly turned around, and Lola saw the warrior he spoke of being. His movements were swift and precise, making it clear he had been trained for battle. Lola understood why the people they encountered earlier had been staring at him as if he was an anomaly. This must have been Callon as his pride knew him: A warrior. The shock on their faces made sense now.

He kept his distance as he walked by her and said in a flat voice, "This way." His movements were rigid and abrupt. He didn't look at her, didn't touch her, no sign of affection in his mannerisms. His lack of eye contact felt like a slap. Lola clenched her jaw and swallowed hard, struggling to keep her emotions contained as rejection pierced through her like a sharp knife, making tears sting her eyes. Taking a deep breath, she refused to let them fall and followed him instead.

Before she knew it they were walking up to Callon's vehicle, which was just as dirty as when they'd left it, complete with scratch marks on the hood. Maybe it was petty, but Lola found herself wanting to give Bane a high-five. She heard a low whistle and turned her head to see Bane standing against the side of the house, partially hidden by the shade. His hands were slipped into his pockets and his eyes focused on her. He winked at her, and she couldn't stop the small smile that formed on her face. Her head whipped back around when she heard a feral-sounding hiss. Callon's eyes were fixed on Bane as he jerked the door open so hard it was a wonder he didn't rip it from the hinges.

She hurried to the car and slid inside. When she looked back to where the panther had been standing, he was gone. "Ass," Lola muttered as her eyes lifted up to Callon's. Piercing gold snapped to hers just before the door was slammed. "Well, guess the honeymoon period is over," she said softly. "And so is the possibility of anything more." Her feelings of pain and dismissal were quickly replaced with anger, something she always found much easier to handle. Lola might be attracted to Callon, and hell, she just might be his soul mate, but she

would not sign up for a lifetime of emotional rollercoasters—she deserved better.

Callon sank down into the driver seat and pulled his own door closed so hard the vehicle shook. Lola grabbed onto the door handle and cursed under her breath. She didn't like confrontation. She didn't like to argue. Katy, and even Maddie, were the ones who appreciated a good fight. Katy claimed it cleansed the soul. Whatever the hell that meant. For Lola, it just made her feel out of sorts and hurt. *Hold on to your anger, she reminded herself. You've done nothing wrong. He's an ass and in less than a day, he's shown his true colors.*

Once the car was started, he put it in drive and peeled out causing the tires to screech on the pavement. There were a few huge cats sunbathing on the driveway that jumped to their feet barely making it out of the speeding car's path.

"What the hell, Callon," she yelled, unwilling to hold her tongue in the face of the possibility of people being harmed. "Those are your pride members, in case you forgot."

"I'm well aware," he snapped.

"Do you usually nearly run over your own people?"

"I wouldn't have hit them, and they know it," he scoffed, as if her question was preposterous.

"Could have fooled me." Lola eased back into her seat once they were on the main road back towards the ferry. How had the morning turned into such a disaster?

As they drove, Callon picked up his phone and touched the screen, then put it to his ear. "I'm putting you on duty," he told

whoever was on the other line. Then he began to make sounds that were not human. She remembered he'd made the same sounds when they'd been with the four cats in front of the huge estate. He was speaking to whoever it was in the animal language they understood. Lola wondered what it was he obviously didn't want her to know.

“That’s an order,” he finished in English and then ended the call.

The rest of the drive was spent in tense silence. They rode in the car on the ferry, the air so thick it threatened to suffocate her. Back in the city, the stop and go traffic was driving her insane. The closer they got to NNP, the more her stomach twisted and bile began to rise in her throat. As much as she wanted away from him, there was an equally strong emotion to fix things between them. *Why*, she asked herself. It's not like they were anything more than acquaintances, and by the way he was acting, she'd be shocked if they ever saw one another again.

She went back and forth in her mind on whether to say something, and her need to know got the better of her. Tossing her dignity out the window, she asked, “Did I do something?” Her hands fidgeted with the bottom of her shirt as she waited for his answer.

“What are you talking about?” he asked gruffly.

Lola turned to look at him. His eyes were firmly set on the road and his grip on the steering wheel had his knuckles turning white.

“You went from being all possessive, and ‘You’re mine, we’re destined for one another, the tattoo matches mine and we will be together,’ to ‘Time to take you home, have a nice life.’” She answered and was proud of how steady her voice was. “So, I’m a little confused as to what happened.”

He was quiet long enough, Lola thought, perhaps, he wasn’t going to answer.

“You didn’t do anything wrong,” he growled, the anger and frustration in his voice palpable. His jaw clenched and his eyes narrowed as he tried to suppress the boiling emotions within him. “I need to think. I have responsibilities that I must consider. I’ve never let my emotions lead me...It’s not what I do.” He ran his fingers through his hair in agitation. “You shouldn’t make decisions based on feelings either,” he said sharply, his body radiating tension like heat from a fire. His body did that partial-shifting thing that happened when he was emotional.

Pot meet Kettle, she thought. “I don’t need you to tell me how I should make my decisions, Callon,” she said coolly. “I’m a big girl, and perfectly capable of handling my business.”

“Is that so?” he snarled. “Then why are you in a car with a male you met yesterday, who told you he’s a supernatural being hellbent on claiming you as his mate? Does that sound like handling your business?”

Lola’s eyes widened at his words, and the cruel tone in which he delivered them. It was as if he’d struck her, but the blow was felt against her heart instead of her face.

“Dammit all, I stalked you for three weeks, Female. And instead of telling someone, you asked to speak to me on a street *at night*. Does *that* sound like good decision making?” Callon’s breathing was rapid as he spoke, and his sharp teeth flashed at her with every word. He came to a jarring halt at the next light, and Lola realized they were only a couple blocks from NNP.

“You’re right.” She slipped her purse strap over her neck so it would hang across her body, and held her phone in her left hand as she opened the door with her right. “It was foolish of me, and *is* foolish of me, to be in a car with a crazy man, not to mention one who is willing to treat me as you have for the past hour. Thank you for being the voice of reason that I obviously needed.”

“Lola,” he snarled, his face shifting to a half-man half-lion form with a feral gleam that scared her. “Get back in the damn car.”

“Lesson learned, Callon,” she said in a calm tone. Lola knew if she raised her voice, or allowed the emotions inside of her to get the upper hand, she’d start crying. “Good luck with all those duties and responsibilities. Don’t follow me anymore, or I will make the responsible choice and call the police.” She slammed the door and took off at a jog without paying attention to the traffic. A horn honked and the hood came to a screeching stop only inches from her legs. Her gaze snapped up, and she held up her hands. “Sorry,” she said and then continued running for the sidewalk.

“LOLA,” Callon’s voice was a roar. She wondered briefly if the rest of the people around heard that, or just the regular sound of a man bellowing like a fool in the street.

She didn’t look back. Lola jogged, biting her lips the whole time to keep the moisture that had gathered in her eyes from falling. *I will not cry*, she told herself. *Not for a guy I just met. No matter how amazing he seemed, or how incredible it was that he’d introduced her to something fantastical.* She had no idea how she’d go about her life as if she hadn’t just learned something so amazing.

She hit the door of NNP so hard that it swung open and snapped back, nearly hitting her in the face. Only her hands, which were still up from pushing it open, kept it from smacking her.

Lola didn’t bother looking around. She made a beeline for the employee door that led to the back, ignoring Katy and Maddie’s voices. She needed to be alone. She needed to get her crap together before all of her emotions burst out of her. “Pull it together, Lola. Don’t you dare lose your shit.”

“Why are you about to lose your shit?” Katy’s voice came from behind her a second after Lola entered the back room.

“And why do you look like you’re on the verge of tears?” Maddie asked next.

Lola bent over, one hand resting on her knee while the other dangled as she held her phone. She tried to catch her breath. She really needed to consider exercising. Thankfully, her inability to breathe due to her little run through New York

City, was distracting her from the fact that she'd just had her squashed heart handed to her on a platter.

"Bad day," she panted.

"I thought you were with mystery guy that you wanted to get to know better," Maddie said. "What happened?"

"Did he do something?" Katy's voice took on the tone she reserved for when she was getting ready to let her wrath lose on someone. "Did he hurt you?"

Lola tucked her chin down until it nearly touched her chest. She squeezed her eyes closed, and tried to focus on something that would bring her peace. Unfortunately, the only thing she could think about was Callon's face. The one he showed her the previous night, this morning, and the one she'd left behind in the car. The one that truly showed the very deadly animal that lived inside of him.

"Lola," Maddie said as she gave her a nudge. "Girl, you're scaring us. What's going on."

She knew she was going to have to tell her best friends. Not only did they have a right to know, she needed them to know, because she needed someone to talk to. She had to process all that had happened to her, and she trusted Katy and Maddie more than anyone. Well, other than her mom. But Lola couldn't tell her mom this. She would flip her lid and possibly hunt down Callon on her own.

"Can we talk about it later?" Lola asked as she pushed up and turned to face them. Both of their eyes widened and Lola knew she must look pretty rough.

“Are you sure?” Katy asked.

“I just need to distract myself right now,” Lola admitted. “I promise we will talk after our shift.”

Maddie pointed a finger at her and narrowed her pale blue eyes. “I will hold you to that. I’m not playing.”

Lola nodded. “I promise.”

Lola quickly put on her apron after stowing her purse in her locker. She glanced at her phone and noticed several texts from Callon. She’d done as she’d promised and changed ‘YM’ to his name. At least she’d used her rational mind then. Well, actually deleting him from her contacts would have been the rational thing to do. She ignored the texts and the stabbing in her chest, and shoved the phone into her back pocket. When she turned to head out she came up short as Maddie and Katy both still stood there with their arms folded in front of their chests.

“I swear to you, Lo, if this has to do with Callon, if he’s hurt you in *any* way, I will hurt him,” Katy said, all the while Maddie nodded in agreement.

“Noted,” Lola said and then motioned towards the door.

When they turned to head back into the dining room, Lola took a deep breath and let it out. “Just do your work and forget everything else,” she said to herself. Then pushed through the door and pasted on a smile.

A couple of hours later, she’d managed to remain so busy that Callon was simply a shadow in the back of her mind. She turned to head towards a table that was empty, but she’d

noticed out of the corner of her eye, a person taking a seat. Lola glanced around the room checking her other tables as she made her way over to the new customer.

As she pulled out her order pad and pen she asked, “What can I get y—“ her words stuck in her throat as she looked up and met the green eyes of Bane. “Uh, what, why,” she stumbled and then glanced around.

“He’s not here,” Bane said, his deep, smooth voice was soft, gentle in a way that reminded her of how Callon had been with her when they’d spoken on her fire escape. “He won’t be bothering you anymore.”

“Why?” she blurted out, and then quickly said, “I mean good.”

Bane studied her, tilting his head slightly causing the light to catch his eyes, making them glow. “You have feelings for him.” It wasn’t a question.

“I just met him yesterday,” she said, her tone as defensive as she felt.

“You don’t have to be with him,” he said, leaning forward and resting his forearms on the table. “An *animus* can choose her mate the same way a human does. You can be with someone who wants you in the same way.”

Ouch, she thought, *thanks for the reminder that Callon doesn’t want me*. She dropped her eyes from his scrutiny. “I’m good, thanks. Not really on the market for a,” she paused and then finished, “male.”

“Shame,” he said. “You’re quite lovely.”

Maybe she should have felt flattered, but Callon had spoken sweet words to her as well, and look where that had led.

“What can I get you to eat?” she asked and held up her pad with her pen poised over it.

“Just a water,” Bane said. “I’m not really hungry.”

“Then why did you come in?”

“I have been commanded by my leader to keep an eye on you,” he said.

“I don’t need you to keep an eye on me,” she said a bit snippily.

“*Animus* need to be protected,” he told her. “Surely, Callon explained that much to you.”

Lola didn’t want to discuss what Callon had told her. “No one has shown any interest in me,” *lie*, “I will be fine.” She wasn’t about to mention the scaly guys who’d cornered her on the street.

Bane shrugged. “I have my orders, and despite how I feel about our Prince, I cannot disobey without consequences. Not that watching you is a hardship. I might even be able to convince you to give me a chance to be the male you need.”

Lola didn’t know how to respond. She had a feeling that there was only one male she needed, and he’d just tossed her aside because his *duties* to his kingdom were more important than even a mate. A mate that would supposedly allow him to fully-shift and make him more powerful. Good grief, it sounded so ridiculous when she thought about it.

Beastwalkers, mates, kingdoms. What had she gotten herself involved in?

“I won’t let anything happen to you,” Bane said, drawing her from her thoughts. She looked at him and saw conviction and determination in his green eyes.

“I’m not your responsibility,” she reiterated her early words. “I’ll get you that water.” She turned and walked quickly to the counter and grabbed a clean cup.

“You look like you’ve seen a ghost,” Katy said as she stepped close enough that her shoulder touched Lola’s.

“Can you take this water to table ten?” she asked Katy without acknowledging her friend’s words. What could she say? She, sure as hell, wasn’t going to tell her that Bane was a friend of Callon’s. Though she used the term friend very loosely considering it didn’t seem like there was any love lost between them.

Katy stared at her a moment and then finally nodded. When she walked away, Lola took a deep breath and pushed Bane into the compartment where she’d shoved Callon. “Do your job, ignore the panther in the room, and forget all that you’ve discovered in the past twenty-four hours.”

“I didn’t think you were coming in today,” Sal said as he stuck his head out of the window that opened to the kitchen.

“I didn’t either, but apparently, I miss you guys when I’m gone.” She smiled and hoped that it didn’t look as forced as it felt.

“Antonio,” he began but Lola held up her hand to stop him.

“Katy and Maddie told me. If he comes back, I’ll deal with it,” she assured him, though she had no idea *how* she was going to deal with it.

“You won’t deal with it alone,” Sal said, giving her a pointed look. “I don’t know what’s going on with him, Little One, but I won’t let him mess with you. Son or not, I didn’t raise him to behave in such a way.”

Lola nodded. “I know. It will be fine, Sal.” *It was a lie.* Apparently, lying to herself was her new M.O.

Just get through the day, then you can deal with your new unhealthy habit, she told herself as she headed to check on her tables. She avoided Bane’s. Dude could get water somewhere else if he was thirsty. Lola was pretty sure she was over her shifter fascination. *Another damn lie.*

CHAPTER 17

Null Your Ass.

“There is no greater darkness than the one that we willingly invite into our lives. We ushered it in like a friend, giving it space in our life. We don’t stop to consider the fact that unlike a friend, it will never leave on its own. We will have to wrestle it into submission while hoping it doesn’t consume us before we can win the battle against it.” ~Callon

The sound of traffic pierced Callon’s ears, but he remained motionless in the driver seat as he stared at the place where he’d last seen Lola. Her strawberry-blonde hair flying in the wind as she ran— from him. For a split second, he’d allowed himself to feel what she felt as she practically lunged from the car, so upset she hadn’t even cared for her own safety. She damn-well nearly got hit by a car. He lowered the wall he’d erected between them and he felt what his words had done to her. He’d crushed her. Any trust he’d built since meeting her, Callon had destroyed. Anguish, betrayal, confusion, and so many questions flooded into him like a tidal wave. It was too

much. He blocked her, because if he hadn't, his resolve would have crumbled.

Back at the estate, when he'd realized he'd been letting his emotions take precedence over his duty, he'd found a distraction in the situation with Ciarian. It only shielded him from the full-brunt of Lola's overwhelming feelings for a moment. When they'd made for the car and she'd responded to Bane's presence, his resolution cracked for an instant. He'd grappled with the urge to rip the panther apart. As soon as he'd gotten into the car, Lola's feelings started oozing through the air like a toxic gas, weighing him down and threatening to choke him. He could feel her confusion, fear, hurt and rage, radiating - but it was the anger which enabled him to manage the drive back. He clutched on fiercely to that emotion, because the others were too much for him to bear.

How had things gone so wrong?

"The doubt, dumbass," he muttered to himself as he finally put the car in drive and maneuvered through the streets.

From the moment he saw Lola, there had been a part of him that kept reminding him of his obligations. Part of him wanted to give into his desires and be with her, but his sense of responsibility kept pulling him back. He felt like he was forever teetering on the edge of what was right and wrong.

Then Ciarian had come in injured on just his second day of training and Callon hadn't been there. It was *his* job to train the warriors and he'd been fawning after a female like an enamored adolescent.

With that reminder he picked up his phone and hit the screen. “Call Shane,” he told the phone. A few seconds later the male answered.

“He’s fine, Callon,” Shane said before he could even ask.

“I should have been there, especially if there were new warriors coming in.” Callon’s hands clutched the steering wheel so tight, his knuckles grew pale. He felt like a tightly wound spring, ready to crack and break apart at any moment. His eyes were fixed ahead, jaw clenched, in an attempt to maintain control.

“You are an incredible fighter, Prince, and you have taught all of us well,” Shane said, “Believe it or not, you’ve taught some of us so well, we’re able to train the cubs.”

“Then why did today happen?” he snarled before he could temper himself. He took a deep breath and let it out. “I’m sorry, Shane. That wasn’t a fair question. Injuries have happened under my training as well. But then *I’m* the one responsible. I should be the one to bear that burden, not you or the others.”

“You know,” Shane’s voice sounded hesitant. “You’re more than just a warrior and Prince. You’re a man, just like the rest of us. You need a break from this, you need rest. Perhaps even more so than all of our warriors.” He paused and then added, “You need a mate. Your royal blood may make you stronger than other unmated males, but—”

“A mate would take my time away from the things that I need to be doing,” Callon cut him off. He didn’t need to explain himself to Shane, but because he cared about those

under his command, he would. “Keep me posted on anything that happens in training,” he instructed. “I will be checking on some things in another kingdom with our Shaman as well as others. Hopefully it won’t take long.”

“May Visata protect you,” Shane said before he ended the call.

By the time Callon pulled into the parking garage of Leonidas Global, Shane’s words had dug their claws deeply into his mind. He was on the verge of driving back to the estate just so he could let his beast loose on the tiger. The wheels screeched to an abrupt halt as he parked the vehicle. His eyes landed on the scratch marks on the hood and he snarled. It just reminded him he’d assigned Bane to guard Lola. What the hell had he been thinking? It was obvious the male was interested in her.

“Isn’t that what you wanted?” he asked the empty car. It had seemed like the best idea because she was an *animus*. She needed the protection of one of his kind. And his males needed mates. Being around Bane would give them both the opportunity to see if they could develop feelings for one another.

As the thought filled his mind, Callon felt a jolt of rage and his vision blurred as he grabbed the steering wheel. With one swift jerk, it popped from the dash. He held it, waiting to see if the brief act of violence had helped at all. *Nope*. He still wanted to kill Bane.

Tossing it into the back seat, he glared at the mangled wires that hung from the spot where it had just been. It was the perfect representation of what his own insides looked like. As

if his heart had been ripped from his chest and all that was left were useless hanging arteries.

She'd only known him for less than a day, but Callon had come to know her over the course of nearly a month. She'd altered something inside of him. Because of her, he forgot his responsibilities. Women were being taken, possible *animi*, and he was obsessed with a female to the point he couldn't stand the idea of being separated from her. What use would he be to his father and their warriors if he couldn't even make rational decisions?

She bares your lion, a voice in his mind reminded him.

“That doesn't mean she can't choose someone else,” he said, feeling like a fool for talking to himself. The action made him think of Lola and how she constantly talked to herself. Callon felt something moving inside of him and watched as claws grew from the tips of his hands and hair rippled across his arms. His beast was not happy. In fact, he was down right pissed. Ever since he'd laid eyes on Lola the soul of the animal had begun to become more prominent.

She is ours, the voice rumbled.

“You've got to be kidding me,” he hissed. The damn animal was growing more bold, he was merging with Callon's human half and increasing in strength. With another snarl, Callon pushed the door open and unfolded his large frame from the car. He slammed the door closed and headed for the elevator. He had no plan to see his parents. He was heading for one of the apartments his father had added to the top floor of the building. Sometimes they needed to stay in the city, and it

was more convenient to stay there than getting an apartment or staying in a hotel.

The ride up seemed to take longer than usual and Callon felt trapped in the small box. He let out a sharp breath when the doors finally opened and he stepped out into the hall. By the time he was standing in the apartment, his agitation level reached a point he was pretty sure being around people would be dangerous. All he could think about was that Bane currently had his eyes on Lola. He was watching her when it *should* have been Callon. Everything inside of him screamed that she was *his*. Only his, and would never belong to anyone else.

Callon ripped his shirt off and headed for the workout room. He planned to beat the shit out of the punching bag that hung in there until he could no longer stand. He connected his phone to the speakers and turned up the volume. Callon walked over to the punching bag and Bane's face appeared in his mind's eye. He felt the beast rise in him again, and this time Callon let him take over.

He had no idea how much time had passed when he finally stepped back. Sweat dripped from his body, and his lungs burned as he sucked air into them. While he'd been taking his rage out on the bag, he'd been able to push thoughts of Lola aside. He kept his mind firmly focused on the idea of taking Bane on in a challenge. Now? It was her face that he saw. The curiosity that constantly burned in her beautiful eyes, the way her cheeks bloomed with two shades of red when she was flustered. He needed to do something to get his mind off of her, or he was going to head to her apartment and carry her out over his shoulder.

He turned off the music and found Roan's number. The Shaman picked up on the second ring.

"Callon," Roan said, sounding surprised to be hearing from him.

"What did you learn at the Council meeting?" Callon asked without any preamble.

"I will be back in New York tomorrow, and plan to brief Taras and Lyra then," he responded tersely.

"That doesn't answer my question."

"It wasn't supposed to," Roan said. "I'm not going to tell you only to then have to repeat it tomorrow." He paused and then added, "I expected you to be indisposed."

"Why would you think that?" It was a dumb question. "I'm my father's Second-In-Command. I need to know what's going on just as much as he does."

"You've just met your mate," Roan said as if Callon wasn't aware. "You *need* to be spending time with her."

Callon's hackles rose at the words that sounded too much like an order. He only took orders from his Prime. "We have a kingdom breaking a sacred law putting *animi* in danger, doing who knows what to them. *That's* what my focus should be on. I can't deal with a mate until after justice has been served."

Roan was silent for a good thirty seconds, and the tension in that silence practically reached through the phone and choked Callon. "Deal with *a* mate?" Roan asked, his words slow and measured. "Not *your* mate?"

“It’s not your concern,” Callon growled.

“That’s where you’re wrong, Prince,” Roan said, his voice tight. “It is very much my concern. Where is Lola?”

Callon hated her name coming from his lips. “She is *none* of your business, Roan. Drop it.”

“She’s an *animus*, that makes her my business. She is on the radar of the Kingdom of Venom which means she is very likely in danger. So I will ask you again, where the hell is she?” he demanded in a tone that made it clear he expected an answer.

“At her job and under the protection of Bane.” The panther’s name came out through lengthened, clenched teeth.

“Why is *he* guarding your female?”

Callon began to pace as he ran a hand through his sweat soaked hair. His body radiated with rage, and with every step, his stride became longer and more agitated. “She isn’t mine. She has to *choose* me to be mine. Which she has *not*. She has to love me to be mine, and she’s not known me long enough to feel those kind of emotions for me.” His free hand clenched into a fist so tight, he heard his knuckles crack, while he fought the urge to crush the phone in his other hand. “And I don’t have time to develop a relationship with her and give her what she needs. As I’ve said many times, my duty to my kingdom must always come first. I let her make me forget about that for a while. If I’d done the responsible thing and gone to New Orleans, this could have all been avoided and no more females taken against their will.”

“Where the hell did you get that idea?” Roan barked. “Is there something so special about you that you’d be able to find out everything that’s going on, and then take down Azure on your own? Are you seriously that arrogant?” Callon heard something in the background slam and Roan spoke again. “You know what it means to have a mate. You know you will be more powerful once your beast is free. Are you really this big of a fool? I mean, damn. I knew you were pigheaded, but I never considered you stupid.”

“Watch it, Shaman,” he said in a tone that made it clear he would not put up with the disrespect Roan was showing him.

“Oh, I’m watching it,” Roan laughed, the sound full of disdain. “I’m watching you make the biggest mistake of your life. You have no idea what you will sentence yourself to if you don’t bond with Lola.”

“There will be other females,” Callon said. The words alone made him want to vomit. But like the fool Roan declared him, he just kept right on going. “She needs a male who can give her all of himself and I can’t do that. At least, not right now. Not if there’s a kingdom or kingdoms committing crimes that could possibly lead to war.”

“I’m going to hang up now, because there’s a strong possibility that if I continue to listen to your bullshit I will show up at your door and Null your ass. Or even better,” he clucked his tongue, “I’ll pay Lola a visit and Null her. Then she can go on with her human life, and not worry about being the target of any beastwalkers. She can fall in love with a man

who will see the gift that she is, and treat her with the reverence she deserves.”

“If you go near her, I will kill you.” The words left Callon’s mouth at the same time his fist went through the wall.

“Why?” Roan challenged. “You’re passing her off to some other male as if she’s too much of a burden for you to handle. What do you care if she’s no longer able to be a mate to one of our kind?” Roan made a sound in his throat as if he’d just realized something. “Or are you hoping that later, when *you’re* ready, you can pursue her? Did you cut her loose and think that she will honestly give you another chance?”

“What are you talking about?” Callon scoffed.

“I spoke with your father earlier, just checking in and letting him know when I’d be back,” he explained. “Your mother was with him, as usual, and she was so excited to share with me that you’d brought Lola to meet them and claimed her in front of them. If she’s not with you, and you’ve got another male watching her, then I’m going to deduce that you, what is it humans call it? Broke up? Yes, that’s it. You broke up with the mate that you just met, and shared our world with, and claimed.” Roan chuckled, but there was no humor in the sound. “And you think she’ll take your sorry, shiftless-ass back?”

“You have no idea the pressure that I carry,” Callon shouted. “She will get half of my attention, and she distracts me from what is expected of me. She deserves more than that, and I can’t give the members of my pride less than my absolute devotion to their safety.”

“I’m done with this conversation,” Roan said coolly. “Be at your father’s office tomorrow. You need to hear what Visata said when He paid the council a visit. Though it won’t matter for you. It’s pretty clear you’ve given up any chance at a mate.”

“Visit?” Callon said, his voice a near whisper. But his question was unanswered because Roan had hung up.

Callon felt the icy grip of dread as his heart raced wildly in his chest. He dropped his phone to keep from smashing it, then hit the wall with his fists over and over, leaving impressions of his pain etched in the plaster. Roan’s words echoed in his mind, begging him to reconsider what he had done, urging him to fight for the future he did not believe was possible with Lola. Thoughts of her flooded him, penetrating the walls he had so quickly built around himself in an attempt to push her away. Something inside of him cracked, and he wasn’t sure what the hell was happening, but the beast in him was done with the decisions the man had made.

He headed out of the apartment going to the one person who he hoped could help him figure out what the hell was going on. He passed up the elevators for the stairs and ran up them the entire way. He wasn’t even out of breath when he opened the door to his father’s office. He’d no doubt that his Prime would still be working.

Taras stood up, concern marring his brow. “What’s wrong. What’s happened?”

“I screwed up. I screwed up bad.”

CHAPTER 18

I Think It's Time To Call Her Doctor.

"What is truth? Is it something we simply decide because we claim it? Is truth something that is absolute? I personally hope, it's the latter. If it is not then we are simply standing on shifting sand. We will sink under the lies boldly proclaimed by those whose 'truth' cared nothing for anyone else, and only benefited the person who believed their disguised lies."

~ Lola

Lola pushed the door to the apartment open and wondered how she'd made it home without collapsing.

"Hey mom," she hollered out. "Katy and Maddie are staying over."

"There's dinner in the fridge," her mom called back from the kitchen. "How was your day with your new friend?"

Lola's throat felt as if it might close up. She swallowed down the lump that had formed and managed to answer. "Fine. We had to cut it short because he had to work. So I just went into work as well."

Her mom appeared in the entryway that led to the kitchen holding a dishtowel and a glass she was drying. “I’m sorry to hear that. Do you think you’ll hang out with him tomorrow?”

Lola heard Katy shift behind her and then she saw Maddie from the corner of her eye.

“I don’t know,” Lola answered. What she wanted to say was, “*Not if hell froze over and pigs started to fly.*”

“Well,” her mom sighed. “It’s good to take these things slow.”

Lola nodded and then started down the hall that would lead to her room. “We ate at NNP, so we’re just gonna go hang out. We might want food later though. Thanks for leaving us some.”

“Yeah,” Katy said. “Thanks, Mom.”

“You just want our cereal,” Andi laughed.

“You’ve got to get over the cereal addiction,” Maddie said. “It can’t be healthy to eat that much of it.”

As soon as all three of them were in Lola’s room and the door was closed, Katy flopped down on the bed, Maddie took the seat at Lola’s desk, and Lola began to pace.

“Alright,” Katy spoke up. “Tell us what that P.O.S. did so we can deal with it.”

Lola took a deep breath and shook her hands out as if that would somehow make this easier.

“This is going to sound crazy” she began. “And I really need you two not to freak out.”

Katy rolled her eyes and threw her hands up in the air. “You do realize that you’ve essentially asked us to freak out now, right? You’ve practically made us sign a contract that promises we *will* freak out.”

“Umm, no,” Lola shook her head. “I actually said *not* to freak out.”

“Which means we will.”

“I won’t,” Maddie raised her hand and pointed to herself. “I’m totally calm. Say what you need to say.”

“Traitor,” Katy muttered under her breath as she shoved her hands in the pockets of her black jeans.

Maddie just shook her head. “I haven’t betrayed you in any way just by disagreeing with you.”

“Hello?” Lola waved a hand at her two best friends. “Remember when I said, ‘I have something to tell you that’s going to sound crazy?’”

“We’re ready,” Maddie made a rolling motion with her arm, indicating for Lola to continue.

“So you know those guys in my books?” Lola felt nauseous. There was no way to prove what she was about to tell her best friends.

“Hot names, shift into cool-ass animals, and have ridiculous, possessive tendencies,” Katy rattled.

“Yes, that.” Lola pointed at her. “Well, they’re real. Like, they actually exist in this world.”

“Uh-huh,” Katy said.

Lola opened her eyes and looked at her brunette friend.

"I'm serious," Lola growled. "I've seen it. I've seen them partially shift with animal features, fur, claws and facial features that weren't human. And I've seen them in their animal form. White tigers, panthers, and I know how this sounds." Lola closed her eyes, scrunching up her face as she tried not to picture Callon and all the times she'd seen the animal in him make itself known.

"And what did Callon give you to drink before you saw these creatures?" Katy asked.

Lola mentally counted to ten. If her friends were the ones telling her about people that could shift, she'd think they sounded insane. "Callon hasn't drugged me. I know it's hard to believe."

"I think it's time to call her doctor," Katy said, as she leaned closer to Maddie.

"She doesn't have a *doctor*," Maddie responded in the same conspiratorial whisper.

Katy made a clicking sound with her tongue. "Then it's time to *get* her a doctor."

Lola glared at her besties. "You two know I can hear you, right?"

"Are you sure?" Katy asked. "How do you know this is real? Maybe we're just a figment of your imagination, and in a second, we're going to morph into some sort of animal." She motioned to Maddie, "She'll probably be a swan, or something equally as graceful, while I'll get to be a goat or some dumb

crap like that. You know,” she tapped her chin. “If you’re going to hallucinate me into an animal can you at least make it kick-ass like a pegasus?”

“First of all,” Lola held up a finger, “pegasus aren’t real—”

“But shifters are,” Maddie mumbled.

“And second,” she added another finger, “are you serious right now?”

“Serious as a hallucination attack.”

“That’s not a thing.” Lola’s hands fisted so tightly she could feel her fingernails leaving indentations in her palms.

“With you, it is.” Katy raised a brow. “I mean, Lo, how are we supposed to believe something like that? How come someone else has never seen one of these shifter people? It would be like national news.”

“Because they keep themselves a secret,” Lola huffed. “They look like normal people, although they do seem to be much, much better looking than humans, but that’s not the point.” She waved the thought off. “They have normal jobs and blend in with society. They’ve been here for centuries and the only ones who can see past their human glamour are women called *animi*.” Lola walked over to her closed closet door and thumped her head against it. She squeezed her eyes closed, her teeth gritted so tightly in her mouth that she could hear them grinding.

“I *need* you to believe me,” she said, her voice breaking with emotion. “I know it sounds nuts. I know. But I can’t deal with this on my own. I’ve only been keeping *this* secret for

twenty-four hours and it's eating a hole inside me. You guys have known me all my life, dammit. I realize that I like to escape into fantasy worlds, but I'm telling you this is real. Callon *is* a lion, like an honest-to-goodness lion, and he needs a mate. Well," she pulled her head away from the door so she wouldn't be tempted to start banging it against it. "The males all need mates because it's the only way they will ever be able to fully shift."

Katy held up a hand, "Okay, we're going to get to that last part in a minute, but let's rewind to the part where you said *this* secret, and put the emphasis on *this* meaning there's more you've been keeping from us."

"Yeah," Maddie nodded and crossed her arms in front of her. "Let's start with *that*."

Lola slid down the door until her butt hit the floor. She bent her legs, wrapping her arms around them and pulled them tightly to her chest.

"Callon stalked me for three weeks before he finally introduced himself to me," she said quickly.

When she looked over at each of her friends she cringed at the horrified looks on their faces.

"Okay," Maddie took a deep breath. "Let's start with, 'stalkers do not *introduce* themselves to you because, well, because—'"

"They're stalkers," Katy finished. "Not someone a friend, like myself or Mads, introduced you to. Stalkers are people with unhealthy obsessions or serial killers."

“I should have told you guys that I felt someone watching me,” she shrugged. “I mean, I could feel his eyes, you know how the hairs on the back of your neck go up when someone is staring?”

Both girls nodded looking a tad like disturbing human bobbleheads.

“That’s your body’s natural way of telling you to get the hell away from someone,” Katy pointed out.

“And you’re telling us that you got in a car with this guy and hung out with him?” Maddie asked, her voice rising an octave with each word.

“He knows where you work?” Katy asked. “And he knows where you live?”

“That’s sort of part of the M.O. of stalkers,” Lola said.

“Do not get smart with me,” Katy snapped, pointing a finger at her.

Lola pressed her palms against her eyes and pushed, hoping the pressure would help the headache that was building. “I know you guys think I’m crazy.”

Arms came around her and she was squeezed tightly. “We’re a little freaked out, but we don’t think you’re crazy,” Maddie said gently, as if not to spook a wild animal.

“I never jumped on that bandwagon. I’m still up in the air on my diagnosis,” Katy declared.

“It’s a good thing we don’t care what you think,” Maddie snipped. She released Lola and sat down beside her.

Lola looked at Katy. Her lips pursed as she stared back.

“Quit trying to be the alpha female,” Maddie said then she looked at Lola. “Sorry, I just thought the reference was appropriate. Getting into the spirit of things.”

Lola groaned. “Good grief.”

Maddie turned back to Katy, ignoring Lola’s reaction. “As the BFFs it’s our job to be here when one of us needs the others. So, here we will be. We will listen *without* judgment.”

After a minute, Katy’s face relaxed with a sigh. She rolled off the bed and walked over, taking a seat directly in front of Lola. She reached out and patted Lola’s hand. “I hate it when she acts like the better friend. You know I will listen and not judge.”

“Liar,” Maddie muttered.

Katy rolled her eyes. “Fine, I will judge a little bit silently. But, I will also try to keep an open mind. Besides, someone has to play the Devil’s Advocate.”

“Well, since you’re most likely Satan’s sister, it works for you,” Maddie said sweetly.

Katy narrowed her eyes on their blonde BFF, “You’re lucky I like you.” She turned back to look at Lola. “Now, spill it. Start from the other night when we called you and you were with Callon.”

Lola cringed as she admitted how long she’d been keeping things from them. “Um, actually, we need to start with the hot guys and the weird tattoos.”

“Let me guess,” Katy’s head tilted to the side as she lifted a brow. “They’re also shifters like Callon. And I want it known that for the moment, I will accept that *you* believe shifters are a thing so I will refer to them as such. However, it will most likely take me seeing all of this with my own eyes.”

Lola nodded. “I understand. I’d feel the same. I won’t lie and tell you that I’d believe something that shouldn’t be possible.”

“Okay, so hot guys and tattoos.” Maddie made a continuing motion with her hand.

Lola started from when she stood in front of the table with the five guys, their weird tattoos, and the one with the swirling, silver eyes.

Her two friends listened intently. At some point, Katy laid down and propped herself up on her side with her elbow on the floor and her head resting in her hand.

“Wait,” Katy held up a hand. “So, the lion tattoo you got wasn’t just a weird, hasty decision?”

“Oh it *was* a hasty decision,” Lola said, “but it also felt right. Like that was just the one I needed.”

Katy’s eyes got huge as she reached over and pressed her hand to her shoulder. “I got a wolf,” she said softly. “Why the hell did I get a wolf?”

“You’re not an *animus*,” Lola said quickly. “The beastwalkers would have known, and the Shaman.”

“What in mother of shifter babies is a Shaman?” Maddie asked.

“They’re kind of like the rule makers and holy people of the beastwalkers.”

“You’re *sure* this isn’t a book you read and are somehow now hallucinating?” Maddie asked.

“At this point, I wish it was.” Lola looked at Katy who still hadn’t moved. Her eyes had that unfocused look, as if she was thinking about something. “Katy, you would have been able to see their tattoos move, and the animal features that I saw. Your tattoo is just a wolf that you wanted, that’s all.” She snapped her fingers in front of her face and Katy seemed to snap out of her trance.

“Of course,” Katy said, dropping her hand from her shoulder. “I mean, it’s not like I’m sure I believe any of this, yet,” she tacked that last word on with an indifferent shrug.

“Alright,” Maddie said. “Weird lion tattoo explained, keep going. And you,” she pointed at Katy, “No more questions until she’s done.”

Katy made a zipping motion across her lips and then flipped Maddie off.

“Are you two done?” Lola asked.

They stared at her blinking like cartoon characters. She took that as their answer and then continued her unbelievable, but completely true, tale. Without interruptions, the dam that had kept the information inside broke and Lola’s mouth almost couldn’t keep up with the thoughts in her brain.

When the last word left her mouth, Lola realized her face was wet. She was crying and hadn’t even known it. She’d been

so entranced in what she was telling Katy and Maddie, she hadn't paid attention to how the re-telling of how Callon had acted affected her.

"Lion or not, I'm going to kill him," Katy said as she pushed up into a sitting position.

"I'm on board with that," Maddie motioned to Katy. "But, before we commit homicide, let's go over some things that are vital to this whole thing being real."

Lola held her hands out. "The floor is yours."

"First, you mentioned *animi*, which are the women able to mate with a shifter dude, correct?" Maddie asked.

"Yes. *Animi* is plural, *animus* is singular."

"Okay," Maddie tapped her chin. "So, what makes a chick an *animus*?"

"Somehow the magic of the Damarian's imbues into human women," Lola explained. "That's what Callon told me. He never said *why* some women became *animi* and others didn't." Lola's brow rose as she looked at Katy, "Actually, if I remember correctly, you interrupted that conversation."

"Well, I should have made good on my threat, come over here and shanked his supernatural ass."

"Moving on," Maddie said. "*Animus* are a mystery that we will need to figure out because you," she motioned to Lola, "are supposedly one. We need to know if that means more than becoming a supernatural ass's piece of—"

"Seriously, Maddie?" Lola glared at her friend.

“Well,” she held her hands up. “You have to admit that’s sort of what it sounds like. He *needs* you so he can become whatever it is he’s supposed to be.”

“He never said that entailed sex,” Lola said.

Katy pressed her lips tightly together and tilted her head to the side. “But he never said it *didn’t* involve sex. Isn’t that right?”

“You need to lay off the Court T.V.,” Lola said dryly. “Your inner cross examiner is showing.”

“Okay, we’ll set the possibility of an *animus* being a booty-call for later,” Maddie said as she tapped her fingers on the carpet. “Let’s move on to when you went with Callon yesterday—”

“Good grief,” Katy interrupted. “I can’t believe all of the Callon drama has only happened in a day. Only *you* would wind up with a crazy stalker for a boyfriend.”

“Anyways,” Maddie said slowly with a sharp look at Katy. “When you were with him, at no point did you eat or drink anything? Not even when you met his parents? No beverages were offered?”

Lola shook her head. “No.”

“And you never felt a sharp prick, like a needle being stuck in you?”

“Seriously,” Lola deadpanned. “I’d know if I was drugged, especially with a freaking needle.”

“I’m just trying to cover all our bases,” Maddie shrugged. “You’re talking about a species that comes from another realm, Lo. A doctor would give you some drugs and stick your butt in a mental hospital.”

“She’s not wrong,” Katy added.

“I know what I saw and it was not drug-induced.” Lola ran her hand through her hair. “Callon’s father looked like a mixture of man and lion. It was both scary and beautiful.”

Katy frowned. “I think your idea of beautiful and mine are very, very different.”

“Not if you met Callon,” Lola said softly.

“You really feel something for him,” Maddie said, and it was not a question.

“You barely know him.” Katy pointed out unnecessarily.

“I don’t understand it, either,” Lola said as she leaned her head back against the door. “Something inside of me is drawn to him. Even now, after today, I still want to go to him.”

“That’s called your libido,” Katy told her. “Hot, muscular, and in your case, just like the dudes from your books, you didn’t have a chance *not* to want him.”

The sudden tap on her window jolted Lola, sending a wave of adrenaline through her body. Her mind immediately jumped to Callon and sitting out on the fire escape with him. Her heart raced and her stomach flipped, ready to crawl up her throat. Fear and confusion clouded her mind. Did she want to see him? *No. And yes.* “Dammit,” she breathed out feeling like every ounce of oxygen escaped her lungs from that one word.

She remembered he'd sent her texts right after she'd bailed from his car but after talking to Bane when he'd come into NNP, she'd hastily deleted them. Now, she'd wished she hadn't. "No you don't," she told herself, and then jumped again when the tapping continued.

"You okay?" Maddie asked, concern filling her eyes.

"Yep," Lola nodded quickly. "Totally fine. Everything is fine. Right as the rain. Feeling good. Totally got this."

Maddie's eyes widened. "Okay, so you're a complete and utter mess, and might need an intervention. Noted."

"That better not be him," Katy said as she pushed up and walked to the window. "Fine as hell or not, I will push him off the fire escape and enjoy the sound of his Lion King-ass hitting the pavement."

Lola jumped to her feet. "No," she said and bumped Katy's hip so she could reach the window first. No matter how bruised her heart was, she didn't want Callon hurt. She pulled up the window without even checking to see who it was.

"Hello, Kitty Cat," Katy muttered. "It *is* a damn shame to have to kill him. You weren't lying when you said he was beautiful in a rugged, masculine way."

"Don't forget the part where she said there was something inside of him that called to a primal part of her that she'd never felt before," Maddie said, her voice sounding a tad breathless.

"You both can shut up now," Lola snapped as she looked at the handsome face, though not the one she wanted to see.

“Bane, what are you doing here?”

“Bane?” Katy asked? “That’s not Callon?”

“Didn’t you listen when she described him?” Maddie asked. “Callon had long, wild hair, like a lion’s mane.” Maddie made some sort of noise as if she was considering something, then she snapped her mouth closed. She tilted her head a tad to the right and smirked. “You’re the panther. You came into NNP today. Lola told us about how you scratched up Callon’s car. I totally like you.”

“I am and I did,” he said, his voice calm and smooth. He didn’t seem concerned or surprised that Katy and Maddie knew what he was. His eyes moved from Lola to Maddie and then Katy. And that’s where they stayed. His eyes narrowed and he tilted his head, reminding Lola very much of how Dog watched a bug he wasn’t interested in messing with. Curious, but unsure if he should act on that curiosity.

Speaking of Dog– or rather, thinking of him– he came out from under her bed, took one look at Bane and hissed.

Bane made a noise that was definitely not human and Dog gave Bane his own tilted head look.

“Are you talking to him?” Katy asked.

Bane made another noise and Dog flicked his tail. Turning, he walked away with his chin held high in that snobby way he sometimes did.

“Not in the way that you mean,” Bane told her as his bright-green eyes looked at Katy again.

“What are you doing here?” Lola asked again. Bane looked back at Lola, and to her surprise, he started to climb through the open window. She backed up quickly so he wouldn’t bump into her. He was incredibly graceful considering his size and the fact that the window was not all that big.

“Holy bat babies,” Maddie breathed out as she scrambled to her feet.

“Or cat babies,” Katy said.

“Are they all this big, Lo?” Katy asked. “Because you didn’t mention that part.”

“My bad,” Lola said dryly. “I was more focused on the fact that he totally seduced me with the whole soulmate thing, and then dropped my butt like a bag of bricks all in less than twenty-four hours.”

“Okay,” Katy nodded. “That trumps you mentioning their size. So, as much as sitting here and staring at you sounds like a good idea, we need to know some things.”

“And lucky you,” Maddie grinned, though it wasn’t a very nice grin. “You’re the one who’s going to let the cat out of the bag.”

Katy put her hands on her hips and narrowed her eyes on Bane. “If we had a bag big enough, we’d totally put you in said bag, just for kicks and giggles.”

“Would you like to give him some catnip while you’re at it?” Lola asked as she walked over to the phone she’d left on the floor. She connected it via bluetooth to her speakers and

turned on some music. Hopefully, her parents wouldn't come to check on the deep voice rumbling from her room. She also walked over to the door and locked it. Turning, she folded her arms across her chest and leaned back against the door. "Now, since you're here, you might as well make yourself useful, and show these two that I'm telling the truth. *Then* you can tell me why you're in my bedroom."

"You opened the window," he answered simply, as if that was reason enough.

"That wasn't a freaking invitation," she huffed. "Can you just show them, please."

Bane stared at her for a long time before he spoke. "They cannot scream."

"*They* are right here," Katy pointed out. "You don't have to talk about us like we're not in the room."

Bane looked at her and then Maddie, "Could you please go stand next to Lola?"

Without a word, both girls walked over and leaned against the wall on either side of her. They mimicked her pose, their arms folded in front of them. Lola knew that there was no way to truly prepare them for what was about to happen. No matter how many times she'd said shifters were real. Seeing it was something incredible.

"I won't hurt you," Bane said. "Our beasts are larger than the natural ones of the human realm. Please don't be alarmed."

"Why do I feel like this is like getting a shot?" Katy asked. "The fear of the pain to come is much worse than the *actual*

shot.”

The words were barely out of her mouth when— from one breath to the next— Bane was a man and then he wasn’t. He was a massive, black panther.

“Okay,” Katy whispered. “Nothing like a shot.”

“No friggin way,” Maddie said as she slid down the wall to the floor, as if her legs could no longer support her. “That’s— he’s— I mean, it can’t,” she stumbled over words, unable to complete a thought.

Bane’s large panther form sat down on his haunches and stared at them. Lola wondered if he was allowing them to adjust to the impossible being real. He opened his mouth, stretching it wide in a big yawn. His long fangs gleamed in the light from her ceiling fan.

“Does he understand us?” Katy asked. “I mean, is he like, completely an animal right now without any human reasoning?”

“Callon spoke to him when he was in this form at the estate where they live,” Lola said. “He spoke in English, and in another language that was definitely not human.”

“Wait,” Maddie said. “If you can shift, then that means you have an *animus*.”

Lola stiffened. She thought about what Callon had said to Bane when he’d come in to tell them he’d finished washing the car, which he had not. Still made her smile. Callon had mentioned he was sorry for the pain Bane endured. And also that their kind didn’t cheat.

“Bane,” Lola said gently, “did your mate die?”

Katy blew out a sharp breath. “Well, that’s one way to make an already awkward situation *hella* more awkward.”

CHAPTER 19

Non-Negotiable.

“In the pit of my stomach I knew I’d lost her. I’d barely even had a taste and already I was addicted to her. There was no life without her, only chaos. Only violence and death. The world would bleed.” ~ Callon

“What the hell is wrong with me?” Callon asked his father after having told him everything. From stalking Lola, to watching her practically dive out of his car because of how he’d treated her.

He paced the length of the office only to turn and go back the other way. Every time he got close to the windows he had the urge to punch it just to see if he could crack it. The idea of the glass shattering was oddly satisfying. Maybe because that’s what happened to his soul.

“You’ve always seen a mate as a weakness, Callon,” Taras said. “That’s the furthest thing from the truth.”

Callon ran both his hands through his hair as he bared his teeth. The beast in him was beyond angry. He was pure rage.

“The most important part of your *animus* isn’t that she is able to unleash your animal,” he stepped from around his desk and walked to Callon, taking his shoulders in his hands. They were the same height and stood eye-to-eye. “The most important part of your *animus*, your mate, your *Sazzi*, is that she has strengths where you have weaknesses. She will make you a better male. Stronger, more compassionate, kinder, more loving and willing to see people for the gift that they are, and not just something to make our kingdom stronger. She will even you out.

“And you have strengths where she has weaknesses and you will get to be those things for her. She’s not a weakness, Son, she’s a precious gift. Just as you are a gift to her. She is yours to protect, provide for, encourage in her dreams and cheer her on in her triumphs. She is the one you will lie down with at night and share your heart with. Your mother is the one person on earth who gets all of me, and I am the one person who gets all of her. That is what Lola is to you. Are you really going to give that up?”

Callon’s body was a rope stretched tight enough it might snap at any moment. His chest hurt from how hard his heart pounded. It was as if the damn organ was trying to leave his body to get to *her*. “Would you give it up?” he asked. Then clarified. “For the good of the kingdom?”

His father didn’t even hesitate. “I wouldn’t give my mate up for anything or anyone. She is the one non-negotiable in my life.”

Callon took a deep breath as he closed his eyes and pictured Lola. *His* mate. He thought about how she'd made him feel. She made him laugh, smile, and made him feel like he could breathe for the first time in his life. And he'd given her up. He'd practically handed her to Bane on a silver platter. His father's words tripped a switch inside of him as he realized there was no way he would sacrifice what they could have for anything either. He'd steal his father's words because they were probably the wisest he'd ever spoken. "Lola is my non-negotiable."

"Then go get her."

CHAPTER 20

Smirking Is Forbidden

"What's next? Shifters are real. Book boyfriends are a thing. Soulmates exist. I feel at any moment there's going to be one of those breaking news alerts where some sort of outbreak has happened and zombies are running the streets with people's brains hanging out of their dead mouths. Okay, so now shifters don't seem so bad. Even if one did crush my heart and soul." ~ Lola

Bane blinked as he stared at the three females across the room from him. Lola's eyes were filled with empathy which called to the animal inside of him. To have that gentleness in his life once more... The brunette, Katy, stared at him in fascination. Also as if she was trying to figure out if he was actually there, or simply a figment of her imagination. Maddie, the blonde sitting on the floor, was at a complete loss. She kept tilting her head from one direction to the other as if that would somehow explain his existence.

"Bane?" Lola's voice drew his attention. Since she wouldn't understand him if he spoke in his animal language,

the Damarian language, he'd have to shift back. He didn't want to talk about his dead mate, didn't want to bring forth the pain of the memories from her death. But, he liked Lola. She was a part of their world now, and whether Callon accepted it or not, she wasn't going anywhere. So she might as well learn as much as she could.

With a simple thought, he shifted back into his human form, complete with clothes. Thank Visata, the magic in them allowed them to manifest coverings so they weren't naked every time they shifted.

"I think I'm going to pass out," Maddie murmured as she closed her eyes and took deep breaths.

"Okay, I want one." Katy eyes were fixated on him.

"He's not a pet," Lola snapped. "You can't just take him home."

Katy glanced over at Lola, "Why do you get one?"

Lola's face immediately went blank. "In case you forgot, I don't."

Katy's eyes softened. "My bad, Lo. You can totally punch me in the boob for that."

Bane frowned. "What?"

"Nothing," Lola said quickly. "Do you mind answering my question?"

He walked over to the chair at her desk and motioned to it. "May I?"

Lola nodded, "Of course."

He sat, his spine rigid as he folded his hands in his lap. “Yes. My mate has gone to be with our Creator. She’s been gone now a couple of decades.”

“I’m so sorry,” Lola said.

“Decades?” Katy blurted out. “You don’t look over twenty-five at best. Does your kind mate young? Age different? Or simply come out of the womb already grown?”

Lola pinched the bridge of her nose. “And here I thought *I* needed a filter.”

“To be fair,” Maddie said. “You usually do. Cut us some slack, Lo. We just realized that all of the crazy you’ve been spewing is real.”

“Lola doesn’t seem like the type to lie,” Bane pointed out. He didn’t know Lola, obviously, but his animal could pick up on things like deceit, ill intentions, nervousness as well as other emotions. The only thing he’d sensed from Lola had been longing for Callon and then anguish. It left a bitter scent in his nose and it made him want to take a chunk out of his Prince’s hide.

“She’s not,” Maddie agreed. “But, this is crazy. Humans that turn into animals? That’s not a thing.”

“We’re not human,” Bane told her. “We’re not animals either. We’re Damarians, beastwalkers,— shifters— if that’s easier to understand. But, you have nothing to fear from us unless you do something that requires we defend ourselves or our kind. Just as humans would defend themselves.”

Katy took a seat on the carpeted floor and leaned forward, resting her elbows on her knees. “I need to marinate on this for a minute. If you don’t mind. That also means I’m going to stare at you. But it’s not because you turn into a big, freaking panther.”

Lola groaned. “Katy, don’t say i—”

“It’s because you’re unearthly-good looking,” Katy continued, obviously unconcerned with Lola’s words. “We live in New York and work in a pizza place that caters mostly to construction workers. Our daily view is less than pleasant. So, if you would be so kind as to sit and look like that,” she motioned to his whole form. “And just let me ponder the fact that my best friend has fallen in love with one of your kind, he professed to want her, then basically told her to take a hike, and now here you are, for whatever reason, sitting in her room.”

“Alright,” Bane said. It’s not like he had anywhere else to be. He’d been commanded to guard Lola. What better way to guard her than be with her? Although, he had a feeling if Callon found out that this was the way Bane had chosen to look after Lola, he wouldn’t consider it a reasonable idea. That made Bane smirk.

“Okay, none of that,” Katy shook her head. “Smirking is forbidden.”

Maddie nodded. “Agreed. The smirk is an unfair advantage that totally takes our mind off of the necessary questions that need to be asked.”

“Shoot me now,” Lola muttered as she took a seat on the floor as well and leaned back against the door. “Okay, now that we’ve established that I wasn’t off my rocker, Bane, can you please tell us why you’re here?”

“That’s a good place to start,” Maddie agreed. “But that’s the tip of the tiger’s tail.”

Bane had to admit the females were quite amusing and intriguing. There was something about them that had his beast perking up, but he couldn’t put his finger on it.

“I told you,” he looked at Lola. “I was told by the Prince to protect you.”

“But why?”

“Because you’re an *animus*.”

“And *that* is the next question,” Katy said. “‘He Who Must Be Pushed From A Fire Escape,’ explained some of it to her. But I think we can do better than his description. And not to bring up a painful topic,” her voice softened, “but you had a mate, so aren’t you better qualified to explain?”

“My mate was not an *animus*,” Bane said as his mate’s beautiful face filled his mind. “She was one of our kind.”

“Okay, I’m just going to stop talking now,” the brunette pulled her hair back from her face and twisted it up in some sort of knot. “Considering I’m just sticking my foot in my mouth.”

“Welcome to my world,” Lola said with a snort. She thought of all the times she’d said things, and then wished the ground would swallow her up. Katy rarely felt embarrassed by things

she said, but she wasn't heartless. She'd obviously seen the pain in Bane's eyes when he spoke of his mate.

"I can try to," Bane began, but another sound came from the direction of the window, only this time it wasn't a tapping. This was a knock on the window sill, because they hadn't closed the dang thing when Bane had come in.

Bane was out of his seat and standing in front of the window before Lola had time to think about it. His speed was comparable to that of Callon, who she had seen move quickly.

He reached through the window and drug another huge man through it. Lola sucked in a breath she didn't realize she'd been holding when she saw that the man didn't have long, wild hair streaked with various shades of browns and blond.

"Stand down, Bane," the deep voice growled.

Lola recognized it immediately. "Roan?"

The man she now knew to be a Shaman stood up as Bane released him and straightened his clothes.

"Hey," Katy grinned from where she'd jumped to her feet, and to Lola's amusement had her desk lamp in her hand. "You're one of the book boyfriends from the group a few weeks ago."

Roan did not return her smile. His silver swirling eyes took her in and then looked at the lamp. "Were you going to attack me with that?"

Katy looked at the lamp and then back at Roan. "It's a lot more dangerous than it looks."

Lola couldn't help but smile as Katy put the lamp back on the desk, and pushed the hair that had fallen down from her hair twist out of her face.

"Are there any more stray cats we need to worry about climbing up the fire escape?" Maddie asked as she walked past the two guys and stuck her head out the window.

"I'm not a homeless cat," Roan declared indignantly. "And no one else is here," he added with a meaningful look at Lola. She felt his words were meant just for her. As if she'd somehow asked with her eyes if Callon was there. Which she totally hadn't.

"Katy, Maddie," Lola looked at her two friends. "Remember how I explained what Shamans were?"

Both girls nodded.

"That's what Roan is."

"Mmm," Katy hummed. "So a stray holy man-slash-politician. We've got a lot of those in our world. You must fit right in."

Bane chuckled.

"Don't encourage her," Lola said, shooting the panther a glare.

He tilted his head forward as if to say, 'As you wish'. Then again, maybe Lola was reading too much into the gesture. When was the last time she read the *Princess Bride*? Good grief, was everything in her life going to be compared to a book now?

“Okay, so the question of the evening,” Maddie said, obviously trying to get everyone to focus.

“How the heck have Lola’s parents not interrupted this little animal shindig?” Katy offered.

Lola glanced at her watch and noticed the time. Dang, it was late. How had so many hours passed since she and the girls had gotten home? “They’re asleep by now.” The music was still playing which would have drown out some of the noise, and her parents room was on the opposite side of the apartment.

“That is *not* the question of the evening.” Maddie put her hands on her hips, and looked from Bane and then to Roan. “Bane seems to have exhausted his knowledge of the *animus* thing and how this affects Lola.” She looked at Katy and Lola. “Do you want to know more, or do you want to tell these dudes to take a shifter-hike and let you get back to your life?”

Lola stared at the two men, and wondered what it would be like to go back to her life before she had ever met them or Callon. At first, the thought of turning back the clock felt comforting. To just go back to what she knew. But when she thought about Callon– of never seeing him again– the idea was gut-wrenching. But why? Why did she care about someone she barely knew? And maybe a better question, how had someone she barely knew hurt her so deeply?

“Because you are meant for this world,” Roan said.

“Crap, did I say all of that out loud?” She sat down on the edge of her bed worried her legs might decide to let her fall to the ground. “I’ve really got to work on that.”

“Explain what you just said,” Katy said, her voice demanding in only the way Katy could be. She didn’t consider that someone might not obey her. It was something that she expected when she gave a command. Lola snorted as she thought that Katy would fit in with the beastwalkers she’d met so far. They all seemed a little, or a lot, bossy.

“She’s an animus—”

“We got that part, Swirly Eyes,” Katy said dryly, “Let’s move onto something we don’t know.”

Roan frowned and narrowed his eyes on her. Then he looked at Lola. He was silently asking her how Katy knew about his silver eyes. Lola pursed her lips and shrugged one shoulder. Maybe she’d mentioned the Shaman had swirly eyes when she’d been telling the girls everything. She honestly couldn’t remember. Things had gone from her friends ready to throw her on the Crazy Train to two Damarians in her freaking room.

“How is an *animus* chosen?” Maddie asked.

“That’s not something we know,” Roan answered. “For some reason there are human women who react to our magic. They absorb it and it becomes a part of them.”

“Does it change something in me?” Lola asked, finally able to get her mouth to work after the shock of Roan showing up. “I mean, if I had blood work done, would my DNA be different?”

“Good question, Lo,” Katy nodded. “That’s why you’re the smart one of us.”

“Dude, what am I ?” Maddie asked.

“You’re the beauty with your ridiculously, model figure and lovely face.”

Maddie smiled. “Oh.”

Katy smirked. “Appeased?”

“For now.”

“Once the magic is imbued in you,” Roan explained. “You won’t ever have to have your blood tested. You will never get sick again. And we have our own healers for injuries.”

Katy took a seat in the desk chair. “Of course, you do.”

“You said that I’m *meant* for this,” Lola pointed out. “Lyra said something similar. What does that mean?”

“You’re not an accident, Lola,” Roan said, his voice almost pleading. “And that Callon is the male you were drawn to is *not* a mistake.”

Maddie snorted. “Tell that to *him*.”

Katy snapped her fingers, “Hey, we do *not* talk about ‘HeWho Must Be Pushed From A Fire Escape.’”

Roan slipped his hands in his pockets and rocked back on his heels. “Callon—”

Katy tossed her hands in the air. “I might as well not even speak.”

Roan seemed immune to her friend’s drama, and just kept talking. “Has always focused on what he considers his ultimate calling in life. He never thought he’d have a mate, *or*

that he'd be around a female long enough for her to choose him."

"Why do I feel like there's a big-ass 'but' coming," Maddie asked.

Roan let out a deep breath and she saw the dark circles under his swirling, silver eyes. His mouth was stretched tight across his face, and his shoulders seemed tense as he stood up a little straighter. "The Shaman Council met."

"That sounds ominous," Lola muttered.

Roan smiled slightly. "It's usually just us checking in regards to the kingdoms we are ambassadors for. But there's a kingdom that might be breaking some of our laws. And we need to deal with it."

"Again," Katy sighed. "What does this have to do with our Lola?"

"That part doesn't really have anything—"

Bane made a low rumbling sound in his chest interrupting Roan. "Be truthful," the panther said. "She has everything to do with it. All of it."

"Dammit, Bane," Roan took a seat on the edge of the bed, opposite Lola. "You have *no* idea what has happened. There are consequences to our past and Visata paid a visit to the Council."

Bane sucked in a breath. "Visata?"

"Why are you guys saying that name like he's the Lion King, or 'He Who Must Not Be Named?'"

“He’s their Creator,” Lola explained.

“Callon told you?” Roan asked. “What else did he tell you?”

“The basics,” Lola answered. “We didn’t really have more time to get to know one another’s deep, dark secrets.” She tried really hard not to sound petty, but it was better than sounding like a pining damsel.

“Damn,” Bane cursed. “He didn’t—”

“Not now,” Roan commanded sharply, his gaze as stern as his words. “There’s enough that needs to be said, and it will not be something you really want to hear right now, but you need to know.”

A knot tightened in Lola’s gut, followed by a wave of nausea. “On second thought,” she said, quickly. “Maybe this isn’t the best idea for me. It might be better for me to just stick to my usual non-exciting, no beastwalker involved, routine of reading books, passing out pizza slices to average guys, and trying to figure out how I’ll pay for college.”

Roan held her stare for several heart beats. “Can you *really* do that? Can you forget what you’ve learned? Wild Ink? Jaxine, Kian? All you’ve seen when you met our kind? The beastwalkers you no doubt met when you visited the estate? And,” he motioned to the tall man in the corner, “Bane? You could forget him?”

“You’re not playing fair,” Lola grumbled, as she picked at the comforter on her bed.

“And I won’t,” he warned. “Bane said I need to be honest with you and I have a feeling you’re going to feel like I’m manipulating you.” He reached out and placed a hand over hers. “I’m not. You need to know the consequences of any choice you make.”

Lola bit the inside of her cheek and then nodded. “Okay. Let’s hear it.”

“The Creator has changed the way our people mate.”

“Umm,” Katy started.

Maddie snapped her fingers and shook a finger at her. “Get your mind out of the gutter.”

“Please,” Katy laughed. “As if you weren’t thinking it.”

“To be clear,” Roan said with a smirk, “I wasn’t speaking about mating as in sex. I’m talking about the way our people bond.”

“Try again,” Katy laughed.

“Humans called it marriage,” Roan said dryly.

“Otherwise known as the marriage bed. Carry on.” Katy held out a hand and slightly bowed her head.

Roan shook his head and looked back at Lola. “For as long as we have existed, our kind found their other half much like humans. They met, fell in love and then chose to spend their life together. There are, of course, some differences.”

“Naturally,” Maddie mumbled.

“What differences?” Lola asked.

“For starters, mated pairs bond on multiple levels. There’s not just a physical bond or emotional bond. There’s a soul bond that can only be broken in death, and even then, it leaves such anguish many beastwalkers choose to follow their mate into the afterlife.”

“That’s so romantic and tragic at the same time,” Katy sighed. “To have someone that desperate to be with you.”

“So, what’s changed?” Lola frowned. “You said that *was* the way mating happened. How does it happen now?”

He seemed pensive as he spoke. “Due to some poor choices our kind made, there are consequences to our actions. Though Visata has also blessed us for our decision to right our wrongs.”

“Consequences first, please,” Maddie said as she took her seat back on the floor.

“It’s not that simple,” he explained. “It’s all combined. Our kind can no longer look for a mate that they can *choose*. Visata is giving *one* mate for each male. She will be his and his alone, and he will be hers. However,” he rubbed his forehead as he looked down at the floor. Lola noticed his hand shook as he rested it on his leg. “The female can choose to reject her mate. She can choose to have a human life. A Shaman can Null her and the magic inside of her will be taken away. She will no longer be the other half of that male. She would not bring forth the animal inside of him and their souls would not be able to bond.”

“Holy crap on a dragon,” Katy said slowly.

“And the male, he will never find another mate,” Roan continued. Lola heard the pain in his voice. He cared for Callon and didn’t want to see his friend hurt. “He will lose his chance at ever being bonded, not to just his soulmate, but his animal as well. He would live only as half of what he was created to be.”

Lola’s lungs felt like they were caving in and her throat seemed to be choked shut. She desperately tried to take a breath, but none of the air seemed to get to her. Her eyes widened as she glanced at Katy, and then Maddie, and she grabbed her throat with her hands as if it could somehow help her inhale. She sprang up from her seat, thinking that standing up would make it easier for her to breathe.

“She’s having a panic attack,” Katy said as she rushed to Lola. “She used to have them when she was a kid, because of jackass kids who made fun of her beautiful skin.” She grabbed her face and forced her to look at her. “It’s okay, Lo. Focus on relaxing. No one is going to make you do anything.”

Lola felt tears gather in her eyes. Katy didn’t get it. She wasn’t worried about anyone *making* her *do* anything. She felt hands on her back and warmth flow into her. Suddenly, everything relaxed, and she sucked in a breath. It sounded strained, but it was getting through, and she didn’t feel as if she was on the verge of passing out.

“You good?” Maddie asked as she pushed Lola’s hair away from her face.

She nodded and looked up. Her eyes collided with Bane’s and she felt the pain that radiated in them. He’d truly hoped

there might be a chance for them. But Lola had never doubted that Callon was the one for her. “I’m sorry,” she said softly.

“You have nothing to be sorry for, *Sazzi*.” Bane patted her hand.

“If you want to live, *never* call her that again or touch her.” His words were low and menacing. But she didn’t get the feeling it was *Roan* that would be killing Bane.

Lola turned to look at the Shaman. “Callon called me that.”

“Callon had the right,” Roan said. “No other male does.”

“Good grief, Man. Do we have to pull every tiny piece of information from you with pliers and fingernail removal?” Katy asked dryly.

Lola couldn’t disagree with her friend. It felt like they were asking things that *obviously* needed to be explained. “What does it mean?” Lola asked.

“The best way to translate it in English is *Beloved One*,” Roan said. “It is something *only* a mate calls his female. To call someone else’s mate that is essentially a challenge and a death wish.”

“Again, romantic and disturbing,” Katy said.

“You said romantic and tragic earlier,” Maddie pointed out.

Katy hummed a thoughtful sound. “Yes, but killing a guy for calling your chick an endearment is not tragic. It is disturbing in a, ‘I will unalive you,’ sexy sort of way.”

“Are you sure you haven’t been reading my books?” Lola asked with an almost smile. Almost, because her mind jumped back to Roan’s words. “That’s a lot to take in,” she told him. “You’re telling me I’m not just *possibly* a mate to one of your kind, but that I *am*, and I am essentially the reason he will flourish or wither away.”

“See,” Katy sighed. “Romantic, tragic *and* disturbing. The stakes just keep going up.”

“Lo, you don’t have to make a decision based on someone else’s future,” Maddie said. “You have to protect yourself, too.”

Roan stood up and started walking towards the window.

“Where are you going?” Lola practically yelled. He couldn’t leave, not after dropping that bomb in her lap. He was a connection to Callon. And not one like Bane. She liked Bane, but he didn’t care for Callon. Roan made her feel closer to Callon because he obviously cared for the Prince of the Kingdom of Claws.

“I’m not going anywhere yet,” he answered gently. “You need to understand what will happen to you if you walk away from Callon. And believe me,” he held up a hand, “I want to kick his ass for what he did to you. I don’t think you should in any way make this easy on him.”

“But?” Lola asked.

“You might be able to have the magic removed from you and find a human male to move on with, but,” he shook his head. Sadness seemed to wash over him as his body deflated,

“you will never be whole either. No one, human or beastwalker, will complete you the way Callon will.”

“How are you so sure it’s her?” Katy asked.

Roan glanced at her. “Besides the fact they were drawn to each other like the tide is pulled to the shore by the moon?”

“Yeah,” she nodded, “Besides that.”

“Her tattoo,” his head motioned to her chest. “It is identical to his. That is a sign Visata has given for a pair to know. Never has one of our ink masters done tattoos that match. Every single one is unique. *Never* repeated.”

Lola crossed her arms in front of her feeling vulnerable as they talked about something too intimate for casual conversation. “Kian told me he’d never repeated a tattoo before and that mine matched *one* he’d done,” she said as she looked at Maddie and Katy. “But he didn’t tell me whose it matched. It was Callon who told me.” She looked back at Roan. “He seemed as shocked as Kian, but he didn’t know what it meant. Or why it happened.”

“That’s,” Katy began.

“If you say romantic, tragic or disturbing, I will duct tape your mouth,” Maddie snipped.

“I was going to say pre-possessing,” Katy huffed. “I realized I haven’t had a Word of the Day. There’s been too much erudition being thrown at me. It’s been enlightening, but also a tad inundating.”

“Four in a row,” Maddie’s brow rose. “Being an overachiever?”

“I figure I’ll need to step into Lola’s spot of being the smart one since she’s got to make the massive decision on whether or not she wants to marry the Lion King.”

Lola’s breathing picked up again as the gravity of the situation hit her *again*.

“Nope,” Maddie clapped her hands at her. “You only get one panic attack a day. Choose more carefully next time.”

“Are you three always like this?” Bane asked.

Lola laughed and was thankful for the second distraction.

“Cool as hell?” Katy asked. “Yes. You’re welcome.”

Bane’s brow furrowed. “For what?”

“All the incredible greatness you’re getting imbued with.” Katy started drumming her fingers on the desk. “Apparently, you beastwalkers, aren’t the only ones who can imbue things. Now, Lo, what’s it going to be?”

Lola’s eyes widened. “You seriously expect me to just make a decision *right* now?” She looked at Roan. “And in case you didn’t know, Callon was the one who made it clear *he* didn’t want me. So it doesn’t really matter what I want.”

“Do you want him?” Roan asked as he took a step towards her. “If he’d never acted like a—”

“Insensate dick,” Katy interjected.

Roan shot her a look. “Yes, that,” he looked back at Lola. “If he never acted like that, would you have chosen to be with him? Was the connection between you two as strong as I described it?”

The ache that had been inside her since she'd fled Callon's car grew until it felt like it would consume her. "We could feel what the other one was feeling." The words had left her mouth before she even considered what it would mean to tell Roan something that had even been shocking to Callon.

Roan's mouth dropped open, his eyes full of disbelief, and he quickly shifted his gaze to Bane. Lola nervously followed his line of sight and met the panther's stare. His green eyes were full of wonder, as if he was seeing something miraculous for the first time. She felt her cheeks flush with embarrassment—she wasn't anything special, yet he seemed to think so. "And you two didn't consummate the bond?" Roan asked.

Lola choked on a cough as her eyes widened. "Are you kidding? I've known him well, I guess, two days now. I don't know what humans you've met, but I don't jump into bed with a guy, supernatural bond or not."

"If he looked like that one," Maddie pointed at Bane, "You have to admit, it would be a valid question."

"Could you two just stop talking all together?" Lola glared and then ran a hand over her face. "Why is that such a big deal? You said that mates bond on deep levels. Is feeling each other's emotions really that big of a stretch?"

"Is it really possible?" Bane asked. His voice was filled with the same awe she'd seen in his eyes.

"Why wouldn't it be?" Roan asked as he continued to stare at her as if he expected something great to happen.

“Okay, did you guys just realize that she is some sort of savior to your kind and she will suddenly be able to kick everyone’s ass, including guys twice her size?” Katy asked, as she leaned forward in her chair resting her elbows on her legs. “I mean, the way all of this is unfolding like one of her books, it wouldn’t be out of the realm of possibility, though it’s a little overdone.”

“How would you know?” Maddie asked.

Katy shrugged and looked a tad sheepish. “I’ve gotten tired of the documentaries, so I took some of Lo’s books. It’s not like she noticed. She’s got enough to make her own library.”

Lola pursed her lips. “We will come back to *that* information later.” She’d actually rather get into it now, but the Curious Monster, as Katy called it, was chomping at the bit to know why Roan was acting so weird, or weirder.

She narrowed her eyes and arched her eyebrow. “Explain why you just freaked out, please.”

“To answer Katy’s questions,” he said, “you’re not some sort of savior.”

“Thank goodness for that,” Katy breathed out. “She’d probably just ask people questions until they died of *Lolaitis*.”

“What?” Maddie and Lola said at the same time.

“It’s a new illness,” Katy said with a completely serious face. “But don’t worry, it’s not contagious. People tend to run from it.”

“Do you want me to eat her?” Bane asked, his tone flat without any emotion. Lola was pretty sure he was actually serious.

“No.”

“Yes.”

Lola and Katy said at the same time.

“Roan, talk,” Maddie implored. “This will only get worse if you don’t.”

“Visata decreed—,”

Katy slapped her leg. “Of course there is. Supernatural Book Class, 102, God-Ordained Miracles, Legends, and Prophecies: Also Known As: Blessings, Curses, and Hexes.”

“What’s 101?” Lola asked, because dammit, she couldn’t help herself.

Katy gave her a look as if to say, ‘Really?’ “Hot, Possessive, Protective, Let Me Have Your Babies Yesterday, Supernatural Guys.”

Lola bit her bottom lip and gave a sharp nod. “Right. Those.”

“He would change the mated pairs,” Roan continued. “Their bond will change on a biological level.”

“You said my DNA wouldn’t change,” Lola reminded him.

“Well,” he rubbed his chin as he spoke. “You *didn’t* tell me that you and Callon could feel each other.”

“Our emotions,” she added quickly. “We could also feel each other’s emotions.”

“That changes things,” Roan explained. “*These* mated pairs have the ability to heal one another, they can always find one another, like a biological GPS.”

“ That covers Supernatural Book Class, 103, the Superincumbent Pursuant. A.K.A. Stalker Dude.”

“ Nice,” Maddie held her hand up, and Katy high-fived it.

Katy grinned as if she’d just accomplished something great. “ Gotta rise to the occasion, Mads.”

“ Is there more?” Lola asked and she was actually afraid to know.

“ The males of an *Erossazzi* mating, well, the best way I can describe it in human terms, is when separated from their mates their animal becomes a berserker.”

“Like we’re talking maniacal?” Katy asked.

“Not evil, per se,” Roan said carefully. “But dangerous. To anyone. And everyone.”

“Like, kill a baby, dangerous?” Maddie asked. “Because we’re going to have to draw a line in the sand at that part of our relationship.”

“Agreed,” Katy nodded. “There has to be boundaries in this arrangement or it will never work.”

“You two do realize that you aren’t included in the pairing of Lola and Callon,” Bane asked.

It was a fair question considering her two best friends were possibly certifiably insane.

“There’s more,” Roan continued.

“Naturally,” Lola mumbled. “Does he have to bite me in order to complete some ritual?”

“Oh good question. That brings us to Supernatural Book Class, 104.” Katy snapped her fingers. “I should have totally asked that one.”

“What you and Callon do in the privacy of your own room is between you. Biting or otherwise,” Roan said, completely straight-faced.

“I’m going to slap you,” Lola said, her face heating with the blush she knew was running down her skin to her neck.

“For the last century, our mated pairs have only bore male children. An *Erossazzi* mating can bear males and females.” His words were nearly a whisper as he continued. “This is the mercy of our Creator. He heard the cries of our male’s souls and answered our need. In time, finding the *animi* will no longer be our struggle or a battleground for our Kingdom Shifters to wage war over.”

“Called it,” Katy whispered softly. “Savior to their kind.”

“There’s some flaws in your theory,” Lola said. “Callon has been separated from me all day and there’s been no reports of some huge, crazy, lion man killing people. In fact, it didn’t seem to bother him at all.”

“Considering he threatened to kill me if I came near you,” Roan’s brow lifted. “I’d have to beg to differ.”

“And since you didn’t listen to me, you, apparently, are ready to spend eternity with Visata.”

Lola’s head snapped up as she looked at the enraged beast standing on the fire escape, his hands braced on the window sill as he leaned inside. His face was barely human, if you could even call him human. He was shirtless, and his arms, chest, and stomach, were toned to perfection. His wild mane of hair billowed in the wind like a wildfire as he scanned the area. Those blazing-gold eyes she felt like she knew, didn’t miss a thing. He was looking for any potential threat. When his gaze landed on Bane, he glared at the panther and bared his razor-sharp teeth.

“I’m going to go out on a very obvious limb and guess that *this* is Callon,” Katy leaned towards Lola and Maddie.

CHAPTER 21

Why Are They Making Those Weird Noises?

"I've been in situations where I felt lost, but it was no big deal because I knew I could look up the answers or ask someone. But what do you do when it involves a person's feelings and all you have is their words? When confusion arises in matters of the heart, how can you ever be certain they're being honest?" ~

Lola

"You need to stop and think, Callon," Roan said, holding up his hands in a placating gesture.

"I have been thinking," he said, the words barely distinguishable because his face shifted more. His beast fighting to fully take over, though that wasn't possible yet. Not without being bonded to his mate. He switched to his own language, which the humans wouldn't understand, but Roan and Bane would hear loud and clear.

"I warned you," Callon told him. "Did you think I was bluffing?" Then his head snapped to Bane. "I told you to guard her, not make yourself at home in her bedroom."

“I have not touched her,” Bane said, his eyes glaring daggers at him.

“Then why do I smell you on her?” he asked, his voice burning with disgust.

“Why are they making those weird noises,” he heard one of the females ask. They annoyed him. He wanted Lola to himself. He wanted them all gone. Killing them would accomplish that.

“You aren’t killing anyone,” Roan snarled, speaking in English. “Do you think she would forgive you if you killed her best friends?”

“What?” Lola’s voice screeched, drawing his attention. She was beautiful. How he’d let her out of his sight, he would never understand. The only thing that would possibly explain it was temporary insanity.

“I won’t let him hurt your friends,” Bane said as he moved into a fighting stance. As if the fool could take him.

“Lola, I’m pretty sure even your music and your parents being on the other side of the apartment, isn’t going to cover the sound of your berserker boyfriend killing us,” the blonde female said.

“Don’t you dare look at her,” Lola said. She walked towards him until she stood between him and the people he wanted to kill.

“Lo,” one of the annoying female voices spoke again, “Probably not a good idea to get close to the crazy, lion man.”

“She’s the only one in this room, or the general vicinity, who is safe,” Roan told them.

“Callon,” Lola said his name and he wanted to bask in how it sounded on her lips. “Why are you here?”

He frowned. *How could she ask such a silly question?* “Because you’re my *Sazzi*. Where else would I be?”

Her brow dropped into a deep frown, her mouth drew tight across her face. “You told me you couldn’t let me distract you anymore from your duty. You basically told me goodbye with no intention of seeing me again.” Her voice wavered as her hands shook at her sides. He looked at her face and saw her lips trembling.

Callon closed his eyes and focused every ounce of himself on her. He nearly collapsed under the weight of her pain. Pain he had caused. What had he done to cause this? How could he ever bring himself to hurt his mate?

“He’s confused,” Lola said. “I can feel it. Why is he confused? It’s like he doesn’t remember what happened today.”

“Maybe when an *Erossiaszzi*-mate dude goes all berserker, they lose some of their sanity, which in turn could cause them to lose some of their memories,” the female, he was pretty sure was the one called Katy, said. “The extreme emotions that this state causes might cause a form of psychosis. It would explain their ability to hurt people they normally wouldn’t.”

“It’s an *Erossazzi*,” Roan said, “And that’s actually pretty brilliant.”

“Are we really going to discuss pronunciations while Lion King’s alter-ego is on the verge of clawing out our entrails?”

Their voices drew his attention away from Lola, and once again he noticed the two males in her room.

“Did you hear that, Callon?” Roan asked. “Lola is more than your *Sazzi*. She’s your *Erossazzi*.”

Callon used one arm to brace himself and leapt, bringing his legs through the window, his feet hitting the floor in complete silence.

“*Only Beloved*,” Roan said, his speech picking up pace. “Not just one you chose, not just the one who picked you.”

“I haven’t exac—,” Lola started, but Roan shot her a look and she clamped her lips closed.

“Do not look at her.” He snapped his teeth at the Shaman who had to jump back to keep from getting bitten.

Roan, obviously in a dying mood, just kept talking. “She is the *one* who will merge with you. Her essence will live inside of you and you inside of her.”

Callon used one hand to gently push Lola to the right of him, away from Bane, and out of danger from the claws he swiped out at Roan.

Roan’s silver eyes swirled dangerously. “Dammit, Callon Leo, think! She will heal you and you her. She will bear your young, male *and* female. She will give you a daughter. She will love you as *no* mate ever could. But if you kill anyone in this room, she will never forgive you.”

Red-hot anger that flooded Callon's mind, completely blocked out any and all sense of reason. A gentle touch on his arm, the maelstrom dissipated. He turned to behold the female who had held his gaze since the moment he laid eyes on her. He raised his hand and she flinched away. His heart stopped as he realized what he must have done— had his rage caused him to harm his female? As he sank to his knees, guilt overwhelmed him— he didn't even remember pushing her away. But it was obvious by the anguish rolling off of her that he'd done something to cause that. Had he really put a violent hand on her?

“No,” she said, her voice just a whisper. “You would never hit me. But you did hurt me.”

Callon heard movement around them, but he couldn't take his eyes off of his *Sazzi*.

“Lola, we're going to the kitchen, and I think Thing One and Thing Two are going to make their exit quickly,” one of the females said. “If your parents are awake we will let them know that a crazy, lion man is trying to make female babies with you.”

There was the sound of a door clicking closed, and movement behind him, but his eyes stayed locked on her pale-green eyes. Callon felt his beast calming, the shifting parts of him return to normal. The sharp teeth that pressed over his lips, the broadened nose, and fur that covered him, all disappeared until he was just a man. As the animal receded, the memories flooded him like a tsunami. “What have I

done?” he whispered as he felt his heart pound painfully in his chest. “Lola, what have I done?”



“Do you think we should stay next to her door, just in case?” Katy asked as she glanced back down the hall where they’d just come from.

“Just in case, what?” Maddie frowned. “Do you seriously think he would hurt her? And even if he got all crazy, what the heck could we do? That lamp would probably feel like a fly bouncing off of him.” She shook her head.

“No,” Katy shook her head. “I don’t think he’d hurt her.”

Maddie flopped down onto the couch and looked around as if Andi and Rick would jump out and say, ‘Boo!’ “Looks like her parents didn’t wake up.”

“They must sleep like the dead,” Katy pointed out.

Maddie sighed as she recounted in her mind everything Lola had told them, and the proof of her words came out only moments later.

Katy rubbed her forehead and groaned. “Can you believe tonight? I mean, she’s been holding onto the fact that Callon stalked her, and then he dropped the supernatural bomb on her.”

“Not to mention she went off by herself with said lion-shifter-stalker,” Maddie pointed out. “I mean, didn’t we teach her better than that?”

“We must have failed somewhere along the way,” Katy said as she leaned forward and pulled off her work shirt. “I wonder if the smell of pizza is overwhelming to them.” She folded the shirt, tossed it on the coffee table, and then straightened the red tank top she wore underneath. “You know, like super senses since they’re part animal?”

Maddie took her shirt off as well, wearing a grey tank. They usually changed out of their shirts at NNP after their shift. But tonight they’d practically pulled Lola out the door, too eager to find out what was up to worry about their shirts and smelling like pizza. After tossing hers next to Katy’s, Maddie leaned back and turned facing her friend, her leg up resting on the couch. “Your tattoo looks kick ass,” she grinned as she looked at the black wolf on Katy’s shoulder.

Katy glanced down at it. She reached up and ran fingers across it. “It does look good.”

Maddie tilted her head as she watched her friend. “Why do you sound sad about it?”

Katy looked up, her face suddenly clear of the melancholy that had been there. “I’m not sad. Why would I be sad about a beautiful tattoo?”

“Maybe you regret getting it?” Maddie offered.

“No,” Katy denied. “I just,” she struggled with what she wanted to say.

“Katy,” Maddie nudged her leg. “Come on, it’s me. Not to mention nothing could surprise me at this point.” She motioned to the hall that led to Lola’s bedroom.

“True,” Katy said as she blew out a breath, puffing out her cheeks. “Okay, here goes. I think I’ve seen it—”

She was cut off by a knock at the door. A loud knock.

“Dammit,” Katy jumped up and made a dash for the door. Maddie was right behind her.

“Who the hell is knocking on Lola’s door this freaking late?” Maddie asked.

“I don’t know,” Katy said as she turned the deadbolt, “but it was so dang loud. We’d be lucky if they didn’t wake up Rick and Andi.” She jerked the door open to find three frowning males.

“Seriously?” Katy and Maddie said at the same time.

“Since when do thugs show up at Lola’s house in the middle of the night, Katy?” Antonio asked. He stood on the far right side with Roan in the middle and Bane on the left. The two supernatural guys looked huge compared to Antonio. But Sal’s son didn’t seem intimidated in the least.

“What the hell are *you* doing knocking on her door in the middle of the night?” Maddie asked.

“She hasn’t returned my calls or texts. I wanted to make sure she was okay,” he answered as he glanced at Bane and Roan, then shifted his eyes back to her, his brow raising.

Maddie shrugged. She didn't owe him any sort of explanation. Lola was not anything more than a friend, and not even close enough for him to show up at her apartment this late.

"Who is this male?" Bane asked, his voice sounding even deeper than it had in Lola's room. Probably because Antonio's wasn't nearly that low.

"An acquaintance," Katy answered as she cocked her hip to the side and rested her hands on her waist.

"I'm more than a damn acquaintance, Kate," Antonio bit out. "I've known you three for over three years."

The three guys just stood there staring at them as if waiting to choose who they'd let in. Finally, Maddie huffed and threw a hand in the air. "Roan is my boyfriend and Bane is my cousin," she said trying to figure out what kind of excuse would get Antonio to leave without the Shaman and panther dudes attempting to kill the little human dude. Maddie reached out causing Katy to have to step to the side. She grabbed Roan and Bane's wrists and pulled. They lurched forward, no doubt because they let her. There was no way she could have ever made them so much as sway in the wind. "They needed a place to stay and Lola's parents offered their couch and floor."

Both guys followed her inside and she pointed to the couch. "Sit." She glared at them.

Roan started to walk past her, then paused right in front of her. He reached up and ran a finger across her bottom lip. "Whatever you say, Baby." Winked at her and kept going. Maddie couldn't move, she couldn't breathe. She knew Roan

was just playing along, but *damn*. He didn't have to be so damn convincing, or sexy.

As Bane passed her, he leaned down. "I'm a cat, not a dog. For future reference, we don't take orders well."

His words broke through the haze of whatever it was that Roan had caused. "Then don't show up at my BFF's door after we told you to freaking leave. Or did you forget there's a pissed off lion down the hall who would love to tie your intestines around your neck and hang you from the fire escape?"

Roan let out a low whistle. "Dang, my girl's got a mean streak. I like it."

"Shut up," she bit out and refused to look at him. She was not going to take the fake, little relationship any further than was needed. Antonio was about to leave, then it was pretty much unnecessary at this point.

She looked over at Katy. She'd moved to the edge of the doorway and was talking quietly with Antonio. She looked over her shoulder at Maddie. "I'm going to step out in the hall and have a little chat with our friend."

Maddie frowned. She tried to convey by her look that she wasn't sure that was a good idea considering how they'd seen him act at NNP. Katy subtly shook her head as if to say, 'Not to worry.'

"Maybe I should," Roan started, but Maddie snapped her head around and interrupted him.

“You should sit and let me get you some blankets so you can go to sleep.” The last word snapped out of her mouth as her eyes no doubt conveyed very clearly she wanted him to keep his ass on that couch. The last thing they needed was a testosterone cock fight.

Bane’s eyes jumped past her and widened briefly before he looked over at Roan. But Roan was looking at her. Bane nudged the Shaman.

“What?” he asked, still staring at her.

“There’s a wolf,” Bane growled.

“That male wasn’t a wolf,” Roan said flippantly. “I would have known and you would have smelled him.”

She heard the door close and walked over to one of the chairs that faced the apartment door. Choosing the furthest chair from Roan, she stared at the door. She ignored the feeling of his eyes.

“I wasn’t talking about the male,” Bane said. “On the fierce female’s arm.”

His description of Katy made Maddie smirk. He wasn’t wrong. She was one of the fiercest people Maddie knew.

“On her shoulder,” Bane continued. “A black tattoo of a wolf.”

Something in the air shifted, and Maddie looked back at Roan. All flirty-ness was gone and in its place, a deep frown. “I would have been able to tell if she was an *animus*,” he said, but he didn’t sound as sure.

“Would you?” Bane asked. “Seems like the rules are changing. If Visata changed how mates are bonded, then who’s to say how an *animus* can be distinguished?”

Roan thought about it as his eyes bounced from Bane to her, and then over to the door. She watched as his body started to go rigid. The obvious muscles in his arms and chest tensed up as he pushed to the edge of the couch. He clearly wasn’t sure if he should risk making a commotion by going out in the hall, and disrupting the conversation between Katy and Antonio, or waiting for Katy to come back inside.

“You seriously think she’s like Lola?” Maddie asked.

“Did she get that tattoo at Wild Ink, when Lola went?” Roan asked.

Maddie nodded.

Roan’s eyes roamed over her. “Did you get one?”

She shivered under his gaze and shook her head. She looked away from him. “Antonio doesn’t have anything to do with your world,” she pointed out. “We’ve known him for a while, as he pointed out. Lola has never said anything weird about him. Well, except his obsession with her.”

Bane looked as ready to jump up as Roan did.

“Do you think she’s in danger right outside the door?” Maddie asked. “Can’t you tell if another one of you is around?” She pointed to her nose. “Or is that a canine thing?”

Bane’s head snapped back as he bared his sharp teeth at her. “You think only dogs have a superior sense of smell?”

“Well, in my last supernatural class, we didn’t make it to the part in the book on panther senses,” she snapped. “We’re still on ‘What The Hell Do You Mean Shifters Exist’. It’s a long chapter.”

Roan chuckled, but tried to cover it with a cough. Then cleared his throat. “Yes, we would know if there were beastwalkers in the halls. That’s close enough for Bane’s senses and my own.”

“You have animal senses?”

Roan frowned. “No. Shaman have their own abilities.”

Maddie nodded and waited for him to elaborate. When he didn’t say anything, she narrowed her eyes on him. “Are they super secret?”

Roan seemed confused. “No. It’s,” he paused and shrugged. “It’s just not something I’ve ever talked about. Our kind don’t need me to explain it, and I don’t associate with humans.”

After about fifteen minutes of awkward silence Maddie stood up. “I’m going to check on Katy. Antonio can be quite persistent when he wants to.”

Roan stood and grabbed her arm, though it was gentle. “Let me, or Bane do it.”

She pursed her lips. “That’s a bad idea. You’ll just snap at him and tell him to leave. Then he’ll get all puffed up like a rooster, and there will be a cock fight.”

“A cock fight requires two roosters,” Roan pointed out, and he seemed to be fighting a smile. Apparently, she amused

him. “I am *not* a rooster.”

She blew out a breath causing her lips to ripple. “Right. You’re a wizard with secret magic powers that you don’t discuss with us lowly humans.”

“I’m not a ridiculous wizard,” he muttered.

“Whatever you need to tell yourself, Harry.” She twisted her wrist and managed to get out from his hold. She hurried for the door and grabbed the knob, but an arm came around her waist, while a hand reached over her and pushed against the door, making it impossible for her to pull open.

“Roan, let me deal with this,” Maddie growled, and made herself ignore the way his body pressed against hers felt. *Good. It felt Good.* But she was *not* thinking about that. “You’ll just escalate things.”

“I’ll let you open it,” he said softly, his mouth next to her ear. *Well, that was just unnecessary.* “And I’ll let you do the talking.”

“*And* you’ll get your wizard mouth away from my ear.” She hoped she didn’t sound as shaken as she felt.

He chuckled, dropped his hand from the door, but kept his arm around her waist. Maddie blew out a breath and shook her head. As if that would help clear the effect he had on her. Then she turned the knob and pulled the door open. “I just wanted to —,” she started, but her words faded off when she saw that there was no Katy or Antonio standing there. Maddie pushed at Roan’s arm as she lunged forward to look out into the hall.

He moved with her instead of releasing her. The hall was empty.

“Dammit, let go,” she dug her nails into the flesh of his hand.

“Bane,” Roan snapped. “Take the stairs, follow their scent.”

Bane moved past them so quietly and fast, Maddie nearly thought she imagined it. The door to the stairwell slammed shut behind his blurred form letting her know she hadn’t. He really had moved that fast.

“What are you waiting for?” she asked. “Go tell Callon. Two noses are better than one.”

“We need to know what it is we’re hunting first,” Roan said. He sounded way too damn calm.

“My best friend has been abducted by an Italian gigolo.”

Roan held her tighter, restricting all her movement. “He sells women for sex?”

“Ugh, no,” she snapped. “A gigolo sells himself for sex. Antonio’s just a womanizer. He tries to get in their pants.”

“Whose?”

“All of them,” She clawed his hand again. “If she’s female, he’s chasing her.”

“I thought he wanted Lola.”

“He wants to *marry* Lola,” she corrected. “Everyone else he wants to bang like a gong.”

Roan turned her in his arms and pressed her to the wall. She might as well have been a sack of potatoes that weighed nothing with the ease he moved her. “Like a gong?” He looked completely confused. “I’ve heard a lot of sexual references in all my time, which is a long time. But never one with a gong.”

“Blame Katy and Jaxine,” she huffed. “They’re the ones who put gongs on the mind.”

“What?”

Bane was back in the door. Just one second not there, and then boom, there. He wasn’t even winded.

“He was with KOV. He’s human, I thought,” Bane said, his voice a deep growl.

“What’s KOV, and why would Antonio be working with what sounds like a crime organization? Why would they want Katy?” The words flew from her mouth as her heart decided it was time to take a sprint in her chest.

Roan’s shock loosened his hold on her. She managed to shift and duck under the arm that had been over her head, resting on the wall. She made a dash for Lola’s room and really hoped Callon hadn’t managed to seduce her paranormal-romance-loving friend. *Idiot, she mentally chastised. Of course, he’d managed to. Who would he not be able to seduce? Roan. Okay, yeah, he wouldn’t be able to seduce Roan. When did this hall get so damn long?*

She felt a tug on her jeans and realized her body wasn’t moving forward even though her legs were moving. “Suck a mother of ducks,” she hissed and looked over her shoulder.

“You can’t just barge in there,” Roan warned, his voice way too calm for the situation. “With the mood Callon had been in when we left, he might attack you without even realizing who you were.”

Maddie’s mind worked in overdrive as she tried to get him to let her go. “I’ll throw the door open and then duck, and you can be standing right behind me and take the attack, while I crawl to Lola.”

Bane moved past them. *How in the world did he move so quietly?* “How about *I* deal with the possible attack and while he’s distracted, you and Roan get to Lola and explain what’s happened.”

Again, like Roan, he sounded so calm and reasonable. *What the hell?* “Why are you guys so calm? Do girls get kidnapped all the time around you two? Was this just part of your day, like getting stuck in traffic, or waiting for the bathroom to open up at the coffee shop?”

“We’ve dealt with similar things,” Bane said. “We do work for a security firm after all.”

Roan pulled her back, his arm a vice around her waist and clamped her to his side. He stepped forward until he stood beside Bane, leaving Maddie beyond the door, safe from whatever might happen. She tried not to think of Katy getting further away with every second they wasted here.

“Is this going to wake up Lola’s parents?” she asked, desperation creeping into her voice.

“He will probably roar,” Roan answered in a steady voice, “but I can use glamor to disguise it as something more mundane –like a car back firing or an ambulance driving by.”

Maddie rolled her eyes at Bane, and whispered harshly, “Not a wizard, my ass.”

Bane clenched his hand around the doorknob, and braced himself for what was coming.

Maddie’s body shivered. “Why do I feel like we’re about to face a firing squad?”

“Not a firing squad,” Roan whispered back. “We’re going to face a pissed-off, possessive, protective, lion beastwalker trying to repair the severe emotional damage he’s done to the one woman who can complete him.”

“Oh,” she shrugged one shoulder. “Is that all?”

CHAPTER 22

Utterly Insane.

“Can a person die from desire? Is it physically possible for a heart to burst, lungs to cease working, and complete organ failure to happen, because of hunger- not for food- but for another person? ~ Lola

“Lola, what have I done?” Callon said again because he just couldn’t grasp how he’d let himself ruin the best thing that ever happened to him.

A single tear streamed down her beautiful face, painting the mapped colors of her exquisite skin. Skin he needed to touch. It was a physical ache that was on the verge of driving him mad. He lifted his hand slowly. Callon tried to make every emotion he felt calm and sincere, because he knew Lola could feel them. The thought of her fearing him was sickening. Knowing he’d pushed her away, as if she meant nothing to him, shredded his soul. When his hand was a hair’s breadth away from her face, he paused. “Can I touch you? I don’t deserve to. I should never be allowed near you after how I treated you. I should let you go,” he forced back the beast

inside of him who violently rejected the idea, “but I don’t think I can.”

“That’s not your decision to make,” she said softly.

“I’ve missed the sound of your voice.” He closed his eyes. “Say something else.”

“It’s only been hours since we saw each other, Callon.” She sounded confused. “Not years, months, or even days.”

“And in those hours, did you miss me?” His hand still hovered by her face. He had no plans to move it unless she slapped it away. “Did you ache to see me, even though I had been a complete, self-centered ass? Did something inside of you long to call out to me?”

She didn’t answer. Callon realized he might have actually lost her. Roan had been right. She would never forgive him. He’d have to follow her around like the stalker he’d been, because there was no way he could live knowing she was in the world, and not be near her. He’d sleep on her fire escape, bring her food so he could provide for her in some way, and most likely, be put in a human prison when he wound up killing any male that got near her. For a brief moment in time, his future looked like it just serving his kingdom. Not that there was anything wrong with that, but after meeting Lola, he realized there was *more. So much more.* He wanted it, but he wanted it with *her.*

He felt warmth against his hand and his eyes snapped open. Her green eyes were closed, and tears streamed down her face as she pressed it into his palm. Her pink lips were slightly parted, and trembled, as she nuzzled closer.

“Why does it feel like this?” she whispered.

Callon felt his heart splitting in two as he heard the pain in her voice. He yearned to take away her hurt. Regret knotted in his gut. Taking her face in both of his hands, he bent forward and touched his forehead to hers. He needed her to feel exactly how desperately he wanted things to be different. In his mind’s eye, he pictured a dam bursting open, gushing forth an unstoppable torrent of water. It cascaded over her strawberry-blonde, streaked hair until it caressed every inch of her pale, dual-tone skin, and then rushed on until it hit the tattooed lion over her heart. A heart he should have protected.

Lola sucked in a breath and he heard her heartbeat speed up. Her own hands covered his, and her warmth chased away the cold that had filled his veins the moment he’d allowed his beast to take over. The dark hole that had formed inside him filled with her light as he felt her *allow him* to experience what she was experiencing.

Her body trembled as if the dam she’d been holding back broke. She was overcome with feeling and sensation. The moment she met him, her fear, excitement, and attraction, consumed her blood. The questions bubbled up like a fountain inside of her mind as her body recognized his on a soul level. She wanted him more than anything. *He* was the knowledge she craved. It made it all so much worse when he shut her down in the most brutal fashion possible taking away everything from her with no warning and no mercy. *This* is what she’d felt when he’d locked away every bit of himself from one breath to the next. His heart beat inside of his chest, but it was bruised and battered, just like hers because they

were bound together. They were *Erossazzi* mates. Brought together by Visata. The love, desire, and need, they felt for each other, would be things that neither one of them could bear losing. Not now that they finally understood. There wasn't anything he wouldn't do for her. "*Sazzi*," he whispered out loud as his fingers threaded through her silky hair. Then he repeated it, because he needed to hear those words in her language on his lips for the first time. "My beloved."

Lola's face burned with the heat of embarrassment as she bared her soul to a man she'd known not even two full days. But it didn't matter. He'd just metaphorically stripped himself naked letting her feel his shame, anger, confusion and realization, that he couldn't live without her. That he *wouldn't* live without her. Callon was prepared to do whatever it took to show her he'd made a mistake, and he was as devastated by it as she was.

Lola had thought she could share only the pain she'd felt when he'd dismissed her, but as soon as she'd cracked the box open, everything came barreling out. Now he felt exactly what she felt for him. She didn't understand it and couldn't explain it, at least, not in human terms. Perhaps, she could just read a section out of one of her paranormal-romance novels, which would no doubt sound just as crazy as Roan's words had. Regardless of how utterly insane it was to feel so strongly for Callon, it was there, and it wasn't going away. The longer he held her, his warm breath blowing over her face, his lips centimeters from hers, the more convinced she was that this was right. She *was* for him just as much as he was for her.

The desire ignited inside of her, and she knew as soon as he felt it. The heat of his hands burned through her skin. Her heart raced as they left her face, and found her waist, pulling her towards him. The pounding of his own heart echoed in her chest until they beat synchronized in perfect harmony. Callon managed to wrap her legs around him before he lifted them both from the floor where he had been kneeling. His gaze was fixed on her. She couldn't take her eyes away from his. His hand moved towards the back of her head right before she crashed against the wall, losing all the air in her lungs with a gasp. His fingers caressed through her hair until he reached her marble-like skin, lightly tracing over every detail. He looked at her as if she was a precious work of art. His golden eyes filled with undeniable passion igniting into something hot and consuming, that sent fire coursing through every inch of her body. It was a desire she'd only ever read about but never experienced.

“I know I have no right to ask for your trust,” he told her as his hand moved down until he reached her throat, and began to travel over her collar bone. “I swear on the kingdom, and on my life, I will never hurt you like that again.” His eyes continued to look from her eyes to the skin he caressed. “I'm asking for a second chance, Lola. Let me show you what it means to be my *Sazzi*.”

Her stomach tightened as doubt crept in. “And what happens when some sort of emergency happens with those you lead, or with whatever is happening with the kingdoms right now, and you feel like you're not giving your full attention to those things because of me?”

“You’re my non-negotiable,” he told her. “You’re the one thing, the *only* thing in this world, that I will never choose second.” The words were a promise, a seal wrapped around her heart and burned into it. He continued speaking but the language was not one she understood. It was his, and the intensity of his gaze, emotion flooding around her, told her whatever he was saying was fervent. His voice was a fierce growl that rumbled and filled the quiet room.

Lola felt a burning in her chest, over her heart. She gasped as he continued to speak and the burning intensified. The area around them began to shimmer and gleam as the space between them lit up. She looked down and saw the lion inked on his chest glow. The light was radiant and pure like the first glimmer of the morning dawn. The beams stretched across to her like the rays of the sun across the city. His hand moved and the burning changed to caressing warmth. Lola looked at her own chest. Callon had pulled the neck of her shirt down enough her own lion tattoo showed.

Her eyes widened as his finger traced the lines of the lion, and everywhere he touched, the ink lit up into a bright gold until it was as bright as his own. As he moved his hand to the side, she saw on the chest of the lion was a *C*. Her gaze jumped to his.

He was still speaking, the words almost lyrical in their sound, as he picked up her hand and brought it to his chest. His eyes implored her and his emotions urged her. She began to trace the lines of the lion, and couldn’t believe how it glowed even brighter. As she finished the last line, she watched an *L* form on the center of the chest of his lion. As if

it had been tattooed in gold, glowing ink. The beast somehow looked even prouder than it had. Lola felt a rush of peace overwhelm her as Callon's words faded. He stared at her in nothing that could be described as less than adoration.

“What did you say?” she asked so softly she'd barely heard her voice. It seemed wrong to disturb the moment, but she had to know. “What did you do?”

“Every cell in my body, my muscles, tendons, ligaments and bones, belong to you. My heart beats for you. Each breath I take is yours, until they are no more.” His voice was smooth and deep, yet trembled with intensity. “I will live and die for you. I shall bring down your enemies, and elevate those who matter most to you, if that is your wish. These things I promise to you. Should I ever break a single one, I will spend eternity wandering, a lost soul with no relief of eternal glory with my Creator.” He looked up into her eyes, determined, unwavering in his commitment.

Lola's heart pounded so hard in her chest she worried it would burst right out through the beast inked there. She'd never felt something so sure –so true and real– as what he'd just promised. How could she respond to it? Some of it, like laying his enemies at his feet, wasn't something she was even capable of doing. So, she did what she always did when she was unsure. “That's what you said. What did you *do*?”

“I opened the soul bond given by Visata.” The words were simple, but she could feel the weight that they held. “Nothing stands in our way of joining save your denial. My soul and

yours, are the light that burns between us. They wait for your decision.”

“And if I say no?” Everything inside her, the very cells he spoke of, rebelled against her words. Her lungs felt like they just might shut down. Her muscles started to cramp as if starved of the oxygen they so badly needed. *Guess that answers that.* “And if I say yes?” she asked, her throat loosening.

Callon’s full lips tilted up slightly. Some wouldn’t call it a smile, but for him, it was. “You sort of already did.”

“I said yes?”

His face moved closer to hers, his hand running up from her chest, over her collar bone and around her neck. “I wouldn’t have been able to open the bond if you didn’t want it—if you didn’t want me.”

Lola inhaled deeply just as Callon’s lips grazed hers. She felt him lean in, and the next thing she knew, her back was no longer against the wall, but rather pinned against the soft bed. Callon’s body was above hers, she could feel the heat, but barely any pressure, as if he was purposely keeping his weight off of her. She arched her back in invitation, and he lowered himself down until she felt blanketed by him.

She couldn’t help but notice the warmth emanating off his arms as her fingertips glided up them. Her memories of feeling it on her own skin when she touched his face back at the estate came flooding back, this time multiplied tenfold. Just then she forgot all about how her own body was faring. She focused on how Callon’s hand snaked its way beneath her shirt and spread

out across her back. The heat flowed directly into the veins that ran down her limbs, leaving her breathless and wanting more. She gasped against his lips as his mouth brushed hers in an intoxicatingly, tender movement before his tongue carefully explored hers.

The taste of him was overwhelming, and the noises she made would have been embarrassing, if an intense light hadn't pierced her closed eyelids. When his lips left hers, Lola opened her eyes to be met with Callon's golden gaze. The beams of light around them were blinding, but it was the lightning in her chest that had her squeezing her eyes shut again. She felt a tug from deep within, like a seam being sewn together with invisible thread until it was sealed tight. As soon as the connection was finished, the pulling stopped, but the feeling of completeness lingered. Whatever had been joined would never be separated.

Callon's forehead pressed against hers, and his lips tenderly kissed her eyelids, then the bridge of her nose, her cheeks, then down her neck to her collar bone. He paused above her heart. His warm breath tickling her skin made her yearn for him to finish what he had begun. Then she felt his mouth touch the spot on her chest where the lion tattoo proudly graced her skin.

When she felt his weight shift off of her, she opened her eyes. His body was pressed against the side of hers, his head propped up by his elbow and hand. The fingers of his other hand ran through the strands of her hair, sending a shiver through, as even her scalp was sensitive. Her chest rose and fell briskly as she stared up at him. His lips were swollen from

kissing her and his face seemed flushed. She felt lust, love, yearning and contentment, course through her. *She* made him feel that way.

“Now you’re stuck with me,” he told her, his tone deep and possessive. “I’ll never let you go. Not even if you begged me to.”

“What if I need to use the restroom? Or the shower? Or what if I have to see the female doctor for my yearly check-up?” She couldn’t help but grin up at him, most likely looking like a love-sick fool.

His lips lifted into a crooked smile. “Always with the questions.”

Her smile dropped away as she reached up and touched his cheek. Her finger ran down his chorded neck to his very naked chest and she stared at the lion that was no longer black ink, but a gold that shimmered. She pressed her hand to it and felt it heat against her palm. “Does this mean you can shift?”

“I—” he started, but in a blur of movement he moved up and off of her as she heard her bedroom door hit the wall. She quickly jumped to her feet when she saw a massive lion standing in front of her.

“Callon,” she breathed out. *Guess that answers that.*

A roar burst from him so loud and ferocious, she was sure the walls shook. Lola slammed her hands over her ears in an attempt to keep her eardrums from bursting. When the sound finally died down, Lola heard a voice she recognized.

“Lola?”

“Maddie,” Lola tried to move around Callon’s huge form, but he shifted, and kept her blocked from her friend.

“Callon, move,” she said, not even thinking about how she was talking to a lion that could kill her with one swipe of his huge paw. She knew he’d never hurt her. He’d sooner kill himself.

“He’s not going to move until we leave,” Roan’s voice came next.

“Okay, who all is ‘we’?” Lola asked.

“Roan, Bane and Me,” Maddie answered.

Lola’s stomach twisted as she heard her friend’s voice shake. But it wasn’t in fear. That was the sound of Maddie’s voice when she was pissed. “Where’s Katy, Mads?”

“Callon,” Roan said, his voice calm and even. “You need to shift back.”

Callon snarled and she saw one of his paws swipe out.

“Son of a—” Roan snarled. “I like this shirt!”

“God save me from stupid men,” Maddie said and then yelled, “Katy was abducted by Antonio. At first Roan thought he was going to sell her for sex, because I called Antonio a gigolo, but then I straightened out that mess, and Bane went after them, obviously, didn’t find them because his cat nose isn’t as superior as a canine nose, though he did say that she was in the possession of the KOV, whoever the hell that is. Now, can you please tell your man to turn his ass back into a human, and help us get our best friend back.”

Lola was breathing hard and knew she was on the verge of tears. She pressed her hand to Callon's side. "Please," she said softly. She saw one of his ears twitch back. "Callon?" She felt confusion coming from him, and rage.

"Why isn't he turning back?" Lola asked as she ran her hand along his side moving towards his head. He felt safe enough that he didn't have to stand directly in front of her anymore, though once she reached his front, he ducked his head and gently nudged as if to say, 'No further.'

Roan's gaze bore into Callon, his hands on his hips and his jaw clenched tight. "You bonded."

Why was he stating the obvious? Was he in shock?

"Lola," Andi's voice came from down the hall.

Lola's eyes got huge as she looked at Callon and then Maddie. Maddie wiped her eyes. "I got it," she shoved Bane and Roan inside, and pulled the door closed behind her.

"How is she going to explain a freaking lion roar to my mom?" she asked the perplexed, and frustrated-looking Roan.

"I made it sound like emergency vehicles."

She jerked back. "You can do that?"

"I can do a lot of things." Roan shrugged.

Lola pointed at the lion in the room. "Can you turn him back into a man?"

Callon growled. Apparently, that question offended him.

Roan gave her a dry look. "No. *That* I cannot do." He pulled his phone from his pocket and swiped the screen before

putting it to his ear.

“We have a problem,” he said.

“Actually, we have several problems,” Lola corrected.

Callon sat down beside her, his head so much higher than hers that she had to look up at him. His eyes were narrowed on Roan and Bane.

“They’ve bonded,” Roan paused and pinched the bridge of his nose. “Yes, it is good news. Except for the fact that he can’t seem to shift back, Katy, a human friend of Lola’s, has been taken by the KOV, and we have a big-ass lion stuck in a small New York apartment with two humans that do not know he is here. Or that we’re here for that matter.” He paused again. “Yes, Bane is still here. No, he didn’t kill him.”

Callon bared his teeth at Bane.

Lola nudged him. “Less snarling, please. You’re not as quiet as you think you are.”

“We think they took her because she’s an *animus*,” Roan continued. “She had a wolf tattoo on her shoulder she got at Wild Ink,” his eyes rose to hers. “When Lola got hers.”

Lola frowned. “Like it’s *my* fault she got a freaking tattoo and might be an *animus*? I mean, she always said she couldn’t see the things I saw. And *you* were around her. I thought you said you could tell when a female was an *animus*.”

“No,” Roan sighed. “I don’t think she, or the other friend, are going to let us go after her without coming.”

“Damn straight,” Lola snapped at the same time Callon let out *another* rumble.

The door to her room pushed open and Maddie squeezed through it. “Your parents think there’s some sort of bad wreck,” she said glancing at Roan. “They claim to *still* be able to hear the sound of an ambulance and fire truck. Thankfully, she said she’d just turn on their second box fan to drown out the noise.”

Lola let out a sigh, relief hitting her. There was no way she’d be able to explain Callon to her parents.

“Umm,” Roan said as he looked at Lola. “Okay,” he drew the word out. Stepping towards her, he stopped quickly when Callon swiped out a paw. This time with no sound and it was almost lazy. As if he knew no one was even a tiny threat to him.

“Your Prime wants to talk to her.”

“Slide it,” Lola said, motioning to the floor.

Roan did as she asked. She picked up the phone and put it to her ear. “Uh, hello?”

“Congratulations are in order,” Taras said, “but finding your friend obviously takes precedence.”

Lola appreciated his brisk manner. “Yes.”

“Lola, you’re the only one who can get him to shift back. He must have had some intense emotions going on when he felt you were so threatened that he shifted.”

Her face flamed as she thought about what had been happening just before the door had opened. “You could say that.”

“How long had the bond been complete when he shifted?”

Callon made some weird noises in his throat.

“I understand it’s personal, Son,” Taras said, obviously able to hear and understand his son. “Lola, how long?”

“A couple minutes, maybe,” she said slowly, and refused to look up at the people in her room. “But we weren’t, I mean, we didn’t– shit,” she breathed out and then squeezed her eyes closed. “Sorry, didn’t mean to say that.”

“Normally,” Taras continued, not phased by her word vomit or cursing, “shifting back wouldn’t be an issue. It’s second nature. But so is protecting you. Since you just bonded, and his animal soul just merged with him *and* you, his emotions are heightened. The need to protect you is overriding his logical thinking.”

“Okay, so what do I need to do?”

“Tell Roan to do what he knows they need to, he won’t like it, but desperate times,” Taras’ voice deepened, “and then you get Callon’s attention solely on you. Your souls are sealed to one another. Convince his soul that right now you are safer with him in his human form. Then all of you get your butts to my office. We have a rescue mission to plan.” He sounded angry, but there was something else in his voice. “I’ll see you soon.” He ended the call, and she stared at the phone a moment before looking at Roan.

“Taras said to do what you know you need to.”

Roan’s body turned to stone, and the indignation in his eyes could have killed someone.

“Do it,” Bane said as he dropped to the ground. He lowered himself until he rested on his bent knees, then leaned forward, his arms held out wide, palms up, and kept leaning until his forehead touched the floor. “Female, you, too,” Bane’s voice rumbled. “He has to see you’re not a threat.”

Roan let out a string of curses as he took Maddie’s hand and moved her so that she was behind him. Then he pointed to the ground.

Maddie glared at him. “I am not a dog, and I am *not* doing this because you told me to. This is for Lo.” Then she placed herself in the same position as Bane.

Lola looked at Roan and could tell he wrestled with something primal in him. A Shaman was not a part of the pride. She’d gathered that much. They were outside of the kingdom ranks. And what Taras was asking him to do was submit to Callon. *Ouch*, she thought as she watched Roan swallow down what had to be an incredible amount of pride. Almost a full minute later, he was on the ground as well. “Please hurry the hell up, Lola,” he muttered.

She moved around Callon, turning her back to the group. He let her, until she stood directly in front of him. Lola held up her hands and he lowered his head enough she could place a hand on either side of his huge face. She pressed her forehead to his muzzle and closed her eyes. “You made me a promise,” she said as quietly as she could. Lola tried to project as much

love as she could, and calm, so he would not feel any fear which would instigate his protectiveness. “I shall bring down your enemies and elevate those who matter most to you, if that is your wish,” she repeated his words. The tug from her chest, as if saying the promise he’d made, triggered a response from his soul to hers. “That is what I wish. But I need you to be a man to do that. Please.”

The entire room held its breath, as if not even a speck of dust shifted in the air, as they waited to see what would happen. He rumbled and then her hands were touching skin instead of fur. She opened her eyes staring into his fierce, gold gaze. “I will get her back,” he promised.

“I know,” she said and she meant it. Lola had no doubt Callon would move heaven and earth to get Katy back.

She turned when she heard movement and Roan, Maddie and Bane were back on their feet. Maddie pushed through the two guys, nearly knocking her over as she wrapped her arms around Lola. “I thought she’d be fine in the hall with Antonio,” she said. “He took her. Why the hell did he take her?”

“I don’t know, Mads,” Lola squeezed her back and then released her when Maddie started to wipe her eyes clean of the tears. “But we’ll find out, and we’ll get her back.”

Lola looked at Callon and saw he was staring straight at Roan. There was a silent conversation going on. She took his hand, and he pulled her against him. “What aren’t you saying out loud?” she asked him.

Callon's eyes scanned her face as he answered. "The wolf tattoo on Katy."

"Yeah," Lola nodded. "What about it? She's not an *animus*, Callon. Roan would have known." She looked at Roan, "Right?"

Roan sighed. "I told you things have changed in regards to matings."

Lola nodded. "Yes," she said, drawing the word out.

"So, that means that detecting a female as an *animus* might be different, too," Roan explained. "It might not be a Shaman that can tell. It might take one of the beastwalkers from the kingdom the *animus* will be a part of to know what she is."

"Okay," Lola huffed. "We're doing that whole thing where we have to drag everything out of you. Callon," she looked up at him. "What's the problem?"

"We're going to have to tell the Alpha of the Kingdom of Fangs that an unmated *animus* with a wolf tattoo has been taken by the Kingdom of Venom."

"Well, that means they'll help, right?" Maddie asked. "That's a good thing."

Callon shook his head. "No. It's not. Wolves hunt in packs."

"Again," Lola said. "We're not seeing the problem."

"The problem, *Sazzi*," he said as he tilted her chin up to look at him. "Is that the moment we tell the Alpha he has a potential female that could be a mate for someone in his pack,

and that said female has been taken– and might be sold by the Kingdom of Venom– the *entire* Kingdom of Fangs will descend upon New Orleans.”

“Oh,” Lola’s breath caught as she pictured dozens? Maybe hundreds of wolves running through the streets of New Orleans.

“Almost,” Roan said. “More like, ‘Oh, shit.’”

Thank you so much for reading Kingdom of Claws! I truly hope you enjoyed it. Please consider leaving a review where you purchased this ebook. They are greatly appreciated!

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

So much goes into writing a book and it's not just the author who should get the credit. Thank you to my amazing husband who continues to work with me despite the fact that I'm not always the easiest person to work with. He does it with grace, love, and patience. Thank you to my boys for understanding that sometimes I have to work a lot which means they see me less. Thank you to Jessica for being a sounding board, and for telling me to stop freaking out when I'm freaking out. Thank you to Lindsey for keeping my boys when I need a break and feeding me when I'm too lazy to feed myself. Thank you to Amy for all the research you do on this series and the hard work you put in. Thank you to my readers who have stuck with me for so long on the journey. I am so very honored and humbled. Thank you to Drina, Michelle, Bryanna, La-Verna, Joyce, Renee, and Evie, the "party planning committee," you gals are simply amazing. Most of all, thank you to my God and Savior whom without this wouldn't be possible.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Quinn Loftis is a multi-award-winning author of over Forty novels, including the USA Today Bestseller, Fate and Fury. When she isn't creating exciting worlds filled with romantic werewolves, she exercises, reads, and crafts like there's no tomorrow. She is blessed to be married to her best friend for over twenty years and they have three sons, a crazy French bulldog, and a cat that wants to take over the world.



Book 2, Kingdom Shifters Series Coming soon