

Christmas Heat

Lora Leigh

For my early readers, all of you.

For saying, Hey, this just doesn't work.

Or, OMG this is working so great.

For telling me when it's going wrong

and when it's going right.

Each book is a combined effort, a creation

of my imagination, my early readers' imaginations, and all the hard work my editors put into it.

You all make the difference.

And I couldn't do it without you.

Foreword

They were created, they weren't born. They were trained, they weren't raised. They were taught to kill, and now they'll use their training to ensure their freedom.

They are breeds. Genetically altered with the DNA of the predators of the earth. The wolf, the lion, the cougar, the Bengal tiger; the killers of the world. They were to be the weapons of a fanatical society intent on building its own personal army.

Until the world learned of their existence. Until the council lost control of their creations, and their creations began to change the world.

Now they're loose. Banding together, creating their own communities, their own society, and their own safety, and fighting to hide the one secret that could destroy them.

The secret of mating heat. The chemical, biological, emotional reaction of one breed to the man or woman meant to be his or hers forever. A reaction that binds physically. A reaction that alters more than just the physical responses or heightens the sensuality. Nature has turned mating heat into the breeds' Achilles' heel. It's their strength, and yet their weakness. And Mother Nature isn't finished playing yet.

Man had attempted to mess with her creations. Now, she's going to show man exactly how she can refine them.

Killers will become lovers, lawyers, statesmen, and heroes. And through it all they will each cleave to one mate, one heart, and create a dynasty.

Prologue

Haley McQuire was hiding in Sanctuary's extensive, beautiful library the night of the pre-Thanksgiving party. She didn't do parties well, and she didn't enjoy them. Jonas Wyatt, Director of Breed Affairs, had given her permission to peruse the extensive collection of first-edition classics, but he had warned her that if one of his enforcers caught her there, they would drag her back to the party.

If she was found, she hoped that it wasn't by Noble Chavin. She smiled a bit at that thought. Noble loved books too, though. He would understand.

He was always at the library, choosing books she would never have expected him to read. Carpentry books, books on world history. He devoured them, it sometimes seemed. And when he returned them, she could quiz him playfully, and he always had the answers.

And he talked to her about the books. She liked that. Perhaps too much. And though he would probably talk to her, she doubted he would let her stay.

So when the door opened, she hid quickly. She expected the breed entering the room to smell her instantly. She was a human, and fairly easy for a breed to detect. Haley didn't understand why she didn't.

Maydene Brock was a breed older, a nurse in the labs. With her graying brown hair and pinched expression, Haley had never really seen her as much of a caregiver.

And perhaps she might have sensed Haley if the men following her hadn't overpowered the room with the scent of cologne.

Haley wrinkled her nose at the smell. Even across the room, hidden behind a low shelf as she peeked between the books, she could smell the obnoxious scents.

"Do you have payment ready?" Maydene snapped.

"We need the code," Phillip Brackenmore, the head of Brackenmore Pharmaceutical Research, informed the nurse dangerously. "No code, no payment, breed."

Maydene sniffed. "We'll meet you at the hotel with the code. We'll slip it out when Dr. Morrey arrives at the party. Everyone will be busy with her," she told them smugly. "When you transfer payment, we'll hand you the code. I don't trust the two of you as much as you would like to think I should."

"As long as you're there," Horace Engalls, president and CEO of Engalls Pharmaceuticals, replied. "Don't bother trying to betray us. We have our own spies watching you, Maydene."

Maydene growled at that. "I know who your little bitch is. She can watch until hell freezes over. All we care about is the cash."

"And all we care about is the information to complete our own research. The live trials on the breeds you suggested aren't working out as well as we had hoped."

"I warned you." Maydene's voice was smug as Haley felt chills race up her spine. "Even Morrey isn't responding as well as you had hoped, is she? I told you, you need us."

"So we do," Brackenmore drawled. "We'll meet you at the hotel and transfer the money to your account, but we'll see what we're paying for first. Understood?"

"Quite well," Maydene sneered. "Return to the party now, before you're missed."

Haley peeked over the top of the books that lined the shelf she was hiding behind. She could barely see them, and as the door opened, she eased back down carefully, certain that if Maydene looked back, she would sense her.

She waited. She waited so long. She could feel her muscles cramping, feel the sweat that eased along her spine, but she could still feel the danger.

She looked up at the vent above her and inhaled slowly. Was that why Maydene hadn't smelled her? The vent pulled the air out of the library and circulated it, while another vent fed dry air into the library to protect the expensive books. That combined with the scent of men's cologne must have hidden Haley's scent.

But Maydene must have suspected that someone was in the room. As Haley began to consider the risk of peeking over the books again, she heard movement, a doorknob turning, a muttered curse.

She took a chance and watched as the breed made her way from the library.

Just a few more minutes, she told herself. If Maydene was suspicious, she might watch the door from outside. She might be waiting for whoever she had sensed.

My God, what were they talking about? Drugging breeds? Selling information? She had to find Noble. The breed enforcer would know what to do—he would know how to handle this. She had to find him before Maydene and whoever was helping her managed to slip from the estate.

Carefully, she moved from behind the shelf, thankful that someone had made the little hidden reading nook that Merinus had shown her a few weeks before. It had possibly saved her life.

Now, to sneak out of the library and get to Noble.

There was something about librarian Haley McQuire and her staid little outfits that just made Jaguar breed enforcer Noble Chavin insane.

He should be watching the ballroom, keeping his eyes trained on the two men they knew would make an attempt tonight to gain confidential breed information from a source within Sanctuary.

Breeds betraying breeds, for money. For greed. And the humans determined to destroy them. Several breeds had already been killed in the past day, and if they didn't stop that information from going out, then more would die.

It had to be insanity, he decided again, as Haley stepped into the ballroom from the direction of the ladies' room down the hall, because nothing else could describe his reaction to how completely luscious she looked in the simple black'long-sleeved ball gown. Or how she snagged his attention against all his best efforts.

The gown swept the floor, the hem floating around her like a dark, sexy dream as he tried to keep his eyes

off her. He was there to increase security, not to ogle the little librarian, who seemed to hug the wall more than she danced.

But his eyes had a will of their own. His gaze swept over the full skirt of the gown, lifted to her curved hips and trim waist, and he had to swallow as he came to where the material draped from her shoulders and barely hid the hint of curvy, sweet breasts beneath. She might have believed she had succeeded in hiding those curves with the folds of material that draped over them, but he could have assured her, nothing was further from the truth.

He should have stopped there. Dammit, he had no business looking further. But he did anyway. He let his eyes caress the smooth, creamy flesh above the material, the graceful arch of her throat.

A stubborn chin. There was fire in her. Soft rosebud lips, a pert nose, and eyes that mesmerized. Dammit to hell, he knew better, but there he was, staring into eyes that seemed to be looking right back at him. Dove gray and ringed with the merest hint of blue. Thick chestnut lashes surrounded them, and they stared back at him as though as helpless as he to break the connection.

Fiery red hair surrounding a gently sculpted face, added spark and fire to her eyes, and the look of her had his back teeth clenching as he fought unsuccessfully to drag his gaze away.

Back to her feet. Where the tip of one small black shoe peeked out beneath her dress. The dress flowed around her, drifted and moved like a whisper as though teasing him, tempting him to brush it from her legs to see all the pale, beautiful flesh he knew it hid.

Damn, if she didn't draw his gaze like a hidden flame, one he was certain would erupt into a conflagration.

He forced his gaze away then, far away, not even looking at her feet but at her slender, graceful fingers. She wore no rings. No adornments. As though proclaiming to the world no ties and no bonds. She was as free as the wind yet restrained by some force inside her.

And she was moving toward him.

Noble let his gaze move to her face once again, a frown edging at his brows, a sense of foreboding rasping at the back of his neck at the look on her face.

Perhaps he should have paid more attention to her face. Because there was an edge of fear in those odd, blue-ringed gray eyes and the pinched line of her lips. Her face was pale, but her chin was lifted in determination and purpose.

His gaze moved around the room then. She had come out of the hall and into the ballroom no more than minutes after Phillip Brackenmore and Horace Engalls had entered, the two pharmaceutical and drug-research magnates.

"Noble." She all but whispered his name, and he heard the sound, that soft hint of longing he wondered if she even knew was in her voice, at the same moment he glimpsed the entrance of the ballroom from his peripheral vision.

He gripped her arm and jerked her behind him, ignoring her soft little cry as orders began to snap into the communications link at his ear.

"You stay!" He jerked her to the corner and pushed her into the little alcove created by the fronds of several potted plants. He pushed her to the floor and pointed his finger to her pale face. "Stay till I come for you. Understand?"

She nodded quickly even as he turned away and began snapping orders to other guests, herding them quickly from the confrontation brewing at the ballroom's entrance and into the buffet room.

Why he hadn't pushed little Miss Haley McQuire into the more secure room, he couldn't explain. It was something about her eyes, that edge of fear, and the fact that she had entered after Brackenmore and Engalls more than anything else.

Or it could have been that niggling of insanity that he had been trying to ignore for months.

"Librarian Haley McQuire is secured in the far left corner of the ballroom, leave her in place," he spoke into the small mic that curved along his cheek as he helped secure the ballroom.

"She's a hazard in the ballroom," he was told, Rule's voice cold. "Get her with the others."

"Negative," he refused the order. "Something isn't right with that, Rule. I want her separated for her own safety."

He heard the tension in the line. "For now," Rule finally snapped.

Moments later, several things happened at once. A breed female enforcer distracted Dr. Ely Morrey, and Jonas jerked the gun from Ely.

"Move in on Brackenmore and Engalls," Rule ordered through the comm link. "Secure them and get ready to move them out."

Noble moved toward the two, staring back at them with cold, brutal determination. They were involved with whatever was going on. Involved in trying to control and kill breeds. The bastards needed to die now, not later.

"Please come with me, Mr. Brackenmore, Mr. Engalls," he requested, his voice carefully bland, unemotional. He wanted to kill rather than react politely.

Those damned animal genetics. He could feel the blood he needed to spill for the threat this man represented to the breeds.

"What the hell is going on here?" Brackenmore blustered, as Noble gripped his arm and began to move him, his wife, and Engalls to the entrance, waiting for the final go-ahead from Rule to escort them from the estate.

"Director Wyatt will discuss this with you soon I'm certain." Noble flashed his canines in a tight, hard smile as he watched the other breeds filling the room, keeping a careful barrier between the guests and the clean-up of the situation that had just arisen.

Felines weren't the only ones in attendance. Noble watched as Wolf Gunnar, pack leader of the wolves, conferred with Del-Rey, pack leader of the coyotes, to direct their own security forces in concert with the felines'.

The pre-Thanksgiving party Sanctuary hosted every year had never been so exciting. Now if they could just make certain they kept the damned journalists contained.

"Noble, give Brackenmore and the others to Mordecai. I want you to contain your librarian and get her sequestered," Jonas said into the link seconds later. "We have a security report from surveillance that she may have been close to a meeting between Brackenmore, Engalls, and one of the lab assistants earlier in the hallway."

Noble's head jerked in her direction. He could still see the very edge of her skirt peeking out from where he had pushed her.

The Coyote breed, Mordecai, his face scarred, his icy blue eyes filled with death, took Brackenmore and the others, and Noble strode across the ballroom quickly.

Haley was still huddled there and stared back at him, her eyes wide and touched with courage and trepidation. He held his hand out to her and watched as she lifted hers, her fingers trembling as he gripped them.

"They're monsters," she whispered, and though her eyes were dry, sorrow filled them. "Noble, they're monsters."

The fine hairs along his body lifted in warning, but even worse, the spots along his shoulders began to tingle in foreboding. She knew something. In that moment he knew, she had seen or heard something that could possibly get her killed.

Chapter 1

THREE WEEKS LATER
DECEMBER 7

The winter storm heading for the Virginia mountains is slated to pile on the snow. We're looking at up to ten inches possible before nightfall, with another ten to fifteen over the next two days. The moisture we're tracking . . ."

Haley turned off the television and stared at the black screen in satisfaction as she forced herself not to smile in glee at the thought of snow.

She tugged at the snug cuffs of her cheery red cotton blouse instead and turned to her assistant, Patricia.

Nearing fifty, but as spry as a woman fifteen years younger, Patricia looked displeased over the weather forecast. Dressed in dark brown tailored slacks and a matching sweater, Patricia had a smile that always brightened the darker hues of the clothing she wore.

"I'll never get out of that damned lane the county refuses to pave with that kind of accumulation," Patricia pouted, her brown eyes sorrowful. "I hate being stuck."

Haley frowned. Patricia's little sedan would never handle such a heavy snowfall, nor was it equipped with the same traction sensors and tires that Haley's four-wheel-drive truck had.

Living in town, Haley didn't worry as much about getting out as she did about the inconvenience of the snow itself. They hadn't had a storm like this move in for years, and the dump of fluffy white stuff almost had her rubbing her hands in glee.

But she knew Patricia, and her friend hated the snow, just as she hated the way it confined her in her little house outside of Buffalo Gap.

"Take my truck." Haley moved to the counter behind which she and Patricia worked and lifted her purse from the floor.

She pulled the car keys from the inside and tossed them to her friend.

"Are you serious?" Patricia stared back at her in surprise.

"They'll have the roads here in town clear before noon, and Sanctuary will make certain the main road is clear before then. All you'll have to worry about is getting out of that little hole you live in."

She almost shuddered. Patricia lived in one of the small hollows that dotted the mountain terrain. The mile-long track between her house and the main road was rough at all times. Filled with snow, it would be impossible for Patricia to navigate in her little car.

"You'll take my car then?" Patricia worried. "I'd hate to leave it just sitting in the parking lot." She gripped Haley's keys like a lifeline.

"The car will be fine for me until they get the snow cleared to your house." Haley shrugged, then stared back at Patricia worriedly. "But please be careful. I just bought her, and she's still un-scratched."

The pristine cherry red pickup had been her dream vehicle, with big tires, the standard shift—and the advanced electronics was her pride and joy.

"Don't worry, I'll take care of your baby." Patricia was almost as gleeful over driving the truck as Haley was over the coming snow.

Haley looked around the nearly deserted library. The two-story glass-and-metal building was incredibly beautiful. Donated by an effort between Sanctuary and several of its supporting companies, the building had the look and feel of beautiful wood, without the cost. Even the metal-and-steel shelves had that old-wood look, and housed the thousands of paperback and hardback books beautifully.

The electronic books were housed in the main data boards and e-readers were plentiful for those who needed to check them out if they didn't have their own. But it was the paper feel of the books that Haley cherished. The history and the bridge between the past and the present that always drew her.

The library was deserted this evening. The last college student had left more than an hour before, and no one else had come through the heavy glass doors.

"Why don't you go home, before the storm hits," Haley suggested. "It's only another hour before closing, and I can take care of that myself."

"Or that handsome Noble Chavin, should he arrive before closing," Patricia teased her. "When do you think he's going to get up the nerve actually to do more than follow you home every night?"

"With Noble, who knows." Haley turned away from her friend, tucked the keys to Patricia's car in her purse, and hid her expression.

Noble, unknown to the curious, wasn't courting her in any way, and she knew it. He was watching her, just as breeds from Sanctuary often watched her. Just to be on the safe side, she had been told after she had told Callan Lyons and Jonas Wyatt about the meeting that had taken place in the library room of Sanctuary the month before.

Jonas had promised her it was a precaution only, but that precaution still had the power to make her mouth dry with fear.

"I think I'll head home early then," Patricia decided, as she moved behind the counter and pulled her coat on. She flipped her shoulder-length gray-and-brown hair over the stiff black collar and stared back at Haley worriedly. "You're sure you don't mind about the truck?"

"As long as you don't scratch her," Haley reminded her, but her smile was quick. Patricia was excessively careful with everything, no matter to whom it belonged.

"Should I throw a quilt over her before I go to bed?" Patricia laughed.

"If you don't mind. And don't forget the pillows for her tires," she reminded her playfully.

Patricia rolled her eyes as she grabbed her purse and headed for the door. "I'll be sure to remember both," the assistant teased her. "Perhaps I should park her where she can watch television as well."

Haley laughed. Okay, so she loved her truck. Everyone teased her about it.

As Patricia left the library, Haley moved from behind the counter, picked up the remote, and flipped the news on again. There was all that fat fluffy stuff headed her way. Piles and piles of snow. A snowman in her yard, the Christmas lights around her house twinkling against it, it was going to be the best Christmas ever.

A smile was curving her lips when the world exploded around her. The blast filled the air, glass shattered as a wave of heat knocked her from her feet and flung her several feet away to where the children's reading nook was sectioned off. She bounced over the low shelves, cried out in shock and pain, and crumpled on the floor as a wash of red seemed to fill the library.

Sirens were howling. Something red was flashing, flickering and the scent of burning paper filled the air. It was hell on earth.

Haley dragged herself to her knees, shaking her head as she felt the ground shake again, and another explosion rock the air.

She cried out, covering her head with her hands as more glass exploded, and the cold seemed to battle with a surge of heat.

She staggered to her feet, shock, disbelief and horror filling her as she realized the books were burning. Piles of books. Flames licked at them, consumed them. The tables, counters, and much of the interior of the library was wood or a facsimile of it, and it was all burning.

Smoke poured around her, choking her, making it nearly impossible to see as she fought to get her bearings. She stumbled through the debris-littered section, nearly falling as another, smaller explosion ripped across the earth.

What was happening? A strike? Some sort of attack? Sanctuary wasn't far from Buffalo Gap, and she knew that it was prone to attacks from several different racist societies, but no one had ever attacked Buffalo Gap.

She choked and stumbled again, falling to her knees as her eyes burned, and she fought for breath. She wasn't going to get out of here. Tears filled her eyes, and fear filled her mind as she tried to crawl, fighting to figure out which way to move, which way to go.

"I have her!" someone yelled, a second before strong arms wrapped around her and dragged her to her feet.

A moment later she was slung over a broad shoulder.

"Was anyone else in there?" another voice called out.

"No one," she choked. She couldn't breathe, even as the cold outside wrapped around her, and she tried to blink the stinging pain from her eyes, still fighting to breathe.

"Haley, where's Patricia?" She was deposited on the hood of a car as someone shook her shoulders. "Is Pat in there, Haley?"

Haley shook her head, blinking as the fierce visage of the sheriff filled her vision. She shook her head again. "Gone," she coughed. "She left."

"Her car is still here," Sheriff Zane Taggart barked into her face.

"My truck," she coughed again. "Gave her my truck."

Silence met the information. She coughed again, blinking, gazing around frantically until her eyes found where her truck had been parked. Right there, in front of where the big windows had been, where a fiery blazing hulk sat in the middle of melted pavement and the burning vehicles left in the parking lot by several city workers that worked nearby.

Her truck. Her truck had sat right there. And Patricia had been in her truck.

"No," she whispered, horror filling her, streaking across her mind. "No!" she screamed. "Oh God, Patricia."

She tried to jump to her feet and ended on the ground. Her legs folded beneath her as the sheriff tried to catch her.

Her nails dug into the frozen earth, and she stared at the blazing vehicle in disbelief and agony. Oh God, Patricia had been in her truck.

The report came across the radios within seconds of the blast. Noble was just coming off a twenty-four-hour shift and heading to the barracks when it crackled across the comm links.

"All available enforcers, be aware. Explosion at the Buffalo Gap Library. One dead, one injured. Officers en route. Sheriff Taggart requesting enforcer backup."

He didn't wait for the order. He heard the names called to backup, the enforcers being pulled in to head to Buffalo Gap, and he didn't care if his name was on the list or not.

"Comm one, this is Chavin," he reported to the dispatcher. "I'm heading from Sanctuary en route now." He jumped on his motorcycle, revved the motor, and shot out of the driveway next to the barracks. "Advise Alpha leaders one through four, we have a compromise."

"Enforcer Chavin, order received and being forwarded. You'll be met by enforcers Warrant, Savant, and Crayven. Be advised, Director Wyatt will be en route."

Sanctuary's heavy metal gates swung open as he approached, the headlights of his motorcycle piercing the darkness and highlighting the faces of the ever-present protesters.

He shot through the opening, hit the gas, and tore through the press of bodies that threatened to surge against him.

"Heli-jet is being prepped and en route," the dispatcher reported.

"Any report of the casualty?" he yelled into the link.

"No report as of yet," he was informed.

He hit the accelerator with one hand, felt the power surge beneath him and, with the thumb of his other hand, hit the integrated traction control and advanced speed protocols before he pushed the specially designed all-terrain cycle to its limits.

Thankfully, the curvy mountain road was more or less free of traffic. The cycle's warning system alerted him to traffic and allowed him to streak around it safely.

As he sped to the town, all he could see were Haley's wary gray eyes and pale, worried face the night she had overheard the plans Brackenmore and Engalls had discussed with the breed attempting to sell them

information. All he felt was the echo of the knowledge that there was the chance that someone besides himself and the Breed Cabinet would find out what she had overheard before the hearing she was due to testify at.

He powered down as he hit the city limits, though he still pushed the cycle faster than the posted speed limits allowed.

Haley, with her bright red hair, her soft scent of desire, couldn't be gone. He knew he should have never left her protection to any other breed. Something had warned him, some strange foreboding had told him that her life would be in more danger than one silent bodyguard could defend her against.

Damn Jonas. Noble had warned him they couldn't keep her safe like this. She needed to be sequestered, at the very least pulled into Sanctuary until the hearing next month against Brackenmore and Engalls.

The bastards. The drug they had created to attempt to control breeds had resulted in two deaths in the past few weeks, and they had nearly lost Dr. Morrey as well.

And now, they could have lost Haley.

He couldn't imagine a world without Haley in it. He refused to imagine such a thing. It was impossible, it couldn't happen.

He hadn't kissed her yet. He had barely even touched her. He hadn't yet figured out why she drew him as no other woman ever had, though in the past week, he had begun to suspect exactly why.

He hadn't yet had a chance to decide*if he could risk taking her, making her his, or if he should force himself to leave the situation as it stood.

The hunger eating at him was still controllable. The need driving him could still be buried in another woman. The heated lust could still be pumped from his body, and though satiation was never complete, it was satisfying.

He was still his own man.

For the moment.

Once he knew Haley was safe, once he made her life his primary objective, he would no longer be able to claim that singular independence. And he knew it.

He raced into town, slowing the cycle and easing it around traffic, bending over the padded chest rest and gearing down as he glimpsed the flames that blazed around the library.

And he felt the roar that discharged from his chest at the sight of the twisted, ruined, blazing hulk of Haley's truck. A roar of bloodlust and animalistic rage. Someone was going to pay. Dear God, if she was in that truck, if she was gone forever, then blood would flow.

Chapter 2

Haley shuddered in the blanket Zane Taggart had wrapped around her. The sheriff was kneeling in front of her as she sat sideways in his cruiser, her feet on the ground, the heat from the vents blasting over her upper body. Still, she shuddered from the cold and the fear.

Zane was one of those men in Buffalo Gap Haley had known almost since the cradle. He was a few years older than she, so he had always been a little protective of her. Zane was protective of all women though. He wasn't in uniform, so he must have been off duty when the explosion happened. He was dressed in jeans, a dark flannel shirt, and a heavy quilted overshirt.

He was staring at her silently as she gripped the cup of hot coffee he had pressed into her hands seconds ago, his expression concerned.

"You should let the paramedics look at you, Haley." He reached out and brushed her hair gently off her forehead.

"I'm fine." A sob hitched her breath, shuddered through her body. "Patricia's not okay, Zane." More tears leaked from her eyes.

She couldn't seem to hold them back. Patricia was gone, and it was all her fault. Because she had let Patricia borrow her truck, had given her the keys because it was going to snow.

Lazy fluffy flakes were already drifting through the air, but they no longer held the magical appeal they had only a few hours ago.

Flames still burned inside the library. The fire blazing around the building and the vehicles that had caught fire were more important than the books inside a building that would contain its own flames.

"No, Patricia's not okay, Haley." Zane sighed and stared through the windshield before turning back to her. "You have to tell me what happened, honey."

"I don't know." She stared back at Zane in shock. "It was going to snow. You know how pitiful Patricia's car is in the snow." Another sob tore free. How pitiful it had been. The explosion had destroyed several other vehicles as well, Patricia's being one of them.

She lowered her head, fighting the sobs that shook her shoulders as Zane patted her knee.

"Come on, Haley." He lifted her chin until he was staring back at her. "You gave Patricia your keys, right?"

She nodded unsteadily. "So she could get to town after the snow. She hates being snowed in."

"Yes, she hates that." Zane nodded. "Go on."

"That's all," she whispered. "She went out to leave. I turned the television back on. I wanted to see the snow." Her lips trembled. "They were showing the snow in other states, and I wanted to see it. And then . . ." She blinked and shook her head.

She had to stop crying. She had to remember what Jonas Wyatt and Noble had told her. She couldn't tell anyone what had happened at Sanctuary until the hearing. But she knew, oh God, she knew Patricia had died because of it. Somehow, some way, the Breeds' enemies knew what she had seen and overheard. She knew it. She could feel it crawling over her skin, digging its way inside her brain.

"Haley." Zane stared up at her, his blue eyes sharp, concerned, but knowing. "You have to tell me what's going on here, honey. Someone blew up your truck. That wasn't an accident. You and I both know it wasn't an accident. Now, you have to tell me why."

She shook her head. She couldn't lie to Zane. She was a horrible liar, and she knew it. And she couldn't look him in the eye when he was staring at her like that. Determined and worried, compassion and pain glittering in his eyes.

She looked at her truck, and her stomach ached with the sobs and the fear she was holding in. Her chest felt constricted, tight, and filled with pain.

There was nothing left of Patricia. She was gone, while the snow drifted through the air, and the flames billowed around them.

Firefighters were working to put out the blazes, several twisted hunks of vehicles were nothing but charred skeletal remains of what they had been.

"We found a breed, Haley," Zane told her then.

Her head jerked around in terror. Haley could feel the rest of the blood leeching from her body, agony tearing through her.

"No." Sometimes Noble came in late. Returned books, helped her lock up.

"He was shot behind the library. Someone killed him. Now tell me what the hell is going on, or I'm taking you in for your own protection."

"Who?" The word wheezed out of her as her stomach churned sickeningly. She was rocking, slowly, back and forth, and didn't notice as the coffee cup slipped from her grip and crashed to the ground.

She was going to throw up.

"Who was the breed?" She nearly pushed Zane back as she forced herself to her feet. The quilt dropped behind her. "Where is he?"

She was shaking so hard she had to grip the open door as Zane grabbed her shoulder.

"Haley, dammit, tell me what the hell is going on."

"Was it Noble?" she screamed back at him. "Tell me, damn you. Who was the breed?"

She tried to tear away from him, the sickening fear of Noble, gone, dead. No, it couldn't be Noble.

But it had been time for Noble. It had been. She had been waiting for him.

She stared around and jerked away from Zane.

"Where is he?" She sobbed again, stumbling around the door and gripping the side of the car as she tried to force her legs to move.

He had said behind the library. Dead behind the library. She wasn't crying now. The fear and the pain was going too deep for tears. If Noble was gone, she couldn't bear it. Not Patricia and Noble. It couldn't happen. Not like this. Not because of her.

As she forced herself around the front of the vehicle, she heard a sound so wild, so animalistic, her head jerked up. It was Noble. She knew it was. She couldn't accept anything else.

"Noble!" She screamed his name and heard the sound again.

It rocked the night. Like the wild lions that patrolled the borders of Sanctuary. If the night was quiet, sometimes, you could hear them. And now, it sounded as though one had stepped into the city itself.

Her head jerked around, staring into the parking lot, watching as the flames flickered around it. And she saw him. All that wild black hair blowing back from his savage face. His lips were pulled back into a snarl as he pushed a police officer attempting to hold him back to the side.

Black-leather pants and heavy motorcycle boots. A leather jacket that he was unzipping as his gaze caught hers. He moved like the jaguar he was bred from, a hard, graceful shift of muscle, a ripple of danger.

"Noble." His name tore from her lips again as he snarled. The sight of it, the sound of it, should have been frightening. The flash of his canines, the hard edge to his black eyes, should have frightened her as much as it did the officers and bystanders.

She tried to make her legs move. Tried to run to him but they weren't functioning as they should. She stumbled again and heard his throttled growl a second before he jerked her into his arms.

Warmth covered her. She was only barely aware of his jacket going around her shoulders, because he was holding her, jerking her against his chest and swinging her off her feet.

She wrapped her arms around his neck and buried her face against him to block out the sounds, the sight, and the smell of the fire.

He smelled like the night. Like winter. Like the snow that was drifting around them. There was no death around him. There was nothing of the nightmare and chaos around her.

For the first time since the night had turned into hell, Haley finally felt safe.

"Chavin, be advised of reinforcements landing," the comm link crackled with the information as Noble buried his face in Haley's hair and held on to her. His arms tightened around her as he let himself rest against the hood of the sheriff's cruiser and let himself soak up the knowledge that she was alive.

As he held her, he was aware of the breed heli-jet landing on the other side of the parking lot, and of the sheriff moving closer to them.

His head jerked up as Sheriff Taggart pulled the edge of Noble's jacket over her shoulder. He flashed a feral snarl at him, the thought of the man touching her finally sending him past the limits of what little control he felt he possessed.

Taggart lifted his hands, his eyebrows arching.

"She was afraid the dead breed behind the library was you," the sheriff told him, his blue eyes knowing as

he watched Noble.

Noble tensed and let go of Haley just enough to activate his communicator.

"Jonas?"

"I have you. We're on scene."

"There's a breed behind the library, apparently dead." Silence filled the line for long seconds. "Fuck. We had Jason covering her."

Jason was young, but fully trained. He wasn't inexperienced.

"I want her out of the open. I'm bringing her to the heli."

"Negative. We have vehicles coming in and a civilian in the heli. Transfer her to one of the secured SUVs."

Noble grimaced. No doubt, the first Leo was in the helijet, the breed who only a few knew was a breed, and an interfering bastard at the moment, had decided to check things out himself.

That meant there was no way to transfer Haley to Sanctuary. Not and preserve the secrecy of Leo's identity from her.

He listened through the link as Jonas sent Mordecai Savant and Mercury Warrant to check the body and prepare it for transfer.

"You guys are going to fuck with my investigation, rather than just helping me secure the scene, aren't you, Noble." Zane tucked his fingers in the belt of his jeans and rocked back on his heels. "You know that's not going to go over with me. Right?"

"Talk to Jonas about it," he snapped. "My concern is Haley right now, Taggart, and where she's concerned, then your best bet is just staying the hell out of my way."

He turned and carried her to the vehicles pulling into the outer edges of the parking lot. The library was pretty much lost. The books had fed the flames that had whipped through the windows as they burst. It was a wonder she was still alive and relatively unharmed.

Relatively. He could smell her blood, her pain. He could feel her fear and her disbelief, and it was enraging him.

Clamping a firm hold on his control wasn't easy. As he carried her to the SUVs and slid with her into the backseat of the nearest one, he could feel that rage pumping through him.

Someone had dared to harm her. To attempt to kill her? The attempt was against her; otherwise, the young lion breed, Jason, wouldn't be dead, and her beautiful truck she so loved wouldn't be a hunk of twisted metal.

"They killed Patricia." Her head lifted from his shoulder as the door closed behind them. Her eyes, that dark ring of blue spreading into the gray, darkening them further.

He saw the pain and tears in her eyes. Noble let his arms tighten around her for long seconds as he watched Jonas stride to the SUV. Beside him, was the taller, broader form of the Leo, barely disguised in a hooded jacket, and his son Dane Vanderale. Evidently, neither of them were content to wait in the heli or at Sanctuary.

Behind them, the sheriff followed more slowly, his rugged face set in a scowl as breeds moved between them. That damned sheriff wasn't going to be content to let this go, he thought, as the others moved into the

long seat across from Noble and Haley, and the doors closed behind them.

The combined stares of the three powerful men didn't bother Noble, but evidently, there was something about them that made Haley self-conscious.

Her head lifted, her expression flickering with wariness.

"Someone found out, didn't they?"

Haley stared back at Jonas Wyatt, knowing exactly what had happened. Brackenmore and Engalls had somehow learned that she would be testifying against them during the January hearing.

"We don't know that, Ms. McQuire," Jonas answered carefully, his expression carefully blank.

She moved, forcing herself from Noble's lap and sliding onto the seat beside him.

"She hasn't been seen by a medical professional, Jonas."

The younger of the other two men leaned forward. She knew him. The vice president of Vanderale Industries and beside him was the president, CEO, major shareholder, and whatever other title anyone had ever found to attach to him. Leo Vanderale.

And she had a feeling she knew why they were there.

She glanced out the front window to where the flames were finally dying down within the library.

"All the books are ruined," she whispered, looking back to the elder Vanderale. "You were so kind, Mr. Vanderale, to help donate all those lovely books." Her breathing hitched. "I'm very sorry."

His head tilted just slightly, his amber eyes staring back at her curiously. "Why would you apologize to me, Miss McQuire?" he asked her.

She sniffed back her tears, aware of Noble brushing back the side of her hair to examine the gash she could feel against her temple.

"Because it was my fault. Someone killed Patricia and destroyed the library because of me."

"Ridiculous," Dane Vanderale snapped, a frown veering his brows.

"My dear, the choices others make because of your kindness is not your responsibility." Leo sighed. "And Dane is right, you need to be attended to. You're bleeding, my dear." He turned to Jonas. "Have her taken to Sanctuary."

"That's not possible." Jonas shook his head sharply.

"And why would this be?" Leo's tone was dangerously smooth.

"Leo, you know exactly why." Jonas bit out. "Let's not air our disagreements in front of Ms. McQuire and see what we can do to help her out here."

There was a tension brewing in the vehicle now, wrapping around her, tightening her nerves to breaking point.

"She's obviously in danger because of her courage in coming to you about what she saw and heard," Leo pointed out imperiously. "She should be taken to Sanctuary."

"No one is asking me," Haley pointed out, watching as the two Vanderale men glared back at Jonas.

"I don't think they believe you should have an opinion." Dane leaned back in his seat with a grin.

Haley ignored him, glancing to Noble instead as he spoke into the mic that curved around his tough, angled cheek bone.

"We need to get her to a secured site, one way or the other," Noble growled. "She's bleeding, Jonas, and she's scared out of her damned mind. Sitting here glaring at her isn't helping the situation."

"And you think taking her to Sanctuary will?"

"No," Noble snapped. "Her home will be easier to control. I want a team under my command, men I choose. I want the area declared off-limits to any other breeds, and I want full security protocols placed around it."

Jonas stared back at him blandly. "Those are a lot of wants for an enforcer," he said softly. "A low-ranking one at that, Noble. You've barely been within the hierarchy a year now."

"And I was invited in," Noble reminded him. "I didn't apply."

Haley blinked as Jonas grunted. She felt light-headed, uncertain. She lifted her hand to her temple, where the pain seemed worse, and touched dampness. Drawing it back, she saw her own blood.

"Choose your team," Jonas suddenly stated. "We'll cover you until they get there." He pulled the mic wand to his cheek. "Lawe, Rule, pull everyone to Haley McQuire's home. I need a medical attendant and the sheriff to follow."

Immediately, three of the breeds standing outside were sliding into the front of the SUV limo. The engine started, and the vehicle was pulling out as the snow began to fall faster.

Haley stared at her bloodstained fingers before lifting her eyes to Noble. "I'm bleeding," she whispered.

"Not bad." He laid a folded gauze pad that Dane handed him from a first-aid box he had acquired from beneath one of the seats over the wound. "Everything's okay, Haley."

"It's not okay," she whispered, staring into his dark eyes, his savage face. "Everything's not okay anymore, Noble."

Chapter 3

Haley's little brick house was strung with multicolored Christmas lights outside. In the front yard sat two wire deer covered in white lights. The two conical evergreen trees at each side of the front of the house were well lit, and there was a large fir wreath on the door.

Inside the large living room, across from the fireplace was a six-foot Christmas tree that glowed with lights reflecting every color in the rainbow. An angel perched at the top, a small light in her folded hands, her wings spread, a serene expression on her face.

The fireplace was laid with fresh logs and ready to light, and four stockings dangled, two on each corner of the mantel.

A television screen hung on one wall, a coffee table between it and the couch, and two chairs sat to the side.

It was a large, simple room. It led into a large kitchen and a smaller dining room. There were two bedrooms down a short hall, each with an attached bath, and a cramped attic above.

The house seemed to reflect her. Gently wel-coming, a sense of restrained excitement filling it with all the Christmas decorations. As though someone here truly believed in the Santa nonsense.

Noble stood in the entrance to the kitchen, his eyes narrowed as a female breed, Shiloh Gage, checked Haley's injuries where she sat in the living room. Shiloh was the closest thing they had to a medic outside Sanctuary's labs. But with Dr. Morrey still recovering from the attempt to destroy her with the drugs Brackenmore and Engalls had tried to develop, that left only the council scientist, Amburg, whom Jonas had kidnapped months before, to treat injuries. And Noble knew he would rip Amburg's throat out before he allowed that bastard to touch Haley.

"I think I'm okay." Haley had her head turned as Shiloh treated the narrow gash at her temple.

The once-white blouse Haley had worn was torn and stained with blood. There were scratches on her arm, one of which looked deep. Her hands were red, almost blistered. The dark pants she wore were in the same condition as the blouse. Her bright red hair was mussed around her face, singed in places and darkened with her blood.

"You're fine." Shiloh patted her knee kindly, her round face filled with sympathy as she lifted a piece of gauze and taped it to Haley's temple. "You'll be good as new in a few days."

Shiloh pulled the surgical gloves from her hands and dropped them into the small waste can that sat beside her. Rising, she adjusted her black uniform pants and turned back to Noble.

Dressed in the enforcer uniform, her dark auburn hair secured in a French braid, Shiloh looked more like a

playful teenager than a full-grown, fully trained breed enforcer.

"I need to clean up." Haley came to her feet, and Noble barely caught himself before jumping for her.

She swayed a bit, and he had to force himself to remain in place as she moved to the hallway.

"You should rest a bit more, Haley," Shiloh warned her, following her.

Haley held up one hand, waving her back. "No. I have to clean up, Shiloh. Just . . . Just let me clean up."

Her voice was stronger than it had been earlier. The shock was wearing off. He could see the anger flickering in her gaze even before Shiloh had finished.

When the enforcer looked back at him, he nodded toward Haley, indicating that she should follow and cover her until Jonas, Leo, and Dane were finished with the meeting in the kitchen. Noble then joined the others in the kitchen.

The sheriff wasn't exactly pleased with the information he was getting. He didn't like being excluded from the investigation, and if Noble could read the man, and he liked to think he could, then he was guessing Zane Taggart wasn't going to be as easy to control as Jonas was hoping.

"Wyatt, you're pissing me off," Taggart retorted at Jonas's suggestion that the sheriff leave the investigation in their hands. "A friend of mine was just killed, and you want me to just back off?"

"Your friend has just lost one friend," Jonas reminded him. "Let's not add to the count. The further you stay away from this, the safer it will be for her."

There was taut silence as Noble turned back to the meeting taking place at the kitchen table.

Jonas stared at the sheriff coolly, while Leo and Dane watched the confrontation silently. Leo hadn't said much, nor did his expressions show his opinion either way as to how the meeting was going.

"Forget it." Taggart crossed his arms over his chest and stared back at Jonas with steely determination.

"The agreement Buffalo Gap has with Sanctuary requires you to step aside in this investigation," Jonas reminded him.

The sheriff snorted at that. "Look, Wyatt, we both know the city council. They're gonna talk out of both sides of their mouths and smile real pretty for both of us. They'll tell you they'll restrain me, they'll tell me they'll cover for me. So let's just cut the shit here and come to an understanding. This is my county, like it or not, hate me or whatever. I'm sheriff, that makes it, and the people living in it, mine. And that includes breeds. I have two of my people dead tonight. From all appearances, it was a professional hit. Your boy was shot in the back of the head at close range. An explosive device large enough to blow a hole in the parking lot and take out the library went off no more than half an hour later. Now you want to tell me what the hell is going on, or do I want to find the answers myself?"

"You want to let this go, Zane." Haley stepped into the kitchen from the washroom.

Damn, he'd forgotten about the door that led from her bathroom and into a small washroom, then the kitchen that he'd found earlier while securing the house. Shiloh was moving through the hall from Haley's bedroom, a scowl on her face.

"Miss McQuire, this meeting can be conducted without you," Jonas told her, his frown fierce as Noble moved towards her.

"Like hell," she told him.

She had changed clothes and washed her face and arms. She was dressed in soft cotton pants resembling pajama bottoms and a long T-shirt. She looked like a kid. A hurt, frightened, angry kid.

"Haley." The sheriff came out of his chair as Noble passed him and shot him a warning glare. "Honey, are you ready to talk to me now?"

Honey? Noble's head jerked around as he barely caught the growl in his throat. What the hell was the sheriff doing calling Haley, "honey"? She wasn't his honey, period.

"I'm obviously in a bit of trouble, Zane." Her lips trembled for a second before she tightened them, seeming to ignore Noble as he moved behind her.

"No shit, little girl." Zane sighed. "Come on, tell me about it, so I can fix it."

"You can't fix this." She shook her head. "I want you to do what Jonas suggests. Let him handle it. I couldn't bear it if I lost you, too."

Noble could feel his jaw tighten at the emotion in her voice, at the statement. As though that damned sheriff was something to her. He wasn't. Noble watched her, he knew her. She wasn't dating anyone. She wasn't sleeping with anyone. She was free. He knew she was because if another man had fucked her recently, he would have smelled the bastard on her.

Noble stared over her head at the other man, his lip twitching as he fought to hold back a silent snarl.

"Haley." Sheriff Taggart shook his head. "You know I'm not going to do that. And what's going to happen when your brothers find out about this? Your daddy? The McQuires are going to descend on Buffalo Gap like a Scottish hunting party, sweetie, and they'll likely bring reinforcements. Do we really want that to happen? They'll talk to me first. If I have answers, they might listen and stay home."

It was a bribe, and a warning. Noble heard it, but he didn't appreciate it. He could feel the worry rising inside her now. She needed rest. She needed to put some distance between her and the events of the night, to allow her to deal with the loss she had suffered.

"The boys are still in California," she said. "And Daddy flew to France last night to help broker a deal with the airlines. I have a few days before I have to deal with them."

"And then?" Zane asked.

"And then, perhaps Mr. Wyatt will have the answers you need. But I can't give them to you right now, Zane. Right now, they aren't my answers to give."

"But it's your life to give?" Zane suddenly snapped, despite Noble's warning growl at the tone of his voice. "Son of a bitch, Haley, you were nearly killed. Don't tell me they aren't your answers to give."

"Son of a bitch, Zane." She was in his face, anger pouring from her. "I've already lost one friend tonight. Do you think I need nightmares of losing another?" She pushed against his shoulders, as broad as they were, even despite the height he had on her. "Go home. I can't deal with you."

"I'll call your daddy myself," he bit out furiously at that point.

"And risk his life? Or my brothers'? I don't think you will, Zane. But you will leave this alone for now. And so will you." She swung around to Noble. "Get the hell out of my house and out of my life. I don't need you here."

Silence filled the kitchen. Noble was aware of Jonas, Leo, and Dane coming warily to their feet. Tension spiked hard and fast, thick enough to cut with a knife as her gray-blue eyes pierced his.

Noble smiled at the demand, the angry exclamation. He was aware that it wasn't a pretty smile. He didn't do smiles well, unless they were the sort that came seconds before killing.

"You must have mistaken me for someone who obeys your orders," he told her softly. "Sorry about your luck there, sweetheart, but it's not happening. You're stuck with me, whether you want to be or not."

Haley stared back at him furiously before swinging around to Jonas.

"He's your enforcer." She shoved a trembling finger in his direction. "I don't want him in my home, period. Get him out of here."

Jonas dragged his hand over his face, muttered something about women and heat that made absolutely no sense whatsoever before staring back at her.

"It's not that simple, Miss McQuire."

"Don't you 'Miss McQuire' me," she snapped back at him, ignoring Noble as well as Zane. "This is your mess, now you can fix it. And you can fix it without him being here."

She couldn't bear the thought of something happening to Noble. For one blinding minute tonight, she had felt the overwhelming pain of believing he was dead, because of her. She knew what that would have meant—a sorrow so bleak, so deep that she had almost sunk beneath the waves of pain.

"Well, looks like you're being thrown out in the cold too, lover boy." Zane's laughter was mocking. "We can share a beer and discuss her stubbornness, then we can get to the best way to protect her," he suggested.

"Stop being a smart-ass, Zane," she ordered him roughly, her eyes still on Jonas. "I helped you," she reminded Jonas. "You know I did. You owe me."

"Yes, ma'am, I owe you." He nodded. "But I don't owe you the chance to die. And Noble won't walk away from this. He has his team, and he knows what the hell he's doing. He's your best protection."

"And the breed that died tonight," she yelled back at him. "Did he know what he was doing? Did you have an untrained man watching me, Jonas? Did you send a boy to do a man's job?" She knew better. "I knew him. Jason Lincoln. Do you know why he chose that name? Do you know he picked the name Lincoln because of a president who died before any of us was ever born? Did you know he liked comics? That he was flirting with one of the college girls who comes to the library?" Tears were filling her eyes. "Did you know that he wanted a Christmas present?" she whispered painfully. "I bought him a Christmas present." She wrapped her arms around herself and turned away from all of them.

Lifting her hand, she covered her lips and shook her head.

"Patricia has a grandson. He was coming for Christmas. Now he'll be coming to bury his grandmother." She wanted to scream with the rage filling her. "I have to see two friends buried because of me." She turned back to all of them. "I won't see any more. I won't bury more friends. Now get the hell out of my house. All of you."

She stalked out of the kitchen, knowing none of them would pay any attention to her, and that only made her madder. The helplessness that rose inside her was like a tide of red, bleak fury. Whoever wanted her dead knew what the hell they were doing. They knew how to get to her. How to hurt her friends, how to make her suffer.

That bomb that killed Patricia would have killed her if she had gotten into that truck herself. Patricia always parked right beside Haley because she didn't like walking to her car alone in the dark. And Jason. She shook her head as she slammed her bedroom door and locked it.

Jason Lincoln. And he had chosen that name because he'd admired all he knew about Abraham Lincoln.

Jason has asked her once if she saw breeds as mankind. Haley had told him she saw them as the best of what man could accomplish, and the best of humanity. His brown eyes had lit with pleasure as he nodded, took his books, and left the library.

And now, she would never see him again. His shy smile would never touch her heart again, just as Patricia's laughter would never again fill her day.

She couldn't bear the thought of never hearing Zane give her another smart-ass comment, or of Noble never reading another carpentry book, or never reading another book of "mistakes" as he always called them. Because history was filled with mistakes, had been his reasoning. And he wanted to learn from them.

She sat down on her bed and stared around the neat, pretty room. The canopied bed, with its thick, heavy curtains that she could draw around her when it was really cold. The bedroom set, which had been given to her by her father's parents. The writing desk across the room, which her mother's parents had given her. Bridges to the past, just as her precious books had been.

The thought of dying filled her with terror. The thought of Noble dying, especially for her, filled her with cold, bleak agony.

She couldn't bear it. He would have to leave. She would make certain they all left. The breeds didn't have enough power to invade her home, or her life, without her permission. If they weren't out of her house by dawn, she would call the state police. She would pack her bags and leave town. And then she would figure out exactly what it was going to take to survive.

Because dying wasn't in her plans. At least not for a while. Living was. And there had to be a way to live without risking everyone she loved.

Noble stared at the closed washroom door and silently opened it a crack to make certain Haley wasn't there. Motioning to Shiloh, he sent her inside to watch for the fiery little librarian before he turned back to the others.

"Well, that was interesting," Dane commented as he turned to Noble. "She does do orders quite well. Too bad she wasn't born a breed."

He smiled, a mocking little smile at odds with the cold fury in his brown eyes.

"Contact the state police," Noble warned Jonas. "Inform them we have a situation here. I want Haley placed under the Bureau's 'persons of interest' mandates."

Persons of interest, meaning anyone, breed or human who might have information pertaining to or involving an open breed case under investigation.

"That's pushing it," Jonas pointed out. "If she gets a lawyer, she could beat it within forty-eight hours."

"Then let's not tell her that," Zane warned them before Noble could speak up. "Listen up, boys, let me tell you a little something about Haley. She's more stubborn than those mountains out there, and she's sure as hell got more fire in her than that explosion that nearly killed her tonight. You're not going to bully her as easily as you think you can."

"I have no intentions of bullying her," Noble ground out. "I'll protect her. With your help."

"Noble," Jonas's voice was warning.

"Do you believe you're going to keep him out of it?" Noble stared back at him coolly. "You're not. And you're not going to keep him from trying to protect her. Let's at least use him wisely."

Man or breed, sometimes one had to go with gut instinct. Gut instinct warned him that Zane Taggart would walk through fire for someone he cared for, and for whatever reason, he cared for Haley.

"Smart boy." Zane's smile was hard.

"Jonas will give you details, you will stay out of the perimeter he lays out to you. This house is fairly sheltered. No neighbors too close, no reason for them to be on her property. Anyone moving within her property line is fair game. Do we understand each other?"

Gut instinct and trust were two different things. The sheriff might get information, but he wouldn't be aware of the security protocols Noble intended to set up.

Haley's home sat at the end of a block. She owned a little over an acre, the boundary of which was fenced and thick with trees. Across the street were several clear lots, the street that ran by the side of the house was an occupied lot, enclosed by a privacy fence. Behind her property were more homes, closer together.

Protecting her might not be easy, but at least here he would know the breeds who should be in place. In Sanctuary, at the moment, there were too many suspects and not enough space to ensure no breed but those he trusted were within sight of her.

"We'll have the information we need on this soon, Noble," Jonas promised, his voice hard now.

And they would. Noble knew that the number of people with the information of the witness who had overheard that meeting was small. One of them told someone, or had personally done the killing. Either way, they would be found. '

"You have two weeks," Noble warned him. "After that, she disappears." He stared back at Jonas, knowing the director understood exactly what Noble was telling him.

"That won't be enough time," Jonas growled.

"It's all the time you have." Noble shrugged before turning to the sheriff. "As of tonight, call before you arrive here. Call before your deputies arrive here. Don't try to surprise me, Sheriff Taggart, and don't try to piss me off. I get mean when I'm pissed off. And trust me, you don't want to see that side of me."

The sheriff's gaze locked with his for long moments before the other man cursed and scowled. He got the message. He wasn't just dealing with a breed, he was dealing with one that didn't mind killing someone for stupidity. If the sheriff was stupid enough to try to blindside him, then he would die. Nothing mattered at this point but protecting Haley. No matter from whom he had to protect her.

Chapter 4

Haley's bedroom door opened slowly, and Noble stepped into the room.

She stared at him from her bed, watched the way the dim light from her lamp followed and loved the hard, strong angles of his face.

His thick black hair fell to his shoulders and framed the hard, sharp contours of his face. High cheekbones, deep-set, slightly tilted eyes, and a strong, sharp nose. He could never be called handsome, not really. Noble was anything but a pretty boy. He was a man, rugged, tough, certain of himself and his abilities to the point that his confidence gleamed in his black eyes.

She remembered, several months before, the report that he had been wounded on a mission. He had been away from Sanctuary for several long weeks. She had waited, and she had worried, and she had promised herself that the next time she saw him, she would push past the wariness inside herself and do something about this "almost" relationship they seemed to share.

Yet, when he had returned, she had retreated again. And it wasn't that she lacked confidence, or even daring. Everyone knew Haley could be daring. No, there was something else that had held her back, a certainty, a knowledge that any woman who took Noble on would be taking on much more than a lover.

And there was always the chance that the "mating-heat" rumors and gossip trash stories in the rags had enough truth to them to be dangerous. Haley was a great believer that where there was smoke, there was fire. And where there was Noble, things would naturally get hot.

She flinched as he closed the door quietly behind him, still watching her, his black gaze cool and shuttered.

"You're not supposed to be here," she told him. "I asked you to leave."

"Are you that anxious to die, Haley?" He leaned against the door and crossed his arms over his chest. "Strange, I never saw you as a quitter."

His lips quirked at one corner as she stared back at him silently.

"You can't run, and you can't hide. Not from this." She was already realizing that. That didn't mean it was any easier to accept.

"Jonas can assign someone else to protect me then," she told him. "I don't want you here."

She wanted him with a need that sometimes bordered on a craving. From that first meeting a year before, when he had walked into the library, she had known a need for him unlike anything she had known for

anyone else.

And her need was going to cause complications, she could feel it. She had made the mistake years before of having a short affair with Zane until he realized his need for the job was stronger than his need for a woman. But that relationship had taught her how to spot a problem male. And Noble was definitely a problem male.

"I'm your best bet to stay alive," he told her.

"And what was Jason?" she asked, her tone biting. "You didn't even warn me you had anyone else watching me. He died needlessly."

"All breeds die needlessly," he informed her roughly. "It's a war out there, Haley, and you're smack in the middle of it now. Get that in your head. You will not survive alone. You will not survive without me. Period. Until we figure out what the hell happened, you're stuck with me."

She came off the bed, denial raging inside her.

"Find someone else. I told you, I don't want you here."

"And I told you, sorry 'bout your luck," he snarled, those wicked, wicked canines flashing at the sides of his mouth.

Haley fantasized about those teeth sometimes. Fantasized about watching them rake over her breasts, nip at them. Sometimes she dreamed of them at her neck, her shoulder, biting against her, holding her in place as he took her.

The animalistic quality of those dreams had always shocked her to her core and left her wet and hungry for days on end.

As she faced him, she felt that arousal, a constant companion anytime he was near, and forced herself to back away from him.

"You act as though all you need to do is place distance between us to alleviate the sweet smell of your hunger for me," he bit out, shocking her. "Do you think I can't smell your desire a mile away?"

She shook her head. She couldn't face this tonight, not on top of the blood and death that surrounded her. She felt as though her body and her soul were stained with guilt.

"This is why you can't be here," she whispered. "I'm not stupid, Noble. I'll distract you, and you'll end up dead."

He shook his head and moved closer. Just a few steps, just enough to warn her that he wasn't going to pay attention to her.

"We'll definitely distract each other," he promised her, his voice low, vibrating with lust. "There's no help for it. And that will be our advantage."

She shook her head fiercely. "It's not an advantage. You know better than that."

She backed farther away from him, jerking in surprise as she came against the wall behind her. She watched, her breathing harsh, heavy as he came closer, stalking her, his expression becoming intent, heavy with hunger.

"You're my mate, Haley," he told her, his voice heavy. And it didn't sound like a good thing. It sounded much too close to the stories that were devoured in the magazines that featured the breeds prominently, with stories

of lust-crazed hungers and desires that defied believability.

"I can't handle this from you," she whispered, as he came closer, almost touching her, his chest inches from the rapid rise and fall of her breasts as she stared up at him beseechingly. "Can't you see that, Noble? I can't deal with fairy tales tonight, or with you here."

"And I can't deal with another man watching over you." He reached out and touched her cheek, his knuckles rasping over it.

He rarely touched her. In the year he had been coming to the library, she could count on one hand how many times his skin had actually touched hers.

"Do you know what a mating is?" His head lowered until his lips caressed her ear.

Haley let her head rest against the wall, her body feeling weak now while the blood began to pump hard and heavy through her body.

"The tabloids," she whispered. "They're not true."

"Not precisely." He rubbed his cheek against her.

The curiously gentle stroke of his cheek against hers did more to her than she could have imagined possible. Her lashes drifted closed, sensual weakness invaded her body as her sex began to heat, to clench with empty need.

"Not precisely?" she whispered, as his head lifted, and he stepped back slowly. "What does 'not precisely' mean, exactly?"

"It means, soon, you'll find out, there's no escaping me, Haley. And there's no escaping what you need from me. Soon."

He stepped back farther. "You need to rest. The next few days won't be easy for you, and I don't want to complicate that. But there's no forcing me out of here, there's no running from me any longer. We will see this through together."

Haley bit back her protests. She had been raised by her Scottish father and two older brothers, she knew male determination and arrogance, and if she wasn't mistaken, then Noble had more than his fair share of both.

As he left the bedroom, she slumped against the wall and breathed out wearily. Fear was like an animal trapped inside her, as was her grief. And like the desire she felt for Noble, she had no idea how to handle either emotion.

Noble stepped from the kitchen hours later, after Haley slipped silently through the house, like a wraith in her long white gown and robe, her soft red hair a fiery cloud around her pale face.

He watched as she moved to the huge Christmas tree and slowly, silently, collected two presents from beneath it and walked to the couch.

He was careful to stay within the shadows. He knew grief. Sometimes, a person had to be alone with it, and sometimes a woman needed to be alone with her tears.

She opened the first, which he knew must have been Patricia's. The finely made wrap was a blend of russets and dark golds. He remembered that Patricia liked darker colors.

Haley brought the wrap to her cheek, closed her eyes, and let her tears fall. They fell to the material as her shoulders shook, and she whispered her sorrow against it.

Long minutes later, she smoothed the wrap over her lap and stared at the other, smaller present in front of her. Regret sliced across his chest. He wanted to go to her. He needed to hold her through her pain. Yet, a part of him sensed, knew, that for Haley to survive, she had to say good-bye in her own way.

She reached for the box and set it on her knee as she opened it slowly. She lifted the lid of the wide, black jeweler's box and stared at what she had revealed for long, silent moments.

"I'll miss you, Jason Lincoln," she whispered. "I'm sorry you never found out what freedom truly was."

Then she set the box on the table, pulled the wrap around her, and curled herself onto the cushions of the couch. She stared at that box as the tears whispered over her cheeks, and finally, just before dawn peeked over the horizon, Haley drifted into sleep.

Noble stepped farther into the room, moved to the table, and stared down at what she had bought Jason Lincoln. It was a bracelet. Hammered silver and engraved with a single word, FREEDOM. Beside the word was a lion's paw print.

She'd known Jason wanted a Christmas present. He wondered if she knew that the women of Sanctuary made certain every breed had a Christmas present at Christmas whether they wanted one or not, whether they believed in the holiday or not.

He bent his knees, resting on the pads of his feet as he stared at the present and at the woman. The wrap she had bought Patricia was snug around her shoulders, and the tracks of her tears still dampened her cheeks.

He would give her her time to grieve because he knew she needed it. If he allowed that to be stolen from her, she would never walk into his arms as he needed her to. And he needed her to do that. To come to him. To need him. To ache as he ached and to want as he wanted.

Shaking his head he straightened, drew the light blanket from the back of the couch, and spread it over her before moving to the chair beside her.

He needed a few hours to doze himself. He would catch sleep as he could, and as a breed, he would adapt until they caught the person who had wounded her so deeply. And when they caught him, Noble promised himself, he would exact vengeance for her.

Three days later, they laid Patricia to rest next to her husband and the daughter who had gone before her. Noble stood behind Haley through the service and the burial, and as her pain overwhelmed his senses, he pulled her against his chest.

Her tears soaked into his shirt, branded his flesh, and broke his heart. He rubbed his cheek against the top of her hair, and across the small area his gaze met that of the sheriff's. Noble's eyes narrowed at the flash of jealousy in the sheriff's gaze and the anger when he looked at Noble.

There was more than friendship in that sheriff's eyes when he stared at Haley. And perhaps hatred when he looked at Noble.

Later, as they attended the small service held at Sanctuary for Jason, Noble found himself frowning. The priest who presided over the funeral was compassionate, he didn't judge, and he spoke of Jason's love for

books and his abiding need for freedom. The priest assured them, Jason was free now.

As they approached the casket, Noble watched as Haley slipped the silver bracelet in beside the young breed, and his heart clenched.

Until Sanctuary, breeds had never had a burial. They were incinerated, turned to dust and ashes and, in the minds of their creators, forgotten.

This ritual that nonbreeds practiced made little sense to him, just as the ritual of Christmas still confused him. Breeds participating in either ritual almost seemed against the laws of nature to him. They weren't human. They hadn't been born, and the God that sanctioned the lives of others hadn't sanctioned the lives of breeds.

If their lives hadn't been sanctioned, could they still claim His benevolence?

Noble shook his head and followed Haley as she left the small chapel. He kept his arm around her, kept her to his chest as his team surrounded her and led her back to the black SUV limo that would return her to the warmth of the home she had made for herself.

Her grief was easing, but he had felt her determination rising. She had been quiet the past few days, but something was strengthening inside her. He could sense it. He could feel it. And the animal part of him stretched in anticipation.

"We need groceries," Haley stated later, as they neared the outskirts of Buffalo Gap.

She was aware of the six breeds who rode with them, their silence, their watchfulness. Just as she was aware of their suspicion each time they checked to see if Zane Taggart was still following them.

Zane wouldn't let go easy. He had imagined himself in love with her years before, and during that brief affair, he had driven her crazy with his protectiveness. It was always very subtle, very warm, but he would have tried to wrap her in cotton if they had stayed together.

And as much as she cared for Zane, the rest just hadn't come as she had hoped it would. As he had been certain it would. Breaking off their relationship had hurt both of them, and she had tried to ensure that she never placed herself in that position again.

"You can make out a list when we get to the house," Noble stated. "Someone will deliver the items you need."

Of course, why hadn't she thought of that?

Her fists clenched in her lap. She couldn't even risk going to the grocery store.

"Jonas will be waiting for us at the house," he continued. "We need to discuss what he's learned in the past few days. He's finally managed to gather enough information to give us an idea of what we're looking at."

She looked up at him in surprise. "He's going to tell me?"

"It's your life." His sensual lips tightened, and his black eyes flared with anger. "I need you to help me protect you, Haley. To do that, you need the same information I do."

"At least you're not going to try to lock me in a box then." She sighed.

The past three days had been hell. Of course her brothers as well as her father had eventually learned something was going on. Concerned neighbors, nosy citizens, someone had made certain they got hold of them.

Her father was screaming on the phone the night before as her brothers vied to be heard over him during the four-way call.

She still had a headache and she doubted Noble's conversation with them had done much to allay their concerns or their threats to head straight to Buffalo Gap.

"It wouldn't do any good to lock you in a box, would it?" He sounded mildly interested at the prospect, enough so that she shot him a warning glare.

"I know how to pick locks."

His lips quirked. "Now, why didn't I guess that?"

"Probably because you were considering the box," she muttered.

She ignored the amusement in the breeds across from her.

They were an interesting lot. The three in the driver's area and the three sitting across from them. They were hard-eyed, tough, and strong. Long hair, numerous scars, and all of them looked like men who could fight their way through an army single-handedly.

And they had all put their lives on the line for her. It was a terrifying thought. It was the reason she had promised herself that whatever Noble needed her to do, she would do. Because it was apparent he wasn't going to leave. Nor would he let her leave. That didn't mean she had to like it. And it didn't mean she had to accept the very sensual invitation he extended each time their eyes met.

"A box was never under consideration," he finally admitted. "We'll find out who is behind the bombing soon. We know the why of it, we just have to identify the who. Once we've done that, you'll be safe. And once you've testified at the hearing against Brackenmore and Engalls next month, then they'll no longer have a reason to want you dead. They'll be too busy trying to save their own skins."

She didn't know if she agreed with him on that one. It seemed to her that the hatred Brackenmore and Engalls would feel toward her would be reason enough to kill her. Thankfully for the breeds, she wasn't the only proof they had against the pair.

"Jonas has arrived at the house," Mordecai Savant, the Coyote breed enforcer who had arrived at Sanctuary six months before, told Noble as he glanced at the handheld PDA he pulled from the heavy uniform pocket at his thigh. "It's clear. No signs of unwanted visitors. The lions have canvassed the area, and everything's clear."

"The lions?" She glanced at Noble again. "You have lions at my house?"

"The natural lions can sense things we don't," he told her. "If they hesitate, then we know there's a problem. They're our best first defense."

"Proceed in," Mordecai told him. "Jonas is waiting in the kitchen."

Haley had to bite her tongue to keep from commenting on that one. No doubt he had sniffed out her stash of cookies agairi. She was going to have to bake more before long. Breeds could find the cookies faster than her brothers could.

"Is he eating all the cookies?" Blade Travers could never, in anyone's imagination, look boyish. But the anxiety in his eyes reminded her of just that. A kid's concern that he wouldn't get his share.

"If there are cookies around, then Jonas is going to find them," the breed simply known as Crayven snorted from the front seat. "And I bet Mercury, Lawe, and Rule are taking more than their share, too."

Yes, she was going to be making more cookies soon, she thought as she heard Noble sigh, almost with longing beside her.

"I know how to bake more," she finally gritted out between clenched teeth.

And why she was that insane, she couldn't imagine.

"You would bake us more?" Mordecai's eyes narrowed on her, as though he suspected her of lying.

She was definitely going to have to add to that grocery list.

"I always bake at Christmas." And it seemed this year, she was going to be baking a hell of a lot more than she imagined.

Breeds. Why hadn't anyone warned her it wasn't just their sharp teeth, biting words, or flare for killing that she needed to watch out for? Someone should have warned her to watch out for their craving for sweets as well.

She wondered if it went to their hips as fast as it did to hers.

She glanced at each one, then grimaced. She couldn't get that lucky.

Chapter 5

Hours later, Haley was baking cookies out of sheer desperation. Chocolate chip cookies, chocolate oatmeal cookies, and chocolate drop sugar cookies.

Haley baked to feel good, to think, and to hide. Tonight she was hiding.

Uriel. She'd heard that name before, she'd read that name before. One of the names associated with a god of death. The Grim Reaper. The taker of life. In this case an assassin.

According to Jonas, the assassin was suspected to be a breed still under the control of the Genetics Council that had created him.

The explosion had all his signatures, but the really telling mark was the so-far-untraceable e-mail sent to Jonas at his Bureau of Breed Affairs e-mail address. It stated that he really didn't want to kill more breeds to get to her, but he would if he had to. And it was signed, Uriel.

She had a professional assassin out to kill her. So what was she doing? She was baking.

The moment Jonas had given Noble the information the demeanor of the breeds guarding her had changed. The six under Noble's command turned hard and cold.

Mordecai had demanded Jonas have his pet released from Sanctuary. So, a full-grown, malevolent-eyed natural coyote was now on her property. Great. Just what she needed.

Weren't they supposed to be impossible to tame?

Noble had changed as well, and that change made her more nervous than the others. The look he had given her had held a promise, a dark, almost forbidden promise, that shook her to her core.

As he and Jonas retreated to the living room to discuss security, Haley retreated to the kitchen to bake. And to try to forget that look she had seen in Noble's eyes. The one that promised her he had given her enough space, and that soon, he would be crowding in even closer.

"Jonas is leaving, Haley." Noble stepped into the kitchen, his black gaze hooded as he flicked over the last sheet of cookies she was pulling from the oven.

Haley nodded slowly. "Fine."

She turned and faced Jonas as he moved into the kitchen.

"We'll have this taken care of soon," Jonas promised her. "We have several leads. Uriel was careless this time. Uriel has been erratic in the past few years anyway, so the successes could barely be counted because of it."

"But someone still ended up dead, right?" she pointed out.

"Only because the victims didn't know they were targets," Jonas stated. "We know. Now, I'll leave you with Noble. You have six men guarding you outside as well as that bloodthirsty animal Mordecai carts around with him. Nothing gets past any of them."

He moved to the back door, shrugging his suit jacket on over the white dress shirt and shoulder holster he wore. Once he had the jacket on, he seemed like any other powerful businessman, until you looked in his eyes.

"Noble, I'd wish you luck with the other thing," Jonas suddenly turned back to them, his gaze amused, his hard face almost smiling. "But I have a feeling you have that covered as well."

He left the house, and Noble secured the door behind him before Haley could comment.

"What's the other thing?" she asked, as he turned back to face her.

"Something more personal," he finally stated.

His voice was different. There was a rasp to it, a brief roughness that sent a chill up her spine.

She rubbed her hands together, ignoring the tingling warmth that filled her palms. Her hands tingled every damned time he was around her. The need, the desire to touch him often nearly overcame her common sense.

She nodded rather than asking about it. For a few minutes anyway – while she transferred the cookies from the baking sheet to the wire rack for them to cool.

"What is something more personal?" She laid the spatula down beside the rack and turned to him.

Facing him across the distance of the kitchen, she somehow felt braver than she had in days. Someone was trying to kill her. Someone who knew how to kill. Excuse me for taking a little initiative here.

"Are you sure you want to know?" Sensually curved lips quirked knowingly.

"Is it about that mating crap you tried to pull on me the other night?"

She hadn't forgotten. It had been in the back of her mind, teasing her, taunting her, and following her into her dreams when she managed to sleep.

His brow arched. "Mating crap?"

She lifted her hand, indicating he should stay in place, then stomped to her bedroom, jerked several tabloids from beneath her bedstand, and moved back into the kitchen and slapped them on the table.

MATING HEAT SWEEPS THROUGH

THE BREED COMMUNITIES.

BREED APHRODISIAC RUMORED

TO CAUSE UNSTOPPABLE LUSTS.

ARE THEY MORE ANIMAL THAN WE IMAGINED?

MATING HEAT RUMORED

TO PRODUCE ANIMALISTIC RESULTS.

The headlines were ridiculous, but they all reported nearly the same phenomenon.

"You read this trash?" he asked her, flipping his fingers over the magazines.

She crossed her arms over her breasts. "How much of it is true?"

He flipped through the magazines one by one. His brows arched a few times. Mockery tugged at his lips before he tossed the last one back to the stop.

"I'd say ninety percent of it is fairly accurate."

She blinked, then narrowed her eyes suspiciously.

"You're lying to me."

His grin was slow, and did nothing to still the nervous feelings rising inside her.

"Yeah, I am." He shrugged. "Probably more like eighty percent."

He pushed his hand into the pocket of his jeans and withdrew a vial. Within it were several oddly colored pinkish pills. He tossed the vial to the table and stated. "One a day, starting tonight."

She stared at it, wondering if the breeds were into poison.

"For what?"

He moved around the kitchen then, stalking closer as she refused to retreat. He came behind her, brushed the hair from her shoulder, and his head lowered, his lips brushing her ear.

"When I kiss you, the taste of that kiss is going to make you crazy for more. The hormone in the small glands beneath my tongue will be released into your system, and the mating hormone will begin to fill your senses. It's like a drug for sex. It's like a need that only one thing will ease, and that's my semen pumping inside you. When that happens, a small, thumb-shaped extension will become erect from beneath the head of my cock. It will lock me inside you, spill another hormone into you, then, together, they'll prepare your body for the few viable sperm breeds possess. That pill will ease the effects of the heat. It might even ward off the pregnancy that will come, eventually. It takes a while sometimes for fertilization, for a child to be created. But it always happens, eventually. And the heat never goes away entirely. It grows, day by day, year by year, until mates are bound so closely together that life without each other is unimaginable.

"Breeds only mate once, Haley. One time only. A breed has one chance, and one chance only to claim something in this world that belongs to him and to him alone. And my body is claiming yours."

"You're crazy." She forced herself away from him, rounded on him incredulously, and stared back at him in shock. "That's not true."

"Why do you think I kept such a careful distance between us?" he asked her, his expression imposing, his black eyes gleaming, glittering with hunger. "A year. I've tasted the need to kiss you, to fuck you, for a year. I've tried to drown my lust, ignore it, fight it. Nothing works, Haley. Nothing is going to work until I share it.

With you."

Her eyes were wide, shock resounding through her. His expression was tortured, almost agonized, almost convincing.

"Why are you doing this?" She stared back at him furiously. "I like you, Noble. Have I ever been cruel to you? Why would you do this to me?"

She was hurt. She stared back at him painfully, wondering why he would want to play with her in such a way. Okay, she gave the tabloids credit, there might be a glimmer of truth to some of it. But what he was saying was unreal.

Noble stared back at her, his jaw clenching furiously, the muscle at the side ticking in a resounding rhythm of restraint.

"You want me," he growled. "I can smell it. More than you've ever wanted another man, Haley. I'm betting on it."

She pushed her fingers through her hair and fought back her embarrassment.

"I know you can smell that I want you," she said uncomfortably, feeling the flush that worked up her neck and face. "I don't expect anything from you, but you don't have to lie to me."

His expression tightened, the flesh seemed stretched over the bones and angles of his face, giving him a darker, more animal-like appearance.

"Come here." He reached out for her.

Haley stared at his hand suspiciously. It was broad, darkly tanned, strong. His fingers were powerful and graceful, and she couldn't stop the clenching of her stomach at the thought of his touching her.

"Give me your hand, Haley." His voice hardened.

She lifted her hand to him. Slowly, he took the tip of her finger and brought it to his mouth. "Let me show you."

His lips parted, the heat of his mouth flushed over the tip of her finger and seemed to wash into her flesh. Then his tongue was curling around it, and there, beneath it, she felt the small, enflamed glands. They were hard, pulsing against her finger, hot and rasping against her.

His thick, black lashes lowered, sensuality and hunger suffused his face. And all he was doing was suckling at her finger, licking it.

Her finger heated, and she swore she felt a tingle of something more than simple pleasure move into her flesh. When he pulled her hand back, she stared at the dampened flesh, then back to him.

"Give it an hour," he told her then, his voice rasping. "It doesn't take a kiss to make the hormone move into you, Haley. Something that simple." He nodded to her finger, and in his expression she could see a need for more of her. "A kiss to your neck. A gentle taste of your flesh, and it will burn inside you, it will warm your desire more than ever before. And the sweet, sensual smell of your cream will make me crazier." His hands clenched into fists at his side. "I want you. I've wanted you since the moment I laid eyes on you a year ago. Want you until the need for you overwhelms everything else. That's why your security team is so large. Why you have six breeds rather than two working to make certain you're safe. Because here, in this house, the world outside isn't going to exist for either of us soon. Soon, nothing is going to exist except the hunger."

She stared at her finger and back to him. She licked her lips nervously, her breath catching as his gaze

sliced to the action.

"I want to lick your lips, too." His voice sounded torn from his throat. "I want to lick your lips, your breasts, and the sweet wet heat between your thighs. I want to take you until you can't deny me, or deny the hunger feeding us both. And it's going to happen, Haley. Very very soon. The only question is, can you accept it?" Could she accept it?

She stared back at him. "I'm not in love with you."

She wanted him. She had wanted him for a year. She was fascinated with him, fantasized about him constantly, but that wasn't love.

"Then we're in for a rocky ride, Haley." He sighed regretfully. "But it's very possible that I am in love with you. And I've never in my life had anything or anyone that belonged to me. Knowing you're my mate makes it damned hard to give you a warning, or a choice. But I'm trying to do that. In the next few hours, I want you to remember that. I'm trying, and for me, that's a hell of a concession."

He turned and walked away from her then, his broad shoulders straight, his head held high as he moved back into the living room.

There was so much pride in every movement of his body. Strength and determination, confidence definitely.

Haley collapsed into one of the kitchen chairs beside her and stared at her finger.

Was it a virus? Whatever that mating thing was? Just a hormone surely couldn't do what he said it could. She turned her gaze to the vial of pills on the table. There weren't a lot of them. One a day he had said. To help minimize the effects?

There were so many questions pouring through her mind now. And so many sensations filling her. It wasn't the hormone he had licked onto her finger that had her heart racing. And it couldn't be causing her thighs to tingle. It was a mind game. And she wasn't so simple that she was going to allow herself to be played so easily.

She rose from the table and moved quickly, angrily into the living room. He wasn't there. His bedroom door was open, and she moved there, determined to question him, to get the answers she needed. She stepped into the bedroom, where she came to a halt just inside the doorway.

For some reason, he had pulled his shirt off. God, why had he pulled his shirt off? Because before he could turn to face her, she had glimpsed his back. There, across his shoulders, were spots. Not freckles. Not scarring, but a unique, fascinating pattern of dark rings, rather like the spots of the Jaguar whose DNA she knew he shared.

She stepped forward. Her hands were tingling again, more strongly, the need to touch him almost driving her past common sense.

"I need a shower." He faced her, and across his shoulders and upper chest those spots continued. They were faint, patterned across his chest and arrowing down into his jeans.

She stepped forward and stopped. Then moved again. She had to touch them.

As she got closer, she could see that it was more than just spots. It was a pattern of the fine, almost invisible hairs she knew covered the breed bodies. But they were darker in areas, creating the pattern of spots.

Breeds appeared hairless, except for their eyebrows and the hair on their heads. Actually, according to her research they were covered in a thin, fine pelt almost undetectable, even to touch.

"Haley, you don't want to touch me right now," he told her softly.

She couldn't help it. She touched. She reached out, letting her palm smooth over his chest and feeling her breath catching in her chest as she felt the heat, the hard muscle rippling beneath his tough skin, and the ultrasoft feel of that darker pelt against her flesh.

"It's beautiful," she whispered, lifting her gaze to his as she lifted her other hand and touched him more.

"Don't. Haley, please." His hands gripped her wrists, but he held her in place, he didn't move her, didn't pull her from him. "You don't understand what that hormone does to me. You don't know how I burn for you."

"Why me?" she whispered. "Why did you choose me?"

His gaze was heavy, black eyes that swirled with dark color and hints of emotion. They gleamed with life, with hunger, and with more than lust.

"I saw you," he said. "A smile on your face, your pretty eyes lit with laughter and hope and joy. And you dazzled me, Haley. You always dazzle me. Confuse me. Draw me. It doesn't take love for mating heat to begin, but if love truly does exist, then I knew that feeling the first moment I saw your smile. I claimed you, when I never meant to claim anything or anyone that could be taken from me. I claimed you, Haley. Now if you don't get the hell away from me, all choice I would have given you is going to be taken from you."

Chapter 6

Noble never would have believed that he had the strength to hold back as he did. To allow Haley to touch him, despite his hold on her wrists, to allow her to pet him.

And she was petting him. Stroking her palms over his flesh, feeling the slight rasp of the darker hairs that made the spots covering his chest and arrowing down his abdomen before spreading out over his thighs.

They weren't large spots. Some were oddly shaped, some smaller than others. They were not human, a glaring reminder of what he was. Part animal. Bred from the DNA of the jaguar.

And at the moment he had never felt more like an animal. His cock was swollen in his jeans, thick and hard, throbbing in a hunger unlike anything he had known before he hungered for Haley.

His fingers circled her wrists as he forced himself to watch her, to stare down at her. Watching the latent sensuality in her expression as she touched him. She was enjoying it. Touching him with stark innocence, discovery, and joy.

"You're so warm," she whispered.

"Haley, I'm burning," he warned her roughly.

He didn't want her to stop touching him. He wanted it to continue forever. But he knew that wasn't possible. Not yet. He couldn't let her strip his control, because if she did, then he would take the choice from her. He would mate her, even knowing it was possible she didn't love him.

She said she didn't. But he could smell her. He had smelled the emotions, the pheromones breeds and mates created together, and he could smell the subtle scent of it on her. It made him crazy, smelling it, knowing he couldn't have her, that she wouldn't understand the animal he was and that he couldn't force her into the mating.

The animal that stretched inside him didn't care though. It wanted. It ached. It snarled relentlessly for the taste of her.

"If you keep stroking me, you know what's going to happen," he told her.

"Maybe I don't believe you." She looked up at him through her lashes, her gray eyes nearly blue as her features flushed with arousal.

With true, pure arousal. This wasn't heat-induced. It wasn't hormone-induced. It was her hunger for him. Pure and sweet and filling his senses.

"You believe me, Haley." He could see it in her eyes, in her expression. She didn't want to believe him, but

she knew it was there. "You think I'll hold back. That I'll let you pet and stroke me and keep the need I have for you under control. What happens when I break? When I take that choice from you?"

And he didn't want to. He wanted to luxuriate in the sensations of her hands on his flesh, touching him, stroking him. If only this.

She stared up at him. "Is it that bad?" Worry filled her eyes and he saw her intentions to draw back, to move from him, to leave him.

"I'll warn you when it gets that bad." Ah hell. He was insane. He had passed that point minutes ago, and he was encouraging her to go further?

"Are you sure?" Hesitation filled her now, and he didn't want her hesitation.

"I'm sure." He was crazy. That was exactly what he was, insane. The need for her touch outweighed everything else and made him insane to think he could control his response.

"I've been dying to touch you," she whispered as he released her hands and reached behind him to the footboard of the bed, gripping the wood tightly with desperate fingers.

He tipped his head back. He wasn't going to watch. He couldn't watch her.

"Touch me then." He could feel the sweat gathering on his back.

Her touch was like electric pleasure. It shimmered over his flesh, dug talons of exquisite need beneath it, and left him tight, tense, torn between stopping her and begging her for more. He would probably end up begging her for more, that was how damned crazy he was, a true glutton for punishment. Or for pleasure.

"Tell me when it's too much," she whispered.

"Gotcha." He gave her a sharp nod.

Too much had already been done and gone. Too much was the feel of his balls drawn excruciatingly tight and the head of his cock flaring thick and hard, and throbbing like a damned wound.

Too much was when he felt her lips touch his chest and her hot little tongue licking over a spot. That was too damned much.

Haley let her senses become immersed in the need to just touch him. Touching should be okay, she told herself. It wasn't a kiss, at least, not his kiss. It was just his flesh, just those intriguing little spots and the dampness of his flesh as she felt his flesh heat.

It was moving slowly, hesitantly into the desires that had never made sense where he was concerned. As though without even trying he touched a hidden part of her, drawing it free, and teasing it to be wild with him.

Without saying a word. Without touching her, without tempting her with anything more than a look or the quirk of his lips. He tempted that unknown something inside her.

"I love how you feel." She touched his hard, rippling abs with her hands, smoothed over them to the band of his jeans and back up.

She tasted him. She kissed his chest, licked at several spots, feeling the ultrasoftness of the tiny hairs against her tongue. Then, in a move more daring than she had ever considered, she raked her teeth over the flesh beside a stiff, hard male nipple.

As though she had flayed him with fire he jerked, a hard, primal growl tearing from his chest as his head jerked up, and he stared down at her.

His eyes were like black velvet, studded with even darker glimmer of lights. How could anything be darker than black? But something was, and it flickered in his eyes, the color overtaking the pupil and giving him a primal, primitive look.

As though the animal were so close to the surface that it would be hard to tell where human and jaguar separated. And she was tempting it. She knew she was.

"Is it too much?" She didn't want to torture him. She just needed to touch him.

"No." The word was short, the rasp in his voice was deep as his hands moved from behind him. "But if you can bite, then I can touch you as well."

She hadn't counted on that. Just as she hadn't counted on the throbbing growl in his voice as he said the words.

"How?" She needed to know. "No kisses."

"No kisses. No little bites." He bared his teeth, and she should have been frightened of those canines, which flashed at the sides of his mouth. Instead, they intrigued her.

How would they feel on her flesh? Raking over it, creating a flash point of pleasure and heat?

She swallowed tightly as he gripped the hem of her shirt.

"Let me take it off."

Her breath caught in her throat. "Is that a good idea?"

"Is any of it?" He tugged the hem upward. "Take it off or walk out of here. I can't stand here and not touch you as well, Haley. That's asking too much."

"No kisses?" She was almost whimpering with the need for his kiss though. Her lips tingled, her tongue ached to twine with his.

"No kisses," he promised.

She lifted her hands from his chest and raised her arms slowly, allowing him to draw the shirt from her. Sensuality wrapped around them heavily, saturating the air with lust and hunger as he tossed the material aside and stared down at her.

The white lace camisole she wore-in place of a bra adequately covered her, sort of.

"That's cheating." There was no grin, there was only need in his eyes to see her. "Let me take it off, too."

She could feel her nipples rasping against the lace, urging him to do just that. She licked her lips nervously and lifted her arms for him again.

He drew the lace covering from her, the material stroking over her nipples drawing a ragged groan from her. As he tossed the material aside, his hands caught her wrists, holding them over her head as he stared down at her.

"I want to suck your nipples." The blunt, blatant hunger in the words caused her womb to clench in response. Like a punch to her stomach, firing her nerve endings and sending pleasure streaking through her

body.

She wanted him to suck her nipples. Her nipples wanted his mouth on them. She ached for it. The flesh between her thighs heated for it. She felt weak, dazed, arousal pouring into every cell and whipping over her nerve endings.

"If I weren't a breed," he told her then, "if I were just a man, I'd lay you down and tempt you with my mouth. I'd suck your pretty nipples until the dark pink blushed a pretty rose. Then I'd go between your thighs and lick the sweetest cream, and know your arousal is just for the pleasure I can give you."

Haley watched the regret that filled him as he stared down at her. He held her wrists easily in one hand. With the other, he cupped the rounded mound of a breast, the tip of a finger stroking over the ultrasensitive, hardened peak.

Haley shuddered. She leaned her head against one of her arms as he held them both over her head and stared up at him.

"I'm going to melt to the floor," she whispered. "We need to stop this."

"I'm still in control," he rasped.

"But maybe I'm not," she gasped.

"I'll keep you in control."

His hand lowered from her breast to the elastic band of her lounging pants.

"Let me." He pushed them over her hips.

Haley stared up at his face. No man had ever stared at her with such need. Even in the height of sex, the few lovers she'd had hadn't looked at her like this.

She trembled as she let him push the loose material over her hips. She watched his face as he stared at the white-lace panties she wore. The French-cut, hip-high panties matched her camisole, and they were damp, wet with her need.

"Ah, Haley." His tone was guttural as she watched in shock as he knelt in front of her.

He had released her hands, but what the hell was she supposed to do with them? The bed. She gripped the footboard as his hands clasped her hips. His face was only inches from her, her flesh covered only by the lace of the panties.

"You don't shave here?" One hand lowered, the backs of his fingers stroking over her mound.

"No." Shock gathered in her voice that he would ask her.

She had tried it, once, and hadn't liked the sensation.

"Good." He crooned, his fingers stroking over her again. "So good. I want to feel your soft curls against my face. Can I do that, Haley? Can I feel your sweet damp curls against my lips? I promise, no tongue."

And she stood there. Stared down at him. And like a woman who enjoyed walking the edge of insanity, she let him draw the panties down her legs.

"You have spots, too." His voice was nearly strangled as he stared at her. And she did have. Freckles over the tops of her thighs and her hips. Not many, a few here and there. But enough.

"I want to lick them."

She watched his jaw bunch.

"I want to taste you."

He leaned closer, both hands gripping her hips now as he neared the dark red curls between her thighs. Haley had forgotten how to breathe, she was certain of it. Why else did she feel so light-headed, so dazed? So aroused. It was like a fire burning beneath her flesh now, searing her, destroying her senses.

"Haley," he breathed her name against the damp curls, against the engorged bud of her clit, and she jerked, much as he had when she rasped her teeth over his chest.

She knew that pleasure now. Like a strike of brilliant, white-hot heat tearing through her.

"Haley," he breathed again. "Get the hell out of here."

It took long, disbelieving seconds to understand what he was saying.

"What?"

"Go," he growled, his eyes still on her as he licked his lips, his tongue swiping over them. "Get away from me, Haley."

"Noble."

"I'm going to lick that sweet cream. I'm going to bury my tongue inside your pussy and to hell with your anger or your hatred later. Get the fuck away from me."

She shuddered, shaking with the need she couldn't seem to control. She couldn't move. How the hell was she supposed to get away from him?

"Go!" His voice hardened.

The deliberate control in his movements as he released his hands from her hips was frightening. His expression, his eyes as he stared up at her, sent her stumbling back from him.

There was lust and hunger, then there was the pure, unbridled desperation she saw in his face. He would do it. And he was close, so close.

What had she done to him?

She jerked back farther, bending to snatch her clothes when he crouched over them, his gaze brimming with fiery, intent lust.

At that point, Haley all but ran from his bedroom. As she glanced back at the doorway, she nearly changed her mind. Nearly went to her knees in front of him and took everything he had to give her.

In one hand he held her lace panties to his mouth and nose, his eyes were closed, and his expression, his expression was pure, wicked pleasure.

She had to force herself to turn and go to her own room. Had to force herself away from him. And she had a feeling running was only delaying the inevitable. He was going to end up in her bed. And he was going to be there soon.

Chapter 7

The night was hell. The next morning was an exercise in restraint that had Noble's control stretched to its limits. The day was gray, the clouds lying heavy as more snow drifted over the mountains.

There was more than two feet out there, and the city was struggling to keep up as more snow was forecast. Winter was driving in hard and heavy, unlike anything they had seen in years. The winds swirled and moaned as the icy cold tried to penetrate every crack and pore of the house.

Haley had lit the fire that morning. Noble had carried in the firewood from the back porch and watched as she efficiently set fire to the tinder, building the coal bed with the smallest logs before placing the larger ones on it.

She did it the old-fashioned way. She used untreated firewood, preferring, she said, the scent of the wood over the fumes of the chemicals.

And as the afternoon progressed, he found her more and more often in front of the fire, her legs curled beside her as she sat on the thick, heavy rug before the hearth and leaned into the fat, fluffy pillows she'd had stored beside the couch.

She watched the fire as though it held the answers to every question she had ever asked.

Behind her, the Christmas tree twinkled with a million lights, the gaily wrapped presents beneath it gleaming with brilliant colors.

He'd never experienced Christmas. He'd been out of the labs for ten years, but it had been ten years struggling to aid the survival of the breed communities. The feline compound of Sanctuary as well as the Colorado-based wolf breed compound, Haven.

Christmas had been just another day for him, until now. Until he saw all the careful planning and the joy that would have gone into it for Haley.

Decorations filled the kitchen and living room as well as the outside of the house. From the groceries that were delivered that morning, he knew she planned to bake. He knew she was praying the danger would all be over before her family arrived on the twenty-third. He knew there were more presents in her bedroom to be wrapped. A pile of them. And he knew she was fighting the same needs, the same hungers he was fighting.

He stood just inside the living room, having just finished a call from Jonas. They were moving in on the person responsible for the leak in Haley's identity. The information they were tracking through their own servers as well as spyware slipped into Brackenmore's and Engalls's computers was turning up some interesting information.

Information that might end this sooner than any of them imagined.

There was a reason why Uriel had been so erratic in the past years. A reason why Brackenmore and Engalls had found the information about mating heat and ultimately the aging decrease. Mating heat always slowed aging in mates. Because Uriel was definitely a breed, and obviously in mating heat. That damned phenomenon was enough to make any breed slightly off center, but for a hired killer, it could be more dangerous than to most.

"They've had a break in the investigation." He kept his voice low, kept a careful distance between them. "Jonas is certain he'll have the identity of the person behind this within days."

She tensed. The fiery scent of her arousal seemed to intensify as he spoke to her.

As she turned, her hair fell over her shoulder, the flames gleaming over it, turning it to fire as well. The sight of it was nearly mesmerizing. Dazzling.

"Within days," she said softly. "That's pretty fast."

Jonas was pushing. He was breaking mandates and laws and working silently to identify Uriel, the hired assassin who had attempted to kill her. Not that he would get caught, even if the spy-ware was eventually detected.

"Jonas made you a promise to protect you, Haley. He'll keep it."

She lowered her head, staring down at her fingers as she twined them together.

"And when it's over?" She lifted her head and stared back at him somberly. "What then?"

"Sanctuary and its backers rebuild the library, restock it, and you get your life back," he told her.

"The way it was?"

He inhaled heavily, staring back at her, uncertain how to ease the pain he could sense inside her.

"That's up to you," he finally told her.

The memory of her touching him seared him then—a flash of heat hotter than the flames as the glands beneath his tongue made it feel thick, unruly. The hormone was growing more potent, torturing him. The arousal was building inside him, and he knew he had only a short amount of time before he was forced to walk away from her or risk destroying her trust in him.

Trust was such a fragile commodity, especially for a woman. He'd known of matings that had worked when that choice was removed. Love had grown, and it had thrived. But he had sworn he would never take that choice from his mate. That he would never take that choice from Haley. But time was running out for him.

The choice had been taken from him a year before, when he first saw that smile. When he first scented her, first felt the glands swelling beneath his tongue and realized what was going on. And he hadn't left. He had stayed. If he had left, he might have had a choice.

"My choice," she whispered before shaking her head and lowering it again. "You don't make things easy do you, Noble."

"Was I supposed to make it easy?" he asked her, feeling the growing tension rising inside him. "Did you want me to take the choice from you, Haley? Would you have hated me for it?"

Haley stared back at him, having no-answers. All she knew was the need that didn't go away, the knowledge it was never going to go away. She had somehow always sensed that. That Noble would be the

one man she would never be able to forget, never be able to get over if she fell in love with him.

And that had been what had held her back.

"I wouldn't have hated you," she finally whispered. "But it's too late for that, anyway. I do know. And knowing changes things."

"It didn't change anything last night," he bit out. "You loved touching me, Haley. Tasting me. I saw it in your face."

And she had seen it in his as well. The pure pleasure, the hunger and the overriding primal lust that had filled him. A part of her was drawn to it. A part of her was terrified by it. And she knew, she couldn't walk away from it again.

He pushed his fingers through his hair before gripping his neck and glaring over at her. She stared at him with those solemn, stormy eyes, and he knew that the same torments plagued her. Not as intently, not as strong. But she needed him, she ached for him.

"I want you until I don't know how to breathe without thinking of it anymore," she finally whispered, her voice echoing with the ache he felt inside his chest. "And I don't know what to do, Noble. I never expected this. And now, I don't know how to handle it."

"I'm not asking you to handle anything," he stated harshly. "Look, don't worry about it." He forced a tight, hard smile to his lips. "I've lived with it for a year now and survived. It won't kill me."

Maybe.

He moved through the living room into the spare bedroom he used. The communications and sensor equipment was set up there. Thankfully, the snow wasn't interfering with it too severely.

The satellite imagery was a little corrupted, but it still pinpointed his team's position. Three breeds on twelve-hour shifts, three resting but prepared for backup. Mordecai's coyote paced the grounds, and there was nothing in the immediate vicinity to cause any alarms.

Even more, whoever the breed was that had targeted her for Brackenmore and Engalls, they had no idea that Jonas was moving in. That would make it easier. And none besides himself, Jonas, and Callan were aware that there was a six-man force on constant detail.

The mission rosters were listed and Blake, Shiloh, and Flint were listed as operational and out of country. Mordecai was listed as patrolling Buffalo Gap, which he did, sometimes. And John Talon and Micah Jones were listed as Noble's outside security team only.

The careful deception wouldn't last for long, but perhaps long enough for the assassin to feel safe and confident enough to move in for the kill. Because Noble was also listed as "compromised," the term used for a breed entering mating heat.

Mating heat was known to compromise a breed's ability to detect more subtle scents. The senses were so involved with the scent, the taste, and the need for the mate, that most breeds weren't even operational during the first months of the phenomenon. Only after the mating heat had leveled off, allowing both mates to function without the near-constant need for sex, were mated breeds returned to operational status.

They had laid the groundwork, and the opportunity for the assassin to show up. And he would, soon. Noble could feel it. And when the bastard made the move, they would be ready for it.

"How bad is it for you?"

He tensed as she stepped into the bedroom. He had been aware of her movement through the house, the scent of her, like summer in the mountains, flowing toward him.

"Like I said, I'll survive." He shrugged.

"Can I touch you then?"

Agony ripped through him.

"No." He had to force the word out. "Not yet, Haley."

"If it's not that bad, then you could stand for me to touch you," she whispered. "Why are you lying to me, Noble?" He clenched his jaw as she moved closer.

"Wrong time to push this," he growled, turning on her, glaring down at her.

There was no fear in her eyes, though he knew he must look more like an animal than the man he tried to be. The hunger was nearly out of control. As long as he kept a careful distance between them, then he survived it, but Haley wasn't keeping that distance.

She flowed toward him, dressed in soft pants and a softer sweater. She looked like an angel coming toward him, and he wanted her with a force that had nothing to do with innocence.

"The wrong time to push it?" she asked him then. "You're hurting, aren't you?"

He'd gone past hurting last night. He was to the point that if she touched him, if she pushed him, he was going to take. And he wouldn't stop taking until all the need burning inside him was sated.

"Do I look like I'm hurting?" He wanted her, not her pity.

"You look just as arrogant and as forceful as you ever have," she told him as she trailed her fingers over the footboard of the bed and stared back at him. "Maybe I'm the one hurting, and I need to know if it's the same for you."

He could smell her arousal. It wasn't yet scented with mating heat, but the alluring scent of her, the sense of her need, the pulsing tension that seemed to throb through her body snared his senses like a carefully laid trap.

"I ache to my back teeth to touch you," he snarled back at her. "Is that what you want to hear? My cock feels like someone's sliced it open I want you so damned bad. Is that hurting enough for you, Haley?"

Her stormy eyes darkened, her breathing hitched. "I need . . ." she swallowed tightly. "I need you, Noble, and that need terrifies me. I've never ached for anyone like this. I've never wanted anyone like this. And I'm scared. I'm terrified you'll walk away, be taken away, or decide later this wasn't what you wanted, despite what you say about the hormone. I'm scared of reaching out to someone who might only want me because he has to protect me, or who may grow tired of having a woman weaker than he is. I'm not a breed." She shook her head as her eyes glittered with dampness. "I'm not strong like a breed woman is, and I'm not as courageous, or as adventurous."

He jerked her to him. "Not courageous or adventurous?" he rasped. "What the hell are you then? You risked your life for Sanctuary, and now you're standing here with me, knowing what I could do to you. What is that, Haley?"

Her lips trembled. "Insanity. And I've been crazy about you since the moment you walked in the library and stared at me as though you knew me. As though you felt that same sense of knowledge that I did."

He stared back at her in shock.

"I've never wanted anything, never needed anyone like I need you," she told him, reaching up, her fingers touching his lips. "Show me, Noble. Show me how to be your mate."

Chapter 8

She had spent the day going over it. She had thought it to death, reasoned it around every corner and curve she could reason it around, and come to the same ending each time. If she walked away from this, if she let him walk away, she would never forgive herself.

Like Noble, she had feared for so long that she would never find that feeling that something or someone belonged just to her. That one heart beat for her, her heart for him.

For a year she had kept her distance, but only because Noble had kept his. It would have taken very little for her to go into his arms.

The mating heat was a frightening prospect. The tabloid stories, if they were even 80 percent true, were enough to make any woman pause. But at least she had an idea what to expect, she told herself as she stared back at him. At least she had a chance of finding that unknown something she had been waiting for so long.

"This isn't like last night, Haley," he warned her. "There's no stepping into this and pulling back. Do you understand me? Once I kiss you, it starts. I promise you, stopping won't be a part of what comes later."

"I understand that." She nodded. And she did, she hoped. Yet he still stood there, staring at her, his expression tight, arrogant, fierce.

She gripped the hem of her sweater and, as he watched, pulled it over her head and dropped it to the floor. She wasn't wearing a camisole today. She wasn't even wearing a bra. Her breasts were swollen with need though, her nipples standing out, hard and desperate for his touch.

She licked her lips and gripped the elastic band of her cotton pants.

"Not the panties," he growled. "Leave them on."

Her heart raced in her chest as she remembered the sight of him holding her panties to his face, inhaling the scent of her the night before.

Gripping just the waist of the pants, she eased them over her legs and stood before him in nothing but the thin silk-and-lace panties she wore now.

She shivered as the winds howled outside, and inside, the bedroom filled with steamy, erotic lust. His black eyes moved over her body as he sat down in the chair next to him slowly and lifted one booted foot to his knee.

He unlaced his boots slowly, watching her, simply staring at her, stroking her body with his gaze as she

felt her breathing constrict in her chest.

No, no man had ever stared at her like Noble did.

His boots thumped to the floor.

"Do you ever touch yourself?" he asked her as he began unbuttoning his shirt, obviously forcing himself to do the chore slowly.

Haley flushed at the question. "Sometimes."

"Do you think of me?"

She licked her lips nervously. "Yes."

"You play with your nipples?"

Oh Lord, she was going to melt to the floor. Each time he spoke, his voice was thicker, rougher.

"I do," she whispered through a moan.

"Gently or rough?"

She was going to turn into one huge blush at this rate. But she answered him, her breathless, "Both," filling the room with another layer of tension.

"Show me." He shrugged the shirt from his shoulders, and she wanted to lick his spots rather than touch herself. "Let me see you touch your breasts, Haley."

She stared at his body as he slowly undressed, watching avidly as her hands lifted to her breasts. She cupped the mounds and imagined his hands. She fluttered her fingers on her nipples, rubbed against them, pinched them lightly as he loosened his belt and pulled the metal buttons of his jeans loose.

She saw his cock before he shed his pants. It eased from between the flaps of his jeans, the flesh dark, thick veins raised along the shaft as the mushroomed head throbbed fiercely.

She pinched her nipples and moaned. Between her thighs she felt her moisture gathering, saturating her flesh, dampening her panties.

She wanted that. Wanted him. She could feel the ache in her sex growing now, the heat and the need almost painful as he quickly shed his jeans and socks.

Another moan slipped past her lips as his fingers wrapped around the shaft, stroked it, once, twice.

"I want to do that." She couldn't hold back the breathless words. "I want to feel you in my hands."

The need rising inside her was unlike any other she had ever felt. She had never wanted anything as she wanted to feel Noble inside her now.

"On the mattress." He nodded to the bed. "I'm not going to take you standing up, Haley. And if I touch you before you get in that bed, then that's exactly what's going to happen."

"I want to touch you." She moved to the bed, staring at him as she eased onto the mattress. "Just for a minute, Noble. I need to touch you."

She had to be kidding. Noble stared back at her, feeling the wash of white-hot arousal tearing through his system, and prayed to God she wasn't a virgin. He couldn't handle it. Right now, he wasn't a fitting lover for a virgin.

"Have you had a lover?" he asked moving closer to the bed.

She blinked back at him. "I'm not a virgin." She frowned then. "Does that matter?"

"Thank God," he muttered. "Move onto the bed. The middle of it."

"You're not just going to take me, are you?" she whispered though she did as he asked.

"Get real, Haley," he growled. "I've waited a year for this. Do you think I'm going to do anything but take hours loving that sweet, hot little body of yours?"

"First, I get to touch." She reached out to him, her hands touching his hard abs, feeling them tighten painfully against her palms. As he knelt beside her, she ran them to his thighs and stared at the thick, heavy length of his cock.

It only made sense that the dark flesh, fully engorged and ready for her, would be so damned sexy. He was sexy all over. He just couldn't help himself.

"Haley, the edge is close," he warned her. "Trust me, you want me to love you before I do this."

"Yeah, I do," she murmured absently, sitting up, her hands moving to touch him.

"Fuck. You're not listening to me." His voice was strangled. She couldn't breathe.

She looked up at him, opened her lips and licked over the thick cock head.

His response was almost violent. A primal growl tore from his throat as his hands went to her head, fingers threading through the strands of her hair, and he leaned his head back.

She parted her lips farther, sucked him inside, and moaned again. Because his taste could be addictive. He tasted like a mountain storm. And she loved mountain storms. Like the lightning rolling over the forest and the wind picking up through the trees. Earthy and clean, natural.

"Damn you." He breathed out the curse, his voice harsh as his hips jerked. He buried the head inside her mouth as she sucked him, tasted him, and loved every second of it.

She licked and consumed, sucked and moaned around his flesh and never knew a pleasure so great. As she sucked, she felt, tasted, the drops of pre-cum that beaded on the head. She consumed them eagerly. If it felt as though each taste warmed against her tongue, then she ignored it. If after a few minutes she could feel the need inside her raging hotter, then she went with it. Whatever his touch brought her, she would accept.

"Touch yourself," he snarled above her.

Haley lifted her lashes and stared up at him. He was watching her, his gaze fierce, demanding.

"Let me watch," he groaned roughly. "Give me something to hold on to, Haley, or I'm going to lose control here."

Her hand lifted to her breast.

"No," the word snapped from between his teeth. "Not your breasts. Your pussy. Spread your legs. Let me watch you touch yourself."

She had never done that. Never allowed a lover to see her touch herself.

"Lean back."

She moaned around his cock. She didn't want to stop tasting him.

"Lean back, Haley. So I can watch you. I promise, I won't take away your pleasure."

The skin was stretched tight over his face, and as she leaned back, she realized the pillows of the bed cushioned her shoulders and head perfectly. She was elevated enough that she could still pleasure him, still touch him, and he could watch her touch herself.

The eroticism of the act was nearly too much for her. Her fingers moved over the fabric of her panties as she touched herself through the silk and lace. She stared up at him, caught by his expression, held suspended by the hard jerk of his hips as he buried the head of his cock in her mouth.

"Yeah. Stroke yourself," he snarled, lust tightening his expression further as she stroked her fingers over her panties. "I can smell how hot that makes you. You're wet, Haley. So wet and so sweet I can almost taste you on the air."

He held her head with one hand, moving against her, his eyes trained on her fingers.

She gripped the elastic that circled her thigh, pulled it to the side, and touched her flesh. The tips of her fingers eased over the narrow slit as she pulled her panties farther to the side to allow for the careful circular strokes around her clit.

It was too much. Noble nearly roared with the surge of lust that shot into his system. He pulled back from her, forcing her mouth from his cock, his other hand pulling her fingers from between her thighs and pushing those glistening tips to his lips.

And he tasted. Soft, sweet cream. Haley's cream.

He tore the pillows from beneath her head and lowered his head to her as he pushed her arms over her head. His lips covered hers, his tongue sinking into her mouth.

He heard her soft cry in a distant part of his brain. The cry of a woman who knows she has no more room to run. The cry of a woman immersing herself in the hunger feeding into her system.

Her lips closed over his tongue, as though instinct guided her. Her tongue stroked against his, rubbed against it, and then, the soft, sweet suction as the taste of the hormone began to fill her senses.

His cum nearly pumped from his body as she began to suck his tongue. He felt his balls clench, spasm, and wrapped his fingers tight around the base of his cock to hold it back.

Not yet. He wasn't coming yet. Not until he could spill inside her. Not until he could feel the barb locking him to his mate, marking her, making her his. just his. No matter what happened after tonight, she would always be his.

Haley paused as the taste of his kiss hit her tongue. A wild, lust-filled taste, dark and potent, spicy and filled with heat. And tempting. Tempting her to sate the sudden need for more that whipped through her senses.

She drew on his tongue, feeling his lips slant over hers, the hard, drawn contours of his larger body moving over her. Had he just ripped her panties off her?

He had, and she moaned at the sheer eroticism of the knowledge.

He held her hands over her head as he kissed her, refusing to allow her to touch him. But that was okay, the taste of him was making her insane. She couldn't think past the need for more of his kiss.

To say the hormone pumping into her system now was potent was an understatement. She could feel it sinking into her, digging talons of need inside her and stoking the flames of arousal past an incendiary point.

"Ah, Haley." When he finally drew back, she was writhing beneath him, her legs clamped around the hard knee pressing between her legs as she moved against it. "I can feel you burning for me now."

"I've always burned for you," she whimpered. "For too long, Noble."

And that had been the deciding factor in her decision. Noble had fascinated, drawn her, and held her attention, solely, for a year now. Each day, each time he spoke to her, each time she saw him, the fascination had only grown. She couldn't walk away, not when so much of her had already become invested in this one man.

Was it love? At this point, she suspected she had been wrong the night she told him she didn't love him. What she felt for him went so far beyond what she knew love to be that she just hadn't recognized it.

And the night she thought she had lost him? Had anything ever been more agonizing in her life? She knew it hadn't been.

But nothing could have prepared her for the hard pulse that shook her moments later. Her eyes widened, her gaze locking with Noble's as he pushed her thighs apart with his leg and moved between them.

She licked her lips slowly, a hard groan shaking her as the next pulse of need shuddered through her body. She could feel her juices spilling between her thighs. Felt her nipples aching and throbbing, her clit swelling tighter, harder.

"Oh. This is different," she moaned, arching against him as the broad contours of his chest lowered and stroked across her nipples.

"It's different?" His voice was strained, his expression tense as she stared up at him. "How's it different?"

His hips settled between hers, the thick length of his erection pressing into her sex, rubbing against her clit. His cock was hard and hot, like living iron throbbing against her.

"It's like . . ." she gasped, arched again as sensation speared through her womb. "Like pleasure and hunger all mixed up." She could feel perspiration beading on her body. "It's like being . . . like becoming, a living flame."

She arched again, gasped, and felt the sensual contractions in her vagina tightening and building into her womb as Noble gave a low, ragged groan and lowered his lips to her neck.

She shuddered at the sensation of his rough kiss there. The light nip of his teeth, she had so wondered what that would feel like. His tongue stroked over the arch of her neck, her collarbone, then his body shifted against her, moving lower as his lips caressed over the rise of a breast.

"I've been dying to suck your nipples," he groaned, his hair falling over his face to caress her skin along with his lips.

Silken, feather-soft, his hair brushed against her skin, adding to the harsh strike of pure pleasure that raced there when his mouth covered the hard tip of her breast.

He sucked her into his mouth. His tongue rasped against the ultrasensitive tip, and Haley felt herself sinking beneath a tidal wave of pure sensation. Pleasure was a haze of exquisite agony and ecstasy.

It raced over her flesh, filled her with heat and, long before his lips began to spread a path of burning kisses down her stomach, she was begging him for more.

"God how I've wanted to taste you." His voice was a growling purr, dark and rough, as he pushed her thighs wider apart, and his kisses moved closer to the burning, tight center of her body. "I've wanted my tongue inside you, Haley. Licking all your sweet cream. Loving you and tasting you."

He rubbed his cheek against her curls and she nearly orgasmed from the sensual, erotic expression on his face.

He had released her hands, but she kept them above her head and stretched against him. She couldn't touch him yet. She didn't dare. If she touched him, she was going to beg. She was going to sink completely beneath the waves.

But her body and her need had minds of their own. Within seconds, her fingers were tangled in his hair, her thighs opened wide, hips arching, and she was pressing his lips into her.

"Oh yes!" Her fractured wail filled the room as he kissed her clit. Kissed it, as though he were kissing her lips. Soft, gentle, sucking little kisses that had her head thrashing against the bed and any thought of control or restraint dissolving beneath the pleasure.

They were wild together. She could feel it, their pleasure and their need blending and merging, creating something she couldn't have imagined as he began to devour her flesh.

He licked and stroked with his amazingly adept tongue. It flickered along the tender slit, circled the entrance to her body, then plunged inside her with destructive results.

She had burned before. But now, as his tongue licked and thrust inside her, she was blazing, consumed, arching, and crying out at the exquisite agony of pleasure. It tightened inside her, expanded, and before she could draw breath or prepare for it, the explosion of exquisite sensation tore through her.

Haley felt her shoulders jerk from the bed. Her eyes opened, widened, unseeing, her senses dazed as the most exquisite feelings tore through her. Sharp and vibrant, a race of liquid flames, white-hot destruction and dark, primal pleasure.

Noble snarled as he felt her release tearing through her. A year. He had waited a year. He couldn't wait any longer. He straightened between her spread thighs, stared into her dazed feature as he lifted her hips, bracing her rear on his thighs, and tucked the head of his cock into the tiny, spasming entrance to her pussy.

Fiery damp curls surrounded the engorged head as he watched, holding her hips still, determined to see this. To watch her body take him, open for him.

His teeth clenched as he pressed inside her. Sweat ran down his face, burned his eyes, and dampened both their bodies.

He had to hold on just a few more seconds. Just a little bit of control. He had to watch. Watch as he worked his cock into the furnace heat of her rippling pussy and felt his senses incinerate with the sensations.

She clenched around the throbbing head, so tight, so hot he wondered if he would survive taking her. Or if he could hold back his own release until he had felt hers once again.

Beneath the head of his cock he felt the ache of the barb pressing beneath the skin. It matched the ache in his balls as he pulled back, worked in farther, then in one involuntary thrust, the pleasure dimming every thought of control, he impaled himself within her to the hilt.

Her scream of pleasure rocked his soul. It was ragged, feminine, throttled. As though she could barely

draw in the air to cry out.

Noble shook his head and fought. He tried logic and reasoning, he thought of fishing and cleaning his weapon, but the thoughts disintegrated even as he tried to concentrate on them.

He came over her, feeling her legs cross above his hips, and gave in to the need striking hard and heavy to the painful erection buried inside her.

Nothing mattered but this. He had to fuck her. He had to take her. Hard and deep. And he took her hard and deep. His arms slid beneath her shoulders, his lips covered hers, and his hips jacked against her, burying his cock inside her with rapid, delirious strokes as she sucked at his tongue and moaned into his kiss.

Her nails were raking his shoulders, biting in and creating an ecstatic burn. Like a cat, clawing at him, demanding more. And he gave her more. He gave her everything he had as he felt her exploding beneath him.

Burying inside her once, twice, he let his release pour from him. Pumping into her, his semen spurted hot and thick as the barb stretched from beneath the head of his cock, locked inside the fluttering muscles of her pussy, and spilled its own, tremulous release into her.

He was shuddering with the pleasure. Jerking against her as his head lifted from her kiss, his lips lowered to her shoulder, and before he could still the need, his teeth bit into her tender flesh.

He tasted blood and heard her scream. He couldn't pull back. His tongue raced over the little wound, licking and spilling the hormone into the marks, sucking at them as he felt another, shuddering orgasm tear through her.

He had marked her. He had promised himself he would hold back, that he wouldn't mar her creamy flesh, that he wouldn't leave that telltale animalistic wound on her. But even as he remembered that promise, his teeth remained in her flesh. The violence of his need rocked inside him, the primal possessiveness tearing through him until nothing mattered, nothing eased it, until he was taking her again.

Chapter 9

"What happened here?" It was dark, the faint light that spilled into the room was courtesy of the bathroom light Haley had left on earlier. Just enough to allow her to see the amazing spots on his body, and the scars.

The scars made her ache. Especially the one on his chest. It wasn't very old, the healing flesh still looked tender to the touch.

"Bullet." He yawned as though it were nothing. "We were on the Lawrence estate a few months ago, and I took a bullet covering one of our enforcers."

She remembered the news reports of that. Callan Lyons had been wounded as well, and Cassie Sinclair, one of the wolf breeds who was often in Sanctuary.

The emergence of the wolf breeds and their Colorado compound had aligned two powerful forces. Journalists were forever covering the compounds, the strikes against them, and the struggle for freedom in the two areas.

"What about here?" There was a long, jagged scar on his side.

"Knife." His tone was lazy, still unconcerned. "Council soldier almost managed to gut me there."

She flinched.

Noble opened one eye and stared down at her. "I'm more careful now than I used to be."

She stared back at him in disbelief. "Why don't I believe you? You wouldn't lie to me, would you, Noble?"

"Course not." His hand stroked down her back, his fingers playing against the rounded curves of her rear as his lips twitched playfully.

"Uh-huh." She rolled from him, aware of his gaze on her, the lazy sprawl of his naked body, and the erect length of his cock.

She glanced at the clock. It was nearly midnight.

"I'm hungry." She was starving. "There's a roast in the slow cooker, if I throw some cut-up potatoes and stuff in, we could have a meal within the hour."

"Let me check the house first."

He was out of the bed in a bound. Smooth dark flesh rippled with muscle as he moved to the surveillance equipment. He checked the screens, then grabbed his weapon, and moved from the bedroom naked to make his rounds through the house.

Haley pulled on the gown and robe that he had collected for her earlier, when she had meant to finish dinner. He had distracted her that time. When he returned, she was belting the robe and pushing her feet into warm house shoes.

"I'll shower." He entered the bedroom moments later.

She almost grinned at his decisive statement. She had showered earlier, then had allowed him to convince her to lie beside him a little while longer.

While he petted her. Just stroked and touched her. For the moment, the incredible biting need that had filled her had eased, leaving her warm and languorous, a glow of satiation filling her.

Another unfamiliar feeling she thought as she moved into the kitchen and checked the roast in the slow cooker. Opening the refrigerator she pulled out the potatoes and carrots she had cut earlier that day. Emptying the water from them, she rinsed them and placed them in the pot.

Half an hour, she decided as she turned the heat up on the food.

She moved into the living room and refueled the glowing embers of the fire, watching as the smaller logs caught, and the flames began to lick over them greedily.

She turned and stared at the brightly lit Christmas tree before moving and rearranging a few of the presents beneath it. The bottom of the tree was surrounded by gaily wrapped boxes. Hanging on the limbs were small, Christmas-patterned bags that held much smaller presents. A silver ring for her mother. A necklace for one of her sisters-in-law, a bracelet for another. There were earrings for several of the college students who helped out at the library and almost always joined Haley and her family for a few hours on Christmas Eve.

The house was always filled on Christmas Eve. Her parents, brothers, and their families would arrive a day or two before, and laughter and joy always filled the air as they dragged mattresses from the attic and made room for ten extra people in the small house.

A smile tipped her lips at the thought of Noble's reaction to that. If he was even here.

She straightened one of the bags and frowned at that thought. Breeds weren't known for their Christmas spirit; she wondered if Noble would at least be patient with the friends and family who piled into her house that holiday week.

"What are you thinking of so hard?" His arms came around her as he pulled her against his bare chest. He'd donned jeans, but he was barefoot and sexy and tough and hard.

"Christmas." Her fingers curled around his wrists. "I bought you a present, you know?"

She looked back at him in time to see his surprise.

"Why would you do that?" he asked her, as though he truly didn't know the reason why.

"Because it brings me joy and always reminds me what Christmas is all about."

"It's all about giving presents?" he asked, his eyes narrowing.

"No, it's not about giving presents. Giving presents reminds me of what the season is all about."

"And what's it all about for you?" he asked her, still staring at the tree, his eyes narrowed, his expression thoughtful.

"It's about life. About celebrating my beliefs and my family. About the connections we don't always consider through the rest of the year. And it's about love. Our love for those who fill our lives."

"So you buy presents?"

"Or make them." She grinned. "Or bake them or cook them. Or simply stopping by to wish them a happy holiday and showing you care. For me, it's the joy in the giving, Noble. In remembering all the joys that have been given to me throughout the year."

He was strangely quiet then. He stared at the tree, then back at her. His gaze flickered. "What did you get me?"

She almost laughed. For the slightest moment, just the briefest breath of time, she might have glimpsed an almost boyish eagerness in his face.

"It's a surprise," she whispered teasingly.

He glanced down at her. "It's about tormenting those who receive, isn't it, Haley?" He growled. "Do you have any idea how curious a cat can get?"

"If you peek, then all you'll get is coal in your stocking."

Noble's head swung around, a completely involuntary act to stare at the mantel. And there was another stocking. One that hadn't been there the day before.

Something in his chest constricted as he turned back to her.

"Why did you do that?" he asked her then. "I've not bought you anything."

"You gave me yourself." She stared back as though there were a question in her statement.

Noble nodded slowly. "Every part of me." And every part of him reached out to her.

"Then I don't need anything else."

"But you gave me yourself as well," he stated confidently. He knew she belonged to him. The mating had been strong, already she carried the scent of him mixed with her own, just as he carried her scent within him. They were bonding, perhaps now, only physically, but she would bond with him emotionally he knew, if she hadn't already.

He saw things in her. In her eyes, in her expressions, in her touch. Perhaps his little librarian just hadn't wanted to admit to what she felt for him. But he knew she did indeed feel for him.

"And I love giving presents." Her smile was soft and filled with happiness. "That's part of the fun, Noble. Knowing there's a present and wondering what it is."

He stared back down at her, faintly confused by that.

"Breeds never celebrate Christmas."

"I celebrate Christmas every year," she whispered. "And on Christmas Eve, my entire family descends. My brothers and their families, my parents, and on holiday nights friends and neighbors are always dropping in. Every Christmas Eve we go caroling in the park, and we laugh and drink hot chocolate and freeze our butts

off walking back."

"And you do this why?" He fought the feeling of confusion that swept through him.

She was quiet then. The Christmas lights flickered over her face, multihued and giving her expression an almost otherworldly hue.

"Because I love doing it," she finally said, sighing. "Because I feel close to my family, my friends, and to my beliefs."

He nodded slowly. "You feel closer to your God," he said.

And she smiled.

"Dinner should be ready." She pulled from him slowly, catching his hand and drawing him to the kitchen. "And we have all these cookies. After we eat, I have about ten million paper Christmas bags to start filling with chocolate chip cookies."

"And those are for?" But he followed her, because her smile was teasing, warm and filled with joy.

"For the breeds at Sanctuary. Cassie Sinclair told me once that they go nuts for chocolate chip cookies. So Callan Lyons was kind enough to give me a number for the bags I needed, and I've been filling them for weeks."

He paused, ignoring the tug on his hand. "That's over three hundred breeds at the moment, Haley."

"And just think, over three hundred smiles when they taste my delicious cookies. I make very good cookies."

She did indeed. She made cookies that melted in the mouth and made a breed think of chocolate ecstasy. But Noble wasn't certain if he wanted to share those cookies, and her smiles, with other breeds. But one thing was certain, he wasn't about to dim the pleasure the thought of it brought to her eyes.

As they shared the late dinner, she managed to convince him, and how she did it he wasn't certain, to make sure those on duty were fed as well.

One by one they came in, ate a plate of heaping roast, potatoes, and carrots, with fresh-baked bread. They were sent off with a handful of cookies.

Even that damned mongrel coyote that trotted at Mordecai's heels was given a bowl of fragrant roast. And he stared at Haley with adoration as he stuck his snout in the bowl and lapped it up.

It was nearly four in the morning before she loaded the dishwasher, and Noble noticed her hands were shaking. He'd smelled the heat building in her, surprised it had taken so long. Normally, the second phase struck must faster, and burned hotter.

"Enough." He closed the dishwasher and took the dish towel she held from her hand.

A fine film of perspiration dotted her upper lip, and the light sprinkling of freckles glared out from across the bridge of her nose, her face was so pale.

"I think I might need you." She was almost panting, her nipples so hard they were pointed into the material of her robe and the sweet scent of her desire filling the air.

The need had lain dormant inside her for nearly four hours, only to strike in a matter of minutes. Which was unusual.

"Have you taken the pills I gave you?" He pushed her hair back from her face.

Haley shook her head. "The first one made me feel funny. I didn't like it."

"Funny how?"

She shook her head. "It gave me a headache. I don't like headaches."

"It shouldn't have given you a headache." He frowned.

"Can we discuss this later." Her arm curled around his bare shoulders, her lips pressed into his flesh. "I'm tired of waiting."

"Why did you wait?" He glared down at her. "You fed every breed in the city rather than taking care of yourself."

She stared up at him somberly. "I wanted to know what you felt for the past year. You held back, even after you moved in here. I needed to see how it hurt you."

Noble stared back at her in shock. "Haley, it isn't the same for the males, sweetheart," he groaned, clasping her face with his hands. "The physical symptoms aren't as severe. Baby, why didn't you say something?"

The endearments slipped out naturally. He barely realized he had spoken them, concern filled him, driving past his lust as he stared into her nearly blue eyes. The gray had almost disappeared, to be replaced by a grayish blue that fascinated him.

"Noble, kiss me before I have to kill you," she groaned. "If you'd just kiss me, I'd be okay."

"It's the kiss that makes it burn," he reminded her, clasping her face and holding her still.

"Then make it burn."

He took her lips with a groan. He licked over the sweet curves and picked her up in his arms. Stilling her heat was the greatest pleasure he could know. But this time, it wasn't the bed he wanted to use to still that fire.

Still kissing her, he stumbled his way to the living room. There, in front of the light of the fire, he laid her down on the large rug.

"What are you doing?" She stared up at him as he stripped his jeans, then knelt beside her and eased her robe from her shoulders.

"I want to take you in the firelight," he growled. "With your Christmas lights shimmering around you and the light of the fire warming you. I want to see you right here, watching me as I take you."

She touched his hair, her graceful fingers threading into it before caressing the nape of his neck.

Her arms arched gracefully moments later as he pulled the gown from her, then she lay there, naked, wanting him, her gaze languorous and filled with desire.

"I used to fantasize about you right here," she told him, her voice low, throbbing with the power of her need. "I imagined you taking me while the fire burned beside us."

He knelt between her thighs, his cock pounding a desperate beat of hunger as he let his hands cup her breasts, let his lips and tongue lick over them.

Her nails bit into his shoulders, and he felt the purr that suddenly dug through his chest.

He had never purred in his life. But as her sharp little nails raked over his shoulders, the sound exploded from him.

And Haley shuddered beneath him.

Noble's head jerked up, his eyes narrowed.

"Just a little one," she panted, describing the orgasm he knew had just exploded within her. Yes, just a little one, but spurred by the sound of his purr.

"You liked that?" He pressed her breasts together and lowered his head again, licking over her nipples as she arched to him.

"A little bit maybe," she breathed.

He drew one of the ripe little points of flesh into his mouth again, restrained the grumble, and watched her face.

She was drifting in her pleasure, dazed by it. Exaltation filled him at that look. This was his woman. She carried his mark, his scent, she hungered for him. Only for him.

He dropped a scattering of kisses down her stomach, moved to the swollen bud of her clit, and drew it into his mouth. He suckled her gently, sweetly. He licked it, pursed his lips around it, and purred again.

And he watched her unravel for him. The sweetest expression he had ever seen in his life filled her face. She stared back at him, her eyes dazed and filled with emotion. Her expression almost serene.

"My Christmas present is right here," he whispered. He kissed her thigh, lifted his hand, and touched her face.

She surprised him then. Her lips parted, and she drew his finger in, suckling at it, nipping as he watched her.

The pleasure streaked from the tip of his finger to the head of his cock. Something that simple, a caress that should have never shaken him as it did. Yet it did.

Rising to his knees he pulled his finger back, then stroked his thumb over her lips. He smiled as he moved between her thighs, came over her, and felt the folds of slick, sweet flesh enclosing the thick crest of his cock.

"Watch." He glanced down along their bodies, holding himself up, allowing her to see.

Haley watched as he took her. She hadn't been able to watch the first time, only feel. She wanted to watch this time. Watch as he parted the sensitive folds, his thick flesh pressing into her.

She saw him and felt him. Felt him stretching her, burning her. She watched as he worked inside her, stroking her, pleasure tearing through her with each inch she took.

She couldn't breathe, and she needed to breathe. She needed to focus, to watch the penetration, to feel him possessing her.

"I dreamed this," she moaned, her thighs opening wider, her hips arching to him. "Dreamed of you taking me like this, Noble."

"I dreamed too, Haley," he groaned, his hips surging slow and easy, impaling her inch by inch with fiery

destruction.

Pleasure whipped and tore through her. It burned with a white-hot intensity, cramped her womb, spasmed through her sex, and had her crying out his name. Her hips lifted with his, burying him deeper inside her, feeling the pleasure and something deeper, something binding and all-consuming tightening between them.

"Hard," she whispered, staring, watching her juices gleam on his heavy erection as he pulled back, only to press deeper inside her once again.

In his arms, that wild uninhibited woman she always dreamed of being fought to be free.

"Fuck me." The words passed her lips, words she had longed to whisper to a lover and had never had the courage. "Hard, Noble. Fuck me hard. Fast."

He surged inside her as she cried out at the pleasure. One hand clamped on her hip as she watched his cock draw back, penetrate, over and over, hard and deep, creating a friction, a pleasure she couldn't fight.

"Oh God yes." She writhed beneath him, pulling him to her, her lips at his neck, her nails on his shoulders as she scratched him in her need.

She tried to hold back, not to rake her fingers across his back. God knew, he had enough scars. But he marked her. He bit her. She could scratch. She could cry out his name, and when the rolling, rocking waves of pleasure began to cascade inside her, she could give herself to it, knowing he was there. Holding her, stilling the fear as she felt the extension becoming erect, the barb of the male breed pressing into her, locking her in place and spilling a fiery sensation inside her that flung her into another strong, deeper orgasm as his semen pumped into her, and his teeth pierced her shoulder.

And he held her. He held her close to his heart, his arms tight beneath her as he shuddered above her, growls rumbling in his throat as she felt something in her chest break free. As though her heart had expanded, as though heat burned from her very spirit, and Haley knew, in that moment, she had loved Noble Chavin far longer than she had ever realized she had.

The first time she saw his black eyes gleam with almost confused amusement. The way she felt when he watched her, the way she watched for him each night. The way her heart had shattered when she feared he had been lost to her.

"I love you," she whispered, and felt the tears that burned in her eyes. "Oh God, Noble, please don't be lying to me about this 'belonging' to you stuff, because I love you."

He jerked against her again, causing her breath to catch as the barb caressed nerve endings rarely subjected to touch. Miniexplosions cascaded through her, little releases that rocked her to the core. There should never be pleasure like this. Pleasure like this was addictive, it could become necessary.

"Mine," he growled at her ear then. "Always mine, Haley. My heart, my love, my soul."

And that was more than love, and why she hadn't known what had been staring her in the face for the past year.

"Mine," she whispered back.

More than love.

Chapter 10

"Aww, how sweet." The menacing drawl had Noble tensing as he pulled away from Haley, the air of danger, of death, filling the room as he turned his head and snarled.

Alaiya Jennings was propped against the doorway between the living room and kitchen. She wore her black breed mission uniform, which she had obviously not turned in when Jonas revoked her position as Enforcer. The utility-and-weapons belt was strapped to her hips and secured to her thigh. She was dressed to kill. And he knew, she intended to kill Haley. As well as him.

Noble felt Haley's nails pierce his side, felt the fear that began to flow through her, and the anger. She turned her head and stared at the breed watching them.

Smiling, Alaiya lifted a cookie and bit into it while she held the imposing, snub-barreled high-powered rifle she carried in one arm.

"The cookies are really good." She lifted her brows.

"Such a shame. Not many people can make good homemade cookies anymore. And now we're going to lose another fine homemaker." She clicked her tongue and shook her head. "Pity."

"How did you manage to get into the house?" he snarled.

Noble eased up until he was sitting in front of Haley, watching the barrel of the powerful short rifle carefully. He knew the mark of that weapon, though it had only been seen rarely. When explosives didn't work, Uriel always found a way in, and the hole that gun made was not something men survived.

"Now, Noble, that would be revealing trade secrets. Assassins never do that."

"Uriel," he muttered, disgust filling his tone.

Alaiya smiled.

"Are my men still alive?"

"Alive. Sleeping, but alive. I'm not a total monster, you know. Jason wouldn't have died if he hadn't seen me." Her giggle was maniacal. The girlish sound scraped across Noble's nerve endings and lifted the hairs at the back of his neck. "Oh and your security system." She waved her hand negligently. "So trite Noble. Did you think any professional assassin would have missed the buried cameras? Really, darling. I thought you better than that."

He was better than that. The cameras inside the house were still working, and the moment another heat signature had been detected, the information would have been sent to Sanctuary.

The cavalry would be coming, but it could be too late if he wasn't careful.

"You're not saying anything." Alaiya frowned as Noble felt Haley's forehead press against his shoulder. "You should be congratulating me on how I managed to outsmart you."

"Yeah, congrats," he muttered, and she giggled again.

Noble could feel Haley behind him, shuddering. Fear was whipping through her, but not panic. She wasn't breaking down on him, she was sitting strong, staying behind him, not distracting him. And son of a bitch, he felt a gun press against his back. Where the hell had she come up with a weapon?

"What do you want me to say, Alaiya?" he asked her, keeping his hands in sight as he watched her. "We knew it was a breed, we just weren't certain who."

"Poor Jonas." She sighed. "He's been racing around Sanctuary, trying so hard to figure out who it is. I even helped him a time or two." Amusement gleamed in her brown eyes. "That was so funny. I, of course, played the distraught mateless mate. Very irritated, very saddened that I had lost Mercury to that bitch Rio. He never guessed, of course, that he was being played."

"He'll figure it out," Noble asserted. "Did you figure out who your mate is?"

Supposedly, she had believed another breed, Mercury, was her mate weeks before.

She stared back at him blandly then. "I've always known who my mate was. The act was merely that, an act to throw Jonas and his enforcers off-balance. To allay suspicion, it was much easier to walk into Sanctuary demanding a mate."

He felt Haley whisper *I love you* against his back.

He felt his heart pick up, race in his chest as she began to tense.

"Come on now, Noble, let's finish this quickly." Alaiya straightened from the doorway, finished her cookie, then gripped the rifle with both hands. "I do want you to know this wasn't easy for me. If the little bitch had just taken her pills as she was supposed to, then she would have been dead by now."

The pills. Noble tightened. "You messed with the hormonal supplement?"

"Of course I had it messed with." She smiled. "Ely Morrey made quite a few toxic batches for us while under the influence of those drugs, you know. It was easy to exchange them for the ones Amburg made up for your mate." She grimaced. "The breed butcher is determined to become the breed savior. I believe he just might find a way to help all that nasty mating stuff." Her lips tightened at the thought of it.

"Don't like being a mate, Alaiya? How sad."

She grimaced. "Such a nasty exercise, that mating shit. And disposing of the pregnancy is a pain in the ass. Those hybrid bastards don't want to die, and I'll be damned if I'll carry one of them."

The evil that poured from her sickened him.

"You're going to die with her, you know," Alaiya stated then, the barrel of the gun lining up with them. "And killing you will be a treasured memory, Noble. No other breed has kept up with me nearly so well."

He stared at the gun, careful not to tense before he moved.

When he moved, the rifle exploded. The blast tore into the fireplace as he threw Haley to the side, jerking the gun from her grip and firing.

There was no time to aim. He hit Alaiya's arm as she cocked the rifle to reload, throwing her back, causing her to lose her grip on it.

"You bastard!" she screamed, launching herself at him. Noble fired again, and again. He could hear the coyote howling outside as Alaiya dropped to the floor, her gaze filled with shock. "It's not over," she wheezed.

"For you it is," he stated, watching the life disappear from her eyes a second before an enraged snarl rent the air.

The attic. How the hell had they gotten in through the attic.

The ladder dropped nearly on his head as a shadow dropped from the opening into the living room. Noble was thrown to the side, ending in a crouch, his leg swinging out in front of him, lashing at his assailant's feet.

He wasn't dealing with a breed this time. But he knew who he was dealing with. Alaiya's mate. A human male and, from his moves, obviously a former council trainer.

Noble came to his feet, his eyes narrowing as he found Haley crawling into the kitchen. Somehow, she had managed to jerk her gown on and was finding safety. Good. If she could just get out of the house. Just get to safety.

Hazel eyes narrowed on him as the man crouched beside the body of his dead mate. He screamed again, rage and anger, insanity burning inside him as a knife cleared the sheath at his thigh and he jumped for Noble again.

The fiery slash against his thigh had Noble cursing, but not pausing. His fist cracked into the trainer's shoulder, his arm blocking the knife as he pulled back quickly.

He jerked Haley's robe from the floor, twisted it, and used it to deflect the blade as he fought for an opening in the man's defenses.

Alaiya's trainer had been one of the best the council had, he remembered that. Mark English was a former black ops agent before the Council recruited him. He was well trained and had a taste for blood.

"You killed her." Mark jumped back, glaring at Noble.

"She would have killed my mate," Noble snarled back at him. "Get a grip, English. You'll die tonight, too."

English rushed him. At the last second, Noble knocked the knife from his grip, twisted his arm, and threw him into the wall.

A hard kick to his stomach had Noble flying back, then the sound of an explosion had him freezing.

He saw the shock on the other man's face, the hole in his chest, blood splattering the walls around him as he slowly sank to the floor.

Noble swung around, expecting to see Mordecai, perhaps even Shiloh.

Instead, he saw his mate. Her gray eyes were wide, her face white. She held the short rifle in her hands and stared at the body of the trainer she had killed without pity, then turned back to Noble.

Noble looked back at English, then back to his mate. Son of a bitch. She was holding that gun like a pro.

"My daddy is a former soldier," she reminded him.

Noble nodded. Hell, he had to be in shock. "He taught me to shoot first, worry about the fallout later. If you're falling out, then at least you're alive."

She was shaking.

Noble moved to her and took the gun. "I could have taken him."

She frowned and looked at the gashes on his waist, thigh, his arms. "Yeah, no doubt." She breathed out roughly. "But he was making you bleed. I didn't like that. He was going to cut something important." She stared down in disbelief. "God, Noble, you really need to get some jeans on. I don't want all those female breeds that I know will be here soon seeing you like that."

He looked down, his lips twisting in amusement. He was still more than semiaroused. Mating heat could be a wicked bitch.

He moved back to the couch and grabbed his jeans before jerking them on. Just in time to hear the kitchen door crash in and all those breeds she was talking about pouring into the house.

He jerked her robe up. Some of his blood was on it, and wrapped her in it as she leaned against him.

Jonas didn't bother asking questions. He stared at Alaiya, then at English, and Noble saw the heaviness in his expression.

"I should have known it was her," he finally said, sighing. "She managed to slip away from me. Stayed just out of range. But I should have known."

And Noble knew he should have suspected. They had all known she was lying about having mated a breed the month before when she arrived at Sanctuary. They had known she had influenced several of the tests that indicated she had mated a breed.

"She was good." Noble exhaled as he held Haley closer, his nerves still taut, still amazed by the sheer courage his mate possessed.

"Yes . . ."

"Don't you tell me I can't come in here!" A booming voice filled the house as Haley jerked in Noble's arms. "Son, you want to get out of my way before we jerk your head off your shoulders and rip your guts out your throat."

"Oh God. It's Daddy."

Noble stared down at her, then into the kitchen. Flaming-haired, gray eyes dark in anger, and followed by two more just like him, it appeared the McQuires had finally made it back to Buffalo Gap. All six-foot-five or better, powerful, red-haired, with blazing eyes and furious expressions. The three warriors stood glaring at him as his arms tightened around her.

Haley turned in his arms and faced her father as he shoved his way past the breeds filling the kitchen. He stopped in the doorway, stared at the carnage, then at his daughter.

His expression twisted in pain before it smoothed out.

"Are we going to have fallout?" he asked Haley, as she turned to him.

Noble stared down at her, expecting her to leave him, to rush to her father, the man who stared at her now with such paternal love that for a moment, Noble wondered how the other man bore the cost of having ever let his daughter out of his sight.

Haley sighed. "Noble will catch me, Daddy," she said then, shocking Noble, as well as her father and brothers. "Don't worry. Noble will catch me."

Epilogue

Christmas with Haley was . . . different. For a breed who had never experienced Christmas, it was frankly terrifying. A terrified breed.

He did fine through all the visits, Christmas presents, cookie giving, and more food than he had seen in his entire life.

They went that morning to Sanctuary and delivered cookies. Other breeds smirked as he helped her hand them out. That didn't bother him. Breeds were always smirking. Until they mated.

They exchanged presents with Callan and Merinus, and Haley even gave Jonas a present. After all, she said, Jonas had ensured that plans to rebuild the library were moving quickly.

They visited the elderly, they visited a children's hospital. Not just he and Haley. He could have handled that. No, it was the whole damned McQuire clan, with her father glaring at him and her brothers dropping hints about wedding ceremonies and dates.

Even that damned sheriff got a present, and gave his own version of a warning.

As he had told all three McQuire males: date, time and location were her decision. She was his. No ceremony could make or break that claim. And then the older brother had arched his brow and asked about the engagement ring. Little things, the brother sneered, like asking a woman to marry him.

Hell, he'd heard of it. He just hadn't thought of it. And slipping away from her long enough to find a jewelry store had been hell. Mating a nonbreed was complicated, he decided. It had its perks. Of course, the perk part was being severely limited by family. Thank God the new hormonal treatments he had gotten for Haley were making it bearable for her. Bearable for him was another story.

But when she asked him — she didn't demand, she asked — that he attend church with her, he nearly backed out.

"I celebrate Christmas because of my beliefs," he remembered her saying. "I give gifts in remembrance."

This was her life. This was what made Haley Haley, and he wanted to know all of her. So he went. A breed, his hands stained by blood, his soul in question, and he stepped into a church and found a beauty he hadn't expected.

The entire McQuire clan celebrated. Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. They ate and laughed, visited and shed tears, and Haley's tiny mother bustled around everyone with a smile and drinks.

And on Christmas Day, they left. They were all glaring at him. The warnings were coming more often. Hell, he'd faced scarier sights than three red-haired Scottish soldiers in his life. They didn't scare him. Yet.

And finally, midnight came.

The tree was devoid of presents now, but it still twinkled merrily. The fire in the fireplace glowed cheerily, and Noble thought he might have had one too many shots of that homemade moonshine the McQuires had acquired.

There was a definite glow burning in him. And when he looked at Haley, curled on the couch watching him, that glow only heated.

And in her lap she held a small, gaily wrapped present. His present he knew.

In his hand, he held hers.

He swallowed tightly as he moved across the room, knelt in front of her, and handed her the little bag the jeweler had put the ring box in.

"You bought me a present?" Joy lit her eyes as she took the bag.

Noble swore he could feel nerves rising inside him, but breeds were taught never to be nervous. It couldn't be nerves.

"Open mine first." Her eyes were bright with excitement. "I want you to see it. I've been dying of anticipation."

He took her present. He'd watched her unwrap presents all day. She did it slowly, she savored it.

He unwrapped his present slowly and savored her excitement.

The long jeweler's box surprised him. When he lifted the lid, he had to blink back a surprising hint of moisture.

There were few things religious that he knew or understood. But this one, he knew. His trainer had, surprisingly, been a religious man. He'd told them once about St. Michael. That if they were honorable warriors, if they were good soldiers, then the saint would look upon them benevolently. No matter their lack of soul, he seemed to think.

Inside the box was a silver chain and medallion. St. Michael, the patron saint of warriors. To wear his medallion was to call upon his benevolence.

He licked his lips nervously as she lifted the chain from its bed of velvet and released the catch. He leaned into her and let her secure it around his neck before lifting it, turning it.

ALL MINE, LOVE, HALEY. His heart nearly burst at the words, his throat thickening as he stared back at her.

"Open yours," he whispered.

She opened the bag and froze. Her eyes lifted to his, and he saw the hope that filled them.

She drew the little box out, her hands shaking, and opened it slowly.

A single tear fell from her eye.

"Will you marry me, Haley?"

She covered her lips with her fingers as he drew the diamond solitaire from its place, lifted her left hand, and pushed it onto her finger. The fit was perfect. The diamond glowed with a rich cascade of color, just like her tree.

"Are you sure?" she finally whispered. "You want to marry me?"

"Haley, you're mine," he told her softly. "My heart, my soul. Your laughter, your tears, your sorrow and joy. And your beliefs. I want every tie I can put around us, so everyone knows that you're always mine."

She kissed him. A hard, tearful kiss before she jumped from the couch and ran to her room.

Noble blinked in surprise. He stood up and followed her, stepping into her bedroom and following to the open bathroom door.

She was digging through a little cardboard box. Tears were dampening her face, worrying him, until she evidently found exactly what she was looking for.

She turned and held them out to him.

Wedding bands. One thick gold band. The other smaller.

"My grandparents'." She looked back at him uncertainly. "Can we wear them?"

He touched the rings and stared back at her before sighing. "Haley, you could put a collar on me, and I'd wear the damned thing with pride. These? Baby, these I'll wear with joy."

She laid the rings carefully back into place, closed the box, and turned back to him.

"I love you."

And nothing had ever sounded sweeter.

He touched her cheek, lowered his lips to hers, and let himself feel her kiss, the love, the acceptance, the joy she found in him. The joy he found in her.

Haley parted her lips beneath his, licked at his, pressed until he gave her what she needed. What she craved. The mating heat was just a low simmer inside her, but his kiss, his taste was something she would always crave. The wild, hot taste of him fed her senses. His touch as he pulled her dress from her body fed her lust. His need for her fed her love.

She pushed his shirt from his shoulders, tore at his belt, at the buttons of his jeans until she released the weight of his cock into her hand.

It throbbed, fierce and proud, as she stroked it. The engorged head pulsed at her touch, and his groan fed her need for him.

"The bed," she whispered.

"Not moving." He nipped at her lips. "I've waited too fucking long now."

He turned her, and Haley found herself staring into the mirror, watching his face as he moved behind her. He bent her over the cabinet, holding her hips as he bent his knees and tucked the head of his fierce erection between her thighs.

He'd only pushed his jeans to his thighs, she felt the scrape of the fabric against the backs of her legs. She stared into the mirror, saw the gleam of the medallion she had given him against one of the dark spots across

his chest.

Then her gaze lifted to his, and she was caught, snared, trapped within the heated black depths of his eyes. There, emotion swirled. Love, tenderness, sometimes confusion, and through it all was pos-sessiveness.

Her back arched as he moved inside her. Slow, easy strokes, stretching her internal muscles, burning them, raking across tender nerve endings with exquisite pleasure.

His hands slid from her hips to her breasts, stroking them, playing with her nipples as they watched each other, loved each other.

Haley curled her arms behind her, held on to his neck and tilted her head, baring her shoulder. She knew what he needed when he looked at her like that. When the pleasure was growing between them like a ravening hunger, tearing at their senses, at their control.

"Haley." He groaned her name, his head dipping, his tongue stroking over the small mark at her shoulder. His tongue laved it, his lips caressed it.

His strokes inside her became harder, deeper, the slap of flesh, the earth moans that filled the bathroom gaining in volume until Haley felt herself come alive in his arms.

This wasn't a little death, as the French called it. It was life. It exploded within her. It lit her senses with a rainbow hue of colors to rival the brightest Christmas tree and filled her with an ecstasy that she knew she could no longer live without.

It completed her.

And when the barb locked him to her, and his release spilled into her, it finished that completion in a round of fireworks that she knew even the Fourth of July couldn't compare to.

When she could see again, when she could think again, it was to watch his head lift from her shoulder, to see his face relaxed and infused with pleasure.

Merry Christmas, Noble," she whispered, touching his cheek, their gazes meeting in the mirror once more.

"Merry Christmas, Haley," he whispered back. "And thank you."

"For what?"

"For being the most precious present a breed could ever receive."

"Merry Christmas, Noble," she whispered, touching his cheek, their gazes meeting in the mirror once more.

"Merry Christmas, Haley," he whispered back. "And thank you."

"For what?"

"For being the most precious present a breed could ever receive."