

THE SHAPE-SHIFTER SERIES #1



SECOND NATURE

JAE



CHAPTER 1

QUINN PROWLED THROUGH THE DARK forest. She stayed in the shadows and slid from tree to tree, from shrub to shrub, avoiding patches of moonlight until she was far away from human campsites. She slipped her shirt over her head while she walked, impatient to get out of her clothes. Under a sprawling oak tree, she tossed the shirt to the ground. Her shoes and pants followed until cool air brushed against her bare skin.

Dropping to her hands and knees, she connected with the damp earth. Heat rushed through her. She clenched her fists in an effort not to scratch her burning skin and felt lengthening fingernails bite into her palms. Her muscles rippled, and she gasped as pain shot through her.

Jorie Price's fingers flitted over the keyboard, keeping pace with her character's movement through the forest. When Quinn stopped and shape-shifted, Jorie paused with her fingers lingering over the laptop and reread what she had written—or rather rewritten. This was the third time she had changed the scene. She stared at the blinking cursor, then sighed and rubbed her burning eyes. Was the scene finally working?

Her heart said yes, but her head wasn't so sure. Why would evolution produce a skill that was painful and made the creature helpless for a few seconds?

She reached for the delete button.

No. Deleting the scene felt wrong. She pressed her fingertips against her temples. *But how on earth does a 140-pound woman turn into a 280-pound cat?* Jorie slid down on the couch until she lay on her back and stared at the ceiling, the laptop balanced on her stomach. Her eyelids felt as if they were lined with sandpaper, but she couldn't allow herself to rest. Not before she had figured this out.

“I could really use some help from a cat expert,” she said to Agatha, who had curled up at the end of the worn, comfortable couch.

Agatha eyed the laptop as if that would make the hated machine disappear from the favored spot on Jorie’s lap. When Jorie looked at her, the cat turned and licked her bushy tail.

“And you, Emmy?” Jorie’s gaze wandered to the calico ambling toward the kitchen. “No words of advice for your favorite can opener?”

“Meow,” the cat said but didn’t elaborate. She walked on, looking over her shoulder as if to make sure that Jorie would follow her into the kitchen to feed her.

“Very helpful, thanks. And I just fed you half an hour ago, so that ‘I’m starving’ act is wasted on me.” She forced her tired eyes to focus on the screen, but instead of the scene, images from her nightmares flashed through her mind. Shivering, she shook her head to get rid of the images. “I need a break.” She saved what she had written so far and opened her e-mail program. Despite the gnawing feeling in her belly that told her she should be writing, she clicked on a new e-mail from her beta reader. Maybe Ally could help.

Hi, J. W.,

*Still having problems with the story? Have you thought about putting it away for a while? I know it works for some authors. Maybe write a short story or get started on a new project. You could even start the research on a sequel to *A Vampire’s Heart*. I know your readers would love that.*

Let me know what you decide.

Ally

Jorie shook her pounding head. Maybe putting the story away for a while worked for other writers. But not for her. Not with this book. For reasons she couldn’t fully explain to herself—and certainly not to Ally, she needed to get this novel written. Now.

She dashed off a quick answer to Ally and then reopened her manuscript file. “No admitting defeat.”

Her cell phone rang before she had written a single word, shattering the silence in the living room.

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Jorie groaned. She set the laptop on the coffee table and got up from the couch before Agatha could settle down on her lap. Barefoot, she padded into the bedroom, where her cell phone was charging.

“Hi, Mom,” she said. Looking at the display wasn’t necessary. Only her mother and her agent had her cell phone number, and since Peter had dropped her when she had refused to give up on her new novel, that left one option.

“Jorie, how are you, darling?” Her mother’s warm voice came through the receiver.

I have a headache as if I’m about to give birth to Athena; my nightmares haven’t let me sleep through the night in weeks, and I have a serious case of writer’s block. Aloud she said, “I’m fine, Mom.”

“Are you getting enough sleep?” her mother asked.

“Yes, Mom,” Jorie said. “Must be all that fresh air out here.”

“Good. And have you met someone?”

Jorie sighed and looked out her bedroom window. Her neighbor was stacking wood in the back of his pickup truck, and the fall wind rustled through the white pines at the edge of her yard, but otherwise, nothing moved. Osgrrove wasn’t exactly a popular destination for most people her age, but coming here had felt right. “Please, stop trying to set me up, Mom. I’m not here to meet someone. I’m here to write.”

“I know, but...”

“Stop worrying. I’m fine on my own,” Jorie said. “Listen, I have to get back to my writing. I’ll call you tomorrow, okay?” She wasn’t in the mood to answer more of her mother’s worried questions about the way she lived her life. Guilt scratched at the edge of her consciousness, but she pushed it away and ended the call.

Back in the living room, the screen saver had come on. A small, red cartoon cat was chasing a ball of wool all over the laptop’s screen. “That’s how I feel.” Jorie lifted the notebook onto her lap. “Chasing the elusive ball of wool, but never quite catching it.” She stroked her fingers over the touch pad and watched as the red kitten was replaced with the text of her story. “Don’t think. Just write.”

Her fingers found their places on the well-worn keyboard, and she started to write. If she could get this book out of her head and onto the page, maybe the nightmares would finally leave her alone.

* * *

Ally stared at the e-mail that might as well be J.W.'s death warrant. She reread it, halfway hoping the text had changed. Of course, it hadn't.

Thanks, Ally. I know you mean well, but I can't give up on this book. I hope you'll hang in there with me.

J.W.

Ally whirled her desk chair around and jumped up. *Dammit. You're not leaving me any choice.*

The walls of her apartment seemed to close in on her. Her skin itched with the urge to shift, to leave the apartment and everything in it behind, and to lose herself in the simpler existence of being a wolf. Things were so much easier when she was running with the pack. If she shifted, she wouldn't just strip off her human skin but also the guilt and sorrow weighing her down. In animal form, things were clear and simple: her loyalty was to her pack, and she was doing what was necessary to ensure the survival of their species.

In human form, things were not so black-and-white.

With a sigh, she sank onto the desk chair. *Wishful thinking.* Running away wouldn't solve the problem. At some point, she would have to shift back, and the guilt would still be there, waiting.

She opened the prologue of J.W.'s work-in-progress. *This book is dangerous.* She had to warn the council before J.W. could publish it.

Ally picked up the phone and punched in her alpha's phone number. Her finger hovered over the last button before she pressed it. *I'm sorry, J.W.*

CHAPTER 2

GRIFFIN WESTMORE PROWLED ACROSS THE manicured lawn of the cemetery. Golden fall sunlight danced around her, but she couldn't enjoy it. At least the sun gave her an excuse to hide her eyes behind her sunglasses. She stopped under a sprawling oak tree, behind the last row of mourners. More than a hundred people had congregated around the freshly dug grave. A chill settled over her. *So many lives touched...*

The scent of grief swirled around her, making her dizzy. For a moment, she thought about leaving, but she forced herself to stay. Attending the funeral was the least she could do to pay respect to the man she had killed.

A gray-haired woman with red-rimmed eyes stood on the opposite side of the grave to deliver the eulogy. "My son Michael was always quick with a joke or a helping hand. He still had so many plans—taking Katie to Disneyland, buying the corvette he always wanted, and most of all seeing his second child being born." She pressed a hand to her mouth and paused as sobs shook her.

Griffin stared at the gleaming mahogany casket next to the open grave. During her mission, it had been easy to think of him as a target, but he had been a person with dreams and a family. She swallowed as she took in the swollen belly of Michael Wiley's young wife. *Shit, she's pregnant.*

"His life was full of laughter and love, and his death..." His mother blew her nose. "Being killed by a burglar when there were just a few dollars in the house...so senseless."

Griffin lowered her head. *Senseless? No.* Killing him had been necessary. He had seen two careless Wrasa teenagers shift shape. Thankfully, the police officer he had reported it to had been a shape-shifter too, but Michael Wiley hadn't given up. He'd started hanging around the kids' neighborhood with a camera. Only a matter of time before he captured something on video

or he could convince his wife that he wasn't just imagining things because he was stressed. *You did what you had to.* She had killed a human twice before, and she would probably have to do it again, but it wasn't getting any easier. Quite the opposite. She hadn't been able to sleep since she had killed Michael Wiley.

"I will always love you, Mikey." Wiley's mother touched the coffin one last time and returned to the rest of her family.

Pulleys creaked as the casket was lowered, the scent of damp earth mingling with the sickeningly sweet smell of death.

Crying openly, Michael Wiley's wife guided a blond little girl toward the open grave. The girl pressed a kiss to the head of a stuffed bear and then dropped it on top of the coffin. Her sobs sounded unbearably loud to Griffin's sensitive ears.

Her jacket seemed to tighten around Griffin's chest. She sucked air into her lungs. *Killing him saved many other children from having to go through this.* If humans found out about their existence, they would think nothing about killing Wrasa like the animals they could turn into.

Someone tugged on her sleeve.

Griffin whirled around and nearly lunged at the elderly man next to her. She forced her instincts back under control.

"My condolences for your loss." The elderly man nodded toward the grave. "Did you know him well?"

"No, not long at all." Two seconds of startled eye contact when he had looked up and found a stranger in his home, then it had been over already. One jerk of her powerful arms and his spine had snapped like a dry branch. He hung limply in her grip, and she stared down at him for a moment before she sprang into action to hide all traces of her presence before the family came home. "But it was a very intense acquaintance."

The old man reached out to pat her hand, then apparently thought better of it and just gave her a pained smile.

Automatically, Griffin smiled back, but it felt more like a baring of teeth. Still hiding behind her sunglasses, she turned and walked toward her car, which she had parked next to the cemetery.

A man leaned against her car, his back to Griffin.

A snarl rose up Griffin's chest. *Mine.* She bounded up to the man, intent on getting him to take his paws off her car.

The man turned. The wind blew his thick, white hair, streaked with wheat-colored strands, into his lean face.

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Griffin frowned but gave up her aggressive stance. What was her commanding officer doing here?

“I knew I’d find you here,” Cedric Jennings said. “Still haven’t given up this strange ritual of going to the funerals?” He clasped his hands behind his back in a gesture that lifted his head up high, straightened his back, and made his shoulders look broader.

Griffin grinned. His posturing was wasted on her. In a fair fight, a liger could make an appetizer out of a wolf. While she respected him as the commander of her Saru unit, she could outsmart and outfight him anytime. Just his ambition surpassed her own. “We each have our own way to wrap up missions.”

“No time to dwell on this mission. We already have a new one.”

“Did one of our cubs get careless again?” Since Griffin was a forest ranger, the Saru often called her to make deer cadavers disappear before someone else could find them and realize they had been killed by something far more dangerous than one of the national forest’s bobcats.

“No. We’re needed for something much more important.” Jennings fanned out two plane tickets and pressed one of them into her hands.

Griffin pulled off the sunglasses and squinted down at the plane ticket. Her feline eyes needed a second to decipher the small print. “Boise, Idaho?” That could mean only one thing: the council wanted to see her. Her lips pulled back in a silent snarl. “Do you know what they want?”

“They just told me to take the next plane, so it must be something important.” The glow of hunting fever already shimmered in Jennings’s eyes. For Cedric Jennings, offspring of a long line of high-ranking Saru, the upcoming mission was just another opportunity to further his career.

Griffin, however, wasn’t so eager to be sent out again. She had hoped to have a few weeks to herself to wander through the forest in her liger form so she could forget the guilt weighing down her human form. Having Jennings accompany her when she was used to going on solo missions wasn’t helping to improve her mood either.

“Let’s go,” Jennings said and strode toward his car.

* * *

The council offices were in a nondescript building in an unremarkable neighborhood of Boise. Jennings had called ahead as soon as he and Griffin left the airport, and a man was waiting in the lobby to greet them. “They’re waiting for you,” he said.

There was something familiar about him, but Griffin didn't remember his face. She opened her mouth and drew in his scent. *Weird*. Her normally reliable nose didn't give her any clue about the stranger's ancestry, and she slowed her steps to study him.

His submissive stance was typical for a coyote-shifter, but his eyes were all wolf.

He's a hybrid. Surprise almost stopped her from entering the elevator behind him and Jennings. She hadn't expected to meet another hybrid in the council building.

"I'm Rufus Tolliver," he said. "Your sister's aide."

Kylin appointed a hybrid as her aide? That had probably caused quite a stir in the council. *It seems she grew some whiskers since the last time I saw her*.

The elevator carried them to the top floor. When the doors slid open, Rufus led them along a corridor, ushered them into the council chamber, and closed the door behind them.

Agitated voices leaped at Griffin, making her flinch back. Amazing how just nine people could make so much noise.

The council members were sitting at a round table that emphasized their equality. Most of them were squabbling and shouting. Only one of the councilors looked up as Griffin and Jennings entered.

Kylin. Griffin gave her twin sister a reluctant nod. How ironic it was to see Ky here. Fathering her and Griffin—hybrids—had cost their father his seat on the council, and now Kylin was a councilor.

"Let's wait until there's a break in the discussion," Jennings said.

Griffin leaned against the back wall and watched the councilors. She wrinkled her nose. *Great hunter. They are arguing like a gaggle of human kids on the playground*.

"I demand that the number of Saru be increased," Jeff Madsen, the council's speaker, shouted over the heated arguments of his colleagues. "They also need more autonomy to react more swiftly to any dangers caused by humans."

Next to Griffin, Cedric Jennings gave a satisfied grunt.

"More power to the Saru?" the representative of the coyote-shifters said. His brow knitted. "We just added ten new units last year. If we keep on doing that, we'll end up with a police state."

Jeff Madsen rose from his chair. The slowness of his movements enhanced the air of danger and superiority surrounding him. "And if we don't do it, we'll end up extinct. The maharsi protected us in the past, but now the last

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dream seers are gone, so we have to eliminate human threats before they become lethal.”

“Killing humans won’t solve our problems,” Kylin said. “It’s not right, and it won’t help. We’re doing this to ourselves.”

Griffin lifted a brow. She hadn’t expected her sister to speak out against the more powerful councilors. Kylin had always been a diplomat, a mediator, trying to fit in and not be noticed.

“Ourselves?” the Kasari councilor, representative of the lion-shifters, roared.

Kylin ducked, but she didn’t give up. “Our paranoia only makes the problem worse. Hiding doesn’t protect us anymore.”

“Not that argument again.” Madsen glowered at Kylin like a father reining in his unruly pup. “Hiding our existence is why we’re still here. There’s no telling what humans would do if they learn that we exist.”

Kylin huffed. “It can’t be worse than what hiding is doing to us right now.” She pointed at the stack of paper in front of her. “Twenty-three of us died last year because they refused to seek treatment in human hospitals, knowing it would reveal our existence. And don’t even get me started on what hiding does to our culture, our language, and our values. We’re losing more than our lives.” When she stood, her reddish-golden hair rose high above the other councilors like a warning beacon. “We’re losing our identity.”

“If we’re losing our identity, it’s because of the humans.” Jeff Madsen growled. “They killed the maharsi. You should know better than anyone else how that affected our culture.”

A few of the councilors turned and glared at Kylin.

Griffin knew what they were thinking. If Kylin and Griffin’s mother hadn’t diluted the last line of dream seers by mating with a Kasari, her daughters might have been born with the talent.

Long-forgotten protective instincts flared up in Griffin. Her muscles tensed, but she forced herself to stay where she was. Protecting Kylin wasn’t her role anymore.

“All right. Let’s talk about this later.” Madsen thumped his fist on the table like a judge’s gavel, ending the discussion. “Tas Jennings, Saru Westmore.” He waved them forward.

Griffin followed Jennings’s example, pulled up a chair, and eased onto it. She didn’t want to aggravate the already explosive atmosphere by impolitely staring down at the councilors.

“We have a problem,” Madsen said.

Big surprise. They had a problem, and they expected her and Jennings to solve it. *Oh, yeah. That's the Saru—elite soldiers, investigators, protectors of the First Law, and jacks-of-all-trades for whatever the council wants us to do.*

“Have you ever heard of,” Jeff Madsen glanced down at the laptop on the table, “J.W. Price?”

The initials indicated a human. Wrasa used neither middle names nor initials.

Why do they expect us to have heard of J.W. Price? Is he or she some kind of celebrity? Is this a case that needs to be handled with care because human media will be all over it?

“J.W. Price? No, that doesn’t ring a bell,” Jennings answered for both of them.

“Then you better get familiar with her because she...” Madsen turned the laptop around for them to see. “...is our problem.”

Griffin had expected one of the usual dossiers with a photo of their target, but instead Madsen was showing them a website. She leaned forward to read the text displayed on the screen. It was an author’s website. Colorful covers presented novels with titles such as *A Vampire’s Heart*. “A romance writer?” Griffin couldn’t imagine what kind of problem a writer of trivial romances might cause for the council. She nodded at the vampire fangs on the cover. “Her prose not pointed enough?”

“Very funny.” Madsen snarled.

The other councilors threw disapproving glances at her.

A sharp pain in her foot let her know that Jennings didn’t approve of her sense of humor either.

Griffin wiped the grin off her face but still couldn’t see where the problem was. Why would it matter to them what some human writer wrote about fictional creatures? *Unless...* “Let me guess. Her newest book is titled *A Shape-Shifter’s Soul*.”

She got somber glances from the nine councilors.

“The working title is *Song of Life*,” Madsen answered, “but yes, she’s writing about creatures that can turn into cougars, bears, lions, tigers, jaguars, foxes, bobcats, coyotes,” he nodded at each of his fellow councilors in turn, then thumped his own chest, “and wolves. She’s coming much too close to the truth for my liking.”

Griffin still didn’t see how this was a threat to their secret existence. “So what if some writer with an overactive imagination coincidentally gets one

or two details right? Thousands of writers have written about shape-shifters, and no one paid them any attention. It's just fiction."

"But this time it's more than getting a few details right. She describes things in the manuscript that none of the other writers got right."

"For example?" Jennings asked. His gaze was glued to the laptop.

"In the prologue, she describes a two-decade-long feud between the shifter subspecies she calls the Kari and the Pogar that ended in 1511."

Griffin squinted. History had never been her strong suit, but wasn't that the year her ancestors, the Kasari and the Puwar, had finally stopped fighting each other?

"And that's just one of many things she gets right in the prologue." Madsen's silver hair flew in all directions when he shook his head. "It can't be mere coincidence. Something else is going on here, and we have to find out what it is before the book is published. This is where you two come in."

"How did you get the information if the book isn't even published yet?" Griffin asked, not reacting to the implied assignment. She wasn't eager to go on this crazy-sounding mission.

"Allison DeLuca, her beta reader, is a Syak," Madsen said.

Griffin cocked her head. "Beta reader?" The term sounded vaguely familiar.

"Someone who reads the story before publication and works with the author to help detect mistakes and improve the story," Kylin said.

It sounded as if she had learned the information by heart just a few hours ago. *Still eager to impress the older council members. Quit trying, Kylin. They'll never truly respect a hybrid as their equal.* Griffin turned back to Madsen. "So you already have one of your wolves close to the writer. Why not send this beta reader to find out more?"

A stiff shake of Madsen's head. "Allison is not a Saru. She doesn't have your kind of training. And they don't know each other personally, so I'm not sure if Ms. Price trusts her. When Allison asked, the human only told her that the idea for the book came from the recesses of her creative mind. She's very secretive about her writing and won't tell her more than that."

"So maybe it really all came from the recesses of her creative mind," Griffin said.

"Maybe, but you know we can't afford to rely on maybe's," Madsen answered. "Not when our very existence is at stake."

Was he exaggerating? Griffin wasn't sure. *Worst-case scenario: Humans find out we exist.* No way to tell what would happen then. Mass hysteria

might break out. Humans tended to be afraid of things that were different, and they often killed what they feared.

Even if their “coming out” didn’t lead to a new Inquisition, humans would try to control them. They would pass laws that forbid Wrasa from taking certain jobs, holding office, or living in certain areas. Horrible images of Wrasa being abused for scientific tests flashed before Griffin’s eyes. Humans with their need to dissect everything would try to find out how the shifting worked or if their regenerative abilities could be used in medicine. The military would want to use the Wrasa with their superior strength and sharp senses as super soldiers.

No.

Griffin had fought hard to escape her family’s influence over her life, and she had no intention of letting her life be controlled by human laws.

“So what do you want us to do?” Jennings asked. “Destroy the manuscript and kill the writer?”

How casually he said that. Griffin wasn’t sure whether she should admire or despise her commander. Sometimes, killing humans was a necessity in their line of work. After all, protecting their secret existence—even if it meant killing—was the Saru’s main purpose. Still, Griffin didn’t like it when things went that far. The law said that killing humans was allowed only as a last resort to protect their secret, but recently, she had begun to think that some of her colleagues didn’t exhaust all available means before making the decision to kill a human. *So it’s better they send me than some trigger-happy Saru.*

“Kill her if everything else fails,” Thyra Davis said.

“The real problem isn’t the book itself,” Jeff Madsen said. “If you have to kill her, do it—but not before finding out where her information is coming from. She knows things that only a Wrasa could know, and I want to know who told her about it.”

He suspects we have a traitor? Would anyone be so stupid, knowing it could get him killed? “So how do we make contact?” Griffin asked. “Do we pose as fans wanting an autograph at a book signing?” A grin trembled at the edges of her lips, and she quickly suppressed it. She couldn’t imagine Cedric Jennings as an autograph-waving fan. He wasn’t a fan of any human.

“You, Saru Westmore, will travel to Osgrove, a small town in Michigan’s Upper Peninsula, under the guise of being a big-cat expert willing to help the writer with her research,” Madsen said. “Tas Jennings will pay the beta

reader a visit in California and, well, encourage her to introduce you to the writer.”

Great. Griffin pressed her lips together. *Guess that's the privilege of rank. Jennings gets to sun his pelt under the warm Californian sun while I get frostbite on my muzzle in that charming little town in Michigan.* She shook herself.

“Why not send me to Michigan?” Jennings’s tone walked the fine line between a submissive suggestion and an angry demand. “I have the superior rank and more experience, so the main part of the investigation should be mine.”

Griffin’s shoulders rotated back, making her look even broader. *What are you doing?* She loosened her shoulders. *You don't even want that job.* Sometimes, being a cat and the possessiveness that came with it had its drawbacks. “I certainly won’t protest if you send me to California,” Griffin said. She could already feel warm sunlight soak into her skin.

“No.” Kylin’s voice replaced the image in Griffin’s head with Michigan’s cool breeze. “Sending you to Michigan is the logical choice. You know the territory, and you won’t have a problem posing as a big-cat expert. As a Syak, Tas Jennings is better equipped to rule out or confirm the beta reader as a suspect.”

You know the territory. Griffin suppressed a growl. *So that's why they're sending me—they want to use my connections to the Ottawa National Forest pride.*

Madsen handed over two plane tickets and dossiers on the writer and her beta reader. “We expect you to keep us updated with regular progress reports. Dismissed.”

The councilors returned to their discussion without giving them another glance.

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“Griffin?” Kylin’s voice stopped her before she had taken three steps away from the council chamber. “Could I have a word?”

Griffin threw a longing glance at the elevator. Slowly, she turned around. “I have a flight to catch, Manark.”

Kylin paused at being called by her title. Then she stepped closer. Her amber eyes, which had been fierce during the discussion with the other councilors, softened. “How are you, Griff?”

“Fine,” Griffin said. She glanced pointedly at her pocket watch.

“Why are you in such a hurry to get away from me?” A bitter timbre resonated in Kylin’s voice. “You have more than enough time to catch your flight. I made sure of that when I booked it.”

The muscles in Griffin’s cheeks jerked as if she had whiskers that could twitch in annoyance. She nodded at Cedric Jennings to go ahead and leave without her.

He stepped into the elevator.

When the doors closed behind him, Griffin turned toward Kylin. “So you were the one who suggested me for this job. Thank you very much.”

“Oh, come on,” Kylin said. “Don’t tell me working in the cadaver brigade makes you happy. Pretending to be human and hiding dead animals is no job for someone with your skills. Why do you keep turning down promotions?”

“Not everyone is cut out to be a politician.”

“I know,” Kylin said, “but you should still fight for your place in the Wrasa community. No matter how good you are at fitting yourself into human society, it’s just a sham.”

“Oh, you mean like your position in the council?” Griffin used sarcasm as she would her claws in liger form.

Kylin bared her teeth. “It’s not a sham. I worked hard to be where I am today.”

The scent of Kylin’s hurt burned Griffin’s nose. She gentled her tone. “I know you did, but hard work never mattered more than having the right parents in our society.”

“Times are changing. People are more accepting now,” Kylin said. “I mean, look at me. I’m a member of the council.”

Griffin snorted. “Yeah, but not because our fellow Wrasa have suddenly discovered their respect for hybrids. Everyone knows who’s really behind your position. They respect our mother, not you.”

A visible trembling went through Kylin as if she were fighting down a wave of anger and the urge to shift.

Not taking her gaze off Kylin, Griffin stepped back toward the elevator. “I should go.” She had long since accepted that despite being twins, she and Kylin would never see eye to eye about their place in the Wrasa society, and no amount of talking would change that.

This time, Kylin didn’t try to stop her. “Say hi to the dads and the rest of the pride for me.”

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“I’m going to Michigan to investigate this human,” Griffin said, “not to visit family.”

“But you haven’t seen them in fifteen years.”

Griffin reached behind herself for the elevator button. “For a very good reason. They didn’t stand by us back then, so I no longer consider them family.”

“But that was—”

“Stop acting like a damn Kasari!” Griffin had always hated the Kasari’s meddling and sticking their muzzles into Griffin’s business.

Kylin straightened her six-foot-two frame. “I am a Kasari. Or at least half lion. And so are you. You can’t deny that side of—”

“Yes, I can,” Griffin said, struggling not to raise her voice. Her skin itched with the first warning signs of an impending shift. She wanted out of here. Now. “If you want to pretend that the pride accepts you as an equal, fine. But I won’t waste my time with that kind of illusion.” She turned and repeatedly stabbed the elevator button.

“Griffin,” Kylin called.

Snarling, Griffin turned. “What?”

“Good hunting.”

One short nod, then Griffin escaped into the elevator.

CHAPTER 3

FLYING. CEDRIC HATED FLYING. THERE'S *a reason why there are no bird-shifters*. Being so high up in the air and moving at such speed played havoc with his sharp senses. But he had to admit that traveling human-style was efficient, and he was a soldier, so he focused on the task at hand.

Not that there was much to do. He had read through the information on Allison DeLuca twice. Nothing interesting about her. Allison was in her mid-forties and worked as a program manager for a software company that developed word-processing software suited for Wrasa eyesight. She had never been on the Saru's radar before.

"Can I get you anything, sir?" A flight attendant directed a phony smile at him.

Cedric didn't smile back. He had never felt the need to mimic human behavior. When he showed someone his teeth, no one would mistake it for a friendly greeting. "Food." He looked at the report on his knees, dismissing the flight attendant.

The scent of confusion drifted over.

Humans. He suppressed a growl. They were confused so easily.

"Um. Anything in particular?" the flight attendant asked.

Unlike cat-shifters, he didn't care. Food was food. As long as it stopped his stomach from growling like an entire Syak pack, it was fine.

"We have delicious roast beef sandwiches—"

"Then bring me three of those," Cedric said before she could recite every item on the menu.

When she hurried away to do his bidding, he put away the report and craned his neck to make sure the only other Wrasa on the plane, a jaguar-shifter, wasn't watching him. When he was unobserved, he pulled a worn book from his pocket.

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The smell of graphite and musty paper scratched his nose as he opened the diary. The crooked handwriting had faded in the four years since he'd owned the book, but Cedric knew every page by heart and could still read the words.

When the jaguar-shifter got up and prowled toward the restroom, Cedric hid the book beneath the report.

Only the council was allowed to own a maharsi's dream diary. Past generations of maharsi hadn't even been allowed to write down their dreams. The dangers of having such a diary detected by humans were too great, as was the risk of the dreams being misinterpreted by Wrasa who weren't as skilled at dream interpretation as a maharsi. But when one line of dream seers after the other had become extinct, the last maharsi had started to write down their dreams, hoping to at least give their people something to help them understand and shape the future. Only half a dozen of these diaries existed, and this one was different from all the rest—powerful and, in the wrong paws, dangerous. Cedric was risking his career by keeping it hidden from the council.

It was necessary. He didn't trust the politicians to handle the information in the little book the right way.

When the flight attendant returned with his sandwiches, he wolfed down the first one without chewing or tasting it, then slowed down and read the entry he had chosen.

She's dangerous. A lethal danger to all of us. It's up to me to stop her. Others don't see this danger and probably never will until it's too late. This is why I was born with the skills I possess. This is my duty. My fate.

Cedric bared his teeth. How ironic. The lines fit his current situation perfectly as if the dream seer had talked about J.W. Price and him. He couldn't be sure yet, but if the writer really was the threat he thought she might be, it was his duty and his fate to stop her.

When the pilot announced they would be landing soon, he put the diary back into the inside pocket of his jacket, right over his heart.

* * *

Cedric took up position in front of Allison DeLuca's apartment. He sent a warning glance to Ian Stewart, the beta reader's alpha, who lingered next to him. "Let me handle this." Then he raised his voice and shouted through

the door, “Ms. DeLuca, this is Cedric Jennings. Open the door!” He didn’t explain who he was and what he wanted. He didn’t need to. Every Syak knew his clan.

When footsteps approached, Ian stepped forward, trying to enter the apartment first.

Quickly, Cedric blocked the doorway and stared down the other man until Ian lowered his gaze. As soon as the door opened, Cedric strode into the apartment.

“Tas Jennings.” Allison DeLuca lowered her head in greeting. She stepped closer to her alpha, seeking his protection. “Can I get you something to drink?”

“Yes,” Ian answered immediately. “I’ll have a—”

“That won’t be necessary,” Cedric said. “I’m not here for a drink, and you,” he glared at Ian, “are probably needed elsewhere. Thank you for accompanying me through your territory.”

Ian’s lips tightened. Cedric could tell that he wanted to expose his teeth in a snarl, but as a commander of the Saru, Cedric outranked him. “I’ll wait outside,” Ian finally said.

“No, you won’t.” Cedric fixed him with a piercing gaze. “The Saru don’t like people listening in on their business.”

Ian grumbled and huffed, but finally, the door closed behind him.

Now Cedric was alone with the beta reader. “Sit,” he said and pointed at the couch. When she sank onto the edge of the couch, he strolled over and took up position in her desk chair, where—as his nose told him—she had been sitting only moments ago. He took his time studying her, slowly swishing back and forth in the desk chair.

Allison’s tongue darted out and licked her lips.

“So you’re a beta reader?” Cedric kept his voice friendly for the moment.

“Yes.”

“What are you getting out of it?”

Allison tilted her head. “Getting?”

“You’re not a professional editor. You don’t get paid for working on other people’s stories.”

“No, I’m not getting paid, but beta reading is fulfilling anyway. I love to establish a relationship with my writers and watch their writing mature over time.”

“Relationship?” Cedric pounced on that word.

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“I didn’t mean it like that,” Allison hastily said. Nervousness wafted around her like a bad perfume. “I don’t even know J.W. personally.”

Cedric stopped the slow swishing of the chair. “Why are you getting so defensive? You don’t have anything to hide, do you? Like, for example, the fact that you told J.W. Price about our existence?” The chair crashed into the desk when Cedric leaped up. Two quick steps had him hovering over her.

“No!” Allison squeaked like a pup. “You think I was the one who gave J.W. the information about shifters?”

“Were you?”

“No, no, of course not. I was the one who made the council aware of J.W.’s novel. Without me, there would be no chance of stopping its publication.”

“Even human children know that sometimes criminals like to inject themselves into investigations to appear unsuspecting.”

“I’m n-not a c-criminal,” Ally stammered. “I didn’t do anything wrong.”

Almost nose to nose with her, Cedric took in her scent.

The sweaty stink of fear surrounded her, but even another whiff didn’t reveal the sulphurous odor of a lie. She might have become a bit too friendly with the human, but she hadn’t crossed the line and become a traitor.

Cedric leaned back, out of Allison’s personal space. “If you didn’t break the First Law, you’ve got nothing to fear.”

Allison sucked in an audible breath.

As if nothing had happened, Cedric returned to the desk chair. “Now tell me everything I need to know about this writer and her story.”

“I don’t know much about the story,” Allison said, her voice trembling. “J.W. is still working on the third chapter, and she didn’t tell me much about the plot. She just said it would be a lesbian paranormal romance, and that—”

“Stop!” Cedric jumped up again. “Say that again.”

“J.W. only just started on the new story. She’s—”

“Not that.” Cedric growled. “Did you just say that this story will be lesbian fiction?”

“Yes. J.W. asked me a few months ago if I would feel comfortable beta reading a lesbian romance. She said she wants to try out a different genre.”

Hmm. Cedric rubbed his beard stubble. *Is that good or bad for us?* He wasn’t sure yet. For now, it might be better to keep this information to himself. He didn’t want some careless idiot in the council to decide that a novel aimed at a niche market didn’t pose a risk and call off the investigation.

“Make sure you run any communication you have with Ms. Price by me, and forward me everything you receive from her. And should Saru Westmore contact you, tell her you already gave me all the details and to read the report.”

“What?” Allison looked like a wolf that had swallowed a rabbit in one bite and was now choking on it. “B-but if I refuse to cooperate with her, she’ll think—”

Cedric stared her down. “Interviewing you was my job. Westmore has her own, so there’s no need for her to interview you again. If she starts asking questions, refer her to me. Understood?”

Allison ducked her head. “Of course.”

“Good.” Cedric stood. “I want you to send Ms. Price an e-mail.”

“What do you want me to say?”

On his way to the door, Cedric handed her a folded piece of paper. “Just write what’s on the paper, nothing more, nothing less.”

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SECOND NATURE

BY JAE

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