

THE SHAPE-SHIFTER SERIES #4



# TRUE NATURE

JAE



# CHAPTER 1

A WOMAN'S HAUNTING SCREAM REVERBERATED THROUGH Kelsey's head. The windshield spiderwebbed, bowing inward against the pressure of the water outside. She gasped as cold water surged onto the floorboard and splashed over her knees. Metal creaked and groaned overhead. The car's roof caved in, slicing Kelsey's forehead and sending warm blood dripping into her eyes.

She screamed and ducked down, trying frantically to release the seat belt, but she was trembling too much. The pressure on her chest increased. She couldn't breathe.

*Out! Out!* She had to get out before the water rose too high or the need to shape-shift overwhelmed her. Her wolf form would be trapped in here, panicked, unable to release herself. Finally, the stubborn buckle gave way, and the seat belt released.

The baby whimpered in the backseat, and Kelsey's sister-in-law screamed again.

Kelsey jerked awake. *Great Hunter.* Would she never be free of that nightmare? Groaning, she wiped her sweaty hands on her blanket and tried to catch her breath.

A weight still pressed on her chest.

Her breathing sped up again, and she struggled not to kick out her legs in blind panic. *Calm down. You're not trapped.* But the weight was still there. She peered down her body and into the gleaming eyes of the cat perched on top of her, digging in his claws to hold on.

"Will!" She growled and shook herself, nearly dislodging the cat. "Damn cat!"

He was definitely getting too bold. Other cats avoided her, but for some reason, the orange tabby loved all Wrasa, even wolf-shifters like Kelsey. “Just because I sleep on the couch doesn’t mean I’m your new best buddy, understood?” She tapped the cat under the chin, but when he began to purr, she grudgingly gentled her touch to a light scratching. “I’m a Saru soldier, here to protect your human, not to serve as a kitty bed.”

She sat up and set the cat on the floor, keeping her hands wrapped around the small body until she was sure Will was safely balanced on his three legs.

Heart still pounding, she listened into the darkness.

Everything was quiet.

*Just a dream. You’re safe.*

Her skin still itched, warning her to calm down if she didn’t want to scare Will with a panic-induced shift into her wolf form.

She breathed in Jorie’s coconut scent that still lingered in the living room. In the six months since she had become Jorie’s bodyguard, she had come to associate the scent with the safety of a pack. *See? You’re not in the car.* Finally, her heartbeat slowed and the itching of her skin stopped. She shoved back the sweat-dampened blanket, got up from the couch, and padded to the kitchen to get a glass of water.

The clock on the microwave showed three o’clock.

She leaned against the kitchen counter, pressed the cool glass against her forehead, and closed her eyes.

A scream from the bedroom made her jerk.

The glass slipped out of her fingers and shattered on the floor. Cold water and shards of broken glass hit her bare feet, and for a few seconds, dream and reality tangled in a moment of frozen horror.

Instinct took over.

Kelsey raced to the bedroom, ignoring the pain of broken glass underfoot, ready to shift and defend her human alpha.

She threw open the bedroom door and leaped into the room. The smell of coconut and fear hit her, but her nose didn’t catch any scent that didn’t belong there.

No intruder.

The bedroom was empty except for Jorie, who shot upright and groped for the lamp switch on the bedside table. She lifted one hand to shield her eyes from the light and clutched the duvet against her T-shirt-clad chest with the other hand. Shaggy bangs were plastered to her forehead. Her Asian

features, distorted with fear, relaxed when she recognized Kelsey. “Kelsey! What are you doing?”

“I...I’m sorry. I didn’t want to—” She took a step back, ignoring the sudden pain in her feet. “Are you okay?”

Instead of answering, Jorie wiped her face and looked to the other side of the bed. As if only then remembering that her partner, Griffin, was away, she glanced at the picture on her nightstand.

Kelsey followed her gaze. From her place next to the door, she couldn’t see the photo, but she herself had taken it just a few months ago, so she knew the frame held a picture of Griffin sporting a liger-sized grin as she wrapped her arms around an equally happy-looking Jorie.

The smell of Jorie’s fear evaporated, and Kelsey wished she had a protector who could chase away her own nightmares as easily.

“I’m fine,” Jorie said. She dragged trembling fingers through her midnight black hair and looked up at Kelsey. “What about you? You look a bit disheveled too.”

“It’s nothing,” Kelsey said. After all, she was there to serve Jorie, not the other way around. “Just some stupid nightmare. That’s all.”

“Yeah, me too.” A sharp breath escaped Jorie. “God, what a dream.”

*Dream?* Kelsey flinched. *Oh, no. I woke her from a dream.* As a member of Jorie’s protective detail, she had to follow just three simple rules: Protect Jorie with your life. Don’t chase the cats, even if they taunt you. Never wake Jorie because she could be dreaming. Since Jorie was the Wrasa’s only dream seer, each and every one of her dreams could be vitally important.

*Congratulations. You just broke rule number three.* “I’m sorry,” she said, lowering her gaze. “I didn’t realize...” Kelsey bit her lip until she tasted blood. What if she had compromised the Wrasa’s safety by interrupting an important dream vision?

“Hey,” Jorie said.

Kelsey glanced up, then away again when Jorie swung back the covers and slender, naked legs appeared.

“Don’t look so guilty,” Jorie said. “If you hadn’t come in, I might have woken myself up with my screams. Besides, it has happened before. Griffin once woke me in the middle of a dream vision by kneading against my belly.”

*Ugh.* Kelsey resisted the urge to press her hands over her ears. She didn’t want to hear any details about what her alpha pair did in bed, even if it was just kneading. It was like thinking about her parents having sex.

When Kelsey looked up again, Jorie had slipped on a bathrobe. It dragged across the floor as Jorie circled the bed, much too long for Jorie's slender five-foot-six frame. She snuggled her nose against the fabric, and her eyes fluttered shut as she inhaled.

A whiff of liger musk and Griffin's favorite body lotion hit Kelsey's nose. *It's Griffin's robe.* Kelsey grinned. *Just one night apart and she's missing her already. Like a pair of mated wolves.* She found their behavior almost comically endearing. Not that she'd ever tell them that, of course. As the lowest-ranking member of the pack, she had no business commenting on their private lives.

"How about a cup of—?" Jorie stopped and rushed toward Kelsey. "Oh my God! What happened to your feet? Stay still. Don't move." She almost stumbled over the bathrobe's excess length before she caught her balance and sank onto her knees in front of Kelsey.

"W-what are you doing?"

"Didn't you notice? You're bleeding!"

Kelsey glanced down. Blood dripped onto the carpet. *So that's where the pain is coming from.* She had ignored it while she made sure Jorie was okay. When she lifted one foot, she discovered that tiny shards of glass were embedded in the soles of her feet. "Oh. I'm sorry. I'm ruining your carpet."

"Don't worry about the carpet." Jorie produced a tissue from the bathrobe's pocket and dabbed it against one of Kelsey's feet.

"Um, Jorie..." Pinpricks of pain shot up Kelsey's leg, but the heat in her cheeks had nothing to do with pain. She reached down and tugged on Jorie's upper arm, trying to get her to stand. "You don't need to do that."

"Sure I do. You're hurt." Jorie continued dabbing.

Kelsey squirmed. *This is wrong. She's a maharsi. She shouldn't kneel in front of me.* She tried to shuffle back, but Jorie's grip on her ankle held her in place.

"Stop that. You're dripping blood all over my carpet. Sit down."

Following orders was in Kelsey's nature. She hobbled over to the bed and sat on the very edge of it.

"Stay here," Jorie said. She gathered up the bathrobe as if she were a queen in a ball gown and strode from the room.

Dazed, Kelsey stayed behind. She shot up when she remembered the state of the kitchen. "Please be careful in the kitchen," she called after Jorie. "I dropped a glass. Let me clean up."

"No, I've got it," Jorie said from the kitchen. "You stay where you are."

Kelsey sank back onto the edge of the bed.

One of the kitchen cabinets banged shut. Glass clinked, and the bristles of a hand brush rasped over the floor. Within minutes, Jorie returned. “Do you want to go out and shift? That would heal the wounds faster than patching you up.”

“Later,” Kelsey said. Since Griffin was in Boise to meet with the council, Jorie’s protection was Kelsey’s responsibility. Leaving her, even for just a few minutes, was out of the question. “For now, I’ll just put a Band-Aid on it or something.”

“All right. You stay here. I’ll get it.” Jorie entered the bathroom and reappeared with a first-aid kit and a small basin filled with water. She pressed her hands against Kelsey’s shoulders. “Lie down. I need to reach the soles of your feet.”

Two instincts warred within Kelsey. Following this order meant invading Griffin’s territory even further. Some days, she got the feeling that Griffin barely tolerated her presence in the house and in her Saru unit, and she didn’t want to give Griffin another reason to mistrust her. “I don’t think that’s a good idea. This is Griffin’s side of the bed, isn’t it?”

Jorie gave her shoulders a firm shove. “Instead of worrying about Griffin, worry about not making me mad. I’ll explain it to Griffin once she gets home. Right now, taking care of you is more important than staying away from Griffin’s side of the bed.” When Kelsey sank onto the bed and dangled her feet over the edge, Jorie knelt down and opened the first-aid kit. “So,” she said, “what happened?” She tilted her head toward the kitchen and then nodded down at Kelsey’s feet.

“I got up for a glass of water, and when I heard you scream, I dropped the glass. I’m sorry I made such a mess.”

“Don’t worry about it.” Jorie used a pair of tweezers to pull needle-sharp pieces of glass from Kelsey’s skin.

Kelsey winced. Now that she wasn’t distracted by a possible danger to Jorie, the tiny cuts started to hurt. *Oh, come on. Don’t be such a puppy.* The pain wasn’t nearly so bad that it would trigger a shift into her wolf form.

Jorie washed out the cuts and then dabbed antibiotic ointment onto them. “So you had a bad dream?” she asked as if to distract Kelsey from the pain.

*Little does she know that the nightmare and my memories are much more painful than the cuts on my feet.* Kelsey just nodded.

“Me too.” Jorie’s breath brushed over Kelsey’s bare feet as she exhaled. “A woman attacked a boy. He struggled and tried to break free, but she pinned him down with her full weight. He was drenched in sweat, and his face was a mask of pain, but the woman showed no mercy. God, the poor boy was terrified. I could smell his fear.” Jorie paused and shivered. “He groaned and I think tried to talk to her, but she pressed her thumbs against his throat and choked him.”

Kelsey’s lips pulled back in a silent snarl. “She was human.” It was a statement, not a question. No sane Wrasa would ever hurt a child. But then again, Jorie would probably say that no sane human would either.

“Yes.” Jorie put the ointment back into the first-aid kit. “The boy wasn’t, though. For some reason, I saw that quite clearly. He was Wrasa.”

Every muscle in Kelsey’s body clenched. She sat up abruptly. “She was trying to kill one of us?”

Jorie glanced up at her. “I thought we finally made it past the ‘us versus them’ stuff.”

Kelsey looked away and licked her lips. “I’m sorry. It’s just...”

“I know. It’s hard to teach an old dog new tricks.” Jorie sent a smile up at Kelsey and dabbed at the cuts until the bleeding stopped.

“Do you think it was just a dream, or was it a vision?” Kelsey asked.

“I don’t know. Some of it didn’t make any sense, so maybe it was just a dream. I mean, the boy wasn’t a small child. He was a teenager, almost as tall as the woman. Why didn’t he just fight her off? Wrasa are usually stronger than humans, so it’s not like he was helpless.”

“Unless...” Kelsey gritted her teeth at the thought. “Unless he was going through his Awakening.”

“Awakening? What’s that?”

“Basically, puberty. That’s when the mutaline kicks in.”

The pressure on Kelsey’s feet increased as Jorie covered two of the deepest cuts with Band-Aids; then Jorie closed the first-aid kit and settled on the edge of the bed next to Kelsey. “That’s why Wrasa children can’t shift, right?”

Kelsey nodded. “Right. Their adrenal cortex will start producing the shifting hormone only after they reach puberty.”

“But don’t Wrasa teenagers become stronger when they can finally shift into their animal form?”

“Yes, once they learn to control it. Until then, the Awakening is the most vulnerable time in a Wrasa’s life.” Kelsey shivered at the thought of a defenseless pup in the hands of a human woman.

Jorie’s brows drew together. “Vulnerable in what way?”

“Imagine confusing dreams keeping you up half of the night for months on end,” Kelsey said.

A snort from Jorie interrupted her. “I’m a dream seer, remember? Been there, done that.”

Kelsey ducked her head. “Of course. But for our teenagers, it’s not just the dreams at night. During the day, your itching skin is driving you crazy. Your sense of smell intensifies, and the world suddenly looks different, but you can’t grasp what exactly the difference is.” Memories of her own First Change bubbled up: confusing emotions and piercing pain, and above it all, her brother Garrick’s soothing peanut scent anchoring her in reality.

“But surely your parents or someone else in your pack prepared you for what would happen?” Jorie asked.

“Of course. But nothing can prepare you for the reality of the Awakening,” Kelsey said. “It’s like the difference between reading a medical textbook and going through a painful, scary illness. Something profound is happening to your body, and you feel like a tightrope walker on the edge of losing control and falling to your death. Then you go through your First Change, and the pain...” She shook her head and fell silent.

“God.” Jorie groaned. “If Griffin and I ever decide to have children, I’ll have them.”

A chuckle chased away the memories of pain and confusion. “It’s not that bad,” Kelsey said. “We don’t let our teenagers go through it alone. A mentor is there for them every step of the way and guides them through the First Change.”

“No one was there for the boy in my dream,” Jorie whispered.

“Do you think the human kidnapped him, snatched him away from his mentor and his family?”

“I don’t know. It’s possible.”

A powerful urge gripped Kelsey. Her skin tingled with the need to take action. “If it’s a vision, not just a dream, we need to do something.” Then a thought occurred to her and made a lump form in her stomach. “Or do you think it has already happened? Are we too late to help?”

“No,” Jorie said without hesitation. “If a dream vision takes place in the past or many years in the future, the intensity is usually a bit...” She

shrugged. “Well, washed-out. But this dream felt urgent. I’m sure the things I saw will happen soon.”

“But the future you see in your dreams is not inevitable, right? We could save the boy.”

“Yes, but we need to find him first,” Jorie said.

“Was there anything in your dream that gives us a hint at his location?”

“Let’s see...” Jorie leaned across the bed and took a notebook from her bedside table.

*Her dream diary.* Kelsey averted her gaze as Jorie started scribbling.

After a minute, Jorie clicked off her pen and handed Kelsey the open diary. “Read.”

Kelsey pulled her hands away and hid them behind her back. A maharsi’s notes were sacred and not meant for her eyes. “But—”

“Read,” Jorie said again. “If we want to save the boy, I’m going to need your help.”

Hesitantly, Kelsey took the diary and read what Jorie had just written, careful not to let her gaze linger on any other entries. “Gray walls. Dim lights, like a basement,” she read aloud. Images of kidnapping victims being tortured in basement dungeons flashed through Kelsey’s mind. The tiny hairs on her itching forearms stood on end as if preparing to grow into thick fur. “Anything else that would give us a clue to the location?”

Jorie shook her head, lips pressed into a tight line.

“Lanky boy,” Kelsey continued to read. “Around thirteen or fourteen. Dark hair.” She glanced up. “That means he’s not a Kasari. Lion-shifters usually have blond hair. And he can’t be a Maki. He’s not large enough to be a bear-shifter.”

“I don’t know why,” Jorie said, “but I got the impression that he might be a Syak.”

*A fellow wolf-shifter...* Kelsey swallowed. “Did you see his face?”

“Yes. It was full of agony, but beyond that, he looked like every other teenager. Nothing there that would help us find him. Same with the woman. She was slender but athletic, about medium height, curly blond hair.”

Not exactly a description that would help identify her. There had to be thousands of women like that in Michigan alone.

“Except for her fierce scowl, she looked like the heroine from one of my books,” Jorie said, fiddling with her pen. “One of the good gals.”

“But she’s not,” Kelsey said more sharply than intended.

Jorie shrugged. “Guess not. And she wasn’t alone.”

Kelsey's stomach twisted itself into knots. "There were others?"

"At least one."

"What did he or she look like?" The dream diary held no description of the second kidnapper.

"I don't know," Jorie said. "I didn't see that person. I was in his or her body."

*Right. That's how dream-seeing works. She sees things through someone else's eyes.* "So there's nothing you can tell me about that person?"

Jorie hesitated. "Sometimes during my visions, when I'm in someone else's mind, there's this strange...vibration. As if my body and my host's aren't quite in tune and their consciousness is reluctant to admit access to a stranger. That vibration wasn't there this time."

The technical details of dream-seeing were giving Kelsey a headache. She rubbed her forehead. "What does that mean?"

"I wish I knew. It's not like there are any other dream seers around I can ask." Jorie massaged the bridge of her nose. "Maybe it means there's some kind of connection between the second kidnapper and me."

"Maybe he or she is human too, so your mind has an easier time connecting," Kelsey said. *Two humans against one helpless pup...* She tightened her hands around the diary until the edges dug into her fingertips. She loosened her grip, not wanting to damage the dream diary. "Anything else that could help us find the boy?"

The clip of Jorie's pen broke off under her fiddling fingers and ricocheted across the room. "No. I woke up before I could see more."

Kelsey closed the diary and hung her head. *That's why rule number three exists. Never wake a maharsi. You're usually so good at following rules, so why not this time?* Her own internal voice sounded like her father's bitter tones.

Jorie dropped the pen and started to pace. "God, those damn dream visions. Why can't they for once show me enough to help? We have to save the boy from that horror." She squeezed her eyes shut as if she could again see the images of her dream. "He was so afraid. He tried to stop her. She had him in a death grip. He kept fighting and trying to push her away." Her eyes still squeezed shut, Jorie waved her hands through the air.

Kelsey's eyes widened. "Can you do that again?"

Jorie stopped midmotion and opened her eyes to stare at Kelsey. "Do what?"

"What you just did with your hands."

“I was repeating the boy’s struggle.” Jorie jabbed her index fingers toward each other and then smacked the side of her right hand into her left palm.

Kelsey recognized the signs immediately. She jumped up, ignoring the pain in her feet. “I know how we can find him.”

“What? How?”

“The boy wasn’t just struggling and waving his hands.” Kelsey repeated the two signs. “Hurt,” she said after the first sign, then accompanied the second one by saying, “Stop.” She sucked in a deep breath and looked at Jorie. “He was telling her to stop hurting him. He’s using sign language.”

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Kelsey glanced out the window. Moonlight reflected off snow-covered hills and trees. Dipped in darkness, the forest at the edge of town pulled at Kelsey like a magnet. She longed to go out for a run and leave behind the sense of urgency that vibrated through her since finding out about the boy an hour ago.

“You’re free to go,” Jorie said from the couch. “I can call in another Saru to stay with me if you want to go for a run.”

*Am I that obvious?* Kelsey turned away from the window. “No, that’s okay.” Running in her wolf form lost some of its joy when she had to run alone anyway. “I want to stay and help find the boy. Should we alert the council and—?”

The faint sounds of a car nearing the house filtered through the walls. After listening for a few seconds, Kelsey smiled. She knew the sounds of that engine. Her tense muscles finally relaxed.

“What is it?” Jorie asked.

Outside, a car door banged shut. Soft steps headed toward the front door, bringing with them the smells of stale turkey sandwiches, nervous humans sweating on a plane, and one liger-shifter longing for her mate.

“It seems Griffin is home earlier than—” Kelsey trailed off when she realized she was talking to an empty room. At the mention of Griffin’s name, Jorie had rushed toward the door.

Kelsey stayed behind, and though she didn’t glance toward the hallway, she couldn’t tune out the sound of Jorie’s moans or the purring that rumbled up Griffin’s chest as she kissed Jorie hello. Blushing, Kelsey escaped into the kitchen to prepare some food for her returning commander.

## CHAPTER 2

“I MISSED YOU,” JORIE MURMURED AGAINST Griffin’s lips when their kiss ended. She wrapped her arms around Griffin’s solid body as tightly as she could. *Who would have thought? Just one year ago, you were a solitary writer who thought she wasn’t cut out for relationships.*

Griffin purred. “Missed you too.” She bent to sniff Jorie’s neck and then started nibbling on it.

A trail of fire raced down Jorie’s body.

Then Griffin lifted her head. “But why are you up in the middle of the night?”

“I’ll tell you in a minute. Let’s go to the bedroom.”

“Oh, yeah.” Another purr rumbled up from Griffin’s chest. She tightened her arms around Jorie as if about to carry her off.

Jorie put both hands on Griffin’s shoulders and pushed. “To talk,” she said, her voice hoarse. They had soundproofed the bedroom when the council had assigned a unit of Saru to the house. With her Wrasa hearing, Kelsey would be able to hear every word if they stayed in the hallway. While Jorie trusted Kelsey, she wanted to talk to Griffin alone.

Griffin loosened her hold on Jorie. She lifted her head and sucked in a breath, clearly tasting the odors in the small house. “Is that...?” Her nostrils quivered. “Blood! Great Hunter, what happened? Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.” Jorie rubbed both hands down her partner’s powerful arms. “Kelsey just cut herself, but it’s not too bad. Come on. Let’s go into the bedroom.” She grasped Griffin’s hand and led her to the bedroom. “How was your visit with the council?”

“Frustrating.” Griffin closed the bedroom door behind them. “They’re finally discussing abandoning the First Law and coming out to the human

public, but knowing them, my stripes will have turned gray and my canines fallen out before that happens.”

“Do you think you could help your sister to sway a few votes?”

“I’m not sure.” Griffin set down her bag and ran her hand along the dresser like a cat marking her territory. “A few of the councilors seem to respect me—or at least my job as a maharsi searcher—but most feel conflicted when it comes to me.”

“Because you’re a hybrid? Christ, they really need to get over that.”

A smile curled Griffin’s lips. “Oh, I think they finally see beyond that. Now they see me as the person who is sleeping with their only dream seer.”

“Oh.” Heat shot through Jorie. “How is that for you?” Being considered a sacred person was still weird for Jorie, and it was probably worse for Griffin, who had grown up with the Wrasa legends surrounding dream seers.

Griffin’s happy-to-be-home purr turned sensual. “Wonderful. I love sleeping with you.”

“You’re impossible,” Jorie said but had to smile. “You know what I mean.”

“My grandfather was a maharsi, so it’s probably easier for me than it would be for other Wrasa. Sometimes it’s still a bit weird. But I’m learning to separate my Jorie from the sacred maharsi. I know you want a partner, not someone who worships you as a religious figure.”

Jorie leaned up on her tiptoes and kissed her.

Griffin tugged her over to the bed and then froze. She opened her mouth and inhaled as if tasting the air.

*Oh, no. Kelsey’s scent.* Jorie laid a hand on Griffin’s arm. “No territorial cat fights. Kelsey was just lying on the bed while I was patching up her feet.”

“What’s wrong with her feet?” Griffin asked.

Jorie took a deep breath. “It all started with the dream I had tonight...”

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Griffin paced the bedroom. When Jorie finished her explanation, Griffin reached into her jacket and pulled out her cell phone.

“What are you doing?” Jorie asked.

Still punching in numbers, Griffin looked up. “I’m calling the council. We need help finding the boy and stopping the woman from hurting him.”

“No!” Jorie crossed the room in a few quick steps and covered Griffin’s hand with hers. “Please, don’t.”

“What? Why?” Griffin paused with her finger hovering over the phone.

“What if I’m wrong?” Jorie’s fingers trembled around Griffin’s. “What if I’m somehow misinterpreting my dream and sending a unit of Saru after a woman who is really innocent? I don’t want that blood on my hands.”

Painful memories darkened Griffin’s amber eyes to a murky brown. She looked at her hands as if expecting to see blood, then threw the cell phone onto the bed. “Then I’ll take over the investigation on my own. My bag is already packed. I’ll leave as soon as we find out where the boy lives.”

*Um, how do I say this without hurting her feline pride?* Jorie pulled Griffin onto the edge of the bed and sat next to her, ignoring the groaning of the wood under their combined weight. “I’m not sure you’re the best choice for this mission, Griff.”

The corners of Griffin’s lips twitched like those of a cat who had been served foul fish for dinner. She flicked imaginary lint from her sweater. “I’m still a Saru and one of our best investigators. Just because my last undercover mission turned out a disaster doesn’t mean—”

“Oh, no, that’s not what I meant.” Quickly, Jorie entwined her fingers with Griffin’s, lifted their hands to her mouth, and kissed Griffin’s fingers. “I know you’re a great Saru, and your last mission wasn’t a disaster. You saved my life, after all.”

Nodding, Griffin rubbed her cheek against their entwined hands.

Jorie suppressed a smile. After six months together, she knew how to smooth the ruffled fur of a pouting cat. “But you said it yourself: The Wrasa see you as the person who sleeps with their only dream seer. Every shape-shifter in America knows you. If you suddenly disappear, someone will notice. It won’t be long before the council finds out what we’re doing. We need to send someone else.”

“Who?” Griffin asked.

“I was thinking Kelsey.”

“No,” Griffin said with a fierce shake of her head, “not her.”

Jorie frowned. “Don’t tell me you still don’t trust her.”

“Not enough to send her to a place where I or the pride can’t keep an eye on her.” Griffin let herself fall back onto the bed and wriggled around as if wanting to replace Kelsey’s scent with her own. “She’s too inexperienced anyway. She has never been on a solo assignment. As a nederi, she’s used to having her alpha make the decisions for her. If we send her on this mission, she would be on her own. Without the resources of the council, we don’t even have the time to thoroughly investigate the boy or the woman. Kelsey

would have to go in totally unprepared, and I don't think she could handle that."

"Hmm." Jorie leaned back on the bed too and stared at the ceiling. Then she rolled around, slung one arm over Griffin's stomach, and cuddled close. She smiled when she felt the soft vibration of a purr beneath her hands. "I don't know. Something about that dream left me with the feeling that Kelsey should be the one to go on this mission. I trust her, Griffin, and so should you."

Griffin stroked imaginary whiskers as if that helped her think.

A knock on the door prevented her from answering.

When Griffin opened the door, Kelsey stood in the doorway, ducking her head. "Sorry for interrupting. I thought I'd ask if you want something to eat. I could prepare an early breakfast."

Griffin grabbed her laptop case and pushed past Kelsey. "Breakfast will have to wait. We have to find out who the boy is first."

## CHAPTER 3

GRIFFIN SAT DOWN ON THE couch and shoved away Kelsey's blanket and pillow.

At the casual takeover of her territory, Kelsey tensed, but she said nothing and sat on the edge of the couch, giving Griffin ample space.

Will wandered into the living room while they waited for the computer to boot. He rubbed his head against Griffin's leg until she leaned down to pet him; then he lolloped over to Kelsey on his three legs and meowed at her.

Sighing, Kelsey bent and lifted him up onto the couch, where he rolled into a feline ball between Griffin and Kelsey and promptly fell asleep.

Griffin grinned at her. "You're totally pussy-whipped, wolf."

"I-I'm not!" Kelsey stammered while heat crawled up her neck. "He's just lording rule number two over me: Don't terrorize the cats, or the big cat will terrorize you."

Griffin smirked.

"Hey, you two," Jorie said from her easy chair. She leaned forward and nodded at the laptop. "Can we focus on finding the boy now, or do I need to watch you fight like cat and dog for the rest of the night?"

Fingers lingering over her keyboard, Griffin said, "All right. So, any idea on how to find the boy? Your dream vision didn't, by any chance, show you his name, did it?"

Jorie sighed. "No. It's never that easy. But Kelsey thinks she knows a way to find him."

Griffin raked her gaze up and down Kelsey's body and lifted a brow. "What way is that?"

"The boy is deaf," Kelsey said, ignoring Griffin's skeptical gaze. This was her area of expertise. She had grown up using American Sign Language. "Or

at least he's using sign language. If the council authorizes it, we can look for a deaf teenager in the Wrasa database."

Neither Griffin nor Jorie answered. Only Will's snoring interrupted the sudden quiet.

Kelsey looked from Griffin to Jorie. Why was no one reaching for the phone to call the council and request access to the secret database? Did they merely want to wait until morning, or was something else going on?

"No council," Jorie finally said. "We're doing this on our own. At least for now."

"What?" Kelsey jumped up from the couch. Her knee banged against the coffee table, and she clutched her kneecap. "But, Maharsi, the First Law demands that we—"

"Do you remember what happened the last time the council thought a human was out to hurt them?" Jorie asked. Her eyes, now almost black with intensity, drilled into Kelsey, who quickly looked away.

"Yes," Kelsey whispered. She sank back onto the couch.

"Do you really? Because I sure remember a few dozen Saru chasing me all over Michigan and a pack of wolves almost ripping out my throat."

Jorie's voice, sharp as steel, cut into Kelsey, making her look away in shame. She had been part of that pack.

"All because of some paranoid prejudices against humans." Jorie pressed her hands to her knees, leaned forward, and slid her gaze from Kelsey to Griffin. "If you ask me, the Saru take their task of protecting the Wrasa a little too seriously. They still like to shoot first and ask questions later. I won't let that happen to another human. Not without having definitive proof that she's really trying to hurt the boy and I'm not just misinterpreting my dream."

*Misinterpreting? How can you misinterpret choking someone?* Kelsey thought but said nothing.

"Besides," Jorie said, "the council is finally considering abandoning the First Law. I don't want to endanger that by telling them a human might be about to hurt a helpless Wrasa teen."

Griffin shook her head. "I understand why you want to do it this way and I support your decision, but I don't like it, Jorie. I don't want you to get into trouble. If the council finds out we're going behind their backs..."

"Who's going to tell them?" Jorie asked.

Griffin's gaze hit Kelsey like a silent accusation.

Kelsey curled her hands around the edge of the couch as if it would hold back the anger bubbling up inside of her. For once, she met Griffin's gaze and held it. "Are you calling me a traitor?"

Not looking away, Griffin shrugged. "If the shoe fits. You think we don't know you're reporting directly to the council, informing them about every move Jorie makes?"

*Oh, Great Hunter, they know!* Kelsey's stomach knotted. Her gaze darted back and forth between Griffin and the door.

"Griffin..." Jorie's voice held an obvious warning, but Griffin ignored it.

"No, Jorie. It's time to settle this once and for all. I was silent for too long already, but I won't let her hurt you." A growl entered Griffin's tone. "We're not stupid, wolf. A human knowing about us makes the council as nervous as a long-tailed cat in a room full of rocking chairs."

Kelsey couldn't deny it. Having a human dream seer put the council in a precarious position. They couldn't kill Jorie, but they also didn't trust her.

"We know the council picked you for this team because you've got plenty of reasons to hate Jorie and me," Griffin said.

Kelsey shook her head so forcefully that she almost became dizzy. "That's not true. I don't hate you."

"No?" Griffin leaned across the couch, encroaching on Kelsey's space so that Kelsey had to lean back to avoid butting heads. "I killed your alpha."

"Griff, please, let it go," Jorie said. "Even if you don't fully trust Kelsey, you need to trust my judgment."

Inch by inch, Griffin retreated, but her relentless gaze still drilled into Kelsey. "I do. But I can't help thinking that maybe it wasn't such a bright idea to accept a member of Jennings's pack as your bodyguard. What if she betrays us?"

Kelsey's fingers, clenched around the edge of the couch, started to cramp. *Are you going to sit here and let her question your loyalty?* This time, it sounded like her mother's voice. "Jennings caused his own death, and it's no longer my pack," she said, trying to keep a tremor out of her voice. "They threw me out."

"What?" Jorie's head jerked around. She stared at Kelsey across the coffee table. "They threw you out? I thought you just hadn't been in contact for a while. God, Kelsey, I'm so sorry. Why didn't you tell me? Maybe I could have convinced them—"

"No." Kelsey shrugged. "It doesn't matter. I never really fit into Jennings's pack anyway. My loyalty is to you and Griffin now." She tried to

catch Jorie's gaze, longing for reassuring physical contact with one of her natakas but knowing she wouldn't get that kind of comfort. That was the biggest disadvantage of not belonging to a pack. Jorie wasn't a touch-positive person. She rarely touched anyone but Griffin. Reassuring little touches to her bodyguards just didn't occur to her.

Griffin leaned over to stare down Kelsey again. "So you're denying that you passed on information to the council?"

At Griffin's raised voice, the cat between them woke and jumped from the couch. Griffin's nose almost touched Kelsey's now, and when she spoke, hot breath hit Kelsey's face and made her wince. Her own breathing sped up until she was nearly hyperventilating. Griffin was too close. "I—"

"Stop it!" Jorie's decisive voice cut through Kelsey's panicked haze. "Jesus, Griff, stop the feline intimidation tactics. Kelsey is not the enemy."

"No, I..." Kelsey swallowed. "I want to explain. Yes, I passed on information to the council." A whiff of anger from Griffin hit her, and she pinched her nose to block it out. "I gave them just enough to make them think I am spying on you, but I never reported anything that could harm either of you. If I refused to cooperate with them, they'd just replace me with someone who would, and then—"

"Kelsey, calm down," Jorie said. Instead of jumping up and hurling accusations, she leaned back in her chair and regarded Kelsey steadily. "You don't need to explain. I already know."

Kelsey pitched forward, almost falling against Griffin. She pressed her hand against her forehead and rubbed the spot above her right eyebrow. "W-what? You knew? But...how?"

A hint of a smile ghosted across Jorie's face. "I saw it in a dream vision."

*A dream vision about me!* Never had Kelsey imagined that their only maharsi would dream about insignificant folks like her. She stared at Jorie. "What did you see?"

"In my vision, you reported to the council and told them what was going on here. But you held back information." Jorie leaned forward, her black eyes searching Kelsey's face. "You know we told my mother about the Wrasa, don't you?"

"I suspected," Kelsey said.

"And yet you never mentioned it to the council."

"As far as your visions showed you," Griffin said.

"I never told them," Kelsey said. "I don't want them to hurt your mother or any of you."

Griffin still regarded her with an unblinking cat stare. Her scent told Kelsey that she was in overprotective mate mode, not ready to trust despite Jorie's vision. "How can we be sure? Just because you haven't betrayed us yet doesn't mean you won't in the future. You attacked Jorie before."

Kelsey's cheeks burned with shame.

"So did you," Jorie said, voice soft. "Yet I still trust you with my life and with my heart. Why can't you at least trust Kelsey not to hurt us? Use your nose. You know she isn't lying."

Now Griffin was the one to lower her gaze. "Maybe she isn't consciously lying. But if push comes to shove, she'll still betray us. Not informing the council about a human out to hurt one of us... That's big."

*Big?* Kelsey tried to rein in her panicked breathing. *Try huge!*

"Not reporting a violation of the First Law goes against everything she has been taught as a Saru," Griffin said, looking up to fix her gaze on Kelsey. "She's a Syak, and the council speaker is their most powerful alpha. It's in her blood to do whatever the council wants."

The truth of her words echoed through Kelsey's mind. "Yes, it is," she said slowly. Her tongue felt heavy in her dry mouth. "But that doesn't mean I can't fight against that instinct. Twice in my life, following orders because it's in my blood had catastrophic consequences." Her gaze veered to Jorie, then away.

Griffin growled. "You and your pack nearly killed Jorie, just because your insane alpha ordered it."

"Twice?" Jorie asked.

Being forced to talk about it felt like getting stabbed in the heart. "The other time, my brother ordered me to leave. And then he died trying to save his family on his own. If I had helped him instead of leaving like he wanted me to..." The thought had spun through her mind on repeat for years. She rubbed her forehead as if to wipe away her memories. "I'll never again blindly follow an order when I'm not convinced it's the right thing to do."

A few seconds ticked by, then Griffin moved away, giving Kelsey room to breathe. "All right. But don't make me regret this, wolf. If you harm Jorie in any way..."

"I won't. I swear."

Griffin smoothed her palms over the sleeves of her shirt like a cat licking its ruffled fur. She pulled her laptop closer and stretched her fingers. Then the rapid-fire clicking of her keyboard echoed through the otherwise silent living room.

While they waited, Kelsey looked over and met Jorie's gaze. Jorie gave her a nod and a brief smile before she turned toward Griffin. "The boy is about thirteen or fourteen, slender, almost a bit gawky, with dark hair."

"Judging from the way he signs, he probably lives somewhere in the US or in Canada," Kelsey added.

Griffin glanced up from her keyboard. "How do you know so much about sign language?"

"My brother was deaf," Kelsey said, trying to keep the emotion from her voice.

With a nod, Griffin returned to her typing. She mumbled something and typed another series of words. Her brows bunched together as she studied the laptop screen. "That can't be." She typed in another word, hit enter, and then shook her head. "Weird. I can't find him in the database."

"So no one filed a missing-persons report with the Saru?" Jorie asked.

"Not just that," Griffin answered. "There are only two deaf male Wrasa in the database. One is three years old, and the other is fifty-two."

"Some children with autism sign instead of speaking," Kelsey said. "Maybe the boy is autistic, not deaf."

Griffin did another search and then again shook her head. "Nothing. The boy is not in the database."

"What?" Jorie circled the coffee table and squeezed in between Griffin and Kelsey. "Let me see."

When Griffin turned the laptop to show her, Jorie squinted down at it. "What's this? I thought you were searching the Saru database."

"This is the Saru database," Griffin said with a grin.

"But...but that's the website for some rock band." Jorie leaned closer to the laptop screen. "The Howlers."

Across Jorie's shoulder, Kelsey dared to take a peek. Only higher-ranking Saru like Griffin had access to their secret database. Now Kelsey watched as her commander moved the mouse over the screen.

One click on "events" revealed a list of places and times for concerts and band appearances. "These are secret meeting places of Saru command, searches for criminals on the run, and other urgent news. If any Wrasa had been kidnapped, it would show up here."

"God, the Wrasa's version of America's Most Wanted, dressed up as rock concerts. Weren't all the passwords enough to protect the database from human eyes?" Jorie lifted her hands before Griffin could answer. "Don't answer that. I forgot that I'm talking about a species of paranoids."

“Jorie, come on.” Griffin gave Jorie a gentle nudge. “You know why most of us think it’s better to hide our existence. The Inquisition drove us to the edge of extinction.”

A tired smile lifted one corner of Jorie’s mouth. “Well, at least you were creative. The Howlers. Tsk.” She pointed at another link on the website. “What’s this?”

Griffin clicked on the fan club link. “This is a database of every Wrasa in North America. Each pack or pride is required to register its offspring before they reach their first birthday.”

“What if a human stumbles across the site and wants to join the fan club or go to one of the concerts?” Jorie asked.

“They can’t access the information on the site without the passwords, and they’re all in the Old Language. But if anyone managed to get in...” With two clicks, Griffin returned to the main site and clicked on a play button. Screeching guitars and off-key singing rattled the laptop’s speakers.

“Okay, okay, okay! Turn it off. Jesus. No one would voluntarily go to a concert like that.” Jorie rubbed her ears.

A Cheshire-cat grin spread over Griffin’s face. “Yeah. And we really have a band called The Howlers. Just in case, because some humans have weird taste in music.”

Jorie stared at the screen. “So you searched the database, but the boy isn’t listed. What does that mean? Maybe his family just forgot to register him.”

“Maybe,” Griffin said but didn’t sound convinced. “Let me try something else.” She pulled the laptop closer and pressed a series of commands into the keyboard. After what seemed like an eternity, she shook her head. “I tried human law enforcement, but there’s no AMBER alert out in any state for a deaf teenager. Nothing in the NCIC, the central database for crime-related information, either. There’s no missing deaf boy at the moment.”

Jorie blew out a breath, ruffling a strand of black hair hanging into her eyes. “Damn.”

“There might be another way,” Kelsey said. “If we can get into the records of schools for the deaf and click through the photos of all enrolled students, you might be able to recognize him.”

“Can you do that, Griff?” Jorie asked.

“Yeah, my sister showed me how to do something like that.” Again, Griffin’s fingers flew across the keyboard.

“Limit your search to students in the seventh, eighth, and ninth grade for now,” Jorie said.

As the first pictures flashed across the screen, the excitement of the hunt swirled through Kelsey’s blood, and this time, she welcomed it. Hunting fever would sharpen her senses and might help them find the boy before the human woman choked him to death.

\* \* \*

Hours later, the first rays of the rising sun crept into the living room. With burning eyes, Kelsey watched Jorie click through one photo after another.

Jorie’s clicking had become less enthusiastic. With each photo, the firm line of her lips tightened. When she reached the last class photo from a school in Los Angeles, she pushed the laptop over to Griffin so that she could get them into the system of the next school.

But instead of reaching for the laptop, Griffin stared at the list of schools they’d put together. “That was the last one.”

The couch shook as they simultaneously sank against the backrest. “So whoever he is, he’s probably going to a mainstream high school, not a school for the deaf.” Kelsey dug her teeth into her bottom lip. “We can’t search them all. There are just too many. And if his parents are homeschooling him, we’ll never find him.”

Jorie placed two fingers on the laptop and closed the lid with a resounding click. “Maybe I was wrong. Maybe what I saw in my dream will happen far in the future or already happened years ago.”

A hollow feeling settled in the pit of Kelsey’s stomach. The boy might be long dead.

“Any other ideas?” Griffin asked and reached over to rub Jorie’s thigh.

Jorie shook her head. Her frustration stung Kelsey’s nose.

When Griffin shifted her gaze toward Kelsey, she shook her head too. They just didn’t have enough information to find the boy. Except for being deaf, he seemed like a pretty average *Wrasa* teenager, with no special characteristics that could help identify him.

“Then I guess I’ll go make breakfast now.” Griffin shoved the laptop away and stood.

Numb, Kelsey stayed behind as Jorie followed Griffin to the kitchen. Her thoughts were still stuck. *Average Wrasa teenager*. She shot upright when a sudden thought occurred to her. *What if...?*

“Griffin, wait!” With bounding strides, Kelsey dashed through the living room and into the kitchen.

Griffin turned.

“How often did you get suspended when you went to school?” Kelsey asked.

“What does that have to do with—”

Kelsey ducked her head. “I just had an idea and want to see if I’m right.”

“Once, okay? I only got suspended once, and it wasn’t even my fault. I wasn’t about to stand by and let a bunch of bullies harass my sister.” Griffin bared her teeth and snarled.

“What did you do?” Jorie asked.

“Oh, nothing much. I just beat them up a little.”

The glint in Griffin’s eyes made Kelsey think those bullies had ended up in the hospital. “Did you get kicked out of school?”

“Almost, but my mother talked the principal into letting me stay.”

“How old were you when that happened?” Kelsey asked.

“Hmm. About thirteen or fourteen, I think.”

Jorie leaned against the kitchen counter. “That’s when Wrasa typically go through that Awakening thing, right?”

“Yes,” Griffin said. “And that’s why so many Wrasa teenagers get in trouble in school. Their human teachers just don’t understand why their behavior changes so dramatically.”

“And that happens every time?” Jorie asked. She looked at Kelsey. “You got suspended from school too?”

Griffin shook her head. “She’s *nederi*—a submissive. I bet she fit in just fine.”

Kelsey winced. *Why do alphas always make it sound like being nederi is such a bad thing?* She gave herself a mental nudge. *Focus on the boy.* “It’s usually the more dominant Wrasa who get in trouble as teenagers,” Kelsey said. “My brother was suspended two times for fighting and almost got expelled. What if the boy from your dream is the same way? What if he didn’t have parents who talked the principal into letting him stay?”

“Good idea.” Griffin gave her a pat on the shoulder that surprised Kelsey. “We should extend our search to include former students.” Without another word, she strode back toward the living room.

\* \* \*

“Stop!” Jorie shouted.

Griffin's fingers froze on the laptop keyboard.

"That's him! That's the boy from my dream!"

Kelsey leaned forward and squinted at the laptop. Griffin had changed it to fit human eyesight, so she needed a few seconds to see the boy's picture clearly.

Thick black hair fell rebelliously into his boyish face. Pale skin and a full bottom lip made him look vulnerable, but the intensity of his gaze told her that he was no helpless victim. If a human tried to hurt him, he'd put up a fight. Maybe that's what had enraged the woman so much that she tried to choke him.

"His name is Daniel Harding," Griffin said. "According to the school's records, he's fourteen now. He got kicked out of the Syracuse School for the Deaf two years ago." The keyboard rattled under Griffin's powerful fingers. "After that, he was enrolled in a program for the deaf at a public school in North Carolina."

"He's still alive," Jorie whispered. "I'm not too late."

Griffin clicked on another screen and typed in rapid succession. "He lives with his adoptive mother," she finally said. "Some rich entrepreneur in the furniture business. Her name is Rue Harding." A few more clicks and keystrokes. "Hmm. She's not in our database either. Seems the whole family is flying under the Saru's radar." Griffin brought up the website of Harding Furniture and clicked through it until the picture of a woman appeared on the screen.

Before Kelsey could take a glance, Griffin turned the laptop so that Jorie could see the screen.

From her standing position, Jorie bent over the back of the couch. Then she froze. "That's his mother? Are you sure?"

Griffin glanced at the screen, then back at Jorie. "Yes, I'm sure. Why?"

Jorie pointed a trembling finger at the screen. "In my dream, she's the one who tries to kill the boy."

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# TRUE NATURE

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