Chapter One

Olivia rubbed her sore rear end while she watched her spooked horse flee, taking her rifle and canteen with him. What had scared him? Olivia looked around the mountain trail and saw nothing. It was silent, though, no sound but the wind in the pines and the burbling water in the stream half a mile away in the meadow below. Where were the normal sounds of birds and insects? She looked around more carefully. Nothing. Her unease lessened as she checked her knife in its sheath on her belt. Not much protection, but better than nothing. She started picking her way over the rocky ground to the trail.

“Crap,” she muttered. Her brothers would never let her hear the end of this. They loved nothing more than teasing their baby sister, except, possibly, scaring off any man brave enough to smile at her. They were still teasing her about being sweet on Rob Russell, down in Kearney. If they knew just how far she and Rob had gone in the stall in his father’s smithy, her brothers wouldn’t have teased her about it; they would have beaten Rob to a pulp.

But that was months ago and what they didn’t know wouldn’t hurt them. Right? Olivia shrugged her shoulders to loosen tight muscles and looked down the trail, hoping her horse would stop so she could catch him. She whistled for him, but he didn’t come. He was probably a mile away by now, heading for his stall back at the ranch. She was going to have to hoof it all the way home. Maybe her brothers would see her riderless horse. They’d tease her to death about it, but they would come find her. Overprotective idiots. If she were very lucky, they wouldn’t mention it to their dad. She knew the rules about riding too far from the house alone. Her father was a reasonable man, but he was also a wolf warrior from the Lakota Wolf Clan, and wolves tended to go overboard in protecting their women.

Olivia brushed herself off one more time, touched a hand to the hilt of the knife in her belt for reassurance, and headed after her horse. It was a pretty day for a walk, a perfect Indian summer day, and the scenery was beautiful. The path was rocky, so she walked carefully in her cowboy boots. There was a sheer rock wall soaring toward the sky a yard to her left, and a grassy slope started about ten yards away on her right, spreading out into a green mountain meadow cut neatly in half by a stream. In the meadow, brush was scoured bare by the early autumn winds, and majestic pines punctuated by tumbled rock lined the edges of the stream. This was one of her favorite places to come to be alone and think.

As she had been taught, Olivia kept her eyes moving to and fro to find any trouble before it found her. She hadn’t forgotten that something had scared her horse. Her vigilance didn’t keep her from being surprised by the thing that dropped from the top of the rock wall twenty feet above her. Instead of thudding to the ground in front of her, it landed lightly, perfectly balanced. Olivia was so startled that she stepped down incautiously on a rock and nearly lost her balance. She paused, hand on her knife hilt. At first she didn’t know what it was. A large sack? A man? A mountain lion? She had just found what had spooked her horse into flight.

The thing was a man. Sort of. He wore brown pants, but no shirt or boots, and his feet were … paws. He crouched on his haunches in front of her, leaning his weight on one hand — no, one paw — snarling, head low. Spilling in a wild tangle of tawny gold over his bare shoulders, his hair hung almost to the ground.

Olivia remembered to breathe, but she couldn’t tear her eyes from the creature in front of her. His face was strangely feline, with a flat nose, and a pointed chin, and eyes of icy green. They almost glowed. If he was a lion in the same way her brothers were wolves, he looked as if he had gotten stuck in mid-shift. This ... person lifted his lip in a snarl that showed frighteningly sharp teeth in a deadly threat. Unlike her wolf cousins, he didn’t seem to hold women in high regard.

Olivia couldn’t decide if she were terrified or fascinated. The lion-man shifted a few inches closer to her, still snarling, and she decided on terrified. Her fingers shook as she gripped the hilt of the knife beneath her hand. The lion-man roared with bone disintegrating rage. Olivia froze for a sickening moment before forcing herself to back up. He roared again, and snarled until she stopped moving. Then he stared intently at her, sniffing the air and making almost sub-vocal noises in his throat. Olivia reached behind her to feel how close the rock wall was to her back. The lion man slowly straightened out of his crouch and took a step toward her. One step was all it took for him to be only a few inches from her. He was tall. Taller than she was. Taller, maybe, than her brother Taylor, who was an inch taller than their father. One of his hands lifted toward her face. Olivia didn’t want to take her eyes off his, but she flicked a lightning fast glance at the hand. It was hairy, with long, deadly claws instead of fingernails. She flinched away and he snarled some more, gripping her jaw in his big, claw-tipped hand. A soft voice spoke from above her head.

“Lergokit,” the voice said quietly, but it held a hint of the same sort of command she’d heard Uncle Muddy Wolf use. “Na owrs. Lehergo.”

The cat man roared, “Mahmayd.”

Who were these men? What language were they speaking? Olivia resisted the urge to tear his hand away. Those claws could lay her face open to the bone with no effort.

The man on the top of the rock wall spoke again, sounding almost shocked. “Sheezahyoomahn. Lehergo.”

The hand clenched painfully on her jaw, squeezing a whimper out of her. She felt tears well and spill, but wasn’t sure if it was because of pain, or horror, or simple shock. No one had ever caused her pain. Her father and brothers protected her. Her uncles and cousins would kill anyone who bothered her. Everyone knew that she was one of the precious daughters of the Wolf Clan, which could call up almost two hundred warriors to defend her if needed. No one dared trouble her. Except this creature.

The hand loosened and the rough thumb rubbed gently over the edge of her jaw. “Sahrie. Naherchu.”

Olivia saw that the eyes, looking almost tenderly at her, were unexpectedly beautiful, gold and green like the eyes of a mountain lion. The lion man inched closer to her until she could feel his warm breath on her throat at the opening of her wool flannel shirt. His tongue, rough like a cat’s, touched her throat, lapped up a delicate taste of her skin there. A tiny heat flared between her legs, embarrassingly like what she’d felt with Rob in the stall. Fainting would be bad, she was sure. She braced her hands against his chest, trying to hold him off. He snarled at her, tightening his grip on her jaw until a thin sound of pain came from her throat.

The voice above said something forceful in their language, and then a slight thud marked the arrival of another body. Olivia couldn’t see anything past the bulk of the lion man, but she guessed it was the man who had spoken from up above. Was he another lion man like the one who had trapped her? The lion man holding her screamed in rage as he whirled to face the newcomer. Olivia felt one of his claws slice her neck and a thin trickle of blood roll hot over her throat. The same voice she’d heard from the top of the rock wall spoke quietly, this time from a couple feet away.

“Lehergo. Muzlergo,” he said quietly. “Kit nahyorz. Cumear kit.”

Her lion man backed up until his back was an inch from her front. “Mine!” he roared.

That word was oddly clear. Slowly, the words they had been speaking began to make sense. Lehergo. Let her go. Muzlergo. Must let her go. Nahyorz. Not yours. Olivia exhaled with relief even as she dabbed at the blood on her neck. Somehow, knowing they spoke English helped ease some of her fear. Not all of it, but some. If the lion man would just move and let her breathe, then she would be even less afraid. She wedged her hands between them and gave his back a shove. He roared and crushed her between his back and the hard rock wall. Her shoulder blade was ground into a sharp jag in the rock hard enough to drag a shriek from between her clenched teeth.

“Get off me,” she yelled, trying to shove him away. “You’re hurting me!”

The pressure eased slightly, but she could feel growls and snarls vibrating in the body pressed against her. The other man said, “See? Yuherher. Lehergo.”

You hurt her, Olivia translated. Let her go. “Yes, please let me go. My brothers—”

“No!” screamed the lion man, slamming her into the wall again. “Mine!”

The other man spoke, once again using his Alpha tone, but her lion man half crouched, all his muscles bunching in preparation for a spring. Olivia could just see over his shoulder and the other man looked perfectly human. His hair was black, either very short or pulled back tightly from a suntanned face with regular features. With his long, lean body, he looked like he would be fast on his feet, but could he defeat the lion man? Olivia didn’t want him hurt; she was counting on him getting her out of this mess.

She tapped the lion man’s shoulder. “Excuse me. Let me introduce myself. I’m Olivia Stensrud. And you are?”

The dark-haired man’s eyebrows climbed up his forehead in disbelief. Her lion man loosened his crouch a little bit, head tilted slightly as if to hear her voice better, but he never looked away from the other man and his snarls didn’t stop either. Maybe she’d spoken too quickly?

“I am O liv ee ah Stens rud,” she enunciated carefully. “Who are you?”

The lion man looked over his shoulder at her, almost calm now that she was talking to him. “Yermade.”

“Yermade? That’s a nice name.” She looked past him to the dark haired man. “And you?”

The dark-haired man flinched when the lion man crushed her between his hard back and the harder rock wall, snarling at the other man. Olivia screamed in pain and anger when her already bruised back flamed with new pain.

“Would you stop that? It hurts!”

Yermade half-turned to her, still keeping part of his attention on the other man. He made a strange noise deep in his throat. A purr? “Sorry, Yermade noherdchu.” He dipped his head briefly for one quick swipe of his rough tongue over her throat. “Yukay?”

The look of concern on that alien face was wiped away by fury as he wheeled on the other man, who had taken several silent steps toward them. The dark-haired man froze, speaking in a quiet voice too rapidly for Olivia to decipher what he was saying. But Yermade seemed to understand, and consider the man a threat. He spat something back, but the words were so distorted by snarls and growls that Olivia had no idea what he said. Since he had moved a foot or so away from her, she took the opportunity to sidle to the left, away from his punishing back. He must have eyes in the back of his head, because he didn’t have to look at her to pin her against the rock wall. She frantically tore at the elbow digging into her windpipe.

“Yuherder, Kit,” the dark haired man said urgently. “Moofyarm.”

The elbow eased a centimeter away. Able to breathe again, Olivia tried to translate what they had been saying. Yuherder? You heard her? You hurt her? Moofyarm. Move your arm. “Look, Yermade, I just want to go home.”

“Mahmade no go!” Yermade growled, still facing the other man as if he were a threat.

“Mahmade?” Olivia said doubtfully.

“You mahmade.” Yermade looked over his shoulder at her, and his eyes glowed fiercely at her. “You. Mahmade.”

“No, I’m Olivia.”

Yermade turned on her, ignoring the other man long enough to stab a wickedly sharp claw at her face. “You. Mah. Madte,” he yowled.

Mah ma … Olivia felt the blood run out of her face. “My mate?” she gasped. “You think I’m your mate?” She looked past Yermade to the other man. “He thinks I’m his mate?”

Yermade roared and fastened a hand around her throat, and by either luck or care on his part, his claws didn’t touch her skin. “No dokdim! You mine! Mah madte.”

“Okay.” Olivia hated the tremble in her voice. “Just don’t hurt me. Okay? Don’t hurt me.”

The hand on her throat became caressing and he made that purring noise again. “Naherchu, Yermadte naherchu.”

Your mate no hurt you. Yermade wasn’t his name. Olivia forced herself to look into his eyes. “What’s your name?”

“Kih.” It seemed he struggled to make the right sound. “Kihdt.”

“Kit?” she guessed. Wasn’t that what the other man had called him? Those monstrous fangs must make it hard for him to pronounce Ts. “Kit, my family will be looking for me. I need to go home.”

The lion man roared and this time his claws pricked her neck when his hand tightened. The other man spoke soothingly, and Olivia was able to follow most of what he said.

“Kit, you’re scaring her. You don’t want to hurt your mate. Let me talk to her so she’ll understand. I won’t try to take her away from you. Kit, I smell blood. You’re hurting her.”

Kit growled something completely unintelligible to Olivia, but the other man seemed to get it right away. Kit was tense as he moved a few inches, enough for her to see the other man, but although he retracted his claws, his hand remained circling her throat. “Dok nahluk,” he growled.

“Lady, we can talk, but don’t look at me,” the other man said quietly, in perfectly enunciated English, his eyes focused on a point past her left shoulder. “And don’t stare at him either. Don’t do anything to make him think you’re challenging him. He’s pretty emotional now. He doesn’t mean to hurt you, but he doesn’t have good control when he’s upset.”

Kit turned to cover her with his body. He pressed closer to her and Olivia found her nose buried against his chest. He had an earthy scent, but not unpleasant, and she could feel the vibrations of his quiet snarls against her cheek.

“His name is Kit?”

“Yeah, Christopher. I’m Devlin.”

“What *is* he?”

Kit’s growls rose in volume and his hand tightened.

“Sorry,” she whispered hastily. “I’ve just never seen anyone like you.”

Devlin’s voice was cold. “He’s a person, same as you are, and he can hear and understand everything you say. After he calms down he’ll go back to his human form.”

Olivia wondered what he looked like in his human form. “Sorry,” she said again.

“Kit’s chosen you to be his mate. It might be a little rough at first, but you’ll adjust.”

Were Devlin and Kit lions like her brothers and cousins were wolves? The men in the Wolf Clan who had wolves didn’t marry just any woman who caught their eye. They waited for the wolves within them to choose a mate. The wolf would reject any other woman, so a wolf warrior who wanted a wife and family had to woo the woman his wolf chose into accepting him. If that was how Kit’s lion worked, then he should be courting her in an effort to get her to accept their mating. If this was courting, she’d hate to see how he treated someone he didn’t like. Her back ached, her throat hurt from being crushed, and the multiple small claw marks stung. Those injuries, plus his feral roaring and snarling, didn’t make her see him in a lover-like light. But if his lion had chosen her for a mate, she should be polite. She had seen her cousins’ pain when their mates rejected them. Olivia aimed a smile up at Kit’s lion face.

“If Kit and I are mates, then Kit needs to come and meet my parents,” she said brightly. Once home, her father and brothers would protect her while Kit courted her.

Kit roared.

“Stop that,” she told him, annoyed. On the other hand, the roars were loud enough that if her brothers were anywhere near they’d hear them and come investigate. “It’s only polite for you to meet my family. If I accept you, they’ll be your family, too.”

“You come wih me,” Kit returned, speaking very carefully, with more than a hint of a growl.

“I can’t. My brothers would worry, and if I’m not home soon, they and my dad will start looking for me.”

“Nah find you.”

“Yes they will! My father’s the greatest tracker alive. And if he doesn’t find me, he’ll send for the Clan to come help. That would be more than two hundred men! You can’t hide me from that many people who love me.”

His shrill scream sent shudders down her spine. “Kit—”

“Quieh!” he snarled, squeezing her throat so tightly she choked. “You come wih me now.”

He hauled her up into his arms and began running. Wind fluttered her hair. How could he run so fast? He was running uphill, carrying her in his arms like a baby. Even her wolf-born brothers and cousins couldn’t run like this. Over his shoulder, she could see Devlin, shaking his head, getting smaller and smaller.

“I told you not to challenge him,” he yelled, but Kit had carried her so far, so fast, that the words were very faint.

He was moving too quickly for her to try to throw herself out of his arms. A spill on the steep mountainside could be crippling. Nineteen was too young to die. Kit would get tired soon; he had to. Maybe then she could get away from him. His heart pounded calmly and steadily against her cheek, not seeming to labor at all. The wind created by his speed forced tears from her eyes. Yeah, it was the wind that made her cry. Olivia blinked away the hot tears, determined to fix landmarks in her memory to follow back home when she’d gotten away from him.

And she *would* get away. She might have been willing to allow him to court her, but the way he’d treated her showed her he’d be a terrible mate. Escape might be difficult, but she was her mother and father’s daughter. She could track and survive in the mountains as well as either of her brothers. Even if she wasn’t able to get away on her own, her father and brothers would come for her very soon. Grimly, she settled into the steely arms that held her against a warm chest, waiting for her opportunity to escape.

Chapter Two

Kit ran carefully with his precious burden. His feelings about this female confused him. He didn’t like people outside the pride. No, he feared and hated them. He didn’t get along even with his own pridemates, and they at least left him alone most of the time. Humans were cruel. Why this one smelled so fascinating, he didn’t know. He knew only that when he’d first seen her, he had wanted to break her neck. A minute later, he’d scented her, and then all he wanted was to get as close to her as possible. A year ago, one of his pridemates had claimed a human female as his mate and gone to live with her pride. Family, the humans called it. Kit had thought him crazy. But now he understood. This female was his. Utterly his, and he would keep her with him, never let her go, ever. Part of him, the sliver of human reason that dimmed when he was in his shift, whispered that he was acting crazy. Kit ignored the whisper. It didn’t matter what his human side thought.

“Kit!” the female said insistently, again. She had tried to talk to him from time to time, but now wasn’t the time to talk. He glanced down at her, inhaling her intoxicating scent, but didn’t respond. He needed to keep his attention on the rocks and trees. He was moving with all the speed he could muster, so he could have her in his lair before dark.

Maria might not like him bringing a human female into the Pride. She and Juanita and Tricia were the queens, and they shared all the males of the Pride between them. They might not like another female to share their males. He didn’t care. This human, Olivia, was his. He wouldn’t allow any other male to give her sex. Olivia would be *his* queen. If she objected to him giving sex to the other queens, he would forsake them. When Justin, his pridemate, found his human mate last year, the human female had demanded that he service only her. That must be exhausting for Justin. Maria sometimes required three or four of the males to satisfy her when she was in heat. Kit would be happy to spend all his time pleasing only Olivia. He snarled at the thought that she might want to invite other males to please her. He would kill any male who so much as sniffed at her. He was the youngest of the mature males, but they all feared him. Not only was he the fastest and strongest of them, in spite of only being able to take a half-form, but he was sometimes able to control their minds if he tried. His eyes could force them to surrender if he thought it hard enough. It was seldom worth it. His teeth and claws were easier to use. There were times, however, when it was good to have everyone walk away unbloodied.

He leapt from one spine of rock to another ten feet away and felt the female tense in his arms. A glance down showed her pale blue eyes staring up at him. He didn’t know what humans thought was beautiful, but in his eyes, she was the most beautiful woman in the world. Her hair was pale, lighter and shorter than his, and her face was narrow, with high cheekbones and a wide mouth. She must spend much time outdoors, because her skin was browned by the sun. He wondered if the skin that didn’t see sun would be pale. He would learn soon enough.

She tried to hide it, but he could smell her fear. Her neck was developing bruises from his fingers, speckled with tiny gouges from his claws. She bruised so easily. Humans were pitifully weak, and she was slender, with none of the fat padding her curves like the women he knew. Breaking her would be too easy. He regretted hurting her, but he had no time to sooth her fear now. After he had brought her to his lair, he would speak to her. There, he would be secure enough to resume his man form, and assure her she was safe with him. He would protect her and any kits they had. But first, he had to get her to his lair. He had to hide her so her pride couldn’t find her and take her away from him.

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How long could he run like this? Olivia looked up at the sky and saw the sun was almost down. It had been at least four hours since Kit had picked her up and carried her away. His pace was faster than any racehorse, and his heart rate and breathing weren’t labored. Olivia estimated he had carried her at least sixty miles. She had tried to pull a few of her hairs out and let them drop on the ground along the way from time to time. Even her father would have trouble tracking her all this way with no scent markers from her. By now, her father, brothers, and cousins who were spending the summer at the ranch would be searching for her. They would easily track her horse to where Kit had attacked her. After that, she wasn’t sure how plain the trail would be, especially with Kit carrying her so her scent wouldn’t linger on the ground. But he was leaving some prints. Even though he crossed running water several times and moved over hard rock, surely her dad and brothers would be able to track him. She just had to leave some clues behind to help them.

Her dad would be disappointed in her. She wasn’t supposed to be more than a mile from the ranch house unless she had one of her brothers with her. According to Uncle Shadow, even that was too far for a woman alone. His daughter, Victoria, had to scheme to get any freedom at all. Luckily, Aunt Glory could stand up to Shadow better than anyone, so her cousin Victoria did get some freedom. Her own poor dad must be frantic to find her now. Olivia was sorry she’d pushed the limits of her freedom so far. When her dad and brothers caught up to her, they’d put her in lock down for sure.

“Kit!” She’d been trying to get him to pay attention to her for the past three hours, but he’d always ignored her. Since he was running on relatively level ground now, she dared to squirm gently in his grip. “Kit, please! Let me down just for a couple minutes. I have to… I need to go to the bathroom.” When he paid no heed she pinched him and screamed, *“Kit, are you listening to me?*”

He glanced down at her. His alien face was fiercely feral. He clamped his arms even tighter around her. “No.”

“Yes!” she snapped back. “Unless you want me to pee all over you.” She wasn’t making it up. She really did need to go, but the real reason was that her urine would be like a red flag to anyone tracking her. “Kit! Please!”

Maybe it was the “please.” He leapt up to a rock crevice and set her down. He waved a hand—paw—at the crevice. “Hurry.”

Olivia’s legs almost folded. She staggered and might have fallen if Kit hadn’t steadied her with a hand under her arm. After only a second, he let her go and took one half-step back. He wanted her to pee into the deep crack in the rock. The scent would be harder for her father and brothers to catch there. She unbuckled her belt and found those rabid golden green eyes watching her carefully. Honestly shocked, she stopped.

“Can’t you go away for a minute?” she asked stiffly.

“No.”

“Then you have to turn around,” she demanded.

“Why?” he asked in apparent confusion.

“Because it’s not polite to watch someone go to the bathroom!”

That strange feline face showed bafflement. Was he totally uncivilized? Didn’t he know anything about common courtesy? Privacy? She felt suddenly cold. He really was feral. “Kit,” she began. Saying please seemed to help before. She tried it again. “Please step away and turn your back. It’s not like I’m stupid enough to try to run off. I know you’d catch me in two seconds. Okay? Please?”

After staring at her for a long minute, he did as she asked. It was embarrassing for her, but she quickly did her business and did her best to leave evidence for her father to find. Before she had even finished buckling her belt, Kit was back, swinging her up in his arms and sprinting off again. Even her father couldn’t cover ground this quickly. Her urine scent would be gone before he came this way. Helpless tears stung her eyes, and in spite of her efforts, she couldn’t force them back. Kit looked down at her as he ran. His eyes really were pretty, in a fierce, non-human sort of way. Intense and staring steadily in hers, his eyes filled her sight. She felt like he was trying to hypnotize her.

“Sleep,” he commanded in a fierce purr-growl. “Sleep, mahmade.”

And somehow, without her meaning for them to, her eyelids dropped and she slept.

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Kit climbed the steep slope to his lair, carrying his mate tightly against his chest. His cave was a hundred yards from the rest of the Pride. They all knew he preferred to be alone. He brought his kills to the Pride to share, and occasionally went to them to give sex to one of the queens, but rarely did any of them come closer to him than the bottom of the slope. He would still share his kills with them, after he had set aside a portion for his human female, but he decided he wouldn’t be giving the queens sex any longer. He had a mate of his own now, like Justin. He wondered how Justin was doing living with his mate’s human pride. Kit could never live under such confining conditions. He was a cougar, for all that he couldn’t make a full change. Living in a human pride would kill him. Even if his human mate begged him to join her pride, he would refuse.

In his arms, Olivia was still deep in the sleep he’d laid on her. He walked into his lair and paused to inhale her scent. His. His mate. That scent made him want to roll around in it. He needed to have her scent on him, marking him as hers. He wanted her to smell of him. Gently he put her down on the tangle of woven wool blankets he habitually curled on to nap. When would she wake? When she did, would she want him to service her immediately? He put his nose close to her crotch to sniff. She was human, so he couldn’t tell if she were in heat. Often Maria, Tricia, and Juanita demanded sex even when they weren’t in heat. She smelled good there. It was a happy scent. He had trouble thinking clearly in his shift, and struggled to clarify his thoughts. Her scent made him happy, that was what he meant. He growled in anticipation.

What should he do until she woke? She needed grooming. That was something he could do for her. Carefully, gently, he licked over her face. Her face tasted of tears and her throat tasted of old blood from where he had accidently cut her skin with his claws. He hadn’t meant to hurt her. Mates shouldn’t be hurt. That was clear in his mind. She had tried to deny him, but he should have been more careful. He would have to learn to control himself around her. As a human, she was frighteningly fragile.

His clawed fingers fumbled a little with the buttons on her shirt, but he was able to remove it and the thick undershirt she wore beneath it. He stared in confusion at the strips of fabric she had wrapped around her chest. Was it a bandage? He sniffed cautiously for injury and decided it must be something she used to protect her teats. He wanted to lick her there. Maria loved to have her teats licked and nipped. Better to wait until she woke, he decided. Leaving her chest wrappings in place, he carefully groomed her belly, shoulders, and back with slow swipes of his tongue.

How long would she sleep? Any of his pridemates would have thrown off his compulsion by now. Humans were weaker than cats. Maybe it would take her longer to wake up. He had to wait for her to wake to service her, but he wanted her right now. At least he could rub against her and absorb her scent while he waited for her. She wore boots and socks and heavy pants with a belt and a knife on the belt. He approved of the knife. As a human female, she had neither claws nor strong sharp teeth with which to defend herself. A knife was a good thing for her to have. He removed her pants, socks and boots, but decided to leave the cloth she wore around her hips in place, too. He would love to groom the pink flesh between her legs, but she might be angry if he did that without her invitation.

He pondered that. Did he have to wait for an invitation? She belonged to him. When he’d first found her, she had tried to deny him. Now that she was here, in his lair and wearing his scent, she would realize that she must submit to him. But he should at least wait until she woke. Females could sometimes be moody and unreasonable when it came to sex. So he satisfied himself with sniffing the rich scent from her female place and cleaning thoroughly between her toes and along the arches of her slender feet.

After he had finished grooming her, he realized that with the sun down, his lair was cooling rapidly and her body was chilled. She was human and would feel the cold more than he did. He had never had a fire in any of his lairs before, but he’d never had a weak human female to care for either. A small fire would be good for her. He could put her clothes back on her, but he didn’t want anything between their bodies when she woke and demanded sex. His pants joined hers on the floor beside them. Was she like Maria, who liked her lover to be rough and screamed at him to go faster, thrust into her harder? Would she buck against him, trying to throw him off to force him to dominate her? Or was she like Juanita, who liked to play during sex and cuddle after? Or was she like Tricia, who indulged in the act only when her need was riding her hard, and clawed the males away as soon as she was satisfied? He hoped she liked to play. She was so delicate he might break her if she demanded he be rough with her. It was in his nature to take control during sex. Maria loved that. For her, sex was a battle. But he liked to play and he liked cuddling. Cuddling Olivia was something he would love to do.

He searched out dry wood and hurried back to his lair to build the fire. Kit curled around his mate, reveling in her bare skin touching his. Cuddling soothed something wild inside him. She smelled right. She smelled like him. He lay on his side almost on top of her and put his chin on his fist to watch her sleep. The pain of the change was brief as he went from his half-form to human. He couldn’t smell her as well in his man form, but he could still feel her stomach where his arm lay over it, and her breath warm on his shoulder. In fact, he could feel her even better with his human hand. Her hair was almost as pale as her belly. It was shorter than his, soft and straight. He used his fingers to comb the tangles out of it.

Safe in his lair with his mate beside him, he was able to think more clearly. Maybe Olivia wouldn’t be happy to be his mate. He swallowed, considering that. She had seemed to resist at first. He hoped he was wrong and she would be glad he had taken her. He hadn’t had a choice either. All he knew was, she was his. Whether she was happy or angry didn’t change that fact.

“Olivia,” he breathed. Her name was strange, but easy to say when he was in man form. It was black in his lair, but he could see her well enough. He couldn’t tell if she was pretty as the humans viewed prettiness. She was beautiful to him. Her white skin almost glowed in the dark. Her belly was firm, the teats beneath their wrappings seemed firm also. Perhaps she hadn’t yet given birth to kits. That pleased him, although it seemed strange. She was fully mature, past the age where she would have dropped her first litter.

Maybe it was a human thing. Kit had watched them sometimes from a distance, but he didn’t understand their ways. Justin and Devlin had told him that some human females accepted only one male. Not just one male at a time, but only one male for their entire lives. That was ridiculous. There were few females but many males among the humans he’d watched. The males must fight each other for the right to claim a female, just as his pride did sometimes when Maria or the others were in heat. Then the pride queens demanded sex from several of the males at a time.

Maybe the human males felt about their mates the way he felt about Olivia. They prevented any other males from servicing their mates and would kill any male who approached. That made sense. He would kill any male who came near Olivia. Devlin was First Male of the pride, but even he wouldn’t be allowed to touch her. Kit was the only one who would give Olivia sex.

Kit bent to inhale at her female spot. To have such an alluring scent, she must be in heat. He felt fierce and wild from it, just as he and the other males did when one of their females went into heat. She would wake up demanding he give her sex. He relaxed into her body, falling into a light catnap while he waited to please her so thoroughly she wouldn’t ask for another male.