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CHRISTINA DODD

A Love Untamed

A Feral Warriors Novel

Pamela Palmer



AVON

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Dedication

To my father, Stew Palmer, one of the finest men I've ever known. Thanks, Dad, for everything.

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By Pamela Palmer

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Chapter One

Eight days ago

Kieran twisted, avoiding the male's kick, then swung out with his own, slamming his opponent to the hardwood floor.

"Good, try!" Kieran said, holding his hand out to the male and helping him up. "Again."

The male groaned but nodded, shoving a sweaty lock of hair out of his eyes. The gym, on the outskirts of Dublin, was unairconditioned and hot despite the late-spring temperatures outside, smelling of sweat and hard work. Inside, more than forty new recruits sparred.

As the two men circled, Kieran called to the larger group, "Watch your opponent's hands. Always know where they are. Hands are a Mage's most dangerous weapons." He didn't have to add that a Mage could enthrall a Therian with a single touch, rendering him a puppet to be turned on his fellow Mage. Or to be captured or killed. The Therians had been at war with the Mage for millennia and his recruits knew it all too well.

Fortunately, Therians had the advantage of muscle mass few Mage possessed. Once they'd had more advantage than that. At one time, all Therians had been shape-shifters, able to shift into the animals at will. But those days ended five millennia ago when, for a brief period of time, the Mage and Therians banded together, mortgaging the bulk of their power to defeat the Daemons, who were terrorizing the Earth. They'd succeeded. The Daemons had been locked in a mystical blade from which they'd never escaped. But the power the two races had mortgaged never returned. When the dust had settled, only one Therian of each of the animal lines had retained the power of his or her animal, and the ability to shift. Those few had banded together, the strongest and finest of the race, and become known as the Feral Warriors.

The rest of the Therians, Kieran included, shifted only in their dreams, fighting their enemies the human way. With their fists and knives.

His opponent leaped at him, too high, and Kieran easily flipped him over his shoulder. “Keep your center of gravity low, boyo. Try it again.”

The male looked thirty but could be anywhere from twenty-five to a thousand or more, as all immortals ceased to age once they were fully grown. The man hunched over for a moment, catching his breath. “Any word on the new fox?”

The fox Feral Warrior had died last month in a Mage attack of some sort. The Feral Warriors tended to be a tight-knit and tight-lipped bunch, and the details had never been leaked to the greater Therian community. But the death itself had not been kept a secret. When one Feral died, the animal spirit flew to the next in the line, the strongest Therian with that animal’s shifter DNA, marking him to take the dead shifter’s place. The marking could take weeks, even months, but ultimately, another would be marked. And the entire Therian world was abuzz with excitement, each of them wondering who he . . . or she . . . might be the one.

Kieran shook his head. “No word.” A flicker of hope danced in his chest because the truth was, *could* be him. Unlike most Therians, he *knew* he possessed fox-shifter DNA. After five millennia most Therians no longer knew their ancestral makeup. But Kieran’s father was old, born only a few hundred years after the Sacrifice. And his father’s mother had been born a fox shifter.

Both had been talented intuitives, often knowing things before they happened. Kieran had inherited that ability to a lesser degree. To a fairly useless degree, unfortunately. His own gut offered him truths that were generally so vague as to be worse than nothing.

He could be the one marked this time if the animal spirit deemed him the strongest and finest of those who possessed the fox-shifter DNA. The thought filled him both with a wild excitement and a mix of mixed emotions. Being chosen would be a tremendous honor. And being able to shape-shift as his ancestors had? *Incredible*. But being chosen to become a Feral Warrior was a life’s commitment. There was no turning it down and no going back. All Feral Warriors lived together with the Radiant, the one woman marked by the goddess to pull the energies from the earth that empowered the Feral. The new fox would have to move to Great Falls, Virginia, and live at Feral House with the other shifters. He would become part of a greater whole, one of the warriors on the front lines of the battle to protect the world from the threat of the Daemons’ return.

Kieran looked up at the wooden rafters above, his mind across the Atlantic. All things considered, would he choose to be the new fox shifter if the choice were his?

With a low chuckle, he nodded to himself. Hell, yes.

“Switch partners!” he called, and three female recruits rushed him at once, all with that look in their eyes that told him they’d be happy to partner with him in any way he wished. With a grin that encompassed all three, he motioned one to approach him and the other two to face one another. All three laughed. The one he’d chosen to work with gave him a beaming smile that quickly turned to surprise as he swept her feet out from under her. She slammed onto her back on the wood floor with a sharp cry of pain.

He refused to train his recruits on mats. Therians were immortal and indestructible. They might

break something in the fall, but they'd heal within a minute. It was better if they learned to deal with the pain right from the start. If they weren't suited to the Therian Guard, he wanted to know it now.

"Keep your mind on the fight, pet," he told the woman, helping her up.

She threw him a look that was part wary smile, part feminine speculation. "You've got good moves, Kieran."

He laughed. "Aye, I do. But the only moves I'm showing you here, pet, are the ones that might keep you alive if the Daemons return. Come now," he said, crouching low and beginning to circle her. "Let's see what you can do."

Fifteen minutes later, he took a break, letting one of his subordinates lead the training as he grabbed his towel and wiped the sweat from his brow and the back of his neck. Jill, one of his lieutenants, joined him, her long legs encased in black fighting pants, her smile as warm and inviting as an Irish pub on a cold winter's night as she handed him a cup of water.

"I've never seen so many female Therians wanting to learn to fight," she murmured. "Most of them have no business here."

Kieran shrugged. "They want to learn how to defend themselves."

Jill snorted. "What they want is a chance at your bed. You're a legend, you know."

Aye, he did, though he was well used to it.

He glanced around the room and found nearly two-thirds of the class paying more attention to his movements than to their opponents'. No coincidence, two-thirds of the class was female. He'd been blessed or cursed—he often couldn't decide which—with the ability to draw females like bees to honey whether he wanted to or not. They watched him with eyes full of invitation, the bolder ones offering themselves freely.

"When the call went out to the Therian enclaves to get their people in fighting shape, every female in the British Isles chose our group to train with. I wonder why," Jill added dryly.

Kieran took a long swig of the cool water and smiled. "You jealous, pet?"

Her expression turned serious. "I could be, Kieran. If I thought I could ever truly win your heart."

Inside, he squirmed. This was the discussion he loathed, for he truly hated the thought of hurting her. Of hurting any of them.

"I've no heart to give you, Jill," he said quietly, regretfully.

"So you've told me many a time, but you're wrong, Kieran. You've a big heart in that finely hewn chest. You just haven't met the right female, yet. And as much as I wish otherwise, I'm not the one."

No, she wasn't. No woman was, as he tried to tell them all. He'd watched one woman whom he loved more than his own life die. It didn't matter that she'd been his sister, not his lover. Over the centuries, he'd watched good friends take mates in a ritual that bound one to the other body and soul and watched as one died and the one left behind suffered untold agony, unable to fully live again. Mating bonds between the immortals was far more than a simple promise to love and cherish. They could not be severed. No, he would never take a mate. If losing his sister could hurt so much, how much more would losing a wife? He'd long ago decided that love of any kind led to heartache and

nothing more. He was better off without it.

He hooked his arm around Jill's neck and placed a kiss on her cheek. "You're a fine thing, pet. And I love you in my way, you know that."

"Aye, I know it, Kieran. I know it."

Releasing Jill, he turned his attention back to the class, ignoring the females, too many of whom were still paying him more mind than they were their opponents. Two of the males caught his attention, one of the smaller men whom Kieran had already pegged as a future leader, and a beefy Welshman with a look in his eye that Kieran didn't like—a hard gleam Kieran suspected revealed a mean streak. Either the attitude or the male were going to have to go.

As Kieran watched, the Welshman's opponent, quick and tough, managed to throw the bigger man off balance. A flash caught Kieran's eye, light reflecting on metal, as the Welshman, still on his arse, swung out. A knife, dammit. The blade sliced through the smaller man's thigh in a spray of blood.

Feck.

Kieran reached him in a dozen angry strides, slammed his fist through the wanker's face as he ripped the knife from his hand, then threw the blade hard, burying it deep in one of the wood ceiling beams.

"What did I tell you on the first day of training?" he shouted. "No knives! No. Knives."

The Welshman leaped to his feet, fury in his eyes. And suddenly those eyes began to change to animal eyes as only a true shifter's ever would.

Bloody hell.

As Kieran stared, fangs dropped from the blackguard's mouth, and the wanker began to laugh. Though he'd yet to shift, and wouldn't until he'd been brought into his animal during a ritual performed by the rest of the Feral Warriors, it was clear the fox shifter had been chosen. Even the newly marked could pull fangs and claws—what the shifters called *going feral*.

He stared at the wanker. The *finest* in the fox shifter line? Well, bloody fecking hell.

The new Feral Warrior swung, for once catching Kieran off guard. Too late, Kieran realized that the hand coming for him was now filled with sharp claws. He felt those claws rip down his face, from temple to jaw, removing skin and muscle, showering him in his own warm blood.

Pain burned through his face as he healed. Fury roared through his mind at the fact that this asshole had been chosen to defend the race. Over *him*.

With a growl, Kieran threw a punch, intending to show the bastard he could still take him, but his hand didn't . . . *wouldn't* . . . close and he wound up scratching the Welshman instead. No, not scratching . . . *clawing*. He stared at the flesh now hanging from the man's shocked face. And at the bloody claws where a moment ago his own fingernails had been.

What the feck? Had he turned into a bloody monster?

His tongue snagged on the teeth suddenly crowding his mouth. No, not teeth. *Fangs*. Like the Welshman, he'd gone feral.

But . . . *two* new Feral Warriors? Impossible . . . unless another had died without them knowing

Dismay, shock, and elation all warred within him, all trying to find purchase.

People crowded around them, gaping, silent. It wasn't every day a Therian got to see a Feral Warrior. Kieran himself had never laid eyes on one, not in the entirety of his over three hundred years. Now, apparently, he was one.

The others all started talking at once.

"I thought only the fox had died."

"Maybe the Ferals were attacked again, and we didn't know."

"You have to call Feral House."

Kieran met the Welshman's gaze, glad to see the male's eyes were once more human, his fangs and claws retracted. Kieran's own slid away as well.

Jill joined him, her eyes wide in her face, drenched in dismay. "You're leaving, then. To join the Ferals."

"Aye." The thought sent a thrill through his body.

"It's a dangerous business," she said, her voice uneven. "They're on the front line of the battle. Two are dead."

But the front line was exactly where he wanted to be. Fighting back evil, making a difference. He met the Welshman's gaze and saw again that look in his eyes that he didn't like. Maybe the male was one of those who didn't take well to authority, in any form. Or maybe he was just an asshole. Either way, apparently they were now brothers. For the rest of their immortal lives.

As he pulled out his phone to call his enclave and get the number for Feral House, goose bumps rose on his arms, the telltale sign that his intuition was kicking in with some tidbit of knowledge that would likely be of little use.

Wrong.

Wrong? And what in the hell did that mean? That he was wrong in thinking his "gift" would be of little use? Wrong in trying to call Feral House right now? The time in Washington, D.C., was . . . about 7:30 A.M. Too early?

Or was his gut trying to tell him something more profound?

Who knew? There was no use worrying about it. What was done was done. He'd been marked to join the exclusive ranks of the Feral Warriors, and there was no turning it down. Nor did he want to.

All his life, he'd dreamed that this moment might someday be his, and he was damned well going to celebrate it. Even if his gut continued to whisper that one word over and over.

Wrong.

Three days ago

Just before dawn on a cloudless night, Kieran strode through the woods that hung high above the rocky falls of the Potomac River in Great Falls, Virginia, surrounded by Feral Warriors, both old and

new. He'd thought that the fact that he and the Welshman had both been marked meant two of the Feral Warriors had died, but that wasn't the case, thank the goddess.

For millennia, there had been twenty-six Feral Warriors, twenty-six animal shape-shifters left in the world, each of whom shifted into a different, unique animal. Then, six centuries ago, seventeen of them fell into a spirit trap, never to return. The spirit trap had separated the men from their animal spirits, killing the men and holding the animal spirits so they could never mark another. For several hundred years, the Feral Warriors had numbered only nine.

Then a week ago, the first of the seventeen lost animal spirits had returned. Word hadn't reached Dublin, but the Ferals had believed their new fox shifter had arrived. Instead, the new Feral had shifted into a saber-toothed cat, one of the seventeen lost animals. As the Ferals rejoiced, eight more had been marked and made their way to Feral House including Kieran and the Welshman. Tonight was their Renaissance, the ritual that would bring them into their animals for the first time, revealing which animal had chosen each.

Kieran strode down to the cliffs beside Jag, one of the original Ferals, and Ewan, another of the newly marked, one he'd fought beside on both sides of the Atlantic, on and off for decades. A good man, thank the goddess. If they'd all been like the Welshman, Kieran might have begun to wonder if the animal spirits truly marked the best in the line, as had always been claimed. The new Ferals were by and large, an unruly lot, but the originals showed every sign of living up to the legend. From what Kieran had seen, they were a good, honorable bunch and a true brotherhood.

"How does this work?" Kieran asked Jag, as the band of more than a dozen immortal males strode shirtless and barefoot, along the rocks. Lyon, Chief of the Ferals, brought up the rear with his mate Kara, their Radiant.

"We'll call a mystic circle upon the goddess stone in order to hide what goes on from any humans who happen by. Then it's ritual time, pretty boy." Jag grinned. "I don't want to spoil the surprise."

A hard thrill coursed through Kieran. He was about to shift into an animal for the very first time. How many times had he done so in his dreams? How many times had he wondered what it must have been like in those ancient days, when all Therians shifted? Too many to count.

As he climbed down the rocks, he wondered which of the animal spirits had marked him. He hoped the fox, for that was the ancestry he knew. His mother had possessed no knowledge of her own Therian heritage. Few Therians ever mated, and virtually none were monogamous unless they did. His mother had never known who her father was, let alone his deep animal DNA. Which meant, Kieran could potentially have been marked by any of the seventeen animal spirits as well as the fox.

He'd find out soon enough.

As the original Ferals gathered around Kara, Lyon turned to the newcomers. "Stay back until we come for you. If you touch Kara when she's radiant, without an armband, she'll kill you."

"You should see her when she glows," Ewan said quietly, leaning close. "It's a sight you won't forget."

Kieran grinned. "It's a sight we'll become well used to."

Ewan chuckled, his excitement matching Kieran's own. "That we will."

As Kieran watched, Kara lifted her arms and literally began to glow as if she'd swallowed a small piece of the sun. She was such a sweet thing, pretty and quite young, not even a true thirty yet. She wore a slinky ritual gown and flip-flops, her hair in a ponytail. And he liked her immensely.

Lyon watched his mate with the devotion of a truly besotted mate, at once fiercely protective and tenderly in love.

Ritual words were spoken, blood was let, and suddenly Kieran felt a blast of energy power through his body in a euphoric rush. Lights sparkled all around him, and he found himself standing at knee level, on all fours, his snout protruding from his face. Excitement burst within him, then joy as he turned his head, eyeing his red fur, bushy tail, and very foxlike body.

He was now surrounded by a polar bear where Ewan had stood, a crocodile in place of the Welshman, a grizzly, snow leopard, white tiger, lynx, and even an eagle.

"Shift back," Kougar told them.

Kieran imagined himself once more standing on two feet, and in another shower of sparkling lights, in another euphoric rush, he found himself a man once more.

"Henceforth, you will be known as . . ." Kougar's straight arm came down, pointing from one new Feral to the next, starting with him. "Fox, Grizz, Polaris, Leopard, Witt, Eagle, Lynks, Croc."

Ewan slapped him on the back. "What do you say, Fox?" He laughed heartily. "The ladies will love that."

Kieran . . . no, he was Fox now . . . grinned and slapped the polar bear shifter on the back in return. "I'd say it's a fine night, Polaris. A fine night indeed."

As Ewan turned to congratulate the others, Jag approached, slapping forearms with Kieran in the traditional Feral greeting. "Welcome to the pack, Fox-man."

"Kara!"

At Lyon's alarmed tone, Kieran and Jag whirled, watching as Lyon swept a fainting Kara into his arms. None of the other new Ferals seemed to notice, but the originals and Fox all gathered close.

"What's the matter with her?" Fox asked.

Kara, rousing, curled her arm around Lyon's neck. "I'm okay. It's just . . . the rituals. It's like they're sucking me dry."

Nine collective breaths released at once.

Lyon tipped his head against the Radiant's. "You scared me."

Smiling softly, Kara pressed her hand to her mate's cheek. "I love you."

"My heart."

Kieran . . . Fox . . . watched them, wondering at the courage . . . and foolishness . . . it took to care so much, to love so deeply. A mistake he refused to ever make himself.

Chapter Two

Two days ago

Fox strode through Feral House, his boots clicking on the hardwood floor, the golden fox-head armband that had appeared during his first shift tight around his upper arm, his mind in turmoil. For days his gut had continued to whisper that same fecking word. *Wrong*.

And now he thought he knew why. Hell, everything was wrong. The situation at Feral House couldn't be worse.

Last night, the new Ferals, those who'd been marked by the lost animal spirits, had risen up against the rest of them, attempting to slaughter them. Jag and Paenther had been badly injured, badly enough that all had feared for their lives, but they were pulling through. One of the new Ferals, Egle, was dead. And the rest were gone. Even Ewan . . . Polaris.

It was all too clear that the evil Mage were behind this. Somehow, the Mage had freed the trapped animal spirits and infected them with some kind of dark magic that had not only kept them from marking the best of the line but had somehow managed to control the resulting Ferals, turning them into their own evil Feral army.

The good Feral Warriors were in a hell of a mess.

Thank the goddess he'd been marked by the fox and not one of the seventeen lost spirits. As he strode down the hallway, he saw Kougar coming out of the media room.

"Any news?" Fox asked. Kougar was a cold-eyed warrior with a mustache and goatee that made him look more than a little unapproachable. But he'd welcomed Fox warmly and given him no reason to think he wouldn't share whatever he knew.

"Jag and Paenther will be returning soon. And we may be able to cure the new Ferals of that damn infection."

"That's brilliant. Then the Mage plot will have failed."

Kougar plucked at his goatee. “Not entirely. Not all those marked were the best of their line. Perhaps none of them were.”

While Fox had the highest respect for Ewan and hated that his friend had been caught up in the mess, he could only feel relief that the asshole Welshman wasn't actually meant to be marked. His faith in the Feral Warriors as a whole, and his pride in being one of them, had been restored.

“The Shaman believes that my mate, Ariana, may have the solution buried inside the wealth of knowledge in her head,” Kougar continued.

“That's a bloody intriguing comment.”

Kougar looked at him. “Are you aware that she's Ilina? The queen of the Ilinas?”

Fox nodded. “I heard. Which is another bloody intriguing comment. For a thousand years, the world thought the Ilinas extinct.” He cocked his head at the far-more-senior Feral. “You knew the truth.”

“No. I only learned the truth recently.”

“Where have they been all this time?”

“Most of them in the Crystal Realm, their castle in the clouds.”

Fox knew he meant that literally.

“Ariana will be arriving momentarily.”

Even as Kougar said the words, Fox smelled a whiff of pine, then watched, awestruck, as two petite beauties materialized out of thin air.

Ilinas.

The one was a pretty brunette dressed in jeans and boots and leather jacket. The way she looked at Kougar, with a lover's smile, told him she must be Ariana.

But it was the other one who caught Fox's attention and clamped her pretty little fist tight around his. Her hair as light as her companion's was dark, she was dressed in a timeless outfit that marked her as a warrior—leggings and tunic that skimmed graceful curves, a knife hanging from the belt at her slender waist, golden hair falling in a thick braid down her back. She appeared as delicate as a doll—her head small and lovely, her nose pert, her mouth a pretty, petal pink.

But when she glanced his way, sapphire eyes pinned him, eyes as hard as blue diamonds, and suddenly, she didn't seem delicate at all.

As their gazes held, his heart went still, then began beating like a herd of spooked cattle. Fire leaped into her eyes, but not the kind of fire he was used to. There was no warmth in those sapphire eyes, no desire. Only a bright, cutting heat that promised to flay the flesh from his bones.

The beauty jerked her gaze from his, turning toward Kougar and his mate.

Hawke and Faith joined Fox. He hadn't even seen them enter the hallway.

“Amazing that they still exist, isn't it?” Fox murmured to the pair, unable to tear his gaze away from the Ilina. She was like a little spitfire, eyes snapping with anger, that pretty mouth twisted with annoyance. Still . . . “She's a fine thing, the blonde.”

“That's Melisande,” Hawke said quietly beside him.

Melisande. A lovely name for an intriguing woman.

“Apparently she tried to kill Lyon a couple of weeks ago,” Hawke continued.

Fox glanced at him with surprise. “And he let her live?” His gaze returned to the female with a new appreciation. So she knew how to use that sword. No, not delicate at all.

“That was my reaction the first time I heard. It was something of a misunderstanding, and they’ve called a truce of sorts. But the woman apparently has a chip on her shoulder the size of the South Pole when it comes to Ferals. That one’s trouble with a capital T.”

Sapphire eyes cut to him, then away again, without an ounce of interest. Without a modicum of warmth. “Chips can be knocked off.”

Faith snorted beside him. “So can heads.”

Fox chuckled. “She hasn’t met the right Feral yet, is all.”

Hawke clasped him on the shoulder. “You’d have more luck taming a tornado.”

Kougar turned to them. “Fox, Faith, I’d like you to meet Ariana, Queen of the Ilinas and my mate. And her second, *Melisande*.”

The blonde scowled, and he wondered if she was really as cold as she pretended to be. If he’d seen only her, he might wonder if that were typical of her race, but Ariana’s eyes radiated warmth and love along with strength.

Melisande interested him mightily. His gaze dropped to her mouth, a paradox if ever there was one. At once hard enough to flay a man alive and yet shaped like a lover’s dream—the bottom lip plump and kissable, the top sculpted in pale pink perfection.

Ariana strode forward and introductions were made. Then she turned back toward Kougar. “Where’s the Shaman? I understand we have work to do.”

As Ariana started back to the doorway, where *Melisande* and Kougar waited, Fox followed, eyeing *Melisande*, turning on the charm. Could such a cold woman be charmed? The thought made him smile. It had been too long since any female had presented a challenge.

With each step he took, the woman grew more beautiful. Her skin was a flawless cream, as soft, but her eyes were hard. Her lashes, a darker gold than her hair, perfectly framed those magnificent eyes. Her body, though small, was perfectly proportioned, her curves neither too slender nor too round. And his hands itched to clutch her waist and pull her against him.

As he drew close, her scent, of wild heather, teased his nose, nearly drowning him in pleasure.

“*Melisande*, is it?” he asked, drawing on the full force of his Irish upbringing. “A beautiful name for a beautiful woman.”

Sapphire eyes snapped at him with disbelief, certainly not the usual reaction to his attention, but he played the game the way he knew how. He held out his hand to her, uncertain whether she would meet him halfway and suspecting that if she did, it would be with a huff or a roll of pretty blue eyes. Either would be fine as long as he got to touch her.

“I’m Fox, *Melisande*. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“That’s what you think.” Her voice was music laced with acid. She ignored his outstretched hand.

her eyes narrowing as she smiled at him, but there was nothing pleasant about that smile. Hawke's words came back to him, that he'd have more luck taming a tornado, and it occurred to him that he might finally have come across a female who was immune to his charms.

"Mel," Ariana warned.

The petite blonde flung her empty hand toward him as if it were not empty at all, as if she meant to toss a fireball in his face.

Instead, exquisite sexual pleasure rushed through his body on a blast so strong, so pure, that he nearly came right there in the middle of the hallway. On a groan, he arched his back, his eyes drooping closed as the pleasure roared through him, wave after wave of pure ecstasy.

When he could move again, his eyes snapped open, and he straightened to find the most fascinating woman he'd ever met staring at him in wide-eyed disbelief, her mouth forming a horrified O.

A grin spread slowly across his face, his gaze locking with hers. The next time he felt that kind of rapture in her presence, he'd be deep inside of her, and she'd be screaming her release right along with him.

Go to hell shimmered in Melisande's eyes as if she'd heard his silent promise, her mouth snapping closed, once more tightening into a hard line. With a low growl of fury, the beauty disappeared, misting away.

Fox began to laugh.

"What did you do to her?" Kougar asked, clearly puzzled.

Fox shook his head. "I've no bloody idea."

"Watch your step," Ariana warned softly. "Melisande is a good person, but she has a violent and justified hatred of Therians. While she's obligated to honor my alliance with the Ferals, she's unpredictable. She won't try to kill you. But that's about all I can guarantee. And if you hurt her, even that's off the table."

"Point taken." But the grin hovered at the edges of his mouth, the pleasure still coursing through his body. He had no intention of hurting her. Not at all. What he had in mind would have her arching with as much pleasure as she'd just given him. And more. Far more.

As Ariana left to speak to the Shaman, Lyon and Kara strode down the hallway toward them. Lyon caressed his mate's hair. "Are you up to it?"

"Of course." Kara smiled, gazing up at her mate with adoration. In the short time he'd been at Feral House, Fox had come to realize that the love between the Ferals' chief and their Radiant was the beating heart of the house and the bedrock that held them all together regardless of what crisis they found themselves in. And they'd faced one crisis after another since his arrival.

Kara turned front again, catching Fox watching them. She smiled at him sweetly, a woman impossible not to adore. In her jeans and bare feet, she exuded a girl-next-door wholesomeness at odds with her role as the most powerful of the nonshifting Therians. In some ways, she was more powerful even than the shifters, for without her, within a couple of months, they'd begin to lose the power of their animals.

“Radiance,” Lyon said, squeezing his mate’s shoulder gently.

Though it wasn’t necessary to take a shot of radiance directly from the source—Kara empowered them through proximity—none of them ever turned down an invitation for that pure energy rush.

As Kara held her hands out at her sides, Kougar stepped forward and curled his fingers around one slender wrist, a smile for her in his eyes. Hawke tugged on her ponytail like a fond older brother, then wrapped his hand around her other wrist. As Lyon slid his hand beneath Kara’s ponytail, pressing his palm against the back of her neck in a gesture at once possessive and tender, Fox stepped forward and kneel at her feet, slipping his hand around one bare ankle.

“Little Radiant,” Lyon said softly, and, a moment later, Kara lit up, her skin glowing brightly enough to light a darkened room. *Going radiant*, they called it.

Warm, lush energy rushed through Fox’s body—the Earth’s energy, the lifeblood of a Feral Warrior, channeled through the golden armband that had appeared during his first shift.

But it was the rush of a different energy, one of pure rapture that he couldn’t get out of his mind. Nor could he think of anything but the sapphire-eyed beauty who’d delivered it. And how he was going to coax her into his bed.

Melisande stormed down the Grand Corridor of the Ilinas palace in the Crystal Realm, grabbing an ancient vase off its pedestal and smashing it on the emerald floor with a roar of fury that set the chandeliers to swaying, the torches on the crystal walls to flickering, and the few Ilina sisters who had been keeping a wary eye on her fleeing in mist.

“Dammit!”

Even now, far from Feral House, that shifter’s face swam in her mind.

Fox.

She’d noticed him the moment she’d misted into Feral House at Ariana’s side, though what female with eyes in her head wouldn’t have? The male was appallingly good-looking, a Greek god with golden waves of hair falling to broad shoulders framing a face of true perfection—high cheekbones, straight patrician nose, a strong, chiseled jaw, and eyes the blue of a summer sky. Dressed in black military pants and an army green tee, he’d looked like the warrior he undoubtedly was. And, oh, the T-shirt had fit him well, pulling snugly across his chest and arms, setting off his muscular form to true perfection. Around one thick biceps had curled the golden Feral armband with the head of a fox.

She’d found herself staring at him, unable to look away. That she’d noticed him annoyed her. That he’d caught her staring at him infuriated her. But the worst . . . the very worst . . . was that when their gazes met, she’d felt awareness . . . *awareness* . . . for the first time in *forever*. Her cheeks had heated, her breath had scattered, her pulse had raced and had yet to calm.

The remnants of a Ming vase crunched under her heels as she paced, fury vibrating through every pore of her body, making her hands clench and unclench at her sides.

The damned Feral had noticed her reaction to him and acted upon it, flirting with her like she was normal, sex-starved Ilina. She’d meant to show him exactly what she thought of him. He should have

felt pain. *Pain*. Instead, he'd felt pleasure, arching as if he were in the throes of orgasm.

The breath caught in her lungs, and she sank back against the nearest wall, one hand curved protectively around her stomach, the other palming her forehead. She was still there moments later, her mind reeling, when her queen and friend materialized at her side.

Ariana touched her shoulder. "What happened down there, Mel?" she asked worriedly.

Melisande glared at her. "I'm going to kill him." At Ariana's raised eyebrow, Melisande rolled her eyes. "I'm *not* going to kill him. But I want to. You have no idea how much I want to."

Ariana studied her. "He's the one, isn't he? The one you can't intentionally harm. The one suited to be your mate."

Melisande started to laugh, then choked instead, pushing away from the wall. "*Never*. I want a male. Especially not a shifter." She'd hated the shifters for so long, both the Feral Warriors who were able to access the power of their animals and the nonshifting Therians. They were all shifters to her. All equally vile.

Well, maybe not vile. Not all of them. As much as she hated to admit it, the current batch of Feral Warriors appeared to be honorable enough. The nine originals, at least. Ariana certainly thought so. And she couldn't deny they were fighting to keep Satanan and his Daemon horde from rising again, which any creature of the world appreciated.

But that didn't alter the fact that her history with shifters was a bad one. She'd spent most of her life hating them. Now, her traitorous body wanted one of them. She dug her fingers into her scalp and met Ariana's sympathetic gaze.

"I don't want to feel this way."

Ariana's eyes widened. "You want him."

"No. *Yes*." *Heaven help her*. For centuries, thanks to a traitorous shifter and his horrid clan, she'd been unable to bear a man's touch. The thought of it still filled her with dread. But her body had somehow awakened again despite that. And it *wanted*.

She shook her head, eyeing her friend helplessly. "When I blasted Fox . . . the pleasure he felt . . . *felt it, too*." Not like he had, not . . . *orgasmic*. But even now, tendrils of heat swam through her blood, dampening her in secret places.

"I don't want this!" she shouted at the top of her lungs, gripping her head because, even as her body ached, her mind reeled with horror at the thought of lying with a man again. Memories she'd locked down for so long were beginning to stir, memories of soul-destroying betrayal, and of soul-stealing pain.

"Why now?" she cried. "Why a shifter? Why *him*?"

"Mel . . . I'm sorry."

None of this would have happened if Ariana hadn't found Kougar again, if she hadn't married him, forcing the Ilinas and the Feral Warriors into this unholy alliance, and the thought hung thickly in the air between them, unspoken.

"Is there anything I can do?" Ariana asked quietly.

Melisande met her friend's gaze. "Leave Kougar and forbid us from ever going near the Ferals again."

A glint of dark humor gleamed in Ariana's eyes. "Other than that." Ariana stepped closer, her eyes soft and serious. "Mel, if you need to step down from your post for a while, I completely understand."

"No." The word shot from Melisande's mouth before her brain fully processed the ramifications of Ariana's offer.

"Think about it," Ariana said kindly, then misted away, leaving Melisande standing among the wreckage of the shattered vase and the remnants of her own hard-won equilibrium.

With a groan, she leaned back against the nearest wall, closing her eyes, forcing herself to consider her options. Because stepping down from her post as Ariana's second-in-command would mean no longer having to go anywhere near Feral House. Or the far-too-disturbing Fox.

But there was no real choice, she knew that. She was by far the strongest of Ariana's warriors, by far the best able to protect her queen and her race. Ironically, the only one she trusted as much was Kougar. He would give up his life for his mate and had nearly done so not long ago.

But with the Mage determined to free the Daemons back into the world, none of them could be too careful. Melisande sighed. She had no choice, not really. Dodging Feral House, and Fox, meant dodging her responsibilities, and that was something she would never do.

Perhaps if she ignored the too-handsome shifter, he'd go away. She snorted. After she'd nearly driven him to sexual release with a flick of her hand? Not likely. He knew she hadn't meant for that to happen. Worse, he knew she'd been affected as well. The knowledge had gleamed plain as day in that predatory look in his eyes.

No, he wasn't likely to lose interest anytime soon. The male was bent on seduction. And his defenses were badly shaken.

One day ago

Kara sat on the floor of Skye and Paenther's bedroom, playing with Skye's pets, smiling at the antics of the black miniature schnauzer, Lady, and the tabby kitten, Tramp, as they simultaneously attacked a vicious chew toy. She was glad for the distraction.

Skye stood at the window, worry drifting off her in waves, a worry Kara shared, though not to the same razor-sharp degree. Skye's mate, Paenther, was in Poland, having led the team sent to battle the evil Ferals and to stop the ritual they'd begun that appeared designed to empower the High Daemon Satan. Lyon remained at Feral House with a handful of men and all the Ferals' mates. Feral House had to be protected. But those left behind paced. And worried.

Skye gasped. "Kara . . ."

"What's the matter?" Dear God, if Skye had felt her mating bond break . . .

"Come here. Quick."

Kara jumped up and ran to join Skye at the window. Peering out, she saw movement beyond the trees. Vehicles. Men leaping out in dark clothing.

“Police,” Kara gasped. “A SWAT team by the looks of it. Oh, this can’t be good.” She raced for the door, flung it open, and ran. “Lyon!”

Her mate was halfway up the first flight of stairs before she reached the top step. He was beautiful, her Lyon, so powerful and regal and sweet. “Cops. A SWAT team. I think they’re coming here.”

“Foyer, now!” he shouted. The Ferals all possessed far stronger hearing than humans, or even the nonshifting Therians. But if his nearby warriors didn’t respond right away, he could contact them in an instant by shifting into his lion and calling to them telepathically.

Lyon held out his hand for her as she raced down the stairs to join him. But when she reached him, he pulled her close, kissed her hair, then said, “Stay here.” As he strode into the living room to peer out the front window, Skye joined her.

Not ten seconds later, Tighe, Jag, and Jag’s mate, Olivia, came running. Lynks appeared at the top of the stairs and started down at a more sedate pace. One of the two new Ferals who’d been cleared from the dark magic, Lynks was now a full-fledged member of the Feral team even if Lyon had admitted to her in private that the man was too soft to have ever been the one meant to be marked.

“We have trouble,” Lyon told them, striding from the living room. “There’s a human SWAT team surrounding the house.”

In an instant, in a spray of colored lights, Tighe shifted into a fifteen-foot Bengal tiger, undoubtedly to speak to his pregnant mate, Delaney, who was napping upstairs. Ex-FBI, she was believed dead by her human colleagues. It wouldn’t do for them to find her alive and well . . . and immortal. Nor could they find Xavier, their cook’s assistant for whom the humans had been searching for weeks, or their cook, Pink, who could never pass for human.

Lyon’s thoughts were clearly running parallel to Kara’s own. His gaze caressed her with the uberprotectiveness that both warmed her and sometimes drove her nuts. “Get the wives, Pink, and Xavier to the deep basement, my heart.” His gaze swung to Olivia. “You’ll accompany me outside. Pretend to be my wife. If the situation gets out of hand, weaken them.”

Olivia was not only a warrior who’d fought with the Therian Guard for centuries, but she possessed the rare ability of being able to suck the life force from others. And she had the control to drain just enough of an opponent’s energy to weaken and not kill.

“I’ll attempt to cloud the mind of the leader.” Lyon’s gaze swung to his three warriors even as he began plucking knives from his boots and shoving them in the drawer of the hall table. If they frisked him, he clearly didn’t want them finding his weapons. “If they get inside, knock them out and cloud their minds. No deaths.”

The last thing they needed was to become a target for the humans. Kara might not be a warrior, but she could certainly understand the ramifications of the humans’ believing that the Ferals posed a danger. They’d have to leave Feral House, perhaps battle their way out, likely revealing the

immortality. A disaster in every possible way.

Delaney came running down the stairs, a gun strapped to her still slender waist. Less than two months pregnant, she had yet to start showing.

“I’ll get Xavier and Pink,” Delaney said.

Skye hurried after her, then glanced back at Kara.

Kara nodded. “I’ll join you in a minute.” Her heart was pounding at the thought of Lyon’s walking outside where all those humans would be training guns on him. While the immortals didn’t age and healed most wounds almost instantly, none of them were truly immortal. They could die. And the thought of losing Lyon terrified her.

She glanced at Jag, saw the hard granite of his jaw, and knew he was just as worried about Olivia. But he was a warrior first, and what was more, so was Olivia, and he knew it. Olivia was the best woman for this job, and Jag would keep his mouth shut even if it killed him. By the clench of his fist, Kara suspected it just might.

“Police! Come out with your hands up!”

Lyon eyed Olivia and took a deep breath. “Are you ready, wife?” he said, reminding her of her role.

The redhead gave him a decisive nod. “Ready, husband.”

“Lynks, cover the back of the house,” Tighe called. “Everyone else, out of the foyer.” If the cops saw several more large males, it would make it impossible for Lyon to convince them Feral House was merely an innocuous, if huge, family home.

Kara slipped into the hallway that led to both the back of the house and the basement, Lyon following. As he brushed past her, she paused. She knew she should go downstairs. That’s what Lyon wanted her to do. But she couldn’t make her feet move. Not when Lyon could die out there. Through the now-open front door, she heard him.

“What’s the problem, Officer?” Lyon asked.

“Get on the ground. Facedown!”

“There’s no need for that,” Lyon replied calmly.

Kara wished she could see what was happening. Was he clouding their minds, pushing suggestions into them? He was trying, she knew that much.

“We have a report of gunshots and screaming coming from this house,” another cop said.

Kara clenched her teeth against the lie. The house was fully warded against sound. Not even standing on the front doorstep would anyone hear the roar of the animals inside. The “report” was bogus and had probably come from the Mage just to cause them trouble.

“Kara.”

Lynks startled her, squeezing her shoulder. “They’re going to overrun this place. You’ve got to hide.”

She looked at the new shifter, meeting his nervous gaze. She agreed with Lyon’s assessment, though Lynks was not the one meant to be marked. He had the mien of a teacher or an accountant, not a warrior. If the humans got inside, it would be up to Jag and Tighe to contain them. She seriously

doubted Lynks would be of much help.

“Okay.” Pressing her fist against her tense stomach, she turned and strode to the basement door, slipping inside, surprised when Lynks followed her down instead of closing it behind her.

“I’m just going to check on the others,” he said.

Which would leave the back door unprotected. Coward or not, was the man stupid? “Lynks . . .”

But as she turned to urge him to cover his post, he gripped her shoulder, too tight. A hard look leaped into his eyes, alarming her.

“I’m sorry, Kara.”

Before she could open her mouth to call for help, he jammed his thumb beneath her ear.

Her world went dark.

Lyon kept his arms in the air, his gaze locked with the human’s in front of him. “There’s nothing wrong here, Officer. We had the television on, and the windows open.”

“I told you it was too loud,” Olivia added tartly. She turned to the officer. “He insists on being able to hear the TV anywhere in the house.”

Lyon’s gaze moved to another of the officers, then another still, catching their gazes, trying to calm them, to steal their wariness. If he could touch them, it would be far easier. But that wasn’t a possibility at the moment. He had to get them out of here without incident. Because there were too damn many cop cars. In the distance, gathering along the street, he could see neighbors watching the goings-on with avid eyes. If Feral House were overrun, the cops disappearing inside, he feared there would be no end to this. There were only so many defensive positions the Ferals could take before they were forced to reveal themselves. And that was the one thing they could never do. Once the humans realized shape-shifters and magic-wielders lived among them, the immortals would be forever on the run, hunted to extinction.

“This is all a misunderstanding,” Lyon said quietly to the man in front of him, his gaze once more locked on his. “There’s nothing the matter here.”

“What’s he saying?” one of the others asked a companion on the other side of the driveway. They might be speaking far too quietly for a human to overhear at this distance, but not a Feral. “Why the hell doesn’t Jim have him on the ground?”

“Beats me. He’s one big motherfucker, isn’t he?” The cop yawned. “Damn I’m tired. And I finally got a good night’s sleep last night.”

The man in front of him yawned as well. Lyon refrained from glancing at Olivia, but he was certain now that she’d begun draining them.

Finally, the tension broke. The officer lowered his gun with a nod. “This was clearly a misunderstanding. I apologize.”

Lyon lowered his hands slowly in as nonthreatening a manner as possible. “Apology accepted, Officer.”

Lyon held out his hand to Olivia and together they turned and made their way back to the house. F

wouldn't breathe easily until the humans piled into their cars and left. The Ferals would have to wait that they didn't return.

"It had to have been the Mage," Olivia said quietly beside him, as they climbed the brick steps to the front door. "But why?"

"That's what we have to find out."

Closing the front door behind them, Lyon met Tighe's and Jag's gazes, then the three took up positions at the various windows, watching until the cops retreated.

"Where's Lynks?" Lyon asked.

"Keeping an eye out back."

"Good."

Finally, the cops were gone. Tighe pushed away from the window. "I'll get Delaney and the others." Three minutes later, he returned. "Roar, where's Kara?"

Lyon turned from the window with a jerk, a vise clamping around his heart even as he turned inward and found her. He always knew where she was. "She's on the basement stairs," he replied even as he started for the basement himself because, *good goddess*, Tighe had just come that way. And if he hadn't seen her . . .

Lyon broke into a run, nearly tearing the basement door off his hinges in his need to find his mate.

Ice formed at the edges of his thoughts, sweat broke out on the back of his neck. There was no logical explanation. There had to be. But his warrior's instinct said otherwise.

He followed his Finder's sense straight to the closed cellar door in front of which sat Kara's bright green flip-flops.

No. *Goddess, no!* He picked up the shoes, his breath leaving his body as if he'd been slammed in the gut with a battering ram. "*No!*" he roared, and tore open the cellar doors, racing up into the sunshine, Kara's flip-flops clenched in his hands.

"Kara!"

He couldn't see her. He couldn't *sense* her except in the flip-flops now held within his claws. He began to run, listening, searching, his heart battering the walls of his chest.

"*Roar.*" Tighe grabbed his arm. "Get back in your skin. You've gone feral. The cops could still be watching."

Lyon struggled against the raging need to rip apart everything and anything in his path. The ice spreading across his thoughts made it nearly impossible to think. "They've taken her," he growled. "They've taken my mate! My life."

Tighe growled low in agreement. "The cops were the distraction."

Kara.

His head pounded, his mind screamed. His heart broke.

Kara!

He would stop at nothing . . . *nothing* . . . until she was once more safely in his arms.

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