

SECOND NATURE

# SECOND NATURE

JAE



A SHAPE-SHIFTER ROMANCE FROM **JAE**

# Second Nature

Excerpt

*By*

**JAE**



## **Second Nature**

Lesbian Fiction: Shape-Shifter Romance

Copyright © 2009 By Jae  
All rights reserved.

eBook ISBN: 978-1-934889-43-5  
Printed ISBN: 978-1-934889-44-2  
Audio eBook ISBN: 978-1-934889-45-9

First Edition  
eBook Format  
November 2009

This book is Published by  
**L-Book ePublisher, LLC**  
La Quinta, Ca. USA  
Email: [info@ L-Book.com](mailto:info@L-Book.com)  
Web Site: <http://L-Book.com>

Editors: Judy Underwood

Cover Design by Sheri  
[graphicartist2020@hotmail.com](mailto:graphicartist2020@hotmail.com)

eMail: [jae\\_s1978@yahoo.de](mailto:jae_s1978@yahoo.de)

\* \* \*

This work is copyrighted and is licensed only for use by the original purchaser and can be copied to the original purchaser's electronic device and its memory card for their personal use. Modifying or making copies of this work or distributing it to any unauthorized person by any means, without limit email, CD, DVD, memory cards, file transfer, paper print out or any other method constitutes a violation of International copyright law and subjects the violator to severe fines or imprisonment. Please purchase only authorized electronic editions.

\* \* \*

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, businesses, companies, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

## Glossary

### Shape-Shifter Terms

(in alphabetical order)

**Alai** – "wanderer" – slightly disparaging term for a Kasari or Syak who lives alone and is not part of a pride or pack

**Antapi** – "both" – hybrid shifter whose parents belong to different shifter subspecies

**Arkwi** – "shining," "silver" – cougar shape-shifters

**Kasari** – "saffron-colored" – lion shape-shifters

**Maharsi** – "great seer" – dream seer

**Maki** – "large" – bear shape-shifters

**Manark** – "noble one" – title of a councilor of the High Council

**Natak** – "lord," "master" – title of a pride regent

**Pako** – "tail" – bobcat shape-shifters

**Parwese** – "first" – title of the high king of the Allied Prides, regent of the Kasari

**Puwar** – "fire" – tiger shape-shifters

**Rtar** – "red" – fox shape-shifters

**Saru** – "hunter" – a shape-shifter law enforcement unit that guards their secret existence. Saru is also the rank of simple Saru soldiers.

**Scirye** – "starry" – jaguar shape-shifters

**Se-asrai** – "one body" – the slightly disparaging Wrasa term for humans

**Sleme** – "flame" – the name for the funeral rite (cremation) of the Wrasa

**Syak** – "together" – wolf shape-shifters

**Tas** – "commander" – rank of a Saru officer

**Wertsiya** – "council" – the shape-shifters' High Council

**Wrasa** – "living being," "creature," "men" – the species of shape-shifters

\* \* \*

## Names and Characters

### Humans

**Marjorie "Jorie" Price** – human writer

**Helen Price** – Jorie's mother

**Dr. Jake Saxton** – the local doctor

### Wrasa

#### Puwar

**Griffin Westmore** – a shape-shifter (tiger/lion shifter hybrid) and saru

**Nella Westmore** – Griffin's mother

**Chiron Westmore** – Griffin's younger (half) brother

**Cullen Remick** – Griffin's maternal grandfather and the last dream seer

**Max Henderson** – the only tiger shifter in Osgrove, owns the bed-and-breakfast

#### Kasari

**Leigh Eldridge** – Kylin and Griffin's half sister, a lion shifter

**Brian Eldridge** – ruler of the Ottawa National Forest pride and Griffin's (biological) father

**Gus Eldridge** – ruler of the Ottawa National Forest pride and Griffin's father

**Sid Eldridge** – Leigh and Griffin's cousin, owns a security firm

**Martha Cahill** – Dr. Saxton's receptionist, member of Brian and Gus' pride

**Rhonda "Ronnie" Cahill** – Leigh's childhood friend and Martha's daughter

**Tarquin** – member of the Ottawa National Forest pride and Griffin's old enemy

**Patrick** – member of the Ottawa National Forest pride and a police officer with the vice squad

#### Syak

**Allison "Ally" DeLuca** – Jorie's beta reader and a wolf shifter of the Los Angeles pack

Ian Stewart – alpha of the Los Angeles pack

**Cedric Jennings** – wolf shifter and Griffin's commanding officer

**Cyrus Jennings** – Cedric's brother, died four years ago

**Gregory Jennings** – Cedric's father

**Kelsey Yates** – a member of Cedric Jennings' pack, also a saru

**Paul** – a member of Cedric Jennings' pack

**Leonidas** – a member of Cedric Jennings' pack

**Wesley** – a young member of Cedric Jennings' pack

### **Council members**

**Jeff Madsen** – council speaker and alpha of the wolf shifters

**Kylin Westmore** – council member and Griffin's twin sister

**Thyra Davis** – council member and bear shifter

**Kendrick Ryle** – council member and coyote shifter

**Rufus Tolliver** – a coyote/wolf shifter hybrid and Kylin's aide

### **Other**

**Quinn O'Reilly** – the shape-shifting main character of Jorie's novel and a pastry chef

**Sid Walker** – the human main character of Jorie's novel

**Peter** – the owner of the fictional bakery where the tiger shifter in Jorie's story works

**Agatha** – one of Jorie's cats, a long-haired Somali. Named after Agatha Christie

**Emily** – one of Jorie's cats, a calico. Named after Emily Bronte and Emily Dickinson

**Will** – one of Jorie's cats, a red tabby. Named after William Shakespeare

**Second Nature**  
**Excerpt**

**CHAPTER 1**

QUINN PROWLED through the dark forest. The moonlight didn't reach her as she slid from tree to tree, from shrub to shrub, always hiding in the shadows until she was far enough away from human campsites. She slipped her shirt over her head while she walked, impatient to get out of her clothes. Under a stooping oak tree, her shoes and pants followed until cool air brushed against her bare skin.

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

Jorie Price's fingers flitted over the keyboard, keeping pace with her character's movement through the forest. When Quinn stopped and shifted, Jorie paused with her fingers lingering over the laptop and reread what she had written — or rather rewritten. This was the third time she had changed the scene, and she still wasn't sure whether it was working.

At first, she had portrayed the shifting process as painful. Then she had thought it made no sense that evolution would produce a skill that went hand in hand with pain and made the creature defenseless for a few minutes.

Rewriting and describing the change as a beautiful, magical moment didn't feel right either. *There's no way in hell that*

*breaking bones, shifting muscles, and rebuilding organs wouldn't hurt.*

So now she was rewriting again. Her fingers roamed across the keyboard again until, a few sentences later, Quinn was standing in the moonlight as a majestic tiger.

Jorie stopped and stared at the blinking cursor. *How does a 140-pound woman become a 280-pound cat?* Jorie was a mathematician at heart, and something wasn't adding up here. She drummed her fingers against the side of her laptop. *You should have thought about it and done more research before you started writing.*

With all her other novels, she had done exactly that. Only after extensive research and careful plotting had she written the first word of the story.

This new project was different.

She had been so eager to write this book, to get started, that she had skipped most of her usual planning. And even some of the things that she had figured out beforehand, she had later changed because her rational mind and her instincts suddenly refused to work together and led her in two different directions.

"How about a little help from a cat expert, Agatha?" she asked the cat that had curled up next to her on the worn, comfortable couch.

Agatha was busy eyeing the laptop as if that would make the hated machine disappear from the favored spot on Jorie's lap. When she noticed Jorie looking at her, the cat licked her bushy tail, uncomfortable with Jorie's direct stare.

"What about you, Emmy?" Jorie's gaze wandered to the calico ambling toward the kitchen. "Any words of advice for your favorite can opener?"

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

"Very helpful, thanks. And I just fed you half an hour ago, so that 'I'm starving' act is wasted on me." With a sigh, Jorie saved what she had written so far and opened her e-mail program. "Procrastinating, aren't we?" Despite the admonition, she clicked on a new e-mail from her beta reader. Maybe it would cheer her up.

Hi, J.W.,

Still having problems with the story? Have you thought about putting it away for a little while? I know it works for some authors. Maybe write a short story or get started on a new project. You could even start research on the sequel to AVH that you said you might write one day. It would give you time to figure out a few things about this trouble-making story.

Hang in there, and let me know what you decide.

Ally

That was unusual. In the three years that they had worked together, Ally had never made any suggestions on what to write. *Seems she's not as comfortable with this new kind of story as she said. She wants me to return to my previous genre.*

Normally, putting the story aside for a while and focusing on something else would have been good advice. Not this time. Writing this story was important to her, not just on a professional level but on a purely personal level too.

"No admitting defeat," she murmured and reopened the file.

Her cell phone rang before she had written even a single word.

Jorie groaned. "I knew I should have turned it off." She set the laptop on the coffee table and got up from the couch before Agatha could settle down on her lap. Barefoot, she padded into the bedroom, where she'd left the phone.

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

"Jorie, how are you, darling?" Her mother's warm voice came through the receiver.

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

"Are you getting enough sleep?" her mother asked. They always went through the same questions, and Jorie always gave the same answers, yet her mother never stopped worrying about her.

"Yes, Mom," Jorie said dutifully. "Must be all that fresh air out here."

"Good. And have you met someone?"

Jorie sighed and looked out her bedroom window, taking in the forest at the edge of the small town. Osgrove wasn't exactly a favorite hangout for most people her age. "I'm not here to meet someone. I'm here to write, Mom." It wasn't that she hated people or wasn't good with them; she just wasn't interested in being around them for more than a few hours. The solitude of being a writer suited her. She had some contact with other people — her beta reader, her editor, some readers and fellow writers — but it was limited and on her terms.

"I know, but..."

"I'm fine, Mom," Jorie said again. "Listen, I have to get back to my writing. I'll call you tomorrow, okay?" She wasn't in the mood to answer more of her mother's worried questions about the way she lived her life. Guilt scratched at the edges of her consciousness, but she pushed it away and ended the call.

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

Her fingers found their places on the well-worn keyboard, and she started to write.

## CHAPTER 2

GRIFFIN WESTMORE prowled through the forest.

Sunlight danced around her as she slid from tree to tree, from shrub to shrub. Under a stooping oak tree, she paused. Her nostrils quivered. She drank in the scents of the forest.

*Blood. Deer blood.*

Griffin licked her lips. She could almost taste the coppery tang, feel her canines sink deep into soft flesh, hear the snap of the deer's neck. Strong legs carried her toward the source of the scent before Griffin was fully aware of it. Her pulse quickened. The beast within rattled at the cage of her self-control. The muscles in her back and thighs quivered. She was ready to pounce.

*No. She stopped herself. You're not here to enjoy the pleasure of a hunt. With the iron fist of a lion tamer, she forced her instincts back under control. Maybe tomorrow. Today, she had been sent out to look for signs of a much smaller predator — Ouachita National Forest's bobcats. While adult bobcats had little to fear from other animals, they sometimes fell prey to hunters and collisions with cars, so the Forest Service liked to keep track of their numbers.*

Hunting wasn't the only problem, though. Griffin could understand the passionate rush of a good hunt. What she couldn't understand was the human need for conquering and destroying nature instead of living in harmony with it. Sometimes, human greed knew no bounds. Their paved roads cut off the bobcats' escape routes; their tourist attractions

replaced the den sites, and their buildings and parking lots destroyed the dense cover the bobcats needed to hunt and rest.

She adjusted her backpack, forcing down her annoyance at having it restrict the movement of her broad shoulders. It made her feel strapped down, trapped like an animal in a snare, even though it was featherlight, at least for her.

Her nose led her through a group of pine trees. The crisp, spicy scent of the pines tangled with the aroma of blood, creating a heady fragrance that no human perfumer could duplicate — or if they did, no one but a Wrasa would want to buy it.

Birds fell silent as she passed beneath them, recognizing her as a predator. The woodpecker overhead stopped hammering away at a red cedar.

The only sound in the forest was the crunching of her booted feet over the leaves. It sounded unbearably loud to her sensitive ears. The brogans and uniform of a forest ranger were part of her job, part of her life masquerading as human, but Griffin much preferred running barefoot, with loose silk and warm cashmere caressing her skin — or better yet, with just her own fur between her and the forest.

*Maybe tonight.*

She stalked up a hill, easily balancing on the uneven ground. Instinct made her avoid stepping on twigs and kicking loose stones that might have alerted whatever or whoever had killed the deer. Her nose insisted that being that cautious wasn't necessary. Even careful sniffing revealed no other predator in the area, but the wind was a fickle informant — it liked to keep things to itself by blowing in the wrong direction.

Better to keep on her guard.

Her gaze roved from tree to tree, scanning for claw marks that were too high up the trunk to belong to bobcats.

The salty scent of blood got stronger.

*There.*

She knelt down next to the half-eaten carcass of a young doe. Long claws or teeth had left deep, bloody slashes along the white belly, and strong canines had cracked right through the breastbone.

*This is not a bobcat's dinner.* The deer had been killed by something far bigger than a bobcat. *Or rather someone far bigger.* She leaned down and drew back her upper lip to let the air brush over the roof of her mouth. *Bear-shifter?* The scent mark was already fading, so she couldn't be sure.

A twig snapped at the foot of the hill.

Habit made Griffin tense the tiny muscles behind her ears, but in their human shape, she couldn't rotate them to pinpoint the source of the sound. The wind was blowing in the wrong direction, so she couldn't tell who was approaching. The continued silence of the birds told her it was a predator — animal, Wrasa, or human.

Only seconds left until he reached her.

She clamped her hands around the deer's mangled throat, whirled around, and tossed it behind a tree, then hurried down to intercept the intruder.

It wasn't a human, nor was it an animal. Humans who spread around nonsensical werewolf stories would have said he was both, though.

Griffin relaxed when she saw Cedric Jennings loping up the hill with an effortlessness that made her think of his wolf form. Every bound threw thick, white hair, streaked with wheat-colored strands, into his lean face. When he stopped in front of her, she gave him a respectful nod, careful not to stare into his arctic-blue eyes. He returned the gesture with the confidence of an alpha male.

Their human colleagues would have frowned in confusion had they witnessed the greeting. They would have thought it impolite not to make eye contact and would have wondered about Jennings's superior demeanor. After all, Griffin was a wildlife biologist, and Jennings was just a volunteer who sometimes helped out the US Forest Service. It wasn't the volunteer to whom Griffin was paying her respects, though.

"What are you doing out here?" Jennings asked, clasping his hands behind his back in a gesture that lifted his head up high, straightened his back, and made his shoulders look broader. He silently communicated his arrogant confidence, not afraid to take up space.

Griffin grinned lazily. His posturing was wasted on her. In a fair fight of one against one, a liger could make an appetizer out of a wolf. While she respected him as her tas, a commander of the Saru, she knew that she could outsmart and outfight him anytime. Just his ambition surpassed her own. "Well, that depends on who's asking," she said. "The official version is that I'm checking up on the bobcats. But, of course, the truth is that I'm making carcasses disappear that some of our people left behind last night." She pointed at the tree, knowing that Jennings's sensitive nose could detect the hidden carcass too.

A sharp growl rumbled up Jennings's chest. "Some of the Wrasa around here are getting a little too careless. If you hunt, you do it without leaving behind traces for the humans to find."

Griffin nodded. They both knew the rules. Experienced hunters or forest rangers would need only one glance to realize that the deer hadn't been killed by a native predator, so they had to make the carcass disappear before a human stumbled across it.

"I'll have one of my men take care of it," Jennings said. "Our presence is needed elsewhere." He fanned out two plane tickets and pressed one of them into her hands.

Griffin squinted down at it. While she looked human, her eyesight wasn't. Her vision resembled more that of a cat. She could spot a moving object on a moonless night without a problem, but she needed a second to decipher the small print on the plane ticket. "Boise, Idaho?" Her lips pulled back in a silent snarl. That could mean only one thing: the Wertsiya wanted to see her — even though Griffin had no desire to see the High Council. She had hoped to have a few weeks to herself before they would give her a new assignment. "Do you know what they want?"

"No." White-blond hair fell onto his forehead as Jennings shook his head. "They just told me to take the next plane, so it must be something important." The glow of hunting fever already shimmered in his eyes. For Cedric Jennings, offspring of a long line of high-ranking saru, this unexpected mission was an opportunity to prove himself to the council, further his career, and increase the power of his family.

For Griffin, it was an interference with the life she had built for herself. Having Jennings accompany her when she was used to going on solo missions wasn't helping either.

"Let's go," Jennings said and strode down the hill.

\* \* \*

"They're waiting for you," the man who greeted them in front of the elevator said.

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

*It seems he finds me just as interesting as I find him.* Griffin had long since gotten used to curious glances. This was

different, though. She smelled no dislike and no morbid fascination from the stranger.

His submissive stance was typical for an Ashawe, but when he turned toward Griffin, the proud light in his eyes held no resemblance to a coyote-shifter. His eyes were all wolf.

*He's a hybrid.* Surprise almost stopped her from entering the elevator behind him and Jennings. She hadn't expected to meet another hybrid in the council building, but then she remembered: two years ago, it had created quite a stir when Kylin had appointed Rufus Tolliver as her councilor's aide.

The elevator doors slid open. Rufus led them along a nondescript corridor in a nondescript building.

Griffin tilted her head and listened. Silence greeted her — not surprising since council meetings always took place in soundproof rooms. Wrasa had excellent hearing, and the council didn't want anyone spying on them.

*Oh, yes, we've lost a lot of things, but our paranoia is not one of them.*

Instead of making them wait, Rufus ushered them into the council chamber. He stayed outside, but his encouraging nod followed Griffin before he closed the door behind them.

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

None of the councilors turned as the door opened, and Griffin was in no hurry to attract their attention.

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

Griffin leaned against the back wall and tried to understand what was going on.

The nine council members were sitting at a round table that emphasized their equality. Wrasa had no regent that ruled over

all of them. Instead, each subspecies sent a representative to the council. The leonine Kasari were represented by the high king of the Allied Prides. At one time in the past, every lion-shifter had expected Griffin's father to end up in this position, but now a dark-bearded man sat in his chair, arguing with Jeff Madsen, the most dominant alpha of the Syak. Next to them, Kylin shouted to make herself be heard over the commotion. She represented the Puwar even though she held no official title in the tiger-shifter community.

Griffin stared at them in distaste. *Great hunter.* She had always hated politics. *How can Kylin stand the constant bickering and squabbling?* If she had to stand it for more than an hour, it would either bore her to death or make her anger flare, causing her to shift shape. *They are arguing like a gaggle of human kids on the playground. Hard to believe that the council was the one thing that saved us from extinction.*

There had been a time when the members of every race had kept to themselves, and when their paths crossed, it had often ended in territorial fights and bloodshed. But after long centuries of being tortured and burned at the stake as witches and demons by the Inquisition in Europe, they had realized that they had to cooperate to survive. They had set aside old feuds and rivalries and had come up with laws that secured the survival of their species.

*Seems they're still discussing the survival of our species.*

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

Next to Griffin, Cedric Jennings gave a satisfied grunt.

"More power to the Saru?" the Ashawe councilor piped up. His brow knitted in concern. "We just added ten new units last year. If we keep on doing that, we'll end up with a police state."

A variety of different feelings from the councilors brushed Griffin's nose. Most of them echoed what she felt — grim satisfaction, worry, anger, ambivalence. On one hand, increased autonomy sounded like a good thing. Griffin liked her independence as much as most tiger-shifters did. On the other hand, more independence for her meant more autonomy for all the other saru too. With added autonomy came an added moral responsibility, and Griffin doubted her fellow saru were equipped to handle it.

Jeff Madsen rose from his chair. The slowness of his movements enhanced the air of danger and superiority surrounding him. "And if we don't do it, we'll end up extinct. There's a steady decline in our birthrate. My grandfather had seven siblings." He straightened his shoulders and looked at each of the councilors in turn. "Now, most of us don't even have one brother or sister."

Anger and pain radiated from Jennings. He no longer had a brother either. Humans were to blame for it.

Griffin knew that Madsen was right. She was one of very few Wrasa who had three siblings.

"We're forced to play constant hide-and-seek in ever-shrinking territories. We can't raise pups like this," Madsen said. "At the same time, our death rate is increasing." His fist hit a stack of paper that probably documented the exact numbers. When he loosened his white-knuckled fist, Griffin saw that his fingers were trembling with rage and grief. "This year, more of us than ever were killed by humans. We can't afford to lose even more."

"Most of these incidents are considered accidents under the law," the Ashawe councilor said, his voice barely loud enough to be heard over the din.

Thyra Davis, representative of the Maki, got up and lumbered over to stand side by side with Madsen. Anger swirled around her in thick waves. It almost drowned out the ripples of sorrow that Griffin's nose detected. "Accidents?" Thyra Davis boomed. "Then I suppose you consider the systematic destruction of our homes accidents too? They're cutting down the forests, draining the swamps, leveling the hills, and they erect campsites and resorts in our natural hiding places. Very soon, there won't be any places left for us to shift and run in our animal forms."

Griffin's throat tightened. She felt trapped in the stuffy council chamber. What the bear-shifter said was true. Most Wrasa were forced to live near national forests and parks, and even there they had to constantly be on their guard and keep an eye out for hikers, hunters, bird watchers, and tourists.

She wanted to cover her ears and not have to listen to the depressing discussion, but she knew with her superior hearing, she would still hear it. All her life, she had avoided politics. There was no escape from this, though. It impacted every Wrasa and her in particular. A few centuries ago, hybrids had been tolerated. Not anymore. Now, Wrasa disapproved of mixed marriages and hybrids because most of them were sterile and put them one step closer to extinction.

"Increasing the number and autonomy of the Saru won't change any of that," Kylin said. Her nervousness wafted across the room.

*She's not used to speaking out like this, Griffin knew. She has always been a diplomat, a mediator, trying to fit in and not be noticed. She must feel strongly about this if she's willing to speak out against the more powerful councilors.*

"Killing humans is not the way to solve our problems. It's not right, and it won't help. We're doing this to ourselves," Kylin continued.

"Ourselves?" the Kasari councilor roared.

Kylin ducked under the roar that probably reminded her of her father, but she didn't give up. "Our fears, our paranoia only makes the problem worse. Hiding doesn't protect us anymore."

"Not that argument again." The movement of Madsen's hand reminded Griffin of an irritated father reining in his unruly pups. "Hiding our existence is why we're still here. There's no telling what humans would do to us if they learn that we exist."

Kylin huffed. "It can't be worse than what hiding does to us right now. Our birthrates are going down because hiding isolates us from each other and keeps us too busy to procreate. A lot of us work two jobs, one in the human world, one as a Wrasa, which leaves no time for raising cubs. And death rates are not going up only because of human hunters." She pointed at the stack of paper in front of her. "Twenty-three of us died last year because they refused to seek treatment in human hospitals or from human doctors, knowing it would reveal our existence. And don't even get me started on what hiding does to our culture, our language, and our values. We're losing more than our lives. We're losing our identity." When she stood, her reddish-golden hair rose high above the other councilors like a warning beacon. "We need change, not more of the same."

"Oh, yes, let's talk about losing our culture." Jeff Madsen growled. "The maharsi were a big part of our culture, our religion, and our identity, and we lost them because of the humans. Our people will forever be robbed of the dream seers' protection and guidance." His head bent in grief and respect. More than half of their maharsi had been killed as witches and demons by the human Inquisitions, ending ancient lines of dream seers.

A few of the councilors turned and looked at Kylin. Their accusing gazes made Kylin flinch.

Long-forgotten protective instincts flared up in Griffin. Her muscles tensed, but she forced herself to stay where she was. From her position leaning against the far wall, she watched as Kylin ducked her head and lowered her gaze. *If she were a dream seer, she would go through life with her head held high.*

"The maharsi protected us from extinction during the Middle Ages, but now they're gone, so we have to be more careful," Madsen said. "We have to stop threats before they become lethal. If we don't act now, we're doomed." His fist thumped the table, ending the discussion like a judge's gavel. "So let's get to work. Tas Jennings, Saru Westmore." He waved them forward.

Griffin followed Jennings's example, pulled up a chair, and eased onto it. She didn't want to aggravate the already explosive atmosphere by impolitely staring down at the councilors. Her glance flashed over Kylin, taking in the stiffness of her big body, but she asked no questions. The councilors would tell her why she was here when they were ready — and not a second sooner.

"We have a problem," Madsen finally said.

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

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

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

*Humans clearly outnumber us, so why do they expect us to have heard of J.W. Price? Is he or she some kind of celebrity? Is this why they called us here? A case that needs to be handled with care because human media will be all over it?*

"J.W. Price? No, that doesn't ring a bell," Jennings answered for both of them.

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

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

"Very funny." Kylin snarled.

The other manarks threw disapproving glances at her.

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

Griffin wiped the grin off her face but still couldn't see where the problem was. They all knew that vampires didn't exist. The Wrasa were the most dangerous predators that prowled the earth. Why would it matter to them what some human writer wrote about fictional creatures? *Unless...* "Let me guess. Her newest book is titled 'A Shape-Shifter's Soul.'"

She got somber glances from the nine councilors.

"The working title is 'Song of Life,'" Madsen answered, "but yes, she's writing about creatures that can turn into

cougars," he nodded at the Arkwi councilor, "bears," a nod to the Maki representative, "wolves," he thumped his own chest, "and so on. She's coming much too close to the truth for my liking."

Griffin still didn't see how this was a threat to their secret existence. "So what if some writer with an overactive imagination coincidentally gets one or two details right? It's fiction; no one will believe it anyway."

"Probably not," Madsen conceded. "But there might be a few readers who are already suspicious, and the novel might make them think. And it's more than just one or two details. She describes things in the manuscript that no one could get right by mere chance."

*I still think they're overreacting. Kylin was right. We're getting a little too paranoid since the maharsi are gone.*

"For example?" Jennings asked. His sharp eyes were glued to the laptop.

"She describes the way our thought processes change while in animal form quite accurately," the Kasari councilor answered. "She knows we retain an intelligence that is above that of animals while our thinking becomes more instinctive and less analytical. She even mentions that memories from things we experienced in animal form are more images and dreamlike impressions than clear cause-and-effect sequences." His ginger mane flew in all directions when he shook his head. "I don't think getting so many things right is mere coincidence."

Jeff Madsen nodded. "Something else is going on here, and we have to find out what it is before the book is published. This is where you two come in."

"How did you get the information if the book isn't even published yet?" Griffin asked, not reacting to the implied job offer. Maybe Jennings was willing to take the job, but she wasn't eager to go on this crazy-sounding mission.

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

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

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

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

A stiff shake of Madsen's head. "Allison is not a saru. She doesn't have your kind of training. And Allison lives in California, so they don't know each other personally. Apparently, beta reading is done mainly by e-mail, and I'm not sure if Ms. Price trusts her beta reader. When Allison asked, she only told her that the idea for the book came from the recesses of her creative mind. She's very secretive about her writing and won't tell her more than that."

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

"Maybe, but you know we can't afford to rely on maybe's," Madsen answered.

Instantly, a new discussion broke out among the council members. Most of them were convinced that revealing their existence to humans would mean the end of the Wrasa, so the writer was a threat that needed to be investigated and, if need be, stopped.

A lot of what they said was true. Griffin had lived among humans, and she knew that they were afraid of things that were different, things they couldn't understand — and they tended to kill what they feared. Even if their "coming out" didn't cause

mass hysteria and lead to a new Inquisition, humans would try to control them. They would pass laws that forbid Wrasa from taking certain jobs, holding office, living in certain areas, or getting a driver's license. Horrible images of Wrasa being abused for scientific tests flashed before Griffin's eyes. Humans with their need to dissect everything would try to find out how the shifting worked or if their regenerative abilities could be used in medicine. The military would want to use the Wrasa with their superior strength and sharp senses as super soldiers.

*No.*

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

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

*How casually he said that.* Griffin wasn't sure whether she should admire or despise her commander. Both of them had killed humans before and probably would be forced to do it again. After all, protecting their secret existence — even if it meant killing — was the single most important rule for every Wrasa and the Saru's main purpose. Still, Griffin didn't like it when things went that far. The law said that killing humans was allowed only as a last resort to protect their secret, but recently, she had begun to think that some of her colleagues didn't exhaust all available means before making the decision to kill a human. *So it's better they send me than some trigger-happy saru.*

"Kill her if everything else fails," Thyra Davis said.

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

*He suspects we have a traitor? Would anyone really be so stupid, knowing it could get him killed?* Griffin wondered.

"And we're sure the writer is not one of us?" Jennings asked.

"We're sure." Madsen's voice left no doubt. "She's human."

"So how do we make contact?" Griffin asked. The "we" was hard to get used to. All of her missions so far had been solo assignments, and that was how Griffin preferred it. This time, she had no choice. "What are we this time? Fans wanting an autograph at a book signing or reporters doing an interview?" A grin trembled at the edges of her lips, and she quickly suppressed it. She couldn't imagine Cedric Jennings as an autograph-waving fan. He wasn't a fan of any human.

Madsen gave the younger Syak a quick, fatherly pat to the shoulder. "We're sending you to California to investigate the beta reader, our main suspect, while Saru Westmore will travel to Osgrove, a small town in Michigan's Upper Peninsula, and try to find out more about the writer."

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

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

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

"No." Kylin's voice replaced the image in Griffin's head with Michigan's cool autumn breeze. "Sending Griffin to Michigan and you to California is the only logical choice. She knows the territory, and as a Syak, you're better equipped to rule out or confirm the beta reader as a suspect."

*She knows the territory, Griffin bitterly repeated. So that's why they're sending me — they want to use my connections to the Ottawa National Forest pride.*

"How do I get in contact?" Griffin asked again. It wasn't that she wanted the job and was eager to get started. What she wanted was to return to her forest and not have to snoop around some poor woman's life and possibly kill her. But she was a saru, and these occasional missions were the price she paid for being allowed to live her life mostly outside of the Wrasa community. This was her place in Wrasa society. There was no other. "Don't tell me I really am an autograph-hunting fan."

"It's not that easy," Kylin said. "J.W. Price is a very reclusive writer — no interviews, no book signings, no public appearances at conferences. She doesn't have a picture on her Web site, and she's writing under a pseudonym. We're gonna have to be more creative than that." It seemed Kylin had been the one to do all the homework on the writer.

Griffin could understand the need for privacy — it was one thing she had always wanted and never gotten. Every shifter in America knew about her and her ancestry. "So how do I find her if we don't even know her real name?"

Kylin leaned forward with the expression of a cat that had just brought home a fat mouse. "We know her real name," she said. "She gave it as copyright claimant in the copyright registration for her books. All it took was a simple search in an online database, and voilà..." She paused for effect, but Jeff Madsen gave her an impatient look. He had no patience for a cat's waiting game. "...Marjorie Carol Price."

"How do you get J.W. from Marjorie Carol?" Griffin asked. "Are you sure we have the right woman?" Thoughts of ending up killing the wrong person were frequently part of her nightmares.

Stretching her six-foot-two frame, Kylin fixed her gaze on Griffin in silent challenge. She clearly didn't like having her competence questioned in front of the other manarks. "She is the right one," she said.

"We're still analyzing the manuscript, but here's all the information we have on Marjorie Price and on Allison DeLuca so far." Madsen handed over two sealed envelopes and two plane tickets. "We expect you to keep us updated with regular progress reports."

The councilors filed out of the room without giving them another glance.

"Good hunting," Jennings said. His intense blue eyes were already focused on the steps of the hunt. "And keep me posted too."

Griffin nodded and turned to follow him.

\* \* \*

"Griffin?" Kylin called. If she didn't stop her before she slipped out the door, she wouldn't see her or hear from Griffin for another year. Griffin could be as elusive as a tiger in its jungle hideaway. "Could I have a word?"

By now, they were the only people left in the council chamber.

Kylin didn't need to breathe in the familiar scent to detect Griffin's reluctance. There was no warmth in the golden-brown eyes as Griffin turned around. "I have a flight to catch, Manark."

*Manark.*

Normally, pride warmed Kylin's heart whenever she heard the title, but she didn't want Griffin to use it. "How are you, Griff?" she asked, ignoring Griffin's attempt to keep their interaction on a strictly professional level.

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

*Are you really so eager to get away from me? There was a time when you enjoyed spending some time together.* That time was long gone, though, and only Kylin seemed to feel any regret about it. "You have more than enough time to catch your flight," she said, hearing the bitter timbre of her voice. "I made sure of that when I booked your flights."

Two measured steps brought Griffin closer, and she stared at Kylin from a height that equaled Kylin's own. "So you were the one who suggested me for this job. Thank you very much." She didn't sound pleased.

"Oh, come on. Don't tell me working in the cadaver brigade makes you happy. Pretending to be human and hiding dead animals is no job for someone with your skills," Kylin said. There was so much more to life than that. Family. Friendship. Love. Griffin ignored all of it. "Why do you keep turning down promotions?"

"Not everyone is cut out to be a manark." Griffin's voice was cold enough to make Kylin shiver.

Kylin struggled to stay calm. *Some things never change. She's still good at getting under my skin.* "I never said I wanted you to strive for a seat on the council. You don't need to be a politician, but you need to fight for your place in the Wrasa community. Stop keeping your distance. You're Wrasa. No matter how good you are at living undercover and fitting yourself into human society, it's just a sham."

"Oh, you mean like your position in the council is a sham?" Griffin's sarcasm sliced through Kylin.

She shoved her chair back. Eye to eye, she stared at Griffin. "It's not a sham," she said through bared teeth. "I worked hard to be where I am today."

Griffin's expression softened. "I know you did, but hard work never mattered more than having the right parents in our society."

"Times are changing. People are more accepting now," Kylin said. She wanted to believe it. "I mean... look at me. I'm a member of the council."

Warm air brushed against Kylin's cheek as Griffin snorted. "Because our mother is too smart to want any part of all that constant bickering and endless border negotiations, not because our fellow Wrasa have suddenly discovered their respect for hybrids. Everyone knows who is really behind your position and who makes the decisions. They respect our mother, not you."

The familiar itch crawled across her skin. Kylin forced down a wave of anger. She didn't answer, knowing nothing she said would convince Griffin. Despite being twins, they had never seen eye to eye about their place in Wrasa society.

With slow steps back, still not taking her eyes off Kylin, Griffin moved closer to the door. "I should go."

This time, Kylin didn't try to stop her. "Say hi to the dads for me," she said.

"If I see them," Griffin answered.

*Oh, you will.* Kylin had no doubt that at some point Griffin would be forced to contact their pride. That was one of the reasons why she had fought so hard to convince the other manarks to send Griffin to Michigan. She wanted Griffin back in the family. "Good hunting," she said.

One short nod, then Griffin was out the door.

## CHAPTER 3

"**T**HREE?" THE flight attendant's eyes bulged. "Did you just say you wanted three snack boxes and three sandwiches?"

A predatory grin stalked along the edges of Griffin's lips. *Don't complain, or I might order three flight attendants to go along with that, sweetheart.* Part of her wanted to unfold her six-foot-two frame and stare down at the woman until she ran to get her lunch. Normally, she had better control over such impulses, but now hunger raged inside her belly.

With forced laziness, she looked up from her laptop. Like most Wrasa, she hated flying, but now that her stomach had settled down, she was hungry and impatient. "I'm a big girl," she gave her well-practiced answer, knowing it would be accepted without further question. In human eyes, she was big. Even among Wrasa, she was bigger than most, taller and heavier than her Puwar mother or her Kasari fathers.

"Of course," the flight attendant said. "I just wanted to make sure." She fled down the aisle.

Griffin's gaze followed her the way she would track a fleeing deer. *Humans. Sometimes, they're just too easy.*

Most of them were uncomfortable around Griffin, while never being able to say why. Humans didn't listen to their instincts. They ignored their sixth sense that told them they were dealing with someone dangerous, someone not quite human. Those age-old instincts were what had kept the Wrasa alive. Humans still possessed them too, but they kept them deeply buried under centuries of science and civilization and

told themselves it was stupid to listen to old superstitions, unreasonable fears, and unfounded emotions.

Leather creaked as Griffin leaned back in her comfortable seat and stretched her legs. Kylin had bought her a first-class ticket to make sure she had enough space and privacy to read the information on the writer on her way to Michigan. The added legroom in the first-class section was a relief. On her flight to Boise, she had been forced to wedge her tall body into a seat designed for midgets and had wished she could shift shape and stretch out in the aisle instead. *Come to think of it... if I had shifted, I would have suddenly had that section of the plane all to myself,* she thought with a wicked grin.

While waiting for her food, she clicked through all the pages of J.W. Price's Web site that she had saved for off-line use to her laptop earlier. The author had written four books so far. All were published by Red Quill Press, a company that published mainly romances and historical fiction. *Nothing about the new book on the Web site, though, and not much about the writer.*

Even her author's bio didn't mention her family, relationships, hobbies, or other personal information, just that she was living with three cats. Griffin squinted her eyes at the chaotic conglomeration of jobs that J.W. Price had once held: waitress, tourist guide, poker player, fitness instructor, assistant at a county fair shooting booth, and volunteer at an animal shelter.

The council hadn't provided a photo, but Griffin imagined a reclusive, older writer who lived alone, with only her cats to talk to.

In record time, the flight attendant returned with her food and offered a cup of coffee.

Griffin took the food but shook her head at the coffee. While it smelled nice, she knew drinking it was not a good idea. "Just water," she said. "Coffee gives me migraines."

Wrasa didn't get migraines, of course, but the flight attendant didn't know that. Caffeine had a poisonous effect on their system. A cup of coffee wouldn't kill a woman of her size, but it would make her queasy. For the same reason, Griffin wouldn't be able to eat the chocolate chip cookies in her snack boxes.

Griffin unwrapped the first sandwich. She lifted one side of the bread and flicked a piece of lettuce aside. Her mouth watered as the smell of juicy ham drifted up. It wasn't exactly gourmet food, but the food in the first-class section was still good enough to enjoy. She took the first bite and chewed slowly, relishing the taste and texture of the sandwich.

When she unwrapped the second sandwich, she opened one of J.W. Price's e-books that Kylin had e-mailed her. On the page with the acknowledgments, the writer had thanked Allison DeLuca, her beta reader. *Seems they've known each other for some time. The beta reader is the top candidate on my list of possible leaks. I hope Jennings remembers to have one of the techies check out her computer.*

Jennings was pretty smart — *for a wolf, that is* — but his computer skills were that of a first grader. *A Syak first grader.*

There was no dedication in the book, no declaration of love to a husband, no heartfelt thank-you to her parents, no mention that this would be a trilogy because she had a couple of kids to put through college. *Good.* The thought of one day being ordered to kill a child made her skin itch in outrage. As a saru, she had done a few things she wasn't proud of, but that was one line that she wasn't willing to cross.

*Or maybe she does have a family and she just wants to protect her privacy.* The biography read as if the writer didn't

want her readers to know anything about her. Griffin could understand that. *I want my work to speak for itself too, without having people assume things because of what they have heard about me or because of who my parents are.*

She scrolled through the story, skimming scenes, knowing she didn't have enough time on the domestic flight to read it all. A few glimpses would have to do.

The writing was solid, with interesting characters, witty dialogue, and a well-written love scene. *If you're interested in hetero sex, that is,* Griffin thought.

The book was decent entertainment, but it was teeming with all the common stereotypes and Hollywood myths about vampires. J.W. Price's characters were drinking blood and sleeping in coffins. Sunlight and a stake through the heart killed them, and holy water and crucifixes made them run for the hills. They even talked with an Eastern European accent that made Griffin laugh and was probably meant to do just that.

Griffin found it hard to believe that the shape-shifter novel would be any different. *I'll bet her shape-shifters are immortal creatures that turn into furry monsters once a month and can be killed only by silver bullets.* She was almost sure that the writer would turn out to be harmless. Relief wrestled with a healthy portion of annoyance. *Kylin, I'll hunt you down and kill you if this is just one of your attempts to get me to reconnect with the family.*

The "fasten seat belt" sign came on. Griffin swallowed the last crumb of her third sandwich and stuffed the snack boxes into her laptop case for later. She had a feeling she would need the energy to complete this annoying mission.

\* \* \*

Flying. He hated flying.

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

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

Cedric knew how to handle her. If he treated her like the submissive she was, he would get the information he was after. Getting past Allison's alpha would be harder.

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

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

The scent of confusion drifted over.

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

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

Unlike the cat-shifters under his command, he didn't care. Food was food. He didn't need that gourmet stuff Griffin was so fond of. As long as it stopped his stomach from growling like an entire Syak pack, it was fine.

"We have a delicious roast beef with —"

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

When she hurried away to do his bidding, he put away the report and pulled a small, worn book from his pocket.

The smell of graphite and musty paper scratched his nose as he opened the book. The decade since the book came to be in his possession had almost made the crooked handwriting fade, but Cedric knew nearly every page by heart and could still read the words. He carried the little book with him on every assignment as a silent reminder of how dangerous humans could be and as a memorial of his duty.

He thumbed through the book, searching for the most interesting entries.

All of them held meaning. They recorded the dreams and visions of a dream seer.

Past generations of maharsi had never been allowed to write down their dreams. The dangers of having such a dream diary detected by humans were too great, as was the risk of the dreams being misinterpreted by Wrasa who weren't as skilled at dream interpretation as a maharsi.

But then one line of dream seers after the other had become extinct until just one last maharsi had been left — Cullen Remick, Griffin's grandfather. When none of his grandchildren had inherited his gift, he had known that his death would leave his people without guidance. He had started to write down his dreams, hoping to at least give them something to help them understand and shape the future. Only half a dozen copies of his diaries existed. They had been handed out to council members and a few selected high-ranking officers of the Saru. The rest remained in possession of Cullen's family.

Not this diary. This one belonged solely to Cedric. Except for the author who had penned these entries, no one but Cedric

had ever held the book in his hands. He planned on keeping it that way.

When the flight attendant returned with his roast beef, he turned the diary upside down on his knees until she was gone. Hunger raged through his stomach as the scent of the meat hit his nose. He wolfed down the first two bites without really chewing or tasting it, then slowed down and read the entry he had chosen.

She's dangerous. A lethal danger, not just to me. To all of us. Her kind doesn't have the respect for life that we do. It's up to me to stop her and to warn my people of others like her. I'm the only one in a position to do it. Others don't seem to see this danger and probably never will until it's too late. It's up to me. This is what I was meant to do, why I was born with the skills I possess. This is my duty. My fate.

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

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

\* \* \*

Allison DeLuca whirled her desk chair around and jumped up.

Dizziness threatened, and it had nothing to do with the speed of her movements. The walls of her small apartment seemed to close in on her. Her skin itched with the urge to shift,

to leave the apartment and everything in it behind, and to lose herself in the simpler existence of being a wolf. Things were so much easier when she was running with the pack in her animal form. If she shifted, she wouldn't just strip off her human skin but also the guilt and betrayal that were now weighing her down. Wolves didn't evaluate their actions by human standards and morality. In animal form, things were clear and simple: her loyalty was to her pack, and she had done what was necessary to ensure the survival of their species. In human form, things were not so black-and-white.

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

Ally stared at the screen. *I'm sorry, J.W.*

J.W. Price was a very private person. Most writers were private about their writing, but it was more than that with J.W. It had taken three years, five stories, and a lot of patience on Ally's part before J.W. had slowly started opening up and commenting on things other than her writing in her e-mails.

Now Ally had to violate that timid trust.

She had always considered confidentiality one of the rules of beta reading. That rule had been shattered — as J.W.'s trust would be when she found out. The bitter taste of betrayal had kept Ally awake for three nights in a row. In the end, she knew she had no other choice than to tell the council about the work in progress and to hand it over.

The blinking of the cursor mirrored the upset thrumming of her heart and directed her attention back to the e-mail she had written an hour ago but not yet sent.

Hey, J.W.,

If 'Song of Life' is still giving you a headache, don't despair. I learned today that an old friend of mine is on vacation in your neck of the woods. She's a zoologist, and she's just what you need because she specializes in big cats. She has helped one of my writers before, and I know she would be willing to do it again.

Let me know if you want to meet with her, and I'll set it up. Or contact her directly. Your choice. Her name is Griffin Westmore, and her e-mail address is [g.westmore@gmail.com](mailto:g.westmore@gmail.com).

Take care.

Ally

Lies. More lies. The council had told her what to write even though it was far from the truth. She had never met Griffin Westmore, and the Saru certainly wouldn't help J.W. with her book.

*Come on; send the damn e-mail. J.W. will be okay, she tried to convince herself. The Saru are not killers. Not if they don't have to be.* Still, she hesitated, her protective instincts toward the writer fighting with her loyalty to her pack and her kind.

The chime of the doorbell made her flinch and almost hit the "send" button. With an angry growl, she marched to the door.

The scent of peanut butter and pines wafted up through the gap beneath the door. Ally stumbled. *Oh, no. What is he doing here?* Her alpha was standing in front of the door — and he was not alone.

She didn't recognize the scent of the second man, but the aroma of leather, earth, and a faint hint of gun oil painted the picture of another dominant wolf.

"Ms. DeLuca," a deep voice called through the door, "this is Cedric Jennings. Open the door!" He didn't explain who he was and what he wanted. He didn't need to. Every Syak knew the Jennings clan. Ally had heard of Cedric only in passing, but she knew his father, once the highest-ranking Syak saru in North America.

This was not a man you kept waiting in front of your apartment. Ally swung the door open.

Two tall men filled her doorway, each trying to enter the apartment first. Frosty blue eyes stared down Ian Stewart. Never before had Ally seen her alpha avert his gaze, but this time, he did.

Unease swept through Ally as Jennings strode into her apartment. She didn't like the confident gaze that seemed to touch everything in her apartment and mark it as his, but there was nothing she could do about it. Her helpless gaze darted over to Ian, who shrugged and closed the door behind him.

"Tas Jennings." She lowered her head in greeting. Her tongue darted out and licked dry lips. As a simple program manager for a software developer, she had very little contact with the Saru. Never had a well-known tas invaded her home. "Can I get you something to drink?"

"Yes," Ian answered immediately. He was trying to get his drink first, establishing his territorial rights and his dominance.

*Good.* Having her alpha be in charge soothed Ally's nervousness.

"That won't be necessary," Jennings said before Ally could disappear into the kitchen. "I'm not here for a drink, and you," he glared at Ian, "are probably needed elsewhere. Thank you for accompanying me through your territory."

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

"No, you won't." Blue eyes were firm and cold like an iceberg, with hidden undercurrents of danger swirling around it. "The Saru don't like people listening in on their business."

If he didn't want to be accused of spying on a saru, Ian had no choice but to retreat. He grumbled and puffed, but finally, the door closed behind him.

Ally was alone with Cedric Jennings.

Jennings strolled over and took up position on Ally's desk chair.

It was a conscious choice. His nose had to tell him that Ally had been sitting here only minutes ago, and now he was forcing her to move to another seat as a sign of his dominance.

He studied her with his cool gaze, slowly swishing back and forth in the desk chair.

Silence had never sounded so loud.

Wolf-shifters were good at psychological warfare and intimidation — and it was working. Jennings's silence made her nervous, but she knew she couldn't ask what he wanted. He had the more dominant rank in Syak hierarchy, even stood outside normal pack hierarchy as a saru, so she had to wait for him to speak.

*I'm a Syak, one of the most dangerous predators on earth, so why do I suddenly feel like a rabbit about to be hunted down?* Ally balanced uneasily on the edge of the couch.

"So you're a beta reader?" Jennings asked. It sounded friendly enough.

"Yes."

"What are you getting out of it?" His voice was calm and interested, not giving anything away.

Ally tilted her head. "Getting?" she asked.

"You're not a professional editor. You don't get paid for working on other people's stories." Like most other Syak, Jennings clearly believed that hard work should always be paid for in some way.

And it was. Just in a less tangible way. "No, I'm not getting paid, but beta reading is fulfilling anyway." A lot of her friends were puzzled by it, and Jennings didn't look as if he understood the concept either. "It's my way of contributing to fiction and helping to make it better. I work with some great writers, and I love to establish a relationship with my writers and watch their writing mature over time."

"Relationship?"

Ally sighed. Of course he would catch only this one word of her heartfelt explanation.

"So tell me more about your relationship with J.W. Price," Jennings said.

"We don't have a relationship," she hastily said. "We don't even know each other personally." Building close friendships with humans was not tolerated, because it could easily lead to their existence being discovered. Beta reading for J.W. had made it easy not to cross the line. J.W. had never seemed interested in sharing anything but her writing with Ally.

The ice-blue gaze trailed up and down Ally's body and drilled into her eyes. "Why are you getting so defensive? You don't have anything to hide, do you? Like, for example, the fact that you told J.W. Price about our existence?"

"No!" A lump of fear, rage, and disbelief closed off Ally's throat and made her squeak like a pup. "You think I was the one who gave J.W. the information about shifters?" Ally couldn't believe it. It dawned on her that J.W. wasn't the only one in danger. Since prison sentences were unknown in Wrasa law, there was just one punishment for treason — death.

"Were you?" Jennings asked.

"No, of course not. I was the one who made the council aware of J.W.'s novel. Without me, there would be no chance of stopping its publication," she said, trying to use calm logic and not raise her voice to Jennings. He was backing her into a corner, though, and she felt her scalp begin to itch.

The chair crashed into the desk when Jennings leaped up. Two quick steps had him hovering over Ally. "Even human children know that sometimes criminals like to inject themselves into investigations to appear unsuspecting and to find out what the investigators know."

"I'm not a criminal," Ally stammered. "I didn't do anything wrong." Her stomach twisted. The biting scent of gun oil and aggression got stronger. Her muscles cramped in the effort not to shift.

Almost nose to nose with her, Jennings nostrils flared as he took in her scent.

Ally quivered. She hoped that his Saru training enabled him to see beyond the nervousness and recognize that she was telling the truth.

The heat that rushed through Ally's body finally lessened when Jennings leaned back, out of her personal space.

"If you didn't break the First Law, you've got nothing to fear," Jennings said, now sounding kinder, like a father soothing his child.

Ally's mangled lungs sucked in a deep breath.

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

Finally back on familiar ground, Ally began to talk.

"Stop!" Jennings interrupted after just a few minutes. "Say that again."

What had she said last? "J.W. only just started on the new story. She's still working on the first chapter," Ally repeated.

"Not that." Jennings growled. "Did you just say that this story will be lesbian fiction?"

*Is that good or bad for us?* Ally wondered. "Yes," she said. "J.W. asked me a few months ago if I would feel comfortable beta reading a lesbian romance for her. She said she wants to try out something completely different from everything she has written before, and since I was interested in how a great writer like J.W. would portray shape-shifters, I said yes."

*Big mistake. I wish I had never gotten involved in this mess.*

Jennings scratched at a few light beard stubbles. Discontent wafted around him. Suddenly, he stood. "Make sure you run any communication you have with Ms. Price by me, and forward me everything you receive from her. And should Saru Westmore contact you..."

*Oh, great. They're sending the big guns not only after J.W. but after me too.* Every Wrasa in North America had heard of Griffin Westmore. She was known for completing her missions quickly and effectively. *She probably thinks she has to prove something because she's antapi.* Ally was part of a newer, more liberal generation. She couldn't care less about Griffin being a hybrid, but she knew that most Wrasa still frowned upon the mating of Griffin's Kasari father and her Puwar mother. They had strict opinions when it came to mixed marriages or even casual affairs between members of different races.

"If she contacts you, tell her you already gave me all the details and to read the report I'll send her," Jennings said.

*What?* Ally couldn't imagine saying that to a saru. Lack of cooperation would make her look even more suspicious. "But —"

"Interviewing you was my job. Westmore has her own, so there's no need for her to interview you again. If she starts

asking questions, refer her to me. Understood?" Jennings's sharp voice left no room for discussion.

Ally ducked her head and licked her lips. "I understand," she said. It seemed hierarchy in Jennings's Saru unit was even stricter than in a normal Syak pack, and if he wanted to keep Griffin Westmore out of his territory, out of the job he had already done, that was fine with her. At least it would spare her another interrogation.

"Good." Jennings pushed past her. "And send off that e-mail to Ms. Price." Over his shoulder, he pointed at the computer screen.

Then he was gone.

Ally collapsed back against the couch. She stared across the living room to the e-mail on the screen. If she refused to send it and get J.W. in contact with Griffin Westmore, Jennings would be back. He didn't understand that in a strange way, J.W. had become part of her pack too. Only loyalty to the Wrasa counted for him. Everything else would get her killed.

She stood and crossed the living room. With every step, guilt settled more firmly onto her shoulders. She struggled against its weight as she lifted her hand. Her finger hovered over the mouse button for a few moments; then she clicked once and sent the e-mail on its way.

\* \* \*

"Meeting with a big cat expert, huh?" Jorie read her beta reader's e-mail again. She still couldn't decide how she felt about Ally's offer. Somehow this resembled one of her mother's setups when Helen tried her hand at matchmaking or at least getting her to make new friends.

It wasn't that Jorie was shy or socially inept. The money won in poker tournaments proved otherwise. She was good at reading people, getting into their heads, and guessing their

strategies. Casual small talk was also not a problem — she had won quite a few hands while chatting about everything under the sun. Most men weren't very good at multitasking, and Jorie readily exploited that weakness.

But beyond that, she had no real interest in meeting people and making friends. *Then don't make it about meeting Ally's acquaintance. Make it about asking her questions*, she encouraged herself. *You don't even need to meet face-to-face. E-mail will be less of an inconvenience for that cat expert too. She's on vacation after all, so getting it over with quickly is the polite thing to do.*

She clicked the "reply" button but then hesitated again.

Even if Ally's friend really was an expert, how could she help Jorie if she wasn't sure what questions to ask and what the problem was that kept her from writing? Most of her problems weren't about tigers or lions but about their shape-shifting equivalents anyway, so what good would a big cat expert do?

Questions rushed through her tired brain, but the answers eluded her. She rubbed her hands across her face and groaned into her palms.

Normally, Jorie was an organized writer. Detailed research and careful plotting had so far spared her from ever experiencing writer's block. And if she ever ran into any problems with characters or plot, she simply analyzed and solved them.

Maybe that was the problem. She had always been writing with her head, not so much her heart. Not this time. This time, she had let her writing be dictated by emotions. She was writing her own issues into the story, and it wasn't working. Even a regiment of cat experts couldn't change that.

*If Ms. Westmore really is a cat expert.* Jorie knew Ally meant well, but Ally was a people person and — as far as Jorie could tell from their e-mail acquaintance — maybe a little too

trusting sometimes. Jorie wasn't. Years of working odd jobs had taught her that people weren't always what they pretended to be and that it was better to be careful.

*Okay. Then pretend to be a writer and do some research before you make a decision.* She closed her e-mail program and googled "Griffin Westmore." *Great name.* She scribbled it down in the back of her ever-present notebook, where she kept a list of names for future characters.

The search engine came up with a few thousand hits. Jorie waded through a few pages of actors, authors, and companies with that name. Finally, she gave up and went back to refine her search, now typing in "Griffin Westmore" and "zoologist." The first link provided her with the summary of a presentation that had been given at a zoology conference in England.

The top of the Web site listed Griffin Westmore's academic accomplishments: a bachelor's degree in wildlife ecology and conservation from Northwest Missouri State University, a master's degree in zoology from Colorado State University, and a PhD in zoology from the University of New Hampshire.

*Three degrees from three different universities in three different states. It seems Griffin Westmore has the "restless feet syndrome" too.* That was what her father had always called her tendency not to stay in one place or keep one job for very long.

Jorie's eyes started to burn. She looked away from the computer screen. Sometimes, grief still sneaked up on her when she remembered the little things about her father.

Resolutely, she clicked on the next link. It gave her the title of Griffin Westmore's dissertation: 'Comparative Anatomy and Sensitivity to Catnip (*Nepeta Cataria*) in Tigers (*Panthera Tigris*) and Lions (*Panthera Leo*).' *Jesus, she really is an expert. Let's see what she has been up to after she got her degrees.*

She followed another link to the homepage of the US Forest Service. There was no photo, but the page listed Griffin

Westmore's work phone number, e-mail address, and title — wildlife biologist — and let her know that Griffin belonged to the Ouachita National Forest office. *Arkansas. I wonder what brings her up north? Can't be our pleasant weather.*

Clicking on a few more links provided nothing new until she stumbled across a newspaper article about a project that Griffin Westmore had been working on. The article described the difficulties in getting a radio collar on bobcats and was nicely written, but what held Jorie's interest was the photo at the bottom of the article.

Griffin Westmore stood with two other people, captured in the middle of explaining something to them. Jorie couldn't tell whether the man and the woman in the picture were really short or the zoologist was really tall. The way she was bending down to talk to them made Jorie think it was the latter.

A shiver ran up and down Jorie's spine as she swept her gaze over the photo. Maybe it was just the camera angle, but everything about Griffin Westmore seemed big and threatening — the large hands that were holding a map, the broad shoulders, the square jaw, and the slightly too long nose. *Oh, come on. Don't let your overactive imagination get the better of you. The picture is too grainy to even tell the color or the look in her eyes, so how could it possibly make you feel uneasy?*

Still, she couldn't help feeling wary about meeting the imposing woman. *If she had dark hair instead of that reddish-golden mane, she would look like one of the sinister antagonists from my early stories.* Then another thought hit Jorie. *A woman in uniform, huh?* She smiled at the thought.

In the picture, Griffin Westmore was wearing the sage green pants and the tan uniform shirt of the US Forest Service. A tag over her left breast pocket had either her title or her name written across it. Jorie couldn't read it due to the low quality of the picture, but she guessed it to say "wildlife biologist."

*She's the real deal, Jorie admitted. Maybe meeting with her could help me figure out a few things. It doesn't even have to be a long getting-to-know-you chat. Asking her a few well-prepared questions will make sure I don't waste either of our time, and it's better than sitting around and waiting for this damn writer's block to pass. With one last glance at the photo, she started to write an e-mail to Griffin Westmore.*

## CHAPTER 4

GRIFFIN LICKED A drop of rain from her lip. It tasted earthy, like fall, very different from the rain in Arkansas. Once again, it reminded her that she was in a stranger's territory, out here in the rain, waiting for hours. Not that she minded the rain or the waiting. She had inherited her Puwar mother's love for water, not her Kasari father's hatred of getting wet. And like all cat-shifters, she had the patience to wait out her prey.

Stalking through the forest surrounding the house also let her know that in the last few days, no shifter had passed this place. No Wrasa scent clung to the bark of the trees. If a traitor had visited Ms. Price's house, he had taken a different route.

The shadow of the woman crossed in front of the window, then again in the other direction as if she was pacing back and forth.

Griffin didn't move. The darkness and the dense foliage of a group of trees kept her well hidden while she watched the house. The constant movement of the writer made her twitchy like a cat that was forced to watch a mouse dart back and forth right in front of her paws. *I wonder what got her so unsettled. Is the leak someone in the council or a saru, someone who told her she's in deep trouble? Or is she just an insomniac?* It was two o'clock in the morning — or rather in the middle of the night — but there was still a light on in the small house at the edge of town. While Griffin felt wide-awake, she knew most humans didn't keep that kind of hours.

The woman's shadow passed in front of the window again but didn't return this time.

*She's going to bed*, Griffin thought.

But instead of the light being turned off, the front door creaked open.

The woman's scent tickled Griffin's nose before she stepped outside. *No perfume*. All Griffin detected were the smells of fabric softener, coffee, and a shampoo with a pleasant coconut scent. And underneath it all was the woman's own scent — slightly floral, with a hint of something muskier. It was a clean, soothing scent, like prowling through the forest on a warm spring day, with all the trees in full bloom.

The door swung back farther, and the woman appeared in the doorway. The light from the house illuminated her from behind, making her look like a vision out of a human fairy tale.

Distracted, Griffin shook her head. The image of the forest elf disappeared, but still, Marjorie Price was different from what she had expected. Instead of the elderly recluse, the woman looked like a college student in her faded jeans.

*No. She's not a student*. Griffin's predatory gaze took in the self-assured way she moved. *Early thirties, maybe*. Moonlight revealed the lithe, lean build that Griffin had sometimes envied when she was younger, before she had learned that her height, strength, and an intimidating look worked well for making people leave her alone. The writer shoved back a strand of shaggy, black hair that fell rebelliously into her eyes. Griffin wasn't close enough to make out the writer's eye color, but she guessed them to be of the dark brown that was so common among humans.

Just imagining the writer's eye color brought another image of the forest in spring — the damp earth coming to life with the first flowers of the year.

"Will?" Marjorie Price called. "Emmy?"

Griffin cocked her head and let the rich, warm tones of her voice trickle through her. *She's calling her cats*, she realized.

Two felines darted out from beneath the car in the driveway, where they had sought refuge from the rain and the scent of a dangerous predator lurking in the neighborhood. They greeted their owner by rubbing against her calves.

"Stop that," Marjorie Price chided but didn't move away. "I'm not a towel."

A moment later, woman and cats disappeared inside the house, leaving behind the scent of coconut and wet fur.

Only when she had to sharply inhale did Griffin notice that she had been holding her breath. *She's not exactly the old woman I imagined.* That posed additional problems for her assignment. *If she suddenly disappears, no one will believe she died of old age.* She shoved the thought away. *Let's hope that no one will have to die, of old age or otherwise.*

The writer's silhouette appeared in front of the window again. Marjorie Price stared out into the darkness.

Griffin stepped back behind a tree, then scolded herself. *She can't see you in the darkness. She's human.*

The light in the house went out, and Griffin turned to go. She had a lot of work to do tonight.

\* \* \*

Jorie turned off the light but stayed where she was. She stared out the window and into the darkness beyond. Not that she could see anything. *Because there is nothing to see,* the reasonable part of her said. Still, her instincts told her otherwise. *There's something out there. Watching.* The thought made her shiver.

Earlier, she had thought she had seen something move in the shadows of the forest and had strained to make out the shape without much success. *Oh, come on. Now you're getting paranoid. Use your overactive imagination for your writing and*

*not to scare yourself, stupid! Maybe I should try my hand at writing horror stories, not paranormal romances.*

She flinched as something brushed against her leg. Her heart pounded against her rib cage. Her gaze darted down.

Will's gleaming yellow eyes looked back at her.

"Jesus, Will, you scared me half to death!" She rubbed her breastbone. As her heartbeat slowed, she began to feel silly. "All right. I'm coming; I'm coming. Your pals better not have taken up all the space in my bed again." With the cat trailing after her, she moved to the bedroom, knowing she wouldn't sleep much anyway.

\* \* \*

Griffin stretched out contentedly in front of the fireplace, enjoying the warmth of the fire and the softness of the blanket she had wrapped around herself. It was just September, and the local humans probably thought even the chilly nights in Michigan didn't require a warming fire yet. Griffin thought otherwise. There was nothing wrong with indulging herself every once in a while. The council was paying the bill for her stay at the bed-and-breakfast after all, and if they wanted her here, the least they could do was make her comfortable. So far, the home-cooked meals, the whirlpool tub, and the gas fireplace had provided all the feline comforts Griffin could wish for.

*Back to work, Griffin ordered herself. There'll be time for a catnap later.* She stretched out on her belly in front of her laptop and opened her e-mail. *Ah.* A satisfied grin curled her lips when she saw a new message from J.W. Price. *So that's what she was doing up at two a.m. — writing e-mails. It seems writers are nocturnal creatures too. So let's see what she has to say.*

She clicked on the e-mail and started to read.

Dear Ms. Westmore,

I realize we don't know each other, and I'm normally not one to send an e-mail to people who don't know me from Eve, but Allison DeLuca told me you might be able to help me with my research. I'm a writer of paranormal romances. Right in the middle of working on my newest novel, my muse decided to leave me for a younger or better-paid writer, and I thought getting a few questions answered by a zoologist might be helpful.

So if you have the time and access to the Internet while you're on vacation, let me know if you are willing to help me with a few questions.

Sincerely,

J.W. Price

Griffin read the e-mail again, carefully analyzing what it told her about the writer. *She's polite, but straightforward. Clever and careful. Openly copying the e-mail to her beta reader instead of just blind-copying her was a really smart move. She's letting me know that she told someone about contacting me. She also didn't tell me anything about herself or her book that I didn't know before. This is not going to be easy.*

The excitement of the hunt prickled along her skin. *Good.* The challenge of the investigation, the back and forth between herself and a worthy opponent was what she liked about her job.

*Now it's the cat's move. Let's see.* She scanned the e-mail again. *For a human, she has a great sense of humor.*

She had noticed it in Ms. Price's books too, and Griffin decided to reply in kind and use a little humor to make the writer feel more at ease with her. Hitting reply, she thought for a moment before she began to type her response.

Dear Ms. Price,

I'm not an expert on unfaithful muses, but if I can help in any way with my zoological expertise, I'd be happy to let you pick my brain while I'm in the area. Since I only have sporadic Internet access while I'm on vacation, why not meet in person?

Just name the time and place. I'm not on any schedule, so whatever you suggest should be fine.

Griffin Westmore

Her cell phone rang just as she clicked send. She glared at the device. *Of all the human inventions, why did we have to adopt this one? Without this thing, a cat could have some peace and quiet to investigate without a certain wolf's meddling.* No doubt it was Jennings, asking for a progress report.

"Westmore," she answered.

"Hello, Griffin," came a voice that was not her commander's. "It's Leigh."

Griffin groaned. *Now, isn't this nice. First Ky and now Leigh. What is this — an investigation or a family gathering?* "Leigh. What do you want?" she asked.

"Me? You should know by now that I don't want anything from you," her half sister answered. "You are the one who wants something from me."

"Bullshit. I'm in the middle of an investigation; I don't have time for..." Griffin squeezed her eyes shut when a thought occurred to her. "Don't tell me you are the techie they picked to hack into Marjorie Price's and her beta reader's computers?" While Leigh was not officially a saru, they sometimes requested her help when they needed a computer specialist.

Leigh growled. "Hey, it's not like I volunteered. The council wanted the best for the job, and so they called me."

Modesty had never been the Kasari's strong suit. *Give her a break, Griff. It's not like anyone ever accused you of having an inferiority complex either.*

"Kylin was the one who convinced the council to hire me," Leigh said. "Unlike your twin sister, I don't stick my muzzle in other people's business. If you want nothing to do with the family, that's fine with me."

Griffin raked her nails over itching skin that was as irritating as her half sister. It was a good reminder that she needed to calm down and act like a professional. "Okay. So the first thing I need you to do is hack into Allison DeLuca's computer and see if there's anything suspicious going on," she said. Jennings had sent her a report about his interview with Allison DeLuca. Nothing pointed at the beta reader as Ms. Price's secret informant, but Griffin didn't want to take any chances.

"Already done. Apart from ordering large amounts of doggie treats online, there's nothing suspicious about the activities on her computer. Do you think she eats them?" Leigh asked.

*Is this a serious question, or is she joking, trying to break through my reserve?* Griffin realized she didn't know Leigh well enough to tell just by the sound of her voice. "You're asking me this in all seriousness?"

"Sure. I always wondered what living with humans might do to a Wrasa's sanity." Working from home and living in her fathers' pride, Leigh had little contact with humans. She preferred it that way, but apparently, that didn't stop her from being curious about Allison Deluca's computer activities.

Griffin didn't want to discuss Allison's eating habits. Spending more time undercover and among humans than any other saru, she had seen human food that made dog biscuits seem appetizing in comparison. "I couldn't care less," she said.

"Having strange eating habits is not against the First Law, but giving information about shape-shifters to a human is. Are you sure she didn't help the writer with her research?"

"If she did, she didn't do it by e-mail," Leigh said. "Allison pointed out things like run-on sentences, missing hyphens, or violations of point of view in her e-mails, but she mostly didn't comment on the content of the story."

"Mostly?" There was no room for doubts with that kind of investigation.

"Once or twice, the beta reader suggested that Ms. Price should take the story in another direction. She tried to get her to change a few things that were too close to the truth, but it seems this human is pretty stubborn." It sounded like a compliment. Stubbornness was a common trait in cat-shifters, and up to a certain point, it wasn't seen as a bad thing. "She seems to know exactly where she wants to go with the story."

*Yeah*, Griffin thought moodily. *Right into her grave*. "Then I need you to get us access to Ms. Price's computer," she said.

"I'm way ahead of you. Let me tell you, it wasn't easy. Ms. Price did all the right things to make her computer secure. I had to —"

"I get it," Griffin interrupted. "You were a good little cat and now want your back scratched. I'll do it later, when I don't have the council and my tas breathing down my neck. So what did you find?"

"Great Hunter! If your mother is anything like you, no wonder the dads didn't want anything to do with her beyond that one night." Leigh snarled.

Anger and fierce protectiveness rushed Griffin. She rolled around and got up onto her knees. The plastic of her cell phone crunched as she tightened her fingers around it. Slowly, her Saru training smoothed the rough edges of her anger, and she loosened her grip before she could destroy the fragile internal

parts of the cell phone. "Who says they didn't?" she asked, her voice dangerously soft. "It was my mother who didn't want the pride to run her life."

A moment of silence lingered between them.

*Let it go*, Griffin told herself. *Nothing good will come of dwelling on the past*. At least Leigh was frank and straightforward, unlike Kylin, who was trying to draw her back into the family with clever cat manipulations. "What did you find on Marjorie Price's computer?" she asked. "And please leave out the detailed step-by-step report of every keystroke you did. I just want the results."

Leigh cleared her throat, not once but twice, taking so long that Griffin was tempted to ask her if she was planning on coughing up a hair ball. "I hacked her e-mail account," Leigh finally said. "And I went through all the files on her hard drive and looked at the Web sites she visits."

"And?" Griffin asked.

"Well, either she's doing research for a very interesting story, or she's a poker-playing, cat-loving sex addict. If she weren't human, I'd ask for an introduction." Leigh chuckled, their earlier fight apparently forgotten.

Forgetting wasn't so easy for Griffin. She was in no mood for joking around. "Leigh..."

"What?" Leigh asked. "She spends a lot of time in online poker rooms, and she has bookmarked a lot of sites about zoology, veterinary medicine, big cats, and casino resorts in Michigan. And there's this Web archive with fan fiction. Some of it is pretty hot, and you won't even guess what kind of stories she —"

"Leigh," Griffin interrupted. That wasn't the information she wanted. "Found anything to do with her new story?"

"Well, the manuscript or what she has written so far is on her computer, but we already have that. She hasn't written more than a few paragraphs in the last few days," Leigh answered.

*Right.* Griffin remembered the "unfaithful muse" Marjorie Price had mentioned in her e-mail. At least it would give her some time for her investigation. "Anything else of interest? Don't most writers do some kind of outline that tells them what to write next? Or at least take notes while they do research?"

"Well, if Ms. Price does, she's one of the old-fashioned writers who does it longhand." Derisive disbelief colored Leigh's words. Clearly, Leigh as a computer expert thought this method of data capture was just one step above chiseling words into stone tablets. "There's nothing on her computer that gives us any clue as to where her inside knowledge about us Wrasa is coming from," Leigh said. "If anyone is providing her with information, he or she is not doing it via the Internet. Ms. Price doesn't use chats or instant messaging, just e-mail."

*No chat, no IM. I'll have one of our people on the police force check out her phone records.* Griffin scratched her chin. "And there's nothing interesting in any of the e-mails?"

"A few e-mails from her mother, who seems worried about her lack of social life; the rest is all somehow connected to her writing — fan mail, feedback from test readers, and exchanges with other authors." She heard Leigh click through a few documents at the other end of the line. "At least now I know where the 'J' in her pseudonym is coming from. She signs all her e-mails to her mother with 'Jorie.' It's a lot cuter than Marjorie; that's for sure."

"And the 'W'?" Griffin asked.

"No idea. Maybe another nickname."

"Hmm. Nothing else?" All that snooping and getting Leigh involved and it had all been in vain?

"I sent you the text of one of the e-mails she sent her agent," Leigh said.

*She has an agent?* Either being a romance writer paid better than she'd been aware of, or J.W. Price was a more successful writer than she had realized. "What did the e-mail say?" she asked. She would read it later, but after a long day her eyes would protest the fine print of the e-mail.

"She said that the new book will be completely different from all her other books and that she's aware she's taking a big risk, but after a revelation, she just had to write this book," Leigh said. "Sounds as if she knew how dangerous writing this book would be. And her agent knew it too. He wrote back that under these circumstances, he couldn't represent her anymore."

"Check out that agent and his e-mail exchanges with Ms. Price," Griffin said.

"I already did that," Leigh answered.

*She's good at her job; I have to give her that.*

"But it seems they usually talked on the phone, so it's another dead end," Leigh added.

Griffin threw her large body onto the bed. *No good leads and a writer who says she knows the book will be a big risk.* Up until now, she had assumed that Jorie Price had gotten a few facts right by mere chance. But now she wasn't so sure. It sounded as if Jorie knew exactly what she was doing. She was determined to write this book — and Griffin was determined to stop her.

## CHAPTER 5

*THIS WOULD BE A lot more comfortable in my cat form,* Griffin grumbled. She was lying in wait in the small forest next to Jorie Price's house. Branches dug into her side, and the ground had never felt so hard when she had settled down to wait for prey while she was in her animal form.

She didn't have a choice, though. A ligerlike creature ambling up to Jorie's house in the middle of the day wouldn't escape notice in the small town, and Griffin didn't want to waste any time changing back once Jorie was finally gone.

The front door opened.

Griffin ducked behind a shrub of wild blackberries. Eyesight wasn't necessary anyway. She breathed in the scent that the wind brought to her. A mental picture of a stroll through the forest in springtime flashed through her mind. The unique scent let her know that it was Jorie Price who was leaving the house.

Jorie got into a battered-looking car and drove off, probably running some errands before meeting Griffin for coffee. This was Griffin's chance to take a closer look at the house. She wasn't proud of invading another person's territory in this way, but she accepted it as necessary. Searching Jorie's computer hadn't amounted to anything, so they needed to do this the old-fashioned way.

Her thigh muscles, which had been ready to pounce for the last hour, stretched powerfully, propelling her toward the house much faster than most humans could have gotten there. She pressed her big body against the side of the house and listened.

Nothing.

Everything was quiet inside the house and in the neighborhood.

Looking left and right to make sure no one was watching, she took her lock pick kit from her pocket. Slowly, she inserted a pick into the keyhole while applying pressure with the tension wrench.

A moment went by. Two. Then she felt and heard a slight click as the first pin fell into position. *Yeah! This is a cat's job.* Griffin had always enjoyed the challenge of picking locks and liked that she needed all her considerable patience and her sense of touch to get the door open.

She listened attentively, but instead of the second click, she heard the crunching of gravel.

"Hello?" It was the voice of a human male. He was shouting through the hedge that separated Jorie's house from that of her neighbor. His steps were coming closer. "Anybody here? Are you searching for Ms. Price?"

The urge to spin around and lunge at the human like a startled tiger defending its kill threatened to overcome Griffin. Then she shoved her tools back into her pocket and sprinted around the corner before the human could appear on her side of the hedge and really see her. *Well, obviously he has already seen you, or he wouldn't know that you aren't Jorie.* She realized that he was probably the next-door neighbor. He must have caught glimpses of her through the window of his own house. Her body had covered what she had been doing, but he had still come to see what she wanted. *That damn small-town curiosity.*

In two big leaps, Griffin reached the back of the house, determined not to let the nosy neighbor see her face. She cursed herself for getting caught like some inexperienced cub who was doing this for the first time. Sure, the neighbor had been

downwind, and she had been focused on picking the lock, but it was still humiliating. *This assignment is not off to a good start.* Jennings wouldn't like it. He was a perfectionist — and so was she.

Pressing her back against the rough wall behind the house, she paused and listened to see if he was following her. She crouched down — and froze when the flap of a kitty door that someone had installed in a basement window opened.

The acrylic glass swung back, and Griffin came eye to eye with a cat.

Half in and half out of the kitty door, the cat stopped and hissed at Griffin.

Griffin was tempted to hiss back and show the small feline who was top cat in the area. "Hush," she whispered. "I'm a fellow cat. Don't rat me out to the human."

The three-colored cat smelled of coconut and Jorie Price, so it was definitely her cat, not just a feline neighbor sampling the food. The cat hissed again. Its eyes were wide with fear, and its nose wrinkled as it took in Griffin's scent. Finally, almost in slow motion, the cat backed away. The flap fell closed behind the disappearing cat.

*Great. A curious neighbor in front and a snobbish cat inside — alarm system Osgrove-style. I'm beginning to think that breaking in was not the best idea I ever had. Now I need to call Jennings and have him send someone over to make Jorie and the neighbor think it was just a salesman or a Jehovah's Witness going from door to door, not a burglar.* Griffin drew her watch from her pocket. Only a half hour left until she had to meet Jorie at the local diner. *There have to be easier ways to get inside the house,* she decided and turned to sneak away.

\* \* \*

*Jesus Christ!* Jorie ducked down in the driver's seat of her car and stared out the window. *Do I really want to go over there and sit down to have coffee with her?*

In the small diner right next to her parked car, at the very first table where she could see the street, Griffin Westmore sat and calmly regarded the other patrons of the diner.

Jorie didn't need the printed-out newspaper article on the seat next to her to identify the zoologist. The photo didn't do her justice anyway. Griffin Westmore was the only stranger in the diner, and the locals were staring at her. Not that Jorie could blame them. She was staring too.

Griffin Westmore wasn't just tall; she was large. Not fat, exactly, but she didn't have the thin limbs and rangy body of some tall people either. The expensive-looking silk shirt she was wearing couldn't hide the strength that lurked beneath it.

It wasn't just her size that made Jorie hesitate to go in. Most of her opponents at the poker table had been men, and some of them made Godzilla look like a harmless lizard in comparison. She also knew that sometimes, the biggest person wasn't the most dangerous.

Still, that niggling sixth sense that had always told her when it was time to fold her cards just wouldn't shut up. Even Griffin's gleaming, coppery hair seemed to shout a silent warning at her, like a fire that set off the smoke alarm.

The waitress came over to the table and extended her arm as far out as it would go to set a cup on the table, preferring to keep her distance from Griffin Westmore.

*She's afraid of Griffin.* Not that Jorie could blame her. *She looks like someone who could break a bobcat's neck rather than put a radio collar around it.*

The cup rattled on its saucer, and the liquid threatened to spill over.

Jorie flinched when Griffin's hands shot out.

But the long fingers were gentle as they took the cup from the waitress's shaking hands and set it safely onto the table. For someone so big, she moved with a flowing grace that Jorie hadn't expected. No hint of irritation was visible on Griffin's face. She just gave a gentle nod, took a sip from the cup, and smiled at the waitress.

*Why is she so calm?* Jorie thought of herself as a levelheaded person, but she wouldn't have reacted so pleasantly at almost having a cup of hot coffee or tea dumped into her lap. Something about Griffin's body language seemed... off. *She's holding back, putting her temper on a tight leash. Does she know I'm here, watching her?* The thought rushed through Jorie's mind, but she dismissed it. *She can't even know what I look like. Maybe she's just used to strangers being intimidated by her size and wants to show them that there's nothing to be afraid of.*

Probably as perplexed by the intimidating stranger and her unexpected friendliness as Jorie was, the waitress hurried away.

*Okay, Jorie thought. Do I go in, or do I run for the hills too?*

\* \* \*

Griffin felt gazes resting on her — and one gaze in particular. As a predator, Griffin was always aware of what was going on in her territory. For now, Osgrove was her territory and the diner her hunting grounds. All her senses came alive, and her skin prickled. For once, the predator was the one being watched. Jorie Price had been sitting in her old car in front of the diner, studying her, for the last ten minutes.

Ten minutes in which Griffin had done everything to convince her captive audience that she was perfectly harmless. She had smiled at the waitress, had greeted the other patrons

with what she hoped was a nonpredatory expression, and had said "please" and "thank you," trying hard to put the people around her at ease. It wasn't easy when you looked like a six-foot-two leader of a street gang. Griffin cursed the scar that the target of her last mission, a renegade bear-shifter, had left behind on her face. It would take a few more changes for it to heal completely and disappear. For now, there was nothing she could do about it, but she tugged her collar-length hair over her left ear that had been injured on another mission two years ago.

She was careful not to look in Jorie's direction, instinctively knowing that it would scare her prey away. Instead, she focused on her herbal tea. Not that the brew deserved the attention. With every sip, Griffin had to fight against the urge to snarl at the tea or the person who had wasted a hot cup of water on it.

Outside, a car door slammed, and Griffin suppressed a triumphant purr. *She's coming in.*

A concert of bells clattered when the door swung open.

Griffin recognized the scent of the writer before she stopped in front of her table. Once again, Jorie's scent made her think of a walk through the forest... or through a coconut grove.

"Dr. Westmore?" Jorie asked.

Griffin looked up with her most charming Cheshire-cat grin. "Yes. Ms. Price?"

"Yes." Jorie's smile was polite, but Griffin felt the wariness behind it.

*Like a deer that has stopped grazing and lifts its head to catch a glimpse of a possible predator. One wrong move and she'll run away. I'll need to work harder to get her to lower her head and munch on the grass again.* "Then call me Griffin, please," she said, still smiling. Unlike the Kasari, she didn't stand on ceremony, and she had noticed that humans opened up faster when they were on first-name basis.

Jorie nodded politely but didn't return the offer.

*Either she's a really private woman, or she got into the habit of using her pseudonym and assumes that I'll just use that.* That was what Griffin would have to do since she officially didn't know Jorie's first name yet. She vowed to be careful not to let slip any information about the writer that she shouldn't have yet.

Even though her Wrasa instincts screamed at Griffin to avert her gaze, she forced herself to keep eye contact. Humans didn't find it threatening. They seemed to think it was the polite thing to do. At least it gave her a chance to study Jorie more closely and take in all the details she had missed on her late-night investigation in front of Jorie's house.

The lithe body and the shining black hair, revealing small ears and a slender neck, reminded Griffin of a black panther. Almond-shaped eyes added to the feline image, but the sparkle of intelligence in those Asian eyes was all human — precise, analytical, and cautious.

It wasn't tradition among her kind, but Griffin reached out a hand. She noticed the confident movements of Jorie's slender hand that took hers in a short, but tight grip. *She might be a recluse, but she's not shy.* Jorie's hand was soft and felt good against hers.

Jorie let go first and gave her a nod. "Dr. Westmore," she said, ignoring Griffin's offer to call her by her first name. "Thank you for meeting me here."

Meeting at the diner had been Jorie's suggestion. Apparently, she thought meeting in a public place with a lot of people around them was safer. *Well, she doesn't know that if the Saru want her dead, there's no place on earth where she'll be safe.* But they weren't at that point just yet, and Griffin hoped it wouldn't become necessary. Right now, she was still investigating.

Jorie sat down across from her.

The waitress came over again, carefully keeping on Jorie's side of the table. "Can I get you anything?" she asked Jorie.

*She's treating her like a stranger, Griffin thought. Either Jorie is not very well liked in town, or she just recently moved here and doesn't socialize.* She would have Leigh or one of their other techies find out for how long Jorie had lived in Osgrove.

"Just coffee, please," Jorie said.

*Coffee, the secret weakness of humankind.* While the scent was nice, her nose wanted to wrinkle as she imagined the bitter taste. *Coffee and nothing else.* Now she congratulated herself on having a big lunch just before she had left for her meeting with the writer. This way, she could concentrate on Jorie instead of being focused on eating or on the smell of frying bacon.

When the waitress left, Jorie took a bound, well-worn notebook from her backpack.

*Leigh was right. Whatever notes she has on her story, they are not on her computer. She has them in her notebook.* Griffin stared at the little book. Somehow she had to get her paws on it, but she knew it wasn't going to be easy. Jorie probably kept the notebook close at all times, just in case she had a sudden idea while she was away from her computer.

After thumbing through it for a few seconds, Jorie stopped at a page with a neatly numbered list of questions. "Then let's get started so that I won't waste more time of your vacation than necessary."

"Oh, don't worry," Griffin said with a reassuring smile. "I don't mind if this takes a while. I have a lot of built-up vacation time, so an hour more or less doesn't matter. I haven't taken any time off in almost three years." That was a lie. She took time off as often as the Forest Service allowed it. Sometimes she just needed to get away from it all — her life among humans, the Saru, and the expectations of her family. But with faint dark

circles under her eyes, Jorie looked as if she was overdue for a vacation and might sympathize with a fellow workaholic. This meeting had just one purpose: getting a foot into the door by earning Jorie's trust. Every word Griffin said was tailored to bring her closer to that goal claw-length by claw-length.

Instead of asking about Griffin's work or politely inquiring about her vacation plans, Jorie just nodded and clicked on her pen. "Allison mentioned you work on a project about mountain lions. Do you have any firsthand experience with tigers?"

"Bobcats," Griffin corrected and mentally added, *As you very well know. I bet you did your research before agreeing to meet me.* "I'm part of a team that is trying to establish the home-range size and movements of bobcats in the Ouachita National Forest in Arkansas. We radio collared them." She had a feeling Jorie was testing her, trying to verify the information she had found about her on the Internet. *Mmm, nice. She's gonna keep this interesting.*

"Sounds adventurous," Jorie said. Neither her facial expression nor her voice revealed any emotion beyond polite interest.

*She must be a great poker player.*

"It can be. But it also involves a lot of data analysis. I don't spend as much time out on the trails as I'd like. A lot of my work is management, putting together proposals and giving presentations." That much was true, but it was also meant to send a clear message: *I'm a harmless, trustworthy researcher, not an unreliable adventurer.* "I guess our jobs have something in common: a lot of paperwork." Griffin tried to establish a connection with Jorie and introduce a little humor into their much too businesslike meeting.

Apparently, Jorie wasn't interested in interpersonal connections. "So you never worked with tigers?" she repeated her question.

*And here I thought the Saru were businesslike. Jorie Price puts us to shame. This woman has a seriously one-track mind. Does she ever think about anything but her writing?* Griffin wondered. "You're lucky," she said although lucky wasn't the right word to describe a human under investigation by the Saru. "I have a lot of firsthand experience with tigers." As firsthand as you could get, actually. "So you're writing a book about tigers?" she asked as if she didn't already know. She could play clueless with the best of them. Cats were masters of deception, so it was a good thing that she had been sent on this mission instead of letting Jennings try his paw at the deception game.

The relaxed features and the controlled body language didn't change. Jorie's scent did, though. The visual image that always came with inhaling Jorie's scent now showed Griffin a stiff breeze ruffling the leaves high up in the imaginary trees. *She's squirming internally, but she hides it well.* Griffin's admiration grew.

"I usually don't discuss my works in progress," Jorie said. Then, as if she realized how brusque that sounded, she added, "I don't want to jinx it." Jorie's charming little smile didn't reveal the uneasiness she felt at talking about her writing with a stranger, but her scent gave it away.

*Oh, so she can be charming too if she wants to.* Griffin got the feeling that she was sitting across from another master manipulator. "Writers are a superstitious bunch, huh?" she asked. *Do you believe in the creatures you write about? Do you suspect you're sitting here with a shape-shifter? Did your informant warn you about us, and that's why you're so cautious?* She studied Jorie's hand that held the pen, but it stayed relaxed and didn't give anything away.

"Some of them," Jorie said. "Muses are fickle creatures, so we have to be careful not to offend them." The answer sounded matter-of-fact, but Griffin saw the twinkling in the dark eyes.

Jorie looked down at her notebook. "A female tiger weighs about two hundred fifty pounds, right?"

Griffin did a quick calculation of her mother's weight. "That sounds about right for a Bengal tiger, but it also depends on the subspecies. Some Siberian tiger ladies weigh even more."

Again, Jorie's facial expression didn't change. Just a short bunching of her neck muscles gave away her tension.

"Something wrong with that?" Griffin asked. She had already guessed the problem: whoever Jorie's informant was, he hadn't gotten around to explaining how a normal-looking woman could change into an animal twice her weight. "Is that a problem for the plot?"

Jorie shook her head, not giving away any information about her book. Her eyes were already on the next question on her list. "What about catnip? Some say it does affect big cats; some say it doesn't." Nothing in Jorie's expression gave away whether she had read the title of Griffin's dissertation.

*I would bet a gourmet dinner against a can of cat food that she has, though.* Jorie was smart and careful. There was no way she had agreed to meet Griffin before she had found out everything she could about her. "I actually did my dissertation on that," Griffin said.

"Really?" Jorie lifted her eyebrows, but her pupils didn't enlarge, so Griffin knew she was faking surprise. She had known the topic of Griffin's dissertation, but admitting it would mean having to admit that she had googled Griffin. "And what did you find out?"

"Most lions are sensitive to catnip, but tigers usually aren't," Griffin said. It wouldn't hurt to give Jorie this information even though Wrasa had the same reaction to catnip. "So I hope you're not planning on having someone in your novel attack a tiger with a can of catnip. It won't work."

Jorie neither confirmed nor denied any plans she might have for her novel.

*She's not giving up any information.* Very rarely had Griffin investigated someone who was so good at not giving anything away. It was a welcome challenge and completely frustrating at the same time.

Jorie's pen moved smoothly over the paper, then paused. "What about ligers? Would catnip have any effect on them?"

Years of undercover work had taught Griffin to control her emotions and her body language when she was around humans. But now she had to fight against the impulse to lift her lip in a surprised snarl and gurgled into her tea. The fine hairs on her neck stood on end. "Ligers?" she repeated. She wasn't a liger, of course. She was a hybrid with Kasari and Puwar ancestors. Her animal form came very close to looking like a liger, though, and she wondered if Jorie's casual question was pure coincidence.

"Yes," Jorie said. "I wonder if they would get 'drunk' on catnip like their lion fathers or if they wouldn't react at all like their tiger mothers."

"Well..." Griffin paused. She didn't like to admit it, but this human had managed to throw her for a loop. "I didn't have any ligers in my study, but I'd say it's about a fifty-fifty chance." It was. Kylin, her fraternal twin, went as crazy as their Kasari half sister when she smelled catnip while Griffin wasn't affected at all.

Jorie asked more questions about cats' senses and about feline metabolism. Every question told Griffin more about Jorie's assumptions about shape-shifters. A lot of them were accurate. Much too accurate.

Every time Jorie asked about cat facts that could be applied to shape-shifters, Griffin gave answers that were as far from the truth as possible. She noticed that Jorie didn't write down any of those answers, discarding them as something she wouldn't use

in her story... as if she already knew a lot about the Wrasa and the answers Griffin gave didn't fit in with that knowledge.

*She's intelligent, and a lot of her assumptions go in the right direction, but if she needs to ask, it means she's not sure. If she thought that conclusion through to the end, it would mean that there was no inside source. Where else would her knowledge come from? Can getting so many things right be mere coincidence?* Griffin wondered.

She knew she wouldn't get an answer today.

Jorie was already paying for her coffee and Griffin's tea and putting her notebook back into her backpack. "It was nice to meet you," Jorie said, again extending her hand. "Thank you for taking the time to meet with me and for answering my questions. I'm sure I can use some of these things in my book."

"You're welcome," Griffin said. She feverishly searched for something to say that would keep her in Jorie's life and allow her to gather more information. Jorie clearly didn't plan on ever seeing her again. "If you have more questions, please don't hesitate to ask me. I'll be around for the next three weeks. You can e-mail me anytime — or you could just call me." She rifled through her wallet and offered Jorie a card with her cell phone number.

Surprise flashed through the dark eyes.

*Damn.* Griffin immediately regretted her offer. *I moved too fast. This is not the kind of trusting woman who would casually give out her cell phone number to a stranger, so she didn't expect me to do it either.* If she were in Jorie's place, she would have reacted the same way.

Within a second, a polite smile replaced the surprised expression. Jorie accepted the card that Griffin held out for her. "Thank you," Jorie said and pocketed the card.

*She won't call,* Griffin thought. Now that all her questions were answered, Jorie saw no reason for further contact.

"I hope you'll enjoy your vacation." The bells over the door rattled again, and Jorie was gone.

*Damn, Griffin thought again. Well, you were the one who was starting to get dissatisfied with boring missions. This writer is definitely a challenge, so enjoy the hunt while it lasts.*

This is the End of the Excerpt of  
Second Nature by Jae.

## About The Author

**I** GREW UP AMIDST the vineyards and gently sloping hills of southern Germany. I spent most of my childhood with my nose buried in a book, earning me the nickname "professor" before I even finished elementary school. The writing bug bit me at the age of eleven. The very first piece of fiction I ever wrote was a thirty-page western story that I still have somewhere (well-hidden because it alternately makes me cringe and laugh when I read it today). I wrote two dozen mostly novel-length stories (westerns, adventure stories, historical fiction, fantasy, science fiction – you name it, I've probably written it) in my "baby years" as a writer, but no one but my poor twin sister ever got to read them.

That changed when I discovered the Internet and the wondrous world of FanFiction and online stories. My parents belatedly got their wish – I took my nose out of my books and started to spend my time glued to the computer screen instead. Soon after, I wrote my first FanFiction, a Star Trek: Voyager story. Don't bother to search for it on the web; even if there was still a copy in circulation somewhere, it's in German. Back then, I would have taken a thousand oaths that I would never, ever be able to write more than a grocery list in English. Then I took an intensive, free online language course – almost eight years of constant fanfic reading. Let's just say that I learned some words I later had trouble explaining to my friends why I would know such expressions.

So in the beginning of 2006, I finally put my newly acquired knowledge of the English language to good use and wrote a series of three Law & Order: SVU fanfics in English. As my confidence grew, I wrote a longer FanFiction and then my first English historical fiction. In some ways, I've come full circle – because "Backwards to Oregon" takes place on the

Western Frontier. Other than the setting I promise that it doesn't have much in common with my first childish attempt at writing.

I still live in Germany, where I work as a psychologist. When I'm not working or writing, I like to spend my time reading, cooking for a bunch of friends, spending time with my nephew and niece, and watching way too many crime shows. I also enjoy learning new languages (Russian is my latest project. I haven't found any lesbian online stories using the Cyrillic alphabet to help me learn, though).

## Other Titles By This Author

### **Backwards To Oregon** – Lesbian: Historical Fiction, Romance

#### **Summary**

"LUKE" HAMILTON has always been sure that she'd never marry. She accepted that she would spend her life alone when she chose to live her life disguised as a man.

After working in a brothel for three years, Nora Macauley has lost all illusions about love. She no longer hopes for a man who will sweep her off her feet and take her away to begin a new, respectable life.

But now they find themselves married and on the way to Oregon in a covered wagon, with two thousand miles ahead of them.

\* \* \*

### **Conflict of Interest** – Book I – Lesbian: Romance, Crime

#### **Summary**

WORKAHOLIC detective Aiden Carlisle isn't looking for love... and certainly not at the law enforcement seminar she reluctantly agreed to attend. But their first lecturer is not at all what she expected.

Psychologist Dawn Kinsley has just found her place in life. After a failed relationship with a police officer, she has sworn to herself never to get involved with another cop again, but she feels a connection to Aiden from the very first moment.

Can Aiden keep from crossing the line when a brutal crime threatens to keep them apart... before they've even gotten together?

\* \* \*

**Next of Kin** – Book II – Lesbian: Romance, Crime

### **Summary**

**SEX CRIMES** Detective Aiden Carlisle is slowly getting used to being in a committed relationship with Dawn Kinsley — a relationship that isn't always easy since Dawn is not only a psychologist but also a former victim in one of Aiden's cases. Aiden's private and professional lives collide when Dawn's newest patient gets in trouble with the law. Will she be able to stay objective enough to solve the case without pushing Dawn away?

The same case also throws Deputy District Attorney Kade Matheson's well-ordered life into chaos. In the last few years, Kade has taken case files and law books, not lovers, to bed. She has been focused only on her career and fought hard to win cases like Dawn's, but now the case forces her to finally face her attraction to women. She suddenly finds herself with two secret admirers — but which one is more dangerous, the threat to her life or her heart?

## Back Cover Summary

### Second Nature

Lesbian: Paranormal Romance

**N**OVELEST JORIE Price doesn't believe in the existence of shape-shifting creatures or true love. She leads a solitary life, and the paranormal romances she writes are pure fiction for her.

Griffin Westmore knows better — at least about one of these two things. She doesn't believe in love either, but she's one of the not-so-fictional shape-shifters. She's also a Saru — an elite soldier, investigator, and if need be an assassin with the mission to protect the shape-shifters' secret existence at any cost.

When Jorie gets too close to the truth in her latest shape-shifter romance, Griffin is sent to investigate — and if necessary to destroy the manuscript before it's published and to kill the writer.

\* \* \*

**Thank You** for Reading the Excerpt,  
**Second Nature.**

*L-Book ePublisher, LLC*



<http://L-Book.com>