



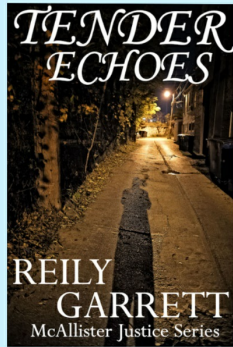
TIA GO

REILY GARRETT

Tiago
Kurupira Series

By
Reily Garrett

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Tiago

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Reily's newsletter at
reilygarrett.com.

Dedication

This book is dedicated to Darius, Leyna, and Raptor. The incredible trio, loyal kind, and energetic, who don't understand the words, give up. To Faith, whose love and compassion changed my life.

Special thanks to beta reader, Laurie Sickles, for your time and effort.

Books by Reily Garrett

Carnal Series

Carnal Beginnings

Carnal Innocence

Bending Fate: Prequel to Carnal Whispers

Carnal Whispers: Mind Stalker

Carnal Obsession: His Heart's Prisoner

Immortal Lovers Series

Unholy Alliance

The McAllister Justice Series

Tender Echoes: Prequel to Digital Velocity

Digital Velocity

Bound By Shadows

Inconclusive Evidence

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Chapter One

Macabre shadows crawled across the tile floor to coalesce in a growing pool, bathing the kitchen in dark comfort as Brielle closed the back door. A long day of sorting microbes had induced residual eyestrain she'd love to deep six in favor of a long vacation where her closest neighbors hung by their tails, ate bananas, and cavorted on liana vines.

The last day of work before leave always entailed loose ends needing a quick tie-off. To make matters worse, her panty-whispering boss hit on her for the hundredth time, not understanding the word *no*. Perhaps some longhorn beetles deposited in his lunch box might change his point of view as far as women equating rabbits, waiting to be bred. If she had to make a comparison, she'd have likened herself to a lynx, solitary, a little wild, and preferring the openness and freedom of the dense forest to the suffocation endured in the concrete and glass modern world.

She'd chalked the day's pall of trepidation up to the inevitable catastrophe encroaching on her horizon, bearing down at a speed her mind failed to comprehend. Heavy rain drumming on the roof didn't help her mood. Now, her gaze scanned obscure corners of the room for the source of her tension. Nothing appeared out of order.

Soft snoring from her mom's bedroom drifted down the hallway as she eased into her own room, those precious, breathy sounds she'd not hear much longer as the ravages of cancer devoured her mom's strength. She'd never expected fairness in life, but the avalanche of disaster plunging downhill threatened the fabric of her sanity as if fate tugged one thread at a time in a game to detect which would be the final blow. She and her mom were all she'd ever known through the highs of earning an advanced degree to the lows of social awkwardness.

Muted rays of moonlight sifted through shivering autumn leaves to highlight two airline tickets sitting innocently on her dresser. Next trip—there'd only be one. Within weeks, she'd lose her only known blood relative, the only person who'd understood the *unique* complexities of her character yet loved her anyway. They'd wanted to see the Amazon River basin one more time, together, but making the special arrangements had taxed her mental reserves as if those very actions brought her closer to orphan status.

Sitting on the end of her bed was more an act of weakening legs than design. When hot tears finally glazed her cheeks, she feared the tidal wave of emotion would smash her wall of stoic determination and drown her in its flood to wash away any trace of her existence. Raindrops tapped softly against the windowpane and emulated a metronome from hell, counting down her mom's remaining heartbeats in cold, mechanical precision.

Holding tight to the necklace at her throat gave little comfort tonight. Normally, it served as a constant reminder of its origins and the semi-annual trips taken to the rainforest, but now the cold crystal brought images of her mom's failing health despite every effort to stop the cancer's invasion of her liver and lungs. She'd never taken the pendant off or even shown it to another living soul, per her mom's warning.

"Oh, Mom, please don't leave me. We have to find a way to beat this." The ineffectiveness of the latest round of chemo echoed in her mom's new hand tremor and the wheeze punching the air even on short walks.

Through it all, self-pity had not become her master or companion, yet to see the only one she loved defeated and accepting the inevitable broke her in a way nothing else could. Day-to-day deterioration made her long for the calming sights and sounds of the Amazon, where its varied existence softened the harsh reality of life. A cold *Guarana* would soothe right now, but the caffeine would keep her awake, and her mom wanted to talk on the plane tomorrow morning. Finally, she'd hear the story of her birthright. Water would do just fine—for the moment.

Mechanical movements of packing in low light and reserving an early AM taxi had become rote with years of practice and lent a small semblance of normalcy in a world gone crazy. One of her peculiarities provided her with unusually keen sight, negating the need for a bedside lamp. If only her mind were as keen and could fathom a way to destroy the insidious invasion claiming her mom's life essence hour by hour, minute by minute.

The light clinking of dishes as she put away the air-dried, dinner plates reminded her they wouldn't be eating their next weeks' meals in what *Uncle Jack* called civilized society. From their first trip to the southern hemisphere long ago, she'd preferred the simpler way of life, but her mom had insisted it wasn't time to move south. Not yet. The basis for that decision remained a mystery to be solved at thirty-thousand feet the next morning.

"I wish we'd relocated years ago. Maybe the shaman could've found a cure." Small pools of low light from cylindrical pendant lamps provided the only illumination in the kitchen and a soothing balm to her fracturing soul, the shadows between mimicking the gulf distancing her from any other person she'd met.

The fine hair on her nape prickled, alerting her to danger, yet no stealthy sounds disturbed the atmosphere. No subtle

change in air currents brushed her face. She could move like that, too.

Figurative bands tightened around her chest.

She stilled.

"I'm glad you didn't." The sultry feminine voice held as much arrogance as threat.

Whirling around in shock, Brielle dropped the stoneware plate. Its shattered pieces skidded across the porcelain tile to stop at a black, steel-toed, jump boot. The rhythmic tapping indicated her intruder's agitated frame of mind.

A sharp inhale supplied further information as the mystery guest swayed her arm left-to-right, right-to-left. Her six-inch blade handled as an extension of her fingers and reflected narrow beams of light to dance along the ceiling. Beads of moisture clung to her leather jacket and pants, perpetuating the chemical smell filling the air.

All this and more, Brielle picked up in an instant. "Who the hell are you?" Her mind raced with alternative scenarios, each leading to an intolerable outcome.

"I'm the one who'll turn you into worm fodder if you don't hand over your half of the crystal in the next thirty seconds." The sly smile spreading across the stranger's face boded ill while expressing a malice Brielle had never encountered.

"You're looking for a crystal? Look at the shelf behind me, moron. Take any one you want then get the hell out of my house." She kept her speech low and controlled. The thought of her mom waking up and shuffling out into this mess sharpened her focus to each tiny movement, each flick of the intruder's demented gaze. Instincts pressed Brielle to challenge, but anyone who'd break into a house then demand nothing more than a crystal spoke of mental instability.

Brielle sidestepped to allow a better view of the shoulder-high shelf behind her. Of all the souvenirs they'd brought back from the rainforest, only one merited a fight with an armed intruder—the crystal about her neck, and not for monetary value.

"Shut up, bitch. I'll leave when I'm good and ready. What makes you so damned special, anyway?" The head-to-toe perusal came as no surprise, nor did the hair flip of her short bob or disgusted snort.

"Just trying to cooperate with my psychopathic intruder."

"Huh, some chosen one you are. Afraid of your own shadow? I expected...more."

"I'm not afraid of you. I just see no sense in fighting over worthless crystals." In fact, they weren't worthless, they were priceless, but sentimental value counted little in the cold world of a cash-based economy and nothing in light of her mom walking into this waking nightmare.

Panic coiled inside like a rattler preparing to strike when a soft shuffling noise rose above the nearly inaudible wheeze beyond the darkened doorway to her right.

"Worthless? You consider your heritage worthless? You don't deserve the blood flowing in your veins. Matter of fact, I think I'll relieve you of some—right now." Her little huff stretched the synthetic leather jacket, permeating the air with its fuel-oil odor.

"Brielle? Who's threatening you? Who...?"

Surprise registered on the intruder's face as she whirled to face a petite, gray-haired woman. A woman holding a pistol whose wobble caused small frenetic shadows to dance in nervous contemplation down her thick terry-cloth robe. Still, the resolute expression equaled that of a mama bear protecting her young.

Time ceased to hold meaning in Brielle's rapidly narrowing world. The water faucet's constant drip drilled a drumbeat not overshadowed by the roaring in her ears while her mom's ragged breathing punched harsh reality in the quiet room.

"Hello, Grace. I've come to procure the relic. I see you haven't apprized your daughter of her birthright. What a shame she won't live long enough to achieve it. I, however, will love taking her place."

How is it a stranger knows about my crystal? A slow steady inhale felt as if she'd sucked in sand.

"No, Jackie, you won't. Only Brielle can stand by his side." Her mom's gun weaved and bobbed, her knuckles white against the smooth, dark-grained handle. Even a small-bore weapon could kill at close range. At the present rate, the floor wouldn't feel a thing.

"Ah, but I have the looks of a native. With the crystal in hand, he'll never suspect the switch."

"It takes more than the crystal to be his mate." Her mom's quiet statement held conviction born of knowledge, but knowledge of what?

If Brielle charged, would the leather-clad bitch try to disarm her mom first? *What...Mate? Whose mate?* Another glance revealed her mom's strength waning. Sweat beading her brow combined with an increased hand tremor detailed her failing energy.

One heartbeat of uncertainty rooted Brielle in place while attempting to discern the bitch's resolve. Her desperate lurch forward coincided with Jackie pivoting and rushing Grace just as the gun barrel came up and fired.

"Mom!" Skirting the kitchen table to her mother's side took a lifetime, a nightmare from which she couldn't awaken.

The Sig Saur's small bore had created little muzzle flash, but two small popping sounds had filled the room.

Jackie's body jerked twice. Her O-shaped mouth and widened eyes conveyed an impossible event transpiring. Crimson rivulets flowed over fingers clenched tightly against her breast, to splash on the tile. She looked at her slickened, bloody hands, then at Grace before visually condemning Brielle. Death crept into her gaze.

The silence that followed was deafening.

Yanking the crumpling, foul bitch back, Brielle barely registered the thump of Jackie's head hitting the floor, her eyes already closed in never-ending darkness as blood continued to seep from her chest wound.

"Mom?" Purgatory remolded reality as steady ribbons of blood dripping from the knife in her mother's stomach brought her closer to hell.

Confusion etching her mom's features gave way to acceptance, a sad smile gracing her lips. A thin crack appeared in the floor tile seconds after Grace's fingers lost their grip on the gun. The low-pitched clap reverberated in the quiet room, exceeded only by a low moan and labored breathing.

"Mom! Oh God, no!" To remove the knife would increase the risk of bleed out.

"Brielle, listen to me. I'm sorry I haven't told you before now." A weak cough sprayed droplets of blood, staining her mother's robe. "There isn't time now. They're after the crystal—around your neck. Never give it up, baby. It's the key to your birthright, protects you in the forest."

Grace's next breath was a struggle with congestion. "Go to my room—my diary, in the nightstand. Take it and this key. Go...now. Run." Her weakened, bloody grip encircled the key worn about her neck, jerking but failing to break the chain before surrendering the fight. Grotesque, crimson patterns bloomed on her chest, muddy roses mocking a loving soul.

"Mom, I'm not leaving you! Let me call Uncle Jack. He'll help." When her mother's legs gave way, Brielle helped her to the floor. Killing was rarely acceptable in her thoughts, but this senseless murder was untenable.

"No...sweetheart, run. They're after you. They won't rest until they have you and the crystal. That woman, Jackie, she—worked—for..." Death weighed heavy in the depths of clear, hazel eyes as her lids fluttered then closed. Several raspy breaths foretold the ultimate struggle would soon end.

"Brielle—run. Find him. Don't come back. Take this key—rainforest. Tashuin will meet you. Your half crystal—finds the other." With a strain born of fierce determination, Grace Coulter yanked the key and chain from her neck, and then held the slippery metal out in reverent offering, conveying with her eyes the things she couldn't speak.

Brielle took it.

An ambulance would take twenty minutes and judging by the bloody foam bubbling out with each wheeze, it would be too late. Still, she snatched her cell and started to dial nine one one while placing the key in her pocket. She'd never seen it before but would slip it on the crystal's chain later.

Breaking glass from the living room snatched her focus toward the open kitchen doorway. She shoved her phone in her pocket.

"Brielle, run..." With a last rasping exhale, Grace closed her eyes in permanent rest.

Brielle picked up the pistol, cold and slicked with blood, her mother's blood. These dirtballs took away her last chance to talk with her mom, be with her mom, and make sense of her entire existence. Cracking knuckles reverberated like mini firecrackers in the quiet, her acoustic broadcast stemming from the poisonous rage swelling to consume every thought except one. *Revenge.*

Stealth acquired from training in the jungle allowed soundless tread around the table to kneel, its bulk between her and the next soon-to-be-dead intruder.

Heavy footfalls indicated male.

Harsh breathing insinuated one out of shape or injured during his trespass.

Either way, he would die tonight.

From the murky veil of night, the barrel of his gun emerged before his presence filled the doorway. Oily shadows covered his face and corpulent abdomen.

Cold fury corralled the violent and excessive emotions seeking to overwhelm and distract while her tightly clenched jaw radiated pain down her neck.

Her finger tightened on the trigger, slowly, incrementally.

Three rounds jerked his body like a crazed puppet master in the throes of a violent seizure. The unruly marionette slammed back into the door, rattling its hinges with each shot, his expression denying anything as mundane as the possibility of death.

The pops barely registered in the back of her mind as she shook her head, wondering how and why her world had suddenly imploded in a miasma of death and hate, a total antithesis to the way they'd lived their lives.

His shocked expression, born from palpable arrogance, dissolved as the lines of confusion smoothed to form a blank slate of understanding. "Damn, by a woman?"

Thick maroon stains on his chest expanding to unite in one large circle over his heart yielded no satisfaction. More blood dribbled from his lips and over his chin to speckle his collar. The weight from his half-stumble back crashed the battered door against the wall before he slumped awkwardly to the floor.

"You haven't won, Brielle, and you won't. He's coming for you. He always wins—in the end." His short-barreled weapon clunked to the floor as his legs slid out straight before him then jerked several times. Terror seeped into his widened eyes and gulping breaths, perhaps suspicion of what waited beyond this life from stockpiled deeds and

thoughts. Not all souls should earn redemption. An ever-widening puddle of urine stained his pants and pooled in the tiles' contrasting grout lines.

Before tonight, she'd never watched a person die. Now, three soulless husks covered her kitchen floor after the grisly battle. How could her world fall apart in less than fifteen minutes?

Big Ben's tick in the other room let her know time marched on, regardless if anyone cared.

"When your boss comes for me, I'll punch his ticket the same as yours, asshole."

She had no clue how long she knelt there, her guts tying knots that would remain forever twisted with rage and grief. Too much had happened to sort and rationalize.

In the rainforest, brutality was an unpleasant fact of life yet understandable and always predictable. Creatures like the great cayman and the majestic jaguar killed to survive, not for greed or petty, inconsequential regard. This equated senseless slaughter, nothing more.

When she stood, the entire evening's events jumbled and twisted to form a ball of confusion that failed any attempt at disentanglement. "All this over a damned crystal? One half finds the other...What the hell?"

All her life, she'd figured it held incredible value, maybe one-of-a-kind, but she'd not associated it with another crystal. Plus, her mom spoke of a mate like some prearranged marriage. *Not in my lifetime*. Now, her thoughts, like her life, took a free fall in space and time as she recalled the admonishments to keep it hidden and protected.

After sliding the gun in her back waistband, she picked up Grace Coulter's frail, lifeless body and carried her back to the bedroom. The knife protruding from her gut was a travesty to life, nature, and their entire existence, mocking her slow and inadequate response to her mother's murderer in a way that words could never achieve. Surely her cunning subconscious would produce better—in the form of nightmares.

The lightweight, quilted bedspread felt impossibly heavy as her shaking fingers maneuvered it up to her mom's waist. For reasons incomprehensible, removing the offensive blade suggested a blasphemy for which she could never atone, yet leaving it there created a vortex of dark swirling emotions that wouldn't let her walk away.

She gagged at the slight sucking sound its removal produced. Wiping it on a towel from the attached bathroom allowed her a mindless minute to collect her thoughts, the mechanical motions requiring little higher-brain functioning. Nothing could provide a sane explanation for such senseless bloodshed.

Gone. Everything in life that mattered, so easily destroyed from one heartbeat to the next. The significance of her world now consisted of nothing but dark matter, invisible to the naked eye but everywhere just the same. The ominous flow of energy created by equally somber thoughts swirling through her soul was alien and unwelcome while sitting on the bedside and reviewing the step by step descent into hell. She closed her mother's unseeing eyes and hoped her spirit had moved to the great rainforest they both loved.

The warning to seek shelter in the Amazon jungle and find Tashuin, a shaman who'd always adored Grace Coulter, seemed her only option. *What does he have to do with all this?* Perhaps the key from her mom's past unlocked the mysteries of her own future. But what did it matter with no one to share it?

Steps from her known life remained unheard, just as the cries from her heart, as she reverently tucked her mother's bulky diary under her arm and headed for her bedroom and soon, a new life.

Grief numbed Brielle as she looked around.

She was already packed.

Chapter Two

For the first time in twenty-four hours, Brielle inhaled without succumbing to the weight of her grief. Like a boat set adrift on the ocean, she was free and unattached, not obligated to anything or anyone. Emotionally lost.

The small V formed by *The Traveler's* wake exuded ample mist to coat her skin in the early afternoon's sweltering heat. The fact the Araguaia River contained enough bacteria to digest woody materials shed by the surrounding rainforest didn't bother her since riding on what many considered the lungs of the planet always gave her a bit of a high.

Quitting her job via email had felt underhanded, but when her mom's murder hit the news and the fact that some unidentified entity stalked her, her boss would understand. There'd been nothing left to say as her mom's warning alleviated the small pang of guilt over not contacting Uncle Jack. *Why not?* Would they kill him, too? They weren't related by blood, but the loose association had provided her mother with a platonic distraction over the years.

Destroying her cell phone en route to the airport had been the second step in her new life yet lacked the relief she'd always anticipated. Soon, she'd become electronically invisible. To flee the modern world and all its complexities had shed her shattered dreams across the miles of ocean and unseen landscapes from thirty-thousand feet. Her future lay empty and vast in front of her, lacking direction, ambition, or substance, similar to a mottled-coated sloth spending its days nestled in the crook of gnarled, forked tree branches.

"Brielle, we'll be stopping just ahead. Sure you don't wanna stay with the tour group?" Gustavo's gravelly baritone speech and dark, good looks had snared the attention of several female tourists from the moment they'd come aboard. His temple-to-jaw scar added a rugged allure, blending character and charisma with a dash of danger. One widow in particular demanded his attention with a constant stream of trivial questions to the apparent annoyance of others, judging by their sighs and scowls.

On prior trips, Tashuin had always been present to greet them upon arrival at the jungle's edge, but this time she hadn't seen him on either of the tour's two prior stops. Five-and-a-half million square kilometers was more ground than her mind could conceive, much less search. *How the hell do I locate Tashuin? What if the asshats responsible for mom's death track me here?*

"No thanks, Gus. I'll be fine. This isn't my first trip..." Tears stung her eyelids as the words in her mom's diary surfaced to torment her again, the story of an incredible love for a shaman living deep in the jungle. A man who had bidden his pregnant lover to return to her own world and raise their special child with care—for men would seek her—hunt her as they hunted the beautiful jaguar for its skin and the toucans and parrots for their colorful feathers, all with lawless and amoral abandon. *Is this why Mom teased me about us being witches?* That mystery remained buried in her mom's grave. A grave she may never get to visit due to those hunting her.

"Poachers are ever present and dangerous—just like the wildlife." Beads of sweat dotted Gus' shaded forehead and shimmered in the stubble covering his chin. His wide-brimmed hat dipped in suave nonchalance to one side as his gaze rambled to the shoreline.

From the riverbank, the splash of a large, black cayman sent howler monkeys blasting their discordant babble through the forest as they swung from grasping tails to the safety of higher branches. All around her, nature and nurture, predator and prey, everything balanced where mankind didn't dominate.

Some of her earliest recollections included stories about the Amazon rainforest, told with such reverence she closed her tear-brimmed eyes to relive a favorite memory of cuddling on a couch with a book in her lap and hot chocolate warming her hands. Her mom—smiling.

"Sure you don't wanna wait 'til tomorrow when I can go with you?" The toothpick in his mouth transferred side-to-side as his jaw worked with casual indifference.

Here was the land where myth and legend blended with dreams and modern day manifestations of progress to produce a medley of old and new, certain and dubious realities. Endless possibilities and untold avenues for eternal contentment awaited any who came in peace as long as they remained mindful of their surroundings.

"No." She couldn't give voice to more until managing her grief.

Flashbacks of them together on their last trip before the ravages of cancer stole her mother's strength revived the painful reminder of her mom's last request, one she'd see fulfilled.

Find Tashuin.

Once again, she checked the backpack at her feet. "I've got a fifty caliber, air-projected, dart gun within easy reach if the need arises." Fear of the two-legged stalkers far outweighed that of any creature she'd ever confronted in the jungle.

Preparation remained key to survival, even though no animal had ever stalked her, intent on knowing the taste of her muscle and organ tissue. Maybe that was part of the reason she'd felt so drawn to and so at home in these parts.

She just fit.

Minutes later, the dull, jarring thud of docking signaled her time for departure into the mosaic of rivers, swamps, and flooded forests, a place she intended to call home. Nearby katydids and smoky jungle frogs screamed their welcome, but the grisly, grunting cough of a jaguar reminded her—she'd be entering the food chain the minute she left the comparative safety of the group.

"But it's your first time alone in these parts, yes? And it's late. It's my job to make sure the entire group is safe. Why not get settled and start fresh in the morning?" Gustavo's subtle warning accompanied the worry lines etching his caramel-skinned expression.

Neither would dissuade her.

The glaring reminder of her newly acquired orphan status forced her to hurry up the makeshift plank, the heavy thump of her snake boots mocking each step. Her mom had purchased the thicker pair after stepping too close to a lance-head pit viper on their last trip.

"I'm an adult, and you have a signed waiver. I'll be fine. I'll be back to my cabin before dark." Sweat beaded her brow, caught by the headband under the waterproof hat she'd worn twice a year for the last seven years. This was her first trip just prior to the hottest season of the year—September in the Amazon.

Thanks to deciphering the complicated web of words and numbers in the back of her mom's diary, she'd found a set of coordinates that lent a sense of hope for her goal. But if she couldn't find the shaman, what would she do? She had no home, no family, and no future. The meager funds obtained from the airport's ATM wouldn't last long. She dare not draw further money even if she could since it would spotlight her location.

From its attachment to her pack, a long machete lent a sense of liberation and power with a simple, quick release. According to one of her last calculations, traveling north might find the native they'd once met in a nearby village. He'd provided them with several special herbs to help combat the constant nausea that accompanied cancer treatments. Perhaps he would know of Tashuin's whereabouts. At least, it'd be one person familiar to her.

The moment she began cutting through heavy layers of broad leaves and spiny growths, nearby spider monkeys edged closer, swinging from limb to limb and keeping a discreet but consistent distance. Excited squeals and finger pointing marked their curiosity and her path. Their constant chattering indicated further interaction likely in the near future, which was new and unexpected. She'd keep an eye on them. *How unusual for them to venture so close.*

Now that she knew Tashuin amounted to more than a friend, so much more, she wondered what other information her mom had withheld and why. Never had her future appeared so open and empty with no ties to anyone or anything. One promise, made a lifetime ago when her mom smiled and encouraged her endeavors, persisted as the last strand to her old life. While here, she'd send cuttings of specific, medicinal herbs back to the States for reproduction and utilization in formulating anti-nausea drugs, something she'd always done. Her friend in the lab would be discreet. What began as a mission for two had narrowed to a solo assignment with her mother's sudden death.

Flooding between February and April rising to fifteen meters, roughly forty-five feet in some areas, drastically changed the topography. She surged forward in a vague sense of self-awareness that allowed part of her mind to shuffle between shadows of the past and wariness of the future. An innate sense of direction coupled with studying her map last night lent the confidence to proceed without frequent checks of the compass, one designed with a pin-set magnet to work in either hemisphere.

Hacking at the king ferns expended some of her excess energy while preventing accidental contact with creatures like poison dart frogs and scorpions, not that they'd ever been a problem in the past. Her mom had always said the Amazon would be her future yet avoided further explanations as to why the jungle's animal life seemed to flow around her, never targeting, just watching. Now, the strange acceptance raised more questions in her scientific mind about how such odd circumstances came into being.

"Ahh, there you are." Two of the collectible herbs she'd hoped to find grew proud among the taller vegetation. Stooping, she fingered and flipped the leaves to check their health. As she snipped several cuttings, a light feathering tickled the back of her neck. Not wanting to startle some small creature into self-defense mode, she slowly reached up to see what had crawled at her nape.

Nothing.

It wasn't my imagination.

After placing the carefully prepared specimens in her pack, she pushed to her feet, grabbed her machete, and moved forward to search for more specimens. A hundred feet overhead, interlocking branches provided a biological highway for the most biodiverse ecosystem on the planet and allowed its sure-footed inhabitants to travel for miles without touching the Earth. "Hard to believe that seventy to ninety percent of the life here is found in the canopy...Oh, Mom, it's just as beautiful as the other sections we've visited. I wish you could see this." With frustrating regularity, she swiped at the tears tracking her cheeks.

Twice more, she stopped to collect cuttings of different herbs, reviewing in her mind the chemical properties of each

and the effects they would have on the human body. Each time, she felt a feather-light touch, once on her nape, the other, as if something touched her hat. When she removed it and checked the wide lip, several *cereza* fruits rolled off the brim. Puzzled, she glanced around yet found no cherry trees. "Where did these come from?" *Like the local chimpanzees are gonna answer.*

Partially hidden by a veil of large ferns, the conspicuous troop of spider monkeys vocalized their prank in barks and chatter interspersed with a few screams.

"Guys, I'm not hungry right now but thank you. You can have these back." After placing the fruit in a small pile on a nearby grouping of leaves, she contemplated their odd behavior before continuing on her way. *Those monkeys should be high in the canopy, not capering about the forest floor. Something is off.*

A low cloud of humid air enveloped and coated all within its domain, filled with the scents of rotting leaves, sweet flowers, and musty earth. Adding to the sheen of moisture shrouding every inch of exposed skin, something pressed down with an ethereal touch, present but not seen, like the curious gaze of someone trying to puzzle out her darkest secrets.

Animals scurrying through the canopy's foliage caused a constant rustle in their search for food and shelter while adding to the ever-present, natural white noise that provided a balm for the soul. The dull hum and buzz of insects lulled her into a dangerous and false sense of security, yet she preferred this reality to any home from her previous life.

One of the markers on her map, a large waterfall, broadcast its presence in the distance with the rumble and crash of water plunging to its basin below. Though the lush foliage and thick, waxy leaves of bromeliads foiled her attempts to view a rainbow, nature's dull roar beckoned her to step closer and enjoy the misty swirls of moisture soaring off sheets of cascading grandeur.

Her next break included resting against the stilt-like roots of a walking palm tree for support. In leaning back against them, she surveyed the path already traveled. No sign of the devilish, black-headed monkeys led her to believe they'd given up dogging her trail, yet the chill of goose bumps crept along her sensitive flesh, trumpeting a presence she could neither define nor expose.

"Jeez, how am I supposed to find Tashuin? What if I can't find someone to help?" Just as she looked to the heavens for support, something snatched the hat from her head, pulling a few strands of hair from its tightly coiled braid.

"Hey! Come on, guys. Enough is enough!"

If not for the monkey's tiny legs seen scampering underneath the wide brim and up the tall root system leading to the canopy, it would've appeared her treasured hat had taken flight.

The torment in her tear-filled words lifted birds from their perches while all manner of creatures fled, her anguish taking near-inhuman form. Sob created sob. Tears brought more tears until her entire body shook with grief. It was the first time she'd let herself feel everything—all the pain, all the frustration, all the despair that had boiled and festered, releasing as a toxic aggregate only the rainforest could purify. Diminished, shaken, and so utterly alone, no less than last night, but now without a reasonable hope of finding a familiar face. *Where is Tashuin?*

Minutes passed as the heartache she poured out sharpened to a clear and poignant realization. Not only was she alone, she would always be alone since the peculiarities that set her apart still remained while everything that mattered had disappeared.

When she was younger, her mom had used words like unique and special to soothe the frustrations and hurt of not fitting in with other children. After she'd traded dolls and teatime for trips to the Amazon and a microscope—it no longer mattered. Despite never understanding exactly what set her apart from normal people, she grew to feel comfortable in her own skin.

Minutes drew out as the tidal wave of grief passed, and she'd pulled herself together. One fact remained. Forward was the only path to travel, one foot in front of the other. Perhaps she'd find a brief respite in locating Tashuin, if she found him. Reminiscing would be painful but a necessary part of the grieving process.

Undergrowth grew thicker the farther inland she went, the resultant lack of distant visual markers necessitating consultation with her compass and adjusting her course on a more frequent basis.

The sudden loud bark of a rifle forced her to crouch in fear and confusion. "Shit." She knew she'd walked into a biological hotspot, but she didn't expect poachers so close to the small, local village. It seemed they'd become more arrogant and brazen every year. A brisk tug on the quick release of her dart gun dropped the smooth polished metal reassuringly in her hand. Years of target practice and cleaning lent a welcome familiarity, though it didn't help with the guilt of leaving someone vulnerable to the predators of the jungle after shooting them. *That's why they call it a jungle.*

Too much vegetation hindered a visual on the shot's origin. She couldn't even discern what the hunter considered his prey. The plus side, she stood a better chance of remaining hidden if she could just burrow down into the layers of detritus covering the forest floor. She prayed they'd missed their target and would move on but the deep, throaty snarl of a jaguar from above signaled the acceptance of a challenge and divided her attention between two equally dangerous threats.

Fear mounted with each breath, slicking her palms and skewing her sense of time while her heart beat harshly against its cage. A knot of sour and viscous dread twisted her gut and threatened to catapult up her throat in its bid for freedom.

Scanning the area, she couldn't judge which threat proved more critical, cat or hunter.

The aerial, gurgle-growl morphed into a hair-raising scream. Any second, sharp claws could channel down her back while immense jaws closed around her neck, snapping her spine in predatory delight. An icy chill centered in her back then spread as if her vertebral canal leaked a refrigerant, its dissemination bathing every cell, every recess of her shaking frame. The mere act of breathing challenged her body to draw thickened molecules into her lungs.

Another shot silenced the cat's roar.

Snapping and cracking branches above her warned that her waking nightmare wasn't over. Heavy boughs laden with thorny leaves along with all their insectile occupants descended to cover her in a smorgasbord of tiny, but deadly jungle inhabitants.

The large cat plummeted into the underbrush just feet from her makeshift if dubious hiding place. Though she wouldn't have volunteered to be the ferocious carnivore's catnip, she wouldn't have killed it either, certainly not for sport as she suspected was the case here. A brutal predator, the spectacular animal would probably adorn some hunter's wall as a prized specimen.

The thought made her sick.

Precious seconds ticked by with no escape plan developing in her normally logical mind. Despite the fallen brush providing camouflage, her prerequisite light-colored, cotton shirt contrasted the dark and rich green vegetation and spotlighted her presence. Fingernails biting into her palm created tiny crescents of discomfort as she waited for the poisonous sting of a spider or the painful bite of a bullet ant to pierce her skin.

Slow, calm breaths stilled her stomach's response to the copper scent permeating the air when images of her mom's bloodstained robe came to mind. Further thoughts stalled like a clock with frozen gears, each wheel a partial idea in the grand scheme and unable to move forward.

She swallowed hard.

Several loud whoops signaled the poacher's assumption of victory followed by congratulatory slaps on the back.

Acid burned her throat.

There's more than one hunter. How many?

Perpetual fog created by heavy, moisture-laden air muffled their words and prevented her from judging their location. Without discerning the number of threats approaching, she couldn't formulate a precise plan.

One shout drifted to her from the right before crude remarks of how they'd use the skinned hide created a silent rage, such an unfitting end to the proud, majestic creature. Intermittent swishing noises ended in solid thumps, thwacks, and the slide of falling brush on brush. Increasing volume indicated their convergence on her position. The path she'd just cut would probably intersect with one of the hunters', making it useless in a bid for freedom.

Her throat became too thick for anything but the thinnest mewl to pass, the cold surge of terror rushing from her head down her spine to freeze everything in its wake. Rumors of kidnapped tourists detailed horrors that by comparison made the cat's quick demise more of a kindness. Accounts of disappearances and terrifying mutilations had filled campfire nights since she was a child.

Making the best possible use of surrounding ferns and decomposing leaves, she removed and covered her canvas daypack without drawing the hunters' attention while sending up a silent prayer. Fetal position presented a smaller target as decaying leaves and twigs cushioned her body on the forest floor. She curled tighter to make as small a target as possible.

Her half-digested lunch threatened revolt.

Snagging her braided hair in the colorful bromeliads hurt less than the small furrows produced on her cheek by their sharp edges, each serving as a reminder she still lived. Again, her mom's admonishment chastised. *"Any cut, however small, is serious. Always take care of yourself."*

Three, maybe four men approached from different directions, judging by their gloating and coarse remarks. For a brief second, she shut her eyes to listen as the poachers closed the distance while expounding on their hunting prowess.

Distraction morphed into cold, dark anticipation as a many-legged something crawled along her scalp toward her neck. The prickling sensation on her dampened skin ramped her heart rate and tightened the virtual bands around her chest until she couldn't draw breath.

Rationalization tempered panic with the realization—though many dangerous beasts existed in the surrounding parts, there were also non-threatening creatures as well. Still, she waited for the shooting barbs of a tarantula to penetrate her tender skin and end the gruesome business.

Methodical chopping from machetes tracked the hunters' movements to the front and each side of her position. They numbered three as best as she could tell, which meant the chances of escaping their notice decreased with each hack of their deadly blades.

Even in her best stealth mode, too much brush covered and surrounded her to escape unseen. Her best hope lay in the possibility they'd overlook her in their zeal to claim the prize. The incredible density of the undergrowth had precluded her from burrowing a deep, concealing channel like a chipmunk or kangaroo rat. All she could do was wait and pray.

"This one's head is gonna look great above my bedroom fireplace."

The hunter's nasal whine reverberated in her mind as a new but slight weight of brush settled to the forest floor on her right, the slight breeze drifting across her side.

"Ha. A lucky shot. If it hadn't been so intent on something else, you'd never have nailed it." The second voice sounded off to her left.

Considering the angles of approach, she'd not be able to dart them all. Since they converged on three sides, to tranquilize the closest poacher and make a run for it seemed the best option if discovered. As the seconds passed, she realized the possibility of discovery had progressed to inevitability.

Using the dart gun clutched tightly in both hands stemmed from a position of self-defense. She was no hunter. The cold metal slipped from accumulated perspiration as the many-legged, piggybacking creature skittered off her shoulder and onto a large palm frond.

Thank God.

The tightening in her throat reminded her of the stories of abducted women, women never seen again or found strangled and half-eaten by the jungle's scavengers. Two days ago, she'd planned an eventful trip for two. Now, her mom was dead, and by all accounts, she'd probably wish for death before the sun set.

The owner of the first predator's voice came from directly ahead, almost on top of her. The swish of steel swinging dangerously close as it cleaved a small sapling to her left forced a small gasp.

They didn't spot where the big cat dropped. Shit. What kind of hunters were they? Even a non-hunter like herself would know to do that.

"Whoa, what the hell? Someone's cut a path here, leading..."

Off to her right, sounds of trail hacking ceased. They'd just cut off her escape route.

"Looks like we're not the only ones who've been here recently. Though, the trail ends abruptly—" The guttural grumbling stopped with an audible click and slide of a rifle's bolt action over her left shoulder.

Even if she could tranquilize one, the others were too close, and she couldn't reload that fast. A strong grip bit into her hair and hauled her to stand, bringing tears to sting the back of her eyelids. She refused to let them fall even as she staggered for balance. A strong tug snatched the dart gun out of her hand.

"The cat was nice, but oh—what a prize to top off my day. Hello, blonde."

Foul breath choked her. "Get off me, you ass. Shooting the cat was illegal." Her vain attempt to punch him met with a resounding slap that slammed her teeth shut on her tongue and produced a copper taste in her mouth. If near death had a smell, it couldn't be worse than the foul dung odor that hung like a cloud about his head, worthy of the largest unkempt stable.

"So is what I'm gonna do to you, doll, before I turn you over to the Doc. Fortunately, there's no one around to stop me."

Within seconds, two more rancid bruisers sidled up to inspect her like a prized filly. Each held a shoulder in their punishing grip before one let his hand roam the slope of her breast to give a brief, painful twist, shades of things to come. Three men surrounding her took the escape option off the table, at least for the moment.

"What do you say, boys? Anybody up for some sweetmeat?" The bastard's two thick bushy brows merged to form a long line beneath a forehead widened from extra bone, not indicative of a larger brain.

The tightening grip in her hair turned her head to face the foul-mouthed animal. "Let me go, bastards. People know where I was headed today."

Unibrow loosened his grip on her hair, allowing her temporary relief and a shaky breath to collect her jumbled thoughts. She'd rather the prick shoot her than fulfill the horrendous promise in his eyes.

"Too bad, and hell yeah...I'll take some of this." Enlarged mandibles gave his misshapen jaw the look of an alien parasite. A look not diminished by poor dental hygiene. The hunter who'd gripped her right shoulder moved one filthy hand possessively over her breast while massaging his groin with the other.

She struggled in vain.

The large bruise he'd cause would be the least of her worries if she survived this encounter. When she slapped his hand away, the parasite latched onto her throat and tightened his grip with a look of glee one would see on the face of a sociopath in the throes of his greatest accomplishment. Feeble attempts to break his hold resulted in a solid shake and a low raspy chuckle.

"Time to learn your first lesson, little girl. Manners." Unibrow's smile betrayed his filthy intentions. When he leaned close to inhale the scent of her hair, she committed what would likely be her last act of defiance by spitting in his face using the remaining moisture in her mouth.

A look of rage.

Pain exploded in her jaw when his fist connected with a dull thud. Gray edged her vision, reshaping everything in fuzzy outlines that shifted and transposed her prior reality into a darker and deadly certainty. *Mom, I'm so sorry.*

The scream of another large cat nearby interrupted the third captor's painful groping. Each man slid his weapon into a defensive position while scanning the perimeter for an aggressive target. The grip on her throat lessened somewhat and

allowed for a hoarse, scratchy if painful breath.

"Bet that's the male. Looks like you're the one who's hunted now." Though emotion choked her words, each man's eyes widened as she continued. "Perhaps it's Kurupira, come to take revenge for your poaching."

"Kuru—who?" Menace threaded the third brute's glare. "Your boyfriend?"

"No, you ass. Kurupira, protector of the forest. Obviously, you're not a local. He's exceptionally strong, fast, and cunning. It's said he's ingenious with incredible illusions and transmutations...mischievous, too." Stories of old, from the time she'd learned to walk, floated back to lend strength in facing whatever fate held in store.

"Yeah, we'll see how well he transforms with lead in his ass if he comes any closer. Let's get her back to camp, guys. Leave the cat." Crowding closer, Unibrow whispered, his words chilling her to the bone. "I've got special plans for you, doll. Maybe we won't turn you over to the mad scientist, after all. A face this pretty should be busy sucking my dick, not fulfilling some psychotic's wet dream of world domination. All that blonde hair to wrap my fists in..."

"We'll take your pack, too. Here, Frank, carry this. No one will ever know she was here." Parasite's vulgar grin exposed the chipped, decayed reasons he should never smile.

With a guttural purr of self-satisfaction, Unibrow backtracked through his previously cut path to leave her at the mercy of his cohorts. A forceful shove from the parasite bastard made her stumble before catching her balance to follow.

Another animalistic growl, this time from her left forced her attention to their immediate problem and made her wonder which animal would destroy her, not that it mattered. While she didn't believe in the myth of Kurupira, the snarl of another large cat was very real, very close, and very threatening.

An odd gurgling sound coinciding with swishing branches to her rear had her freezing midstep. A glance over her shoulder provided more confusion. Of the two thugs behind her a moment ago, only the parasite remained.

"Where's Frank?" Unibrow's unwelcome return accompanied a painful grip in her hair. "Who else is here with you?" His low harsh whisper in her ear interwove anger with fine threads of concern.

"What? No one. I'm alone." Small bits of chewing tobacco sprayed from his foul mouth to make her stomach roil. Whatever microscopic beasties he harbored would surely defeat anything the jungle could offer.

"Frank? Where the hell are you?" Unibrow's tone carried a heavier burden of worry.

Widened eyes exhibited more white than she'd ever witnessed in a man's gaze, a decidedly fearful man.

"I don't like this, Jules, what the hell's going on?" The uncertainty infusing the tone behind her brought small satisfaction considering her present circumstances.

"Hell, I don't know. There's no sign of him." Unibrow hitched his bushy fur south over narrowed eyes flashing dark with deadly intent.

Her quick gasp grated over irritated tissue as behind her, the staccato burst of automatic fire raised pimpled flesh along her arms and scalp. Shivering in fear, she waited for hot metal projectiles to plunge through her back and cut her down if her abductor decided she wasn't worth the trouble. Parasite had sprayed the forest with a killing barrage of bullets that only served to advertise his fear in a futile attempt to prove superiority.

Straining to see if any shots met their intended mark, she swallowed the bite of pain in her scalp holding her immobile. Tattered leaves forming mini vegetative tornados provided a temporary veil as shredded foliage drifted down in the blasphemous perversion of nature. Lack of grunts or screams of pain indicated her kidnapper's poor aim.

"Let's get the hell out of here, Charles. And stop firing until you see something worth shooting. Bring our little piece of fluff. I've need of consolation." Unibrow took off running down the path they'd previously cut.

Before she could follow, Parasite shouldered his rifle in favor of a handgun after hauling her back against his chest. Pain flared from the gun barrel pressing against her temple.

"Got a boyfriend out here, do you, sweetie? Wanna show him what's gonna happen if he doesn't back off?" His painful grip transferred to her breast, eliciting a whimper.

"I don't have a boyfriend. I told you I don't know who's out there."

"What about this Kuru..."

"That's just a myth."

"Then where's Frank? How'd he disappear into thin air?"

His grip tightened on her breast, the twisting movement forcing her to cry out.

"Please s-stop. I-I d-don't know, but we need to get out of here."

"No. We'll let him come to us. Then I'll kill him. I'm sure his hide will make a nice addition to my collection...no matter his color. I'm not picky." His grip once again secured her throat in a vise, squeezing unmercifully.

Desolate and dusty shadows bled to a darker gray with his tightening chokehold as the probability of death crept into her soul. Time ceased to matter, her mouth filling with the bitter taste of mortality. She thought admission of defeat would grant her a clinical indifference of her fate, yet something held her back from acceptance and urged her to fight.

Waning strength forced her clenched hands to relax and drift to her sides. Parasite supporting some of her weight helped her remain upright as tingling in her limbs along with a strange lightheadedness alerted her to approaching unconsciousness.

Long ago, she'd read that hearing was frequently the last sense to go. Now, the constant drone of buzzing insects combined with the typical harmony of singing macaws and chattering monkeys dimmed until a peaceful hush filled her mind.

The sudden stillness filling the air pricked her fading senses. She'd traveled the basin enough to map out a mental template of what the rainforest *felt* like. Nature's sudden deferential demeanor signified something of great importance to come, but it didn't look like she'd live to see it.

"Let her go, and I promise you a less painful death."

Maybe the threat of her imminent demise forced the hallucination, or perhaps determination to fulfill her mom's last request brought about the mirage of a rescuer surrounded by a golden glow. Either way, she'd welcome it as her last thought on Earth.

Partial, broken breaths allowed a slight air exchange in her constricted lungs, though not enough to discern what her mind's descent into the mystical twilight of semi-consciousness had conjured. Perhaps impending death would involve a prelude of what to expect once she'd crossed that final bridge.

Pushing thick, green foliage aside, a bare-chested man emerged amid the underbrush of large ferns and palm trees. Black shoulder-length hair caught ambient light and glistened like diamonds in the filtered rays while something on his chest reflected a brilliant starburst so intense she couldn't determine its shape or nature but surmised it wasn't from this world. The secretive smile playing about his lips suggested an arcane knowledge boding ill for anyone crossing him.

"Ahh, I was wondering if you'd show yourself. What did you do with Frank?"

Her captor's ragged breath stirred her hair with his harsh rasp. As if sensing her failing strength, his grip loosened enough for her to gulp a few strident breaths.

Taking advantage of her weakened state, Parasite turned her face to meet his gaze. "Don't move, bitch, or I'll shoot him first and still ease my needs in your little puss."

Though resistance remained foremost in her mind, she lacked the strength to fight, much less flee. Gasping, wheezing breaths crippled her capacity to process anything beyond what she could see or feel.

"What the hell are you?" Fear infused Parasite's aura.

A stronger glow bathed the stranger's silhouette, perhaps a hypoxia-induced hallucination. The unnatural luminescence flickered on the periphery of her vision like a mirage she couldn't quite reach yet couldn't stop trying. Her attempt to turn her head for a better view resulted in a teeth-rattling shake and admonishment.

"Be still, bitch!"

A strange numbness seized her mind. She didn't want to die. Was she in some type of limbo before death, one that created hallucinations? The longer she stared, albeit indirectly, the more his body seemed to grow—translucent.

"He's around—in another form. Fortunately for the forest's residents, he's no longer the hunter."

Before the last word left his mouth, Brielle's abductor dropped his pistol, slid his rifle around on its sling, and raised it to fire. At the same time, he closed off her airway.

Reflex brought her hands scrabbling to free his tightening grip while blackness crowded out all thoughts but one. If her last action on Earth could save another, she'd take it.

With the last of her reserves, she slapped at the rifle's barrel while reaching over her shoulder and searching for the soft targets of his eye sockets.

Please, God, let this be enough. She could do no more as her hands dropped and the shroud of darkness pulled its cloak tight.

The rifle's rapid-fire crackle sounded like a popping noise in the distance. The last thing she heard was a string of expletives, as if through a hollow tube.

Chapter Three

Dealing with the poacher holding this extraordinary woman captive lent a satisfaction that left Tiago energized in a way he'd never known. It was unfortunate he couldn't save the large cat, too.

Earlier, when a sense of urgency had drawn him to the river where he'd watched a lone woman disembark, disgust transformed to enthrallment as he'd shadowed her journey, following a path only she could see. The compassion she'd displayed toward his mischievous friends still echoed in his soul to make him wonder once again... *Who is she?*

Despair and frustration had woven through her mumbled ramblings as if searching for a target, someone to blame for a great wrong. However, the selflessness and courage, so uncommon in humans, drew him like the precursor of the flannel moth, prickly and deceptive in its pre-chrysalis stage before emerging as a soft-winged beauty.

After the monkeys had failed to lift her downtrodden spirits with their antics, he'd decided to keep a close eye on her. His curious friends had never displayed such tenacity, and that alone demanded exploration. The longer he remained in her presence, the harder it became to walk away. When the little devils stole her hat, she'd reacted with a deep emotional if disproportionate pain, pouring out her grief to the jungle. Unfortunately, he'd no experience in dealing with such circumstances and couldn't help despite his inexplicable but desperate need to ease her suffering. Eventually, he'd put the pieces together—she'd grieved for her dead mother.

"Why do you feel so different, little one?" Instead of the slippery, contaminated auras most foreigners failed to contain or the simplistic sense of the natives, her character transcended the normal plane of consciousness to a level he couldn't describe. Unlike any other human he'd met, she emanated no sense of evil nor the slightest malevolence.

From the moment he cuddled her tight to his chest while carrying her toward the village, a strange tingling began in his hands and spread up his arms and shoulders then throughout his body. He'd touched other humans before with an automated indifference yet there was no denying the effects she produced in him. *What makes this one unique?*

"Ugh...what happened?" The eyelids of his little adventurer fluttered to reveal lush green depths in every shade of the jungle. Golden flecks rimmed but couldn't contain their soul-searching yet profound and inquisitive nature.

"You must rest now." With a simple touch to her face, he could put her to sleep, but his hands were full of incredible femininity combined with courage and defiance. How could he do it? When his lips met the smooth sun-kissed skin of her forehead, the tingling sensation that had begun in his fingers spread to his mouth.

"No, must find..." Her words trailed off as her eyes closed on a soft sigh, the steady rise and fall of her chest indicating she'd drifted off to sleep. What wonders filled her dreams?

Years had passed since he'd known human contact, preferring to avoid it whenever possible. Evil-tainted men and women reeked from both touch and scent. Now with centuries of existence to confirm his opinion, he found a human who defied all his theories and fascinated him beyond endurance. Braided, honey-gold hair had snared his attention from first sight and distracted him from his designated purpose. Protecting the rainforest was all he'd ever known or cared about until crossing paths with this blonde-haired enigma.

Now, the great cat's spirit prowled the forest floor minus its flesh and blood shell, the wail of its call added to the howls of other murdered souls seeking revenge. A poacher roamed his rainforest, looking for bigger prey—another reason to resent mankind. Yet he couldn't condemn the vulnerable bundle in his arms when her last act had been an attempt to help him.

To see this obstinate mortal talk about him in the face of the poacher's threats and abuse had stirred images he didn't need or could afford. For the first time, he wanted to absorb the strength of her spirit and freeze the vision of her front and foremost in his mind forever.

"Ah, little one, when you awaken, I want to know what's guiding and driving you. When you left the group at the dock, I was curious—then fascinated as you hacked away at the brush, following an invisible path straight toward my favorite sanctuary."

Jungle savvy in her economical yet effective movements revealed experience in his realm and had further piqued his interest. Her distinct and diverse nature, evidenced in the caring for curious monkeys yet harboring great anger and hurt toward an enemy unknown, captivated him, pulling him closer when she stooped to cut medicinal herbs. In careful consideration, she'd left enough to avoid killing the plants—something foreign researchers never cared enough to do.

The scent of her hair had lingered in his nostrils as he'd followed at a discreet distance with the promise of something exotic just outside his reference to keep him tuned to her every movement. Her thin, muscular frame contained an agility rarely seen in humans, yet she was made of the same primitive essential elements as the rest of humanity. Still, there

existed a baffling tint to her aura, an extraordinary, undefinable quality just begging for exploration.

Because of his distraction, a jaguar lay dead. Its spirit now lingered among the giant buttress roots of a kapok tree as if to haunt him for his careless disregard. For hundreds of years, he'd prided himself on his ability to protect his portion of the jungle. Never once had he been so tempted to—He couldn't even define his goal concerning her. Consorting with humans had never appeared on his list of things to do.

Unbidden images of relaxing in the canopy with her by his side, languid and sated, popped into his mind. *Not helping.* Those urges had died long ago, or so he'd thought. His existence held one purpose, protect the rainforest.

His brethren in the Amazon weren't faring as well with the poachers, deforestation, mining, and dams all threatening his world. All because of man's greed and lack of foresight. The constant battle to maintain the integrity of the jungle bore down on his soul in quiet mounting pressure bordering on desperation.

The steady rise and fall of her chest lulled him into a sense of surreal tranquility, something foreign to his nature when considering humans. With a little shifting of position, he removed her wallet from a back pocket in hopes of discovering where she'd camped. "Do you have a mate, little one?" The thought of her belonging to another rivaled humanity's greatest corruption. "Surely, there can't exist two such incredible humans."

On a small scrap of paper next to her ID, he found an address identifying the nearby village that would present her with easy access to the jungle. Walking slowly allowed more time to enjoy the feel of her in his arms.

Nudging the door to her cabin closed stimulated an immediate round of coughing from the musty interior common to jungle huts. "A spirit this pure should not be in a place so airless, moldy, and confined." He could easily see her aura aligning with that of the rainforest, free to explore and unite with the natural world unfettered by humanity's corruption.

Three strides across the tiny interior positioned him beside her decrepit cot. With utmost care, he placed her gently then removed her boots and covered her with a thin sheet. The steady rise and fall of her chest and stable rhythm of her pulse eased his mind. Placing his palm on her forehead, he closed his eyes to concentrate on her body's functions. She'd bear no permanent effects from the hunters' mistreatment.

Unconscious for no more than a few minutes, she'd awaken again soon and he shouldn't be there—or even near the outskirts of the village for that matter.

He couldn't force his feet to turn away.

Something emanated from her eyes when their gazes had first met, almost an apology, just before she'd shoved the rifle aside. "You thought to save my life with your last act in this world. Why?" *As if my life was in danger.* Yet she couldn't have known that.

Ambient light reflected back to him from the silver rope chain against her neck, stirring his curiosity. Did it hold a locket bearing the picture of a loved one? The need to discover her cherished secrets pressed him to finger the chain, gently lifting. Something heavy lay at the end, snagging her bra en route to freedom.

She groaned.

He dropped the chain.

The soft flutter of thickly fringed lashes revealed a startling emerald depth he couldn't fathom but could spend eternity discovering each little nuance, what made her gaze dance with delight, what made her inquisitive or pensive. Tiny lines bracketing her lips betrayed a pain he somehow knew she wouldn't voice.

"You—how'd you survive? I tried to..."

Rubbing her temples to alleviate the obvious ache tightened his chest. He could *feel* her pain. He'd take her misery in a second if allowed, but long ago he'd been forbidden to interfere with human affairs not related to his duties. *I've already done that by bringing her here.* "I have survived many of your kind over the..." The sight of her distress proved a distraction that nearly revealed his closest-kept secret.

"My kind? Those poachers were not my kind. Not even close."

Her words rang true in the flashbacks of how she'd ensured the life of the plants from which she'd taken cuttings and returning the fruit to the monkeys. Before him lay a woman who revered life just as he did. Rare findings in a foreigner.

Local shamans used the herbs she'd collected in healing stomach sickness, yet when he'd held her close no disease ravaged her body. *Has she saved the cuttings for a loved one?*

"Yes, I have seen this. Still, it's very foolish for a woman to be alone in these parts."

"I'm not alone."

Maintaining an implacable façade required all his willpower. An arched brow and a glance around refuted her statement without a word spoken.

"I came with a tour group. The guide will check on me."

Something about her air of vulnerability smothered beneath a warrior's spirit exchanged his protective urges for a compulsion to collaborate. Perhaps a few minutes longer in her presence wouldn't hurt. Such strange circumstances warranted knowing more about her origins and circumstances.

Gold-streaked emerald eyes and honeyed hair declared her a foreigner. Just the thought of all that fine silk wrapped around his fingers presented a challenge he struggled to resist. Desires of the flesh had dwindled centuries ago, yet now his body prepared for something it should not want.

“Why was he not with you, protecting you?” Regardless of inner strength, experience, or training, an ordinary day in the jungle outmatched any single woman and most single men, especially foreigners.

“Who said the guide was a man? A bit prejudiced, don’t ya think?” Another massage of her temples alluded to her pain’s severity.

“Hmm.” *I sense a bit of a wildcat, too.* “Just because you respect the rainforest does not ensure your survival in it.”

A small groan accompanied her frown.

Less than a foot of space separated them, alone and enclosed in her cabin, yet she showed no fear—indicating she lived by instincts honed well above those of the average mortal.

Lightly tanned skin contrasting the shimmer of golden tresses necessitated his exploration if only for future reference. With his first grazing touch of her cheek, she closed her eyes and leaned into his caress. He was lost. Contrary to her apparent obstinate, fearless, and determined nature, her hands adapted a boneless quality and slid to the mattress.

Nothing in his experience compared to the downy-soft texture of her hair. Its glide along his fingers instigated an immediate and disparate rigidity in his groin, yet he couldn’t stop any more than he could back away.

“Hmm, that feels wonderful. What’s your name?” Her eyelids fluttered shut on a moan.

The sultry vulnerability in her voice augmented his urgent hunger, sending needles of prickling excitement to electrify every cell of his being and plunging his mind into a vortex of need. The first touch had fueled his need for another, then another.

The moment he thought she’d fallen asleep, he saw little harm in answering her question. “My name is Tiago.”

His triple-hammer pulse rivaled the thrum of a hummingbird’s wings just before the hawk’s talons sank deep into its chest, for here lay a confusing enigma with a spirit capable of taking on the world yet soft enough to care about the smallest plants in his realm. Unable to withstand the sight of her discomfort, he nudged a bit of his aura to cocoon her, unlocking each straining muscle fiber that strangled her equanimity. No resistance meant he expended little energy in healing while exploring the confusing nature of her origins.

What started as a gentle slide of his preternatural presence morphed into a twining of their spirits he couldn’t untangle. *What type of magic does she wield?*

Along with curiosity, a sense of peace settled over him comparable to a quiet evening within the soothing, enveloping jungle surrounds. Her spirit existed as the eye of a hurricane such that regardless of what transpired in her surroundings, her mind would seek peace and tranquility while radiating the same to those around her.

His small indulgence provided near-instant relief as her forehead and shoulders relaxed with a soft sigh whispered from parted lips. Even her heartbeat slowed, matching his own decelerating beat.

What is she? With fair coloring and obvious western culture, she wasn’t shaman born, something each of his brethren hoped to find to end the loneliness of their existence. Everything about her screamed foreigner.

Then how could such a compelling bond form? He’d seen them formed in a few of his kin—never with an outsider. He was a solitary creature, constructed from nature to protect all within his realm.

“What are you doing alone here in the jungle, little one?” His question startled her, yet he couldn’t wait to hear what she’d say next.

“Mm, I came to see the shaman who helped my mother before she died.” Again, she leaned into his lightly stroking fingers.

“Ah, perhaps I could help. There are a few in the area, but great distances separate them. What was the name of this healer?”

“Tashuin. He treated my mother every time we visited. I still don’t know how he knew when to be at the village, but he always arrived ahead of us and secured a cabin, until now. Since she’s not with me...”

“And how did she know Tashuin?”

A slight fluttering of her eyelids preceded her gaze sliding away to study her surroundings.

She’s hiding something. Lies from humans were easy to detect, accompanied by either malice or deceit. Though she harbored neither, her body language suggested she held tight to a secret, one he felt compelled to know.

“She’d never say. In her diary, she made a last request—that I find and tell him she couldn’t go on.”

“I am sorry. The loss of a loved one is a pain from which few souls can fully recover.”

“She said it was time for me to embrace my destiny.” Tears spiked her lashes like little diamonds, weighing heavier against his heart than the dark fringes gracing her cheeks.

“Here? In the Amazon?”

“Yes. When I saw you in the forest, you were surrounded by a glow...”

“The canopy is very dense, and little light can penetrate to permit clear sight. A few beams merely played a trick on your senses.”

“Trick, huh...”

“Lack of oxygen muddled your mind. You imagined it.”

“And you carried me all the way here?”

“Your weight is slight. Why were you cutting herbs in the jungle?”

"To send back to the States. They can be propagated and used in the treatments that helped my mom for so long."

Facing a deadly enemy created less tension than the words she'd so reverently uttered. He recoiled with the thought of others invading his land, searching for this or that herb, all while destroying the precious ecosystem he fought to protect.

"What? What's wrong?"

"You don't belong here. Go home. Do not return."

Rejection and defeat seized her expression as her spirit dulled with his sudden, cold withdrawal, leaving an ache in his chest. Long shadows of sunset spilled through the cabin's window to etch her face with the type of pain he couldn't soothe. For the first time in centuries, he felt a human's suffering as his own, yet his sense of honor and duty demanded he turn away.

When he reached for her forehead, suspicion crept into her gaze.

"What are you going to—?"

This time, the initial connection with her spirit snapped into place with contact and didn't dissipate. It remained entwined to the point he couldn't distinguish between their two auras, a match unlike anything he'd ever witnessed.

Dark, forest-green eyes widened briefly before her fluttering eyelids closed to grant him a much-needed respite.

"Since I have no protection from the bite of your gaze, you will sleep." With the ordeal she'd just survived, rest would restore her energy in preparation to leave, not to mention give him time to figure out what had just occurred between them.

Sharp instincts and a decisiveness born of strict moral code allowed him to master the art of understanding humans to determine a suitable punishment for their encroachment and widespread destruction of his lands. Centuries of meting out justice to poachers and other vermin honed his mind and body into a lethal weapon, utilizing his mystical talents in unique and inventive approaches. In the last hour, something had changed him for all time. Something he knew his heart would seek and his soul would crave even if he couldn't decipher its origins.

Changed me how? Why? Perhaps foreigners were learning a magic of their own in hopes of avoiding the laws of his land.

Mere minutes in her presence had crumbled his composure and chipped away at his resolve. What had she done to him?

Either way, she would leave now and return to a world of computers, technology, concrete sidewalks, and tall skyscrapers. If her absence didn't grant his senses relief and his mind clarity of purpose, he'd consult his peers.

He still had a poacher to punish.

As his soft steps breathed life into the quiet darkness, the strange tingling he'd felt with initial contact amplified and shifted to set up shop in his chest until pulsing electrical charges fired at the rate of a rattlesnake's tail preceding a lethal strike.

For the first time in his life, a bewildering and complex wariness overwhelmed his spirit. He headed for the canopy in hopes of sorting these strange impressions and emotions. It never failed to soothe his soul.

Chapter Four

"Hold her down, for God's sake, Ermano. She can't weigh more than ninety pounds soaking wet." Doc's growing vexation over controlling the little, dark-haired native blunted his excitement and enthusiasm over the latest experiment. "This should be the final test, so you may even survive, my little tawny-pelted kitten."

"Get away from me, *bastardo*." The filthy, damp sheet covering the stainless-steel table slid from beneath the native, giving her bare feet enough traction to propel herself toward the head of the table until Ermano snatched a handful of hair, yanking hard and arching her neck to leer in her face.

With one hand brutally clamping down on her naked thigh, Doc grabbed her ankle and straightened her leg, allowing him to fasten the ankle restraint and keep her in place. "My dear, your sacrifice will save countless lives in the near future. An extremely vicious strain of bacteria is about to break out in D.C." He chuckled at her writhing, futile attempts at escape.

"Ermano, the last piece of this puzzle touched down yesterday morning, less than fifty miles from here. Have your men collect and bring her to me tomorrow tonight. Apparently, my men have failed. Wait 'til she's away from prying eyes. I want no witnesses. I've got a picture of her in my office. She should be in one of the small villages along the river."

"Got it, Sir, careful. This one is especially strong from all the climbing she does. She lives in the village next to mine." Ermano latched on to the foot aimed for his groin and gave a vicious yank before fastening the other ankle restraint. "You're looking for a specific person this time?"

"Oh, not just a person, she's so much more, and she doesn't even know it yet."

"We'll handle her like a prized specimen."

"See that you do. I'll fetch her coordinates shortly." Patchy morning sunlight filtered through the dirty, high windows to highlight the sheen of sweat on his newest captive who continued to thrash in her four-point restraints. Securing the wide band at her waist further restricted her movements, though to watch her naked form twisting and jerking in her bid for freedom lent a fascination he couldn't deny.

"This one's prettier than most you bring me, Ermano. I'm surprised you'd destroy such beauty." Her sleek, velvet-soft skin quivered under his touch. "When you brought her scanned DNA sample, I figured this was just another native from a distant village. This test should prove the completion of my work and might not kill her, so you'll have someone to play with."

"Thanks. The villagers thought I was peddling a sturdy light fixture that could run for hours on batteries, damn morons."

"All the while, you were waiting to flip the switch to read a short sequence of her DNA genome. Someday, I'll amass thousands of DNA sequences and make my own worldwide, genetic data bank."

The native's expression twisted in rage with the ball gag Doc shoved in her mouth. Lifting her head and fastening the leather buckle at the side of her face left tangles of black hair in disarray about her face to heighten her natural beauty. If her muffled words left him any doubt of her intentions, the crazed look in her eyes said it all. *Either way, she won't survive.*

"She works at the restaurant. Thinks she's too good for anyone other than rich tourists." Ermano's slow grazing caress ended at the juncture of the woman's thighs, instilling more fear than rage in her next muffled scream. "When you're finished, I want to keep her."

"Since she's seen our faces, she doesn't get to see the light of day again. Other than that, I don't care what you do with her after the test is completed. I need to make sure the antidote works properly and that my designer bacteria won't mutate and spread from host to host."

"How can you make it specific to one person?"

"Genetic hacking. The virus I've engineered is specific for her body. If it works, I can hold the leaders of every major country as biologic hostages. This strain is so insidious that by the time the symptoms develop, they won't be able to stop it. Even I can't once they start coughing blood." A dark chuckle bubbled up as he thought of all the wonderful things he could do with the power he stood to gain.

"How fast does it work? It's not contagious?" A tinge of uncertainty crept into Ermano's expression.

"This dose isn't. I used the subjects in the lower level to test for susceptibility. I received spectacular results that exceeded my wildest imagination. Once it leaves the intended target, it's no worse than the common cold."

"Why not make it affect everyone?"

"Because this way, I can strike with the precision of a surgical knife, ensuring mortality only in whom I wish it. And because of the way it's engineered, they won't be able to locate patient zero." With a genuine smile directed at his latest subject and one hand tight just below her elbow, Doc inserted the hypodermic needle into his victim's vein and injected two cc of his latest trial. "Thank you, my dear. Though the next twenty-four hours will be very painful, I will give you the antitoxin tomorrow about this same time." As if he'd committed a grievous error, he added. "Would you care for a soda? It seems that in my haste, I've neglected my manners. I don't want you to become dehydrated."

The minute her gag loosened, the captive's screams rent the air. Again, the string of expletives would've done any sailor proud.

With a fistful of hair in his grasp, Ermano tilted her head to meet his gaze. "It's a little early to ruin your vocal cords from screaming, bitch. There'll be plenty of time for that tomorrow after you get the antidote." He replaced the gag. "I don't want to dip my wick in something and catch a bug that Ajax wouldn't scrub off."

Doc ignored his employee's crudities. "This journey has been long and difficult, but I'll finally slide this world into an exciting array of chaos and pandemonium while accumulating limitless wealth from the arrogant and corrupt politicians, all from the safety of my jungle hideaway. What else could a man want?"

"Sounds like a nice plan, boss. Glad to be a part of it. Got to admit, I like the perks." Another slow glide across the feathery curls covering his prize brought muffled screams from the bound native.

"Your most important assignment will bring you riches to go wherever and do whatever you want." Studying the spiral links of his new microbe as it had reproduced every twenty minutes fascinated him when he finally put together the optimal conditions for growth. In one culture plate, he could incite a population explosion the size of a sugar cube within twenty-four hours. *Such sweet, sweet success.*

"You sure it won't get out of control?" Ermano laughed as he gave a vicious yank on the woman's pubic hair. The more she pulled at her leather cuffs and writhed, the wider his grin became. Her muscles strained as her head whipped side-to-side and her back arched as far as the waist restraint allowed.

"At the time of inception, I'll introduce a self-limiting process to prevent the bacterial population from evolving." It was a tribute to his genius that he maintained control over the rate of its evolution, ensuring no surprises complicated his goals after the germ's activation.

"Within weeks, I'll control the most important Heads of State throughout the world." Decades of planning would bring him more power and money than he'd ever dreamed. "And to think it all started with the rainforest."

"Take care of her, Ermano. I'll be in the lab. Be back for blood samples later." The low tune he whistled covered the sound of his retreating footsteps.

Networking with natives and long hours of study would culminate in the side benefit of controlling all the jungle's inhabitants, both two-legged and four. Since the base of his work had begun here, it had seemed a good place to set up shop. He'd never been disappointed. After preparing another bacterial slide for study, he rotated his stool in front of the microscope.

The circuitous route of gaining immunity from past and future transgressions meant executing the rainforest's protector, Tiago, immortal and keeper of the jungle. From learning of his existence, achieving that goal had remained his most daunting task, how to kill an immortal.

Years of studying native plants and their deleterious effects on the body and mind had led to his ingenious little strain of bacteria. Cajoling and rubbing elbows with the primitive natives had granted him access to the local shaman, who'd first regarded him with great suspicion. From there, he followed the natural order of progression with schmoozing the medicine men and acquiring their magical secrets, one at a time.

Natural curiosity had driven him to form a platonic relationship with Grace, a pregnant woman on her way back to the U.S. In time, he'd realized her genetic significance and suspected she would play a role in the Amazon's future but couldn't hash out the details. In the end, he figured their meeting was destiny's way of giving him a hand.

When the brat she'd carried proved even more remarkable in fending off disease, new goals led to different approaches and parameters with his biologic research. The resulting engineered microbes had surpassed all previous expectations and led to his current incredible success. Repeated attempts in developing more than a low-level infection in the mother had failed when every other test subject died from the infection Grace fought off with apparent ease.

Only in the last year when he'd unlocked the sequence of his nanobacteria did he succeed in truly affecting her. Developing cancer after multiple sub-clinical infections didn't come as a surprise. Still, the secret of her survival had lain in either her unique genetics or the herbs her shaman-lover supplied, two variables he couldn't control. That would be his next area of study.

Disgust over losing her as a test subject strained his patience since it would set his studies back months, if not longer. If his lackeys weren't already dead, he'd have loved to use them in the next stage of trials. *By tomorrow night, however, I'll at least have Grace's body to study postmortem, along with her living offspring.*

"If only I could've seen the brat's expression as her mother died. Damn Jackie, anyway. Good help is so hard to find." The recent delivery of fresh pastries, his one true indulgence, took the edge off his irritation as he swiveled away from the microscope to enjoy the rich, creamy flavor of his exotic delicacy. "Time to make my rounds."

* * * *

"Good evening, Tamo, or should I say grandfather of the forest. You honor me with your presence. Please, have a seat." Doc allowed just the right amount of reverence to creep into his tone. Years of cow-towing and false humility had grown tedious long ago, but the locals bought into his façade, and he needed their support just a little while longer. After Tiago was dead, they wouldn't matter since no other could face him and survive.

"Good evening, Doctor. I have some new herbs for you to work with." Several specimens of saw-tooth and scalloped-leaved plants overflowed two brightly colored clay pots placed on the wooden desk. "Be careful. Like most medicines, they are toxic in large amounts."

"Of course. I have learned much from you these past years. As usual, I will pass along anything learned to you and the other shaman you've so graciously introduced. Would you like to see our progress with the last batch of herbs while we discuss these new samples?"

"Yes, we need to review the latest occurrence in a nearby village."

"Oh? I haven't heard anything of significance." Worn wooden armrests on his chair groaned when Doc pushed to his feet. It felt good to look down on this primitive caricature as he circled his desk to usher the shaman to the secondary lab. He'd learned long ago how to impress these tribal medicine men with a good storefront and so maintained the air of professional concern.

Showtime.

A short hallway joined the modest, medical facility with a like-sized research lab. He'd even brought in some ethnobotanists to study the effects of local flora on the resident population.

Within a year, many shamans were traveling from all over for help in dealing with some of their tribe's medical problems. Soon after, he set up several bays where he could treat and watch some of the more severe cases overnight. From there, he'd won respect and cultivated trust from each tribal leader, ensuring their slippery slide into his convoluted web would continue.

"Watch your step over the threshold here, Tamo. I'm afraid this lab isn't as visitor friendly as it should be." Several men and women in white coats sitting at various lab tables examined slides under high-powered microscopes. Each looked up and nodded with their boss's entrance into the sterile-looking room full of centrifuges, Bunsen burners, and glass beakers containing various fluids.

"One of the Kanoe tribesmen came to me with swollen nodes in his neck and underarm, among other symptoms. It began three days ago. Have you seen this in others?"

"No. Is he infectious? If he's too ill to travel, I can send someone..." Keeping track of the natives' health ensured none of his experiments snowballed into catastrophic proportions or incurred the CDC's curiosity and untimely intervention. *Unless this is an unexpected mutation, no one else should develop these symptoms.* After all, he intended to control the world, not destroy it.

"No one else is sick with this. We will bring him to you this evening. I have done all I can."

"Of course, Tamo. We have access to some of the best medical care providers in the region. Considering the varied plant specimens you and the others have brought combined with progressive medical techniques, we've made incredible strides."

"We are all grateful for your watchful eye in keeping the miners and loggers from our lands. Each year, they destroy many acres of the jungle. The slight magic we've shared is of little consequence."

"I made a vow to prevent the vultures from destroying this land and I've done my best to keep that promise to the gathering of local tribes. My contacts have provided us with high-quality, satellite imagery for such detection, thanks to many conservation-minded organizations." *So I can have it all as my own personal playground, performing experiments as I see fit while ensuring that at the end of the day, I'll destroy my greatest enemy and become master of all.*

"You have done well by us over the years. I have no regrets. You've treated us as family."

Oh, but you'll have many regrets very soon. If you only knew how I treated family... Memories of his pregnant wife thrashing against her restraints, her belly swollen with his child, brought a smile to his lips. He'd called her patient zero, his first trial. For reasons that still eluded him, she'd refused to accept the honor. The wickedly deleterious results of the bacterium on her had far outweighed his expectations while expanding his research. The effect on the child born the next morning led to new avenues of experimentation. He wasn't a family kind of guy, anyway. The thought of dirty diapers and baby vomit made him shiver.

"And why shouldn't I? You've helped me make this my home."

"We've tried, but you work too much since losing your wife in childbirth."

"Ah, I do take breaks now and then. I've gone back to the States to visit friends several times a year." *And drop off another batch of infected pastries to my prized patients.* Grace and Brielle's immunity provided one more mystery he'd solve after unlocking their ingenious DNA. On the black market, he could make another fortune off those rich enough and who wanted to bolster their immune systems.

Sometimes, he amazed himself with his good luck and foresight. Long ago and at moderate expense, he'd arranged for

Grace's GYN doctor to inject a subcutaneous micro-tracking chip in her vaginal canal at the time of the brat's delivery, ensuring constant location monitoring in case she moved or ever got wind of his experiments.

Unfortunately, by the time he'd realized their combined worth, Grace kept a tight watch over the little bitch and refused all but the barest contact, making fresh DNA samples difficult to obtain.

Chapter Five

Brielle woke with a start. A grim awareness had halted her breath before her eyelids opened. She wasn't alone. Flashes of the evening before burst through her thoughts but failed to illuminate the reason for her current wariness. Every muscle tensed as she listened for signs of movement. Keeping her eyes closed heightened her other senses while in the guise of sleep.

Body odor.

Heavy, scratchy-soled boots scuffing the rough-planked floor on the other side of the room.

Had the poacher returned for her? She cracked one eyelid open.

Dappled light from the small window backlit her intruder, a large male wearing a long-sleeved shirt and moisture-wicking trail pants. Scrutinizing the trespasser revealed a bulky torso and sloping shoulders from a very short neck, almost as if his head sat squarely above his clavicle.

Not yesterday's rescuer.

She opened both eyes and cleared her suddenly dry throat, mentally preparing herself for a fight. However, if he'd intended to harm her, he wouldn't be searching through her belongings.

He jerked back.

The few items on the old worn dresser, her wallet and cabin key was knocked to the floor in his haste to face her. Several new items, not hers, lay in their place. She couldn't make them out. Light streaking through the window splintered over his face to reveal a jagged scar along his cheek. *Gus.*

"Hey, kiddo. It's just me. I came to check on you. I saw your door was ajar and your pack contents spilled on the floor. Wanted to make sure you were all right."

Though he made no move to come closer, a slight narrowing of his gaze lent a cunning quality not present yesterday.

"I looked in on you last night to make sure you'd made it back to the village when you didn't answer my knock. This morning, I wanted to make sure you weren't sick. You feeling okay?" An ominous creaking accompanied his sitting in the chair occupying the opposite corner.

The skin on her nape and forearms prickled. She waited for a sense of fear to overwhelm her thoughts but it never came.

Still, his gaze drifted around the room, dissecting each long section of darkness before moving on. "I brought you some aspirin and pink tablets, good for anything from north to south." A slight chuckle belied his feigned thoughtfulness.

What is he searching for?

"Yeah, I'm fine. Just decided to sleep in." Events of the previous day again flashed through her mind along with her rescuer's warning to leave. She had no intention of running since her basic circumstances hadn't changed. There was no choice but to continue forward with her original plan and find Tashuin. Slowly, she let her hand drift to her neck to hide the bruises she'd obtained yesterday. A small scarf would cover them today.

"You don't look so good. What happened? It looks like someone went rummaging through your things. You should lock your door at night." His gaze searched the area by her bed before his hand scrubbed over the thick morning stubble on his chin.

Clutching the thin sheet to her chest, she realized she was still fully dressed. *Thank God.* "Hmm, I was exhausted when I got back. Guess I forgot to lock it."

"You run into trouble out there?" Character lines etched the corners of his eyes, betraying his suspicion.

"No. Well, there was this cougar...When it screamed, I dropped my tranq gun in the basin by the waterfall. Without any backup defense, I high-tailed it back here." *Let him think I'm a fainting lily.*

"Damn. Gotta be careful out there. I have one you can borrow, but perhaps I should go with you today. My tour doesn't resume for another two days."

"Thanks, Gus, but I'll be fine. You don't need to bother." Throwing the sheet back, she swung her legs down to the floor, thankful her hands didn't betray her shaken nerves. Her boots sat neatly by her bed. *Figures.*

Images of a bare-chested native removing them after gently laying her on her bed flashed through her mind. What was his name? *Tiago.* She should've been terrified after such an ordeal, yet he instilled such a sense of serenity she'd—fallen asleep? How was that possible?

She'd keep the details of her rescue to herself, that and the mental picture of a perfectly sculpted torso with carved

and curved ropes of muscle under nutmeg skin. Scents of the jungle, warm and inviting, had clung to him and now drifted through her memory.

Her mom had warned her not to trust the villagers until she'd gotten to know them. Two-legged beasts presented more danger than any creature from the rainforest. Even though Gus' offer to help felt genuine, she recognized the nonverbal discrepancies in his shifting, narrowed gaze and the fake smile that never reached his eyes.

"Nonsense. Just doing my job. I'm responsible for everyone on the tour. I'll meet you at the Agouti restaurant. Maria's serving barramundi this morning. You can watch the water dragons darting around the tables while we eat."

"Fish for breakfast?"

"It's almost noon."

"Oh, yeah, okay. Fish and lizards. Got it. I'll be out in a minute."

The smile over his shoulder as he left radiated more false sincerity. Since she hadn't informed him of her plans to leave the group yesterday until minutes before docking, he couldn't have been involved with the poachers.

But he's hiding something. Best to let some tourists know he's joining me today.

Vivid, bright-green heads contrasted the intense, orange throats of the male water dragons darting on their hind legs around the wooden chair legs in a frenzied chase. Aggressive arm waving, head bobbing, and throat puffing gave them a comical appearance—before they ducked under the fence and jumped off the dock into the river.

Condensation beaded the sealed water bottles sitting on a corner table between two platters of crusted barramundi, acai berries, and *maracuja*, another fruit she loved. To sit and enjoy the cross breeze in a quaint establishment lacking man's commercialized stamp of modernization instilled an inner peace she wanted to maintain the rest of her life, and would once she found Tashuin.

"Hmm, Brielle, you were quick. Have a seat. Eat while it's hot." Gus' demeanor appeared far more relaxed as he leaned back in the slat-backed chair.

"Um, I'm a vegetarian, but the fruit looks wonderful."

"No problem. I'll eat the meat."

The screech of fork against plate induced a shudder as he stabbed the fish and heaved it over to his dish. Considering his size, he could afford the calories.

"I also have a dart gun you can use until we find the one you lost yesterday." His easy smile vanished behind a large bite of baked fish.

Despite Tiago's warning to return to her world, she realized no safe haven existed to which she could flee. To go back would bring death faster than venturing out into the jungle and among the two-legged predators who already had her scent.

"Thanks, Gus. It shouldn't take long. I won't have trouble finding the way." It felt good to accept company for today's forage in the jungle. Considering the poacher was still out there, it would be better to have someone watching her back—as long as they didn't plan to stab her with a knife. In mentally reviewing their previous interactions, she realized Gus had no reason to bring her harm. He was a tour guide that traveled with her group and would move on with the same. The recent chain of events seemed to have stirred a bit of paranoia along with her fear.

Acidic juices from the fruit dribbled down her chin to inflame the abrasion received yesterday during her confrontation. Unshed tears clouded her vision, formed from equal parts pain and grief of all she'd lost in the past forty-eight hours.

"What's wrong, Brielle?"

"I'm fine. My mom and I always made these trips together, twice a year. She died recently." A deep breath kept the threatening tears at bay even as she sought the elusive words to convey the depth of emotions roiling inside. Her mom's dreams for her own life would never be fulfilled. Brielle had spent the entire flight time reading and trying to decipher parts of the diary but failed to unlock the secrets behind the half crystal worn around her neck.

"Sorry, you seem like such a strong woman, like nothing could affect you."

Something in his demeanor, the set of his jaw and narrowed gaze, spoke of ulterior motives, yet she saw no reason for either. If he'd wanted to hurt her, he could've done so this morning in her cabin or even last night while she slept.

The shaman, Tashuin, would no doubt have the answers she needed, and today she was more determined than ever to find him. If she crossed paths with the poacher again, she'd dart him on sight and leave him vulnerable to the rainforest creatures, a fitting end to the coward.

A slight unease between her shoulder blades yanked her attention to the forest beyond the restaurant's fenced area where fluttering palm leaves and lush green ferns screened the jungle's secrets. *Is Tiago watching?* Just the thought of him brought a curious sensation curling around her chest.

The more she thought about it, the more she realized his explanations regarding her hallucination made sense. She'd first seen him just before passing out. Lack of oxygen, desperation for survival, and a fertile imagination were prime ingredients for any mind to conjure a magical rescuer in their last moments of life. Despite the overwhelming grief, she'd prayed for a miracle as approaching death sank its claws into her mind. She hadn't wanted to die regardless of the supposed rewards on the other side. However, that didn't prevent her desire to experience his domineering presence

again.

The first portion of their journey passed in humid, companionable silence with the normal ebb and flow of the forest creating a tranquil backdrop for her restless thoughts. Following the initial trail cut yesterday conserved strength as she contemplated the circumstances concerning her rescue. *Tiago*. Intriguing didn't come close to describing his uniqueness. Regardless of what he'd claimed, she knew he was different from anyone she'd ever met and hoped to see him when hypoxia and grief weren't clouding her mind.

In his fierce gaze, she'd seen determination, strength of will, but also compassion and—something else, something she couldn't define. His touch, though light, had created a yearning so intense she'd silently begged him to come back. Only his adamant rejection bordering on sudden revulsion kept her mouth closed.

The farther they traveled, the more the jungle seemed to close in around her, isolating, threatening with an invisible and unstoppable menace. It was the first time she'd felt such animosity without recognizing the source for her concern. *If Gus sees the remains of the cat, he'll figure I've lied about running into trouble.*

"Um, Gus, I know the path I cut yesterday leads northwest, but I found that if I'd traveled a little more eastward, it would've saved me some steps. How about we cut our way from here?" From the side of her backpack, she retrieved her machete to begin hacking at the ferns and thick foliage in her new direction, leaving him to follow or not.

"Okay, but if we don't find what you're looking for by midafternoon, we turn back, okay? This area feels—wrong to me." Gus' gravelly baritone drifted over the swishing of falling palmate leaves, his tone lacking the controlling note earlier and the suave *mien* of yesterday when dealing with the widow.

"Yeah, but I've kinda grown immune to weird since my first few trips to the Amazon." Her next strike stilled in midair with an oddly familiar sound. "Do you hear that?"

"What?"

"Sounds like—grunting pigs." To her knowledge, wild boar never hunted people and wouldn't attack without provocation.

"Nah. I don't hear anything. Even if you're right, they won't bother us as long as we stay away from their young."

Not far from where she figured the jaguar had fallen from its perch in the trees, she found more medicinal herbs and carefully wrapped her cuttings in the packaged, moist towels inside her backpack. *Did Tiago bury the cat or did scavengers remove its remains?*

The brief interlude gave her precious minutes to catch her breath and collect her thoughts. It didn't surprise her that Tiago apparently saw fit to return her backpack minus yesterday's cuttings. His devotion to the preservation of the jungle was obviously unconditional. "Canopy is thinning a bit. Must be a meadow ahead." Midday sunlight trickling through the rooftop's ever-increasing gaps allowed the brilliant rays to rout the ominous shadows in favor of its blazing, golden radiance.

"Yeah, we'll break there so you can rest." Though sweat covered them both, Gus appeared able to continue until nightfall.

"I hear water." The subtle roar of the falls ahead shifted her mind to a soothing nostalgia where she and her mom had enjoyed other natural wonders, bringing a smile to her lips, the first since her mom's death that didn't mingle with salty moisture from her eyes.

"Yeah, the natives call it *Pequeno Cielo*, or small heaven."

Earthy smells became stronger with the increased moisture in the air. Stepping out of the deep shadows created by thick, shade-loving ferns, giant kapoks, and other resident architects of the forest allowed the sun's intense rays to highlight one of nature's most treasured treats.

At least fifty yards separated her from the top of the falls, while four irregular, shelf-type ledges diverted the water's force, changing its path to create a magical vista worthy of the most talented photographer. Misty swirls of foamy, delicate filigrees floated on micro currents away from the cascading sheets that carved craters in the basin's large rocks below, completing the picture.

"Hmm, I love this waterfall. It's so beautiful." After tucking her machete away, she made a show of searching for her supposedly lost dart gun. Unibrow had tucked it in his pack yesterday, which meant she'd probably not see it again. *Hopefully.*

"This plunge pool is beautiful, makes me wish we could take off our boots and swim." The biologically complex depths presented a danger she understood and respected despite its deceptive beauty. Tempting the vagaries and vulgarities of fate wasn't on her agenda even if the denizens of the rainforest had never bothered her.

"Hmm, might meet a school of red-bellied piranha or something a lot bigger, longer, and scali-er. Not a good idea. I don't see your dart gun, Brielle. Are you sure this is where you dropped it?"

"Well, I thought so. But that damned cat shook me up pretty bad..." Water swirled around her boots as she sloshed around the shallow edge. Several large, flat stones off to one side would've made a perfect spot to bask in the sun. *Right—cuddled up to the anaconda's molted skin.*

"I don't see it. Perhaps one of the locals found it. There's a nomadic tribe living a bit farther inland, and they do like to explore."

Again—distressed piglet squeals followed by low, grunting sounds confirmed her suspicion that wild pigs were indeed stalking them.

“Gus?” Pausing midstep, Brielle searched the edge of the tree line for their pursuing swine but failed to pinpoint the danger. A mixture of sweat and humidity coated her skin to a sheen, the salty moisture seeping into her eyes to create a stinging veil that blunted her vision but not her mind’s ability to conjure images of death by slashing tusks. Very slowly, she reached for her borrowed dart gun, then let the solid feel of it in her palm steady her nerves. A glance over her shoulder revealed Gus with a two-handed grip on his own.

“Yeah, I hear ‘em, and it just ain’t natural. Be very still. Maybe they’ll keep moving. It’s not safe to go deeper in this water.” The wide brim of his hat cast most of Gus’ face in shadow, his mouth working the pale wooden toothpick side-to-side the only indication of his doubt.

The chattering of teeth and distinct popping sounds grew louder, closer. *Feral hogs are notoriously aggressive.* From experience, she knew these weren’t the giddy, noisy grunts of a feeding frenzy. Numerous low growls indicated increasing aggression without any apparent cause unless they faced some type of mutation or evolved species, which was always possible.

There was nowhere to go, nowhere to hide.

Minutes passed as her frenzied pulse roared in her ears, the erratic beats competing for attention over the swine’s mounting fury.

As a scientist, she rationalized the results of her fight or flight response. As a woman facing one of nature’s most aggressive animals, she prayed she didn’t have to make a stand. Not only would they lose, they would lose brutally, painfully. “Sounds like a very large herd.”

“Yeah, it just ain’t right.”

The nearby wail of a soaring, harpy eagle surged over the screams of several macaws and howler monkeys, interrupting the denizens’ rest. Agitated commotion in the canopy morphed into rabid chaos as the predatory bird’s presence incited a frantic, mass exodus from the biological roof.

Danger and risk always accompanied travel through the rainforest, but this, wild pigs traveling in large numbers defied logical explanation. Her arms ached with the suspense of waiting, tense and ready. Each minute that passed seemed to add ten pounds to her gun’s weight. If the hogs charged, she and Gus couldn’t stop the numbers they’d present judging by their otherworldly chorus. *Gored by wild hogs or eaten by fish.*

Her state of hyper awareness endured through their stalkers’ continued trek west, each minute dragging out to leave her exhausted and shaken while fate determined her future. At least long pants concealed her trembling legs.

Seconds felt like hours.

Unbidden, images of Tiago drifted through her thoughts. Was he nearby? Maybe another narrow escape was playing havoc with her emotions and her desire to catch a glimpse of him. Maybe anxiety imitated the same heaviness in her chest as yesterday in Tiago’s presence.

“They’re moving on now, Brielle. Let’s get the hell out of here.” Gus stowed his dart gun before removing the wide-brimmed hat and wiping his brow.

“Yeah, I’m anxious to find Tashuin.” Returning her own weapon, she was relieved to seek shelter from the sun within the jungle once more.

“The shaman? Why do you seek him?”

Her true motives would remain her own, regardless of his probing gaze. “He’s well known for treating ailments and alleviating pain. I want to discuss the unusual properties of these specific herbs I’ve collected.”

Gus followed her for this leg of the journey. It seemed odd he didn’t insist on leading, seeing how he was the tour guide and a native. Moreover, she felt his weighted stare, his suspicious and scrutinizing *mien* watching her every move and dissecting her every word. The farther they traveled, the more ominous the atmosphere became.

Since little light filtered through the canopy, time stretched before them without acknowledgment from the sun’s position. Still, moving forward without the hog’s threat of danger left her free to contemplate current circumstances in all their convoluted and intricate possibilities. Life was so much easier to sort while enveloped in the jungle’s basic, simplistic beauty. She prayed she could find Tashuin and make a life for herself here, simple and unfettered by the complications of the modern world.

Tonight, her muscles would stiffen after resting, but for now, the activity gave her the mindless task needed to deal with the turmoil created by her own endless questions and a precarious environment.

“Hmm, what makes you think you can find the shaman? Many have tried and failed. You don’t have the advantage earned from years of life in this jungle. It’s well known he likes his privacy.”

Considering the time elapsed since she’d mentioned Tashuin, she figured other things occupied Gus’ mind and wondered if he harbored ulterior motives in joining her today.

“I don’t know that I can, but I have to try.” She’d never tell him Tashuin met her and her mom twice a year regardless of which village they visited. Perhaps these coordinates would lead her to him. More likely, they would not. The only thing she knew for sure—she had to find him if she wanted answers to verify her mom’s last words. The journal’s

haunting command denied her peace of mind.

Afternoon sun defined a small clearing nestled beside a turbulent, fast-flowing stream. "Time for a break, Brielle. You need to rest and drink some water."

"You know, the raw beauty of this land far outweighs any danger nature can throw at you." Several large boulders bordered a rough, wooden bench and lent an unusual but welcome seating area. After slipping her backpack off, she removed her canteen to take a much-needed drink. "I've never seen the likes of this. Have you?"

"No. Brielle, this place just isn't right. It's as if someone set that bench in that specific spot so you could rest and enjoy the view, yet there are no villages nearby. It just feels...out of place. We should move on as soon as you're rested. Besides, running water will attract predators."

Regardless of what her guide said, she perceived an atmosphere laced with peace and harmony, begging for a hammock and a good book. When she stood, her skyward gaze caught on a strange formation of leaves in the middle canopy along the clearing's edge. "Look, Gus, over there. How odd." Something innate drew her from the bench and toward the strange site. "I think—it's a hut. No, it's two huts! Look closer."

Constructed in the native style with bamboo, palm leaves, and clay, each dwelling nestled securely in the middle canopy where they'd enjoy protection from flooding and predators of the forest floor yet bask in the filtered light. Each blended so well that if her intuition hadn't pulled her forward, she would've missed them entirely.

Inside, natives would use natural resources in the continuance of their simplistic lives. A tribal mask would hang next to the entrance to ward off evil spirits while hammocks, baskets, and even musical instruments from natural materials would complete the setting. A small, split log with a large hollowed area for holding water would sit on a homemade table.

Once again, her sixth sense pulled her forward. Gus was right; something did feel—wrong, out of place. The closer she came to the tree hut, the more trepidation filled her soul. A sour ball of dread lodged in her belly then clawed its way up the back of her throat. Her fingers felt over-sensitized when she touched the tree trunk, prickles sliding up her arm to create a shudder that ran between her shoulders.

"Come on, Brielle. It doesn't feel right."

A natural staircase made of braided liana spiraled the large kapok tree to a hide-covered entrance. Oddly inviting, the hut inspired a racing pulse and tightening in her chest, shrouded in equal parts apprehension and ominous premonition.

"No. You can leave if you like, but I'm going up."

Bromeliads tucked haphazardly here and there amid the weaving vines displayed exquisitely colored blossoms, adding their visual voice to the magical blend of the rainforest. The paradox of each housing its own self-contained ecosystem including algae, frogs, tiny crabs and salamanders paralleled the larger environs, nature's way of caring for the great and small.

"Hello? Anyone home?" Something about the huts felt familiar even though she'd never visited this section of the rainforest.

"If this were a tribal home, there'd be more than two huts, and they'd use a single tree notched out with steps to climb." Sweat beaded Gus' brow as he slowly reached for something in his pack.

She hadn't heard him step up beside her.

"Yeah, but..." The urge to climb the natural stairs was too great to resist. With her first step on the tightly weaved vines, she realized the thick mass was stronger than it appeared.

"Brielle, wait. Let's keep moving."

"No. I'll go up by myself. Whoever's there won't feel as threatened by a lone woman." Ascending around the ten-foot diameter trunk wasn't as difficult as she'd thought when just overhead the next spiral lent natural handholds for balance.

Halfway up, she stopped and looked around, listening to the screeching of several nearby macaws. Of all the visits she'd made to the Amazon, nothing could equal this incredible view. Her perspective encompassed infinite shades of deep, green foliage glistening with beads of moisture and dazzling flowers in a full range of colors she wouldn't find anywhere other than the rainforest.

"At least have your weapon handy, Brielle." Gus' harsh whisper struck a discordant note in her mind. For someone concerned about her safety, he didn't object much to her going up alone—unless he had a reason to not join her.

She ignored the warning and continued to climb, noting that with increased height, her breath came easier with the reduction of humidity. Her inquisitive nature had never steered her wrong before and doubted it would now.

This manmade structure blended well with the environment and was not the average native's hut, especially considering its isolated location. Still, on a normal day, the sense of peace and belonging inspired by the view could soothe any trouble if one took the time to appreciate it.

When tiny hairs on her arms rose, doubt and alarm niggled a warning even as a shudder slithered down her spine. The fact her intuition sent mixed messages usually signaled trouble ahead.

A small wood-plank landing provided enough space for a hammock where one could spend quiet evenings listening to the mosquitos buzzing along the moisture-laden, forest floor. To experience that kind of serenity, inhaling the melding scents drifting up combined with the incredible views would be her idea of heaven. Perhaps, when she found Tashuin,

she could persuade him to help her build something like this.

An inaudible yet discordant note flowed through her psyche and stayed her hand as she reached for the soft hide door. None of her five senses discerned anything to cause alarm, but she knew better than to ignore the feeling.

Below, Gus shifted his weight from one foot to the other, looking around in nervous anticipation. Hands fisting at his sides added an uncharacteristic wariness as if he expected an attack at any moment.

Determination strengthened her spine as she pushed the covering aside. Inside held little in common with her expectations except for the tree trunk growing through the middle of the hut and the tribal mask near the door. If her memory served correctly, the mask represented the work of a spirit guide. Her pulse kicked up a notch.

Incense from indeterminate plants lent a pleasant aroma while several wood-framed drums with string tension systems hung along the south-facing wall. Burnt-etching designs adorned several seed shakers laying on a small handcrafted table.

A low groan coming from the other side of the single cot made her jump.

"Brielle?"

She recognized that voice. *Ob God*. "Tashuin?"

Mumbled words too garbled to decipher compelled her to skirt the trunk in search of the source of the pain-filled speech. On the other side and next to his cot, Tashuin lay supine on the floor, his face a mask of agony. Blood spray from coughing crimson foam splattered his tunic.

"Brielle, come closer."

Kneeling by his side, she couldn't have imagined this scenario in her worst nightmare. "Tashuin, what happened? What can I do?"

The pulse in his neck beat fast and thready under her searching touch while asthmatic respirations yielded more pink-tinged, lacy filigrees from his mouth.

"There is nothing to be done for me. I can no longer fight this poison."

His weak cough made her cringe. *This can't be happening*. "Who did this? Why would someone hurt you?"

"They wanted—to prevent me from helping—you, my daughter. Took—other half of the crystal. Must find—Tiago. Tell him to retrieve. Jungle cannot survive without—guardianship. United crystal—your birthright." The last of his words trailed off with his declining strength.

"Tiago? What does he have to do with the crystal?"

"Don't let them link with the jungle, Brielle."

"Tashuin, I don't understand. Mom said you'd explain."

"I'm sorry—couldn't see you together again. I go now—to her spirit."

The touch of his calloused and gnarled fingers on her cheek lent a certain peace despite his words. After another wheeze, his entire body relaxed, his hand falling to his chest.

Tears trailed down her cheek to mingle with her father's life essence, the widening crimson stain a blasphemy of all she found good in the world. Her father. All these years when her mom refused to talk about her origins, she finally found her father—only to lose him. First, her mother, now Tashuin, whom she'd never had the privilege of truly knowing, abandoned her in death.

The loud wail of a harpy eagle jerked her tear-filled gaze toward the entrance.

Gus poked his head around the makeshift door, his puzzled frown transformed into apprehension as his gaze traveled over the small interior and landed on the mask. "This is a shaman's hut, Brielle. We shouldn't be here. Come."

From his vantage point, he couldn't see Tashuin's body, inert, a husk no longer containing its spirit.

"He's dead, Gus. They're all dead."

"Who's dead? What are you...?" Three strides brought him within sight of her father. Though not aimed at her, the following diatribe weighed heavy with his frustration without the need for deciphering foreign words. "Brielle, come. I'll let the locals know. They'll properly care for his body."

With a gentle but firm resolve, he pulled her to her feet then urged her to the exit. "We must leave. Now. Our very presence is an unforgivable transgression."

Chapter Six

Gentle rain weighed the slim, fern leaves down, allowing thin rivulets of silvered water to pool at its base. For hours, Tiago had trekked through the webbed canopy, searching for his prey, confused as to the poacher's non-existent aura. Since he'd felt it yesterday, it should be no trouble to locate now.

"Strange. Of all the varied species in this land, not one creature has alerted me to his presence..."

Perhaps his lack of success stemmed more from Brielle's distraction than his prey's ability to hide. Images of her long, thick braid flashed again amid his thoughts. Through all his centuries of existence, an enduring serenity had centered his soul. One chance encounter with a mere woman turned his world into a maelstrom of tingling awareness and eager anticipation. His link to the foreigner was as unfathomable as it was unsettling.

The sudden cessation of the jungle's innate music coincided with a deep natural awareness of Brielle—in distress. Her grief overwhelmed his ability to think clearly. A few deep breaths failed to clear his mind. The inexplicable pull to go to her gained momentum until he shifted his weight in agitation.

She should've been well on her way home, but this morning his instincts had warned him differently. He'd postponed his responsibility of exacting justice on yesterday's poacher in favor of seeing her safe. At least this time her guide accompanied her.

Through the cloak of the forest, he'd watched as they'd eaten breakfast, uncertainty regarding her guide filling his thoughts with mistrust. From the distance, one of the other tourists among them could've instigated the strong misgivings that had filled him with such doubt. Either way, she wasn't his responsibility.

The rush of turbulent water ahead marked his position, yet its normally soothing burble and cascades didn't pacify his growing angst. If he didn't find his prey between here and the river, he'd backtrack to check on Brielle, the drive to discover her source of distress arising from the deepest reaches of his soul. Just the taste of her name on his tongue breathed a sigh of longing into his thoughts.

Several screeching macaws focused his attention near the bend in the river. The birds had sighted two men getting into a boat, only one clearly visible.

Within minutes, a mental search uncovered the poacher's aura ahead, just as a large male bird, nearly a meter in height, landed on the thick branch next to him, forcing an adjustment in position.

"Found the stone. Capture the girl. Found the stone. Capture the girl." The brilliantly colored macaw repeated his message two more times using the same tone and inflections, neither one native to these surroundings.

From the canopy's top, he surveyed TJ Chemicals nestled in the curve by the river to his west. For decades, the CEO had given him no valid reason to eject the company from the basin since the renewable resources they'd harvested were studied and prepared locally. TJ had proven to be a formidable weapon in the battle to silence the chainsaws of deforestation.

The fact that this company supplied the natives with a portion of their medicinal products never negated the slick, oily feel of the CEO's character but until given a reason otherwise, Tiago would tolerate his presence.

Quick, jerky movements defined the occupants in the boat. Bumping into each other and fumbling with the tie-offs lent a sense of urgency to their demeanor, an unusual behavior in a native.

This morning, he hadn't detected the hunter, but from one instant to the next, the miscreant's aura had snapped into existence to fill the previous void. Nothing had ever felt this strange except—Tashuin's presence. Does the poacher have some connection with the shaman? *Highly unlikely.*

"What stone? Which girl?" Tiago knew nothing about a stone, but the queasy feeling in his stomach told him someone stalked Brielle. Native girls rarely disappeared from these parts. If he left now to find Brielle, he might lose the chance to gain valuable information from the two he'd sought.

"Found the stone. Capture the girl."

"Okay, Mac, I got it. Let's see what the poacher and his friend have to say for themselves."

Air *whooshed* from under the four-foot wingspan as the majestic feathers spread in flight. Several other males kept pace as they converged on the river's edge over the canopy's highway. If the poacher intended to export rare stones and mine precious minerals or any other natural resource, today would provide a much-needed learning experience. The jungle taught all within its borders that meddling carried many risks, risks not everyone survived.

Since no natives lived in the immediate area, the poacher must've met someone here, near TJ Industries. If the CEO conspired against Brielle, the facility would soon exist as nothing more than crumbles of stone and mortar, a shell of its

intended purpose.

Regardless of his restriction to not interfere with mankind's business, he wouldn't stand by while they kidnapped innocent women. His duties included justice among all the living creatures in his domain.

A small wake trailed the two-man craft in the late-afternoon sun. Considering the poacher's size, it wouldn't take much to capsize their vessel. "How odd for a foreigner to use a boat with no motor." *Unless he doesn't want to be heard.*

From his perch overlooking the river, he saw the poacher smile in self-satisfaction after a comment from his companion. Were they discussing Brielle? Again he swore, unable to scour her image from his mind and concentrate on what he needed to do.

The moss-covered, branching highway beneath his feet shivered as his avian friend landed by his side. "Found the stone. Capture the girl."

Now the bird's intonation wasn't that of the poacher. It held the perfect pitch of a man he'd always suspected embraced a duplicitous nature, the man everyone knew as Doc. Jungle law dictated duties he'd relish executing before the sun set, both for the poacher and his boss. *Why didn't I feel the poacher's presence before now?*

Flashbacks of Brielle's terror-stricken expression as the hunter squeezed the life from her came to mind. "Turnabout seems fair." It took little concentration to connect with a few friends in the area. Hungry as they were, they were glad to oblige. If the poacher's companion helped with the plot, he'd share the same fate.

In his mind, he pictured the scenario that would gather the needed information in the least amount of time. Within minutes, multiple splashes indicated the river received new guests looking for a good meal.

Before the boat could turn the river's bend to slip behind the great kapoks and his narrowing view, his silent request manifested in two, twenty-five-foot anacondas heading for their target with eyes and nostrils just visible above the water line.

His lips twitched in a harsh and humorless smile as he waited.

Above the din set up by the canopy dwellers, his prey's enraged growl began a fast descent into a nightmare of his own instigation when the five-hundred-pound anacondas wrapped their weight around the boat's oars, nearly snapping the wood before the men let go. In quick succession, two *arapaimas*, torpedo-shaped fish over ten feet in length, flashed out of the water and arced through the air to land across the narrow width of the boat.

As the small vessel capsized, the hunter's roar of rage became a shrill scream rising above his companion's shriek.

The hunter is now the hunted.

Unseen hands pulled the companion's body underwater amid gurgled screams and frantic splashing. Seconds later, both men emerged, blasting their fear in high-pitched wails. Their attempts to swim for the shoreline was short lived.

The poacher's thrashing ceased when an anaconda wrapped its length around a flailing arm. Intermittent choking interrupted their screams as the snakes delivered both men to the river's shore.

"Your type never understand the error of your ways until it is too late."

Several *candirus*, small catfish, squirmed under their prey's shirts and attached their spines to the hysterical men to feast on their hosts' blood before the small amount of leaking crimson invited millions of swarming mosquitos to join the banquet.

The companion, a local judging by his looks, shut out the horror with tightly clenched eyes and muffled wails.

"You are a native. You are aware of his deeds?" The cutting edge in Tiago's anger opened the tribesman's gaze, now filled with panic and foreboding. His initial, quiet expectancy an admission of guilt.

"I didn't know they'd kill him. I thought they'd just take the stone and leave." A new and quiet thread of alarm filled the native's words, barely above a whisper.

"That is enough to earn your fate." *Murder and kidnapping equals a death sentence.* In answer to his silent call, large swarms of giant hornets thickened the air before hovering above the shuddering native. With stingers half the size of his little finger, they coated the tribesman's body in an angry press of malevolence. Strong mandibles tore at his flesh while their stingers drove deep, leaving holes the size of small bullets. Convulsions, paralysis, and death soon followed. Centuries of existence had taught Tiago patience if nothing else.

"Now, it is your turn."

Though he closed his mouth to avoid inhaling the buzzing insects, the hunter's muffled screams deteriorated with each attempted breath. Horror-filled eyes had watched as the forest's tenants poisoned and feasted on his companion.

A silent command brought the denizens' feast to a temporary halt while the anacondas dragged their burly prey farther up the small bank. Coiled snake covered the hunter's outstretched arms and squeezed until his hands turned a dusky purple while tears flowed from tightly clenched eyes.

"Look at me, hunter."

Though a bone-chilling fear prevailed, the hunter obeyed, his expression pleading for life before he spoke.

"Oh God. Please—make them go away. I'll give you anything you want. I have money."

At that point, Tiago believed him, for in the poacher's eyes both guilt and knowledge of impending death warred for supremacy.

"Explain—the crystal."

"Crystal? What crystal?"

The immediate slither of a snake's tail around each leg prompted a more favorable response as the stench of urine hovered over the decay of fallen leaves. Each reptile slithered until eye-to-eye and mere inches from its food; unhinged jaws cracked wide to expose fangs and fluttering split tongues that were deadly despite lacking poison. When they closed their mouths, the resultant smile allowed their flicking tongues to elicit palpable fear.

"O-okay! Okay! I-I'll tell you." Visible shudders interrupted his sob of relief. "D-doc wanted a crys-crystal. I got it from a local shaman, but it was only h-half of a whole. I-I don't know where he hid the other half. The old man wouldn't tell me. I've no idea. I-I don't even know what the crystal does." Slight flexing of his fingers betrayed the pins and needles result of decreased circulation. "I-I was told to spray him with that stuff."

"What stuff?"

"I don't know. Something that makes you paralyzed for a short time—b-before it kills." Tears streamed down to glisten in his chin stubble as his body continued to shiver and shake, wracked with sobs.

"You laid hands on him, which is why I sense his aura around you. What about the girl? Who were you supposed to kidnap?"

"G-girl? O-oh, a foreigner. She—just arrived." Thin mewls escaped his closed-mouth cries.

"What were you ordered to do with her?"

"T-take her to the facility. Doc didn't say why. I-I swear, he didn't. I don't know what he intended to do to her. We just had to deliver her alive. Get these things off me. Please, God, get these things away from me. I-I don't want to die out here, not like this. I've told you everything. Let me go."

"What was the girl's name?"

"I don't know!" Three pit vipers slithered around the candiru bodies to curl about the poacher's neck and shoulders. The resulting breathless scream reverberated in the forest. "I swear, I don't know. Call them off...please. I-I have a picture in my shirt pocket. See for yourself."

Air hissed from Tiago's lungs after examining the photo. Brielle sat beside a slightly older woman, smiling at an unknown photographer. Each held a glass of red wine raised in toast.

An uncanny likeness identified the other woman as Brielle's mother while the background contained foreign-looking objects and materials—a modern apartment as described by Tashuin long ago.

With a reverence he hadn't felt in years, he tucked the photo in his back pocket. For reasons he couldn't define, the picture would hold a place of honor in his home.

"I will keep this." Since the poacher didn't know Brielle's name, it seemed unlikely he'd have further useful information.

After turning away from the hunter, the resurgence of the various predators' indulgence gave little satisfaction. The remains of these men, like the others yesterday, would never surface, yet this was far from over. The doctor and any other who attempted to follow this misbegotten path of killing shaman and abducting women were destined for similar fates.

Man, the most dangerous predator of all, was hunting Brielle, who remained unaware of the extent of her predicament. Anxiety mounted with the thought of her in the Doc's treacherous hands. Frustration and curiosity twined in his gut with his lack of knowledge concerning her unique aura and mysterious effects on his senses. *Where is she and what is she doing?*

He'd sensed her overwhelming grief earlier. Whatever disturbed her no longer held her in its strong grip. Had she found consolation in Tashuin after describing her mother's death? Few could find the shaman, but he'd no doubt she could.

Unlike the natives in the forest, each shaman maintained his anonymity through magical interference. It was a small indulgence, but one he tolerated considering their dedication to protecting his homeland. Perhaps she'd described her predicament, and the medicine man saw fit to reduce her aura's presence. He couldn't name all the reasons he found that unacceptable. He should be the one helping her, not Tashuin.

Chapter Seven

Twice, Brielle's steps slipped during descent to the forest floor. Her heart numbed with grief as she tried to make sense of this increasingly bizarre situation.

"Brielle, careful. A broken leg or even the smallest cut can be very dangerous out here." Gus' left cheek provided a prime example of the results of an untreated wound.

"I'm trying." Salty tears stung her eyes and the abrasion on her cheek.

Tiago had warned her to leave, but she'd no doubt that whoever had ordered her mom's murder waited for her return stateside, crouched like a stalking panther and ready to strike on a second's notice. Considering the size of the jungle, no one could've foreseen her crossing paths with the poacher, so the rainforest remained her safest haven.

"Gus, why would someone kill that man? How could he be any threat?" Protecting her relationship to Tashuin felt necessary since she'd no idea who conspired against him. Now was not the time to disregard her instincts.

"Brielle, that was a shaman's hut. No sane local would cross much less harm one such as him. This is bad, very bad. Watch your step. You're almost down. We need to get as far away from here as possible."

No breadth of terrain granted her mind the freedom she craved more than the jungle, miles and miles of endless, predictable life. Now, invisible walls suddenly closed in around her, claustrophobia in a vacuum, sucking both air and light from her mind and soul. Near the bottom, a moment of motionless quiet helped her regain her composure through several slow, halting breaths.

An unidentified oppressiveness in the air seemed to seal her fate. No matter which way she turned, danger awaited. This morning's enthusiasm had drained away with her father's vital force to leave her weary and dragging, afraid to look forward or back. It suddenly dawned on her that she'd never truly known what living in limbo meant until now.

Men from her past wanted to kill her. Men in her future home wanted to enslave her. Where could she go? Her mother raised her to be self-sufficient, but there was no safe haven. The fact she was female meant she had to compensate for lack of strength with cunning, intelligence, and strategic planning, yet the numbness enshrouding her refused to ease its grip and allow coherent thought in formulating a survival plan.

The last step brought her to eye level with her guide. She didn't want his sympathy; it would break her. Anxiety lingered in his gaze, which shifted restlessly around their perimeter.

"Let's get back to the village, Brielle."

"Yes, I need to sort things out." Buttress roots covered with epiphytes, or air plants, stood taller than her five-and-a-half foot frame as she picked her way around them to begin the journey back. The massiveness of the root structure reinforced her insignificance in Mother Nature's eyes.

"Brielle?"

The peculiar note in Gus' voice turned her to face him. Her mind barely registered the speed at which he placed a rough cloth over her nose and mouth with one hand while gripping the back of her head with the other, securing her in a terrifying, motionless hold.

A startled gasp allowed the sickly, sweet odor to infiltrate her lungs before her mind recorded the danger. An ineffective shove against his chest progressed into a desperate grasp to hold on to consciousness.

The last thing her senses registered included Gus' headshake in disgust and the quiet words.

"I didn't know, Brielle. I didn't know the bastards would kill a shaman."

A loud thump woke Brielle, whether from outside or within her skull, she couldn't determine as pain roared through her brain. Stygian shadows capered on the thin sheet covering her, given life from the medley of tree branches and leaves filtering the early moon glow outside the open tent flap. The depth of darkness surrounding her paled in comparison to the fathomless intensity of oily foreboding invading her mind.

Habit forced her to reach for her tranq gun, the one that was missing. She'd always slept with it beside her when in the jungle.

She wasn't alone.

The bulk of a man hunched beside her, his identity concealed in darkness.

"We can't stay any longer. Obviously, our contact isn't going to meet us here. Let's pack up and head to the main camp." Disgust laced the disembodied words outside.

"I'll be out in a bit, guys. Give us a few minutes." The harsh and cagey tone contained motives she understood, dark

motives with steel-jagged edges that would hurt as he terrorized.

The sudden painful grip of her wrist accompanied another hand covering her mouth. Alarm escalated to fear when he turned her face to the side. His calloused fingers dug into the right side of her face and closed off half her airway.

Her muffled scream didn't penetrate the foul-scented barrier of his palm, but his inherent filth made her gag. Scrabbling at his hold failed to gain her release or a better air exchange. That thick, gravelly tone brought back the events of the day in a flood of images to mingle with the throbbing pain in her head.

"Hello, Brielle. Good to see you're awake. You've no idea what's happening here, do you? And to think, when I first met you, I thought you were just another pretty face."

Her struggle to breathe multiplied when his grip tightened. The weight of him on her thighs stilled her movements while increased pressure over her nose and mouth diminished her blood oxygen level. In the depth of her soul, she knew death would be better than the unspoken intentions vibrating in the gritty tenor of his words. Precious seconds passed.

She blinked. The scene of horror remained.

A sense of weakness invaded her arms, which dropped to her chest, unable to obey her mind's command.

"Why?" Her muffled croak wouldn't be heard. As a peculiar coldness settled in her limbs, its icy fingers raced up her spine to encircle each vertebra and secure her defeat in immobile hell. *Why is this happening?*

In her mind's eye, she pictured Gus in the rainforest as he'd held her in his deadly grip. If he'd wanted her dead, why not kill her at Tashuin's hut? In that split second, there'd been a threat in his eyes, one he appeared ready to carry out now. Lightheadedness brought confusion. Was her mom waiting for her?

"Yours is the only tent left, Gus. We wanna go now since he isn't here to take the bitch off our hands. You promised us money..." The volume of the nasally whine lessened in steady degrees of encroaching blackness.

"All right, I'll finish this later. You'll get paid exactly what and when I said. Maybe a little more now that we seem to be missing the middle man." Gus' condescending sneer was the last thing she saw.

* * * *

Tiago crouched low in the umbrella-shaped crown of a kapok tree to avoid detection from passing natives below. Its towering advantage over the rainforest allowed an unobstructed view while the linking branches provided the means to travel great distances without descending to the forest floor. A few of the tree's palmate-shaped leaves had fallen, leaving its limbs full of bat-attracting, pungent, pink flowers.

Several open seedpods offered their soft, silken fibers to those who would have them. Would the sharp, bitter odor of the blossoms offend Brielle, or would they soothe in a way only nature could? Only a few hours had passed, and he craved the sight of her, the soft scent of her hair and the contented hum from her throat as she snuggled against his chest. *And I ordered her to leave...*

A nearby capuchin monkey hung suspended by her long, grasping tail while instructing her young on opening a nutshell with a small stick. The soft purr rumbling from her chest replicated in several other females teaching the same lesson to their offspring. Even as he let his senses drift to search for Doc, the prey who had eluded him earlier, his thoughts strayed to honeyed hair and emerald eyes. Considering the time his thoughts lingered on the connection with the spirited foreigner, the mystery should've resolved itself.

The tingling which had begun the moment he'd stepped away from her now roared to life, each element of his body flaring a warning he'd never experienced and couldn't endure for long. Blowing out a series of short breaths gained him little control.

Fear for her encompassed, overwhelmed, and formed painful knots in his chest. Never in his existence had his heart raced out of control before meeting the woman who radiated both comfort and confusion. The current foreign and unsettling sensations threatened his sanity and spurred him into motion.

The living pool of consciousness normally held a relative balance. Now with the ascending levels of alarm spreading through his system came a realization. The connection formed with Brielle held more significance than he'd understood, their unique bonding not some aberrancy. Sending her away had been a mistake, one he had to rectify.

Her foreign heritage, fair skin, and golden hair precluded the logical assumption that their destinies merged, their minds and spirits fated to come together just as their bodies would. Such physical characteristics would create a form of protection since any creature searching for a Kurupira's mate would initially discount her on sight.

A mate. He hadn't considered the extraordinary possibility in so many years. The very idea grew like a seed scattered among leaf litter until consuming his every thought. Energized by the whisper of hope, he couldn't get to her side fast enough.

Her sudden struggle for survival materialized in his shaking hands and clouded vision as he raced through the canopy. He felt her panic then denial, followed by acceptance of defeat.

His confusion and trepidation led to fear and desperation, distilling finally into blinding rage that overwhelmed his ability to concentrate on her aura. The higher powers saw fit to reward him, expecting him to protect her above all else. *Why else would I feel this way?*

Suddenly, he felt nothing. Was she dead? His roar induced a silence his forest had never known. Nearby monkeys

ceased their activities, arms suspended in air, waiting.

With a sure-footedness born of experience, he leaped among the tangled network of limbs, guided by instinct, spurred by an urgent sense of self-preservation.

Precious minutes passed as he raced toward her cabin. Every second pounded another round of recriminations in his mind. Where was she? Why couldn't he pinpoint her location?

Before he'd breached the clearing surrounding the village, her aura snapped into place within his mind. His sudden skidding halt then change of direction resulted in lost traction on the dampened foliage, reminiscent of native children scampering about after heavy rains.

Chapter Eight

Somewhere in the depths of her consciousness reigned logic and sanity as they always had, yet Brielle couldn't latch onto their elusive threads to weave even the vaguest of pictures to discern her circumstances.

The hard surface beneath her was slightly cushioned but not enough to dull the sharp object jutting into her lower back. Instead of the musty, slab-wood ceiling of her cabin, dirty canvas smudged from years of a smoker's habit sheltered her from the fine drizzle pattering its surface. Memories slammed into her with the force of each throb in her temples. Gus had brought her back to a tent then rendered her unconscious. Intuition advised she was currently somewhere different—*why?*

Rope binding her wrists bit into her flesh, yielding a slippery, stinging burn with each movement that abraded more of her sensitive skin. Her fingers and toes tingled from lack of circulation while acid in her stomach churned with the full dawning of her situation.

A little squirm let her know cotton panties and bra covered her intimate parts. A glance around revealed her pants and tee in a pile several feet away. Lack of pain between her legs confirmed her continued virgin status. No one had raped her—yet, but she'd seen the intent in her guide's gaze.

Gus held her captive in a large tent somewhere in the jungle. *Why? Were they waiting to sell her?* Thin beams of flickering firelight cleaved the gapped, tent front to dissect interior shadows into long, wavering rectangular boxes that changed their coffin shapes according to the intended inhabitants. Too dim to pierce the depth of her enclosure, pre-dawn light broke over someone's backpack, one she recognized. Morning had arrived in the Amazon, and with it, her uncertain future.

The chattering of spider monkeys, honking *tzaak* of gray-winged trumpeters, and constant low humming of insects filling the atmosphere lent a small, short-lived peace until the hiss of a smothering fire and whispered words outside furnished credence to a more desolate future.

One whisper she recognized and would remember for the rest of her life, however long that might be. The gravelly syllables belonged to the one intent on her debasement, death, or both. Gus.

"Well, hello, Brielle." Backlighting gave new dimension to the shadows on Gus' sharply angled face as he pushed the tent flap farther aside. Each hollow and concavity defined his depravity and radiated a darkness transcending any measure of luminance. This side—she'd suspected he harbored but hadn't seen soon enough.

Fear whispered through her mind, raising gooseflesh across her back and down her arms. Of all the lessons life had taught her, all the ways she'd prepared to meet new and difficult challenges, the menace in this man's posture created a new blistering despair, one she'd never faced.

Meager air currents flowing around his muscular bulk cooled the clammy moisture on her forehead and replaced the musty air with scents of blooming flowers yet didn't quell the nausea threatening to dislodge the lump in her throat, an acid that burned as well as humiliated. She swallowed hard.

"He will find you, asshole. Think carefully about your next move. Your punishment will be tenfold unless you release me, now." *Brave words from someone about to suffer.*

"Oh, so you *do* know him, which gives me leverage. If I can't keep you, I've still got the crystal. Either way, I'll be a rich man within a few hours."

All these years, she'd dedicated her life to her studies, how to alleviate suffering and survive in the wild. Now, she'd either die or wish for death before she'd accomplished either goal. Her mother would be so disappointed.

"No. I don't know him, but I do know he'll find and punish you. That's what he does to men like you." From the remembered snippet of conversation and Tiago's previous rescue, she'd understood his desire to protect the innocent.

"Huh, you don't understand the crystal's power, do you?"

His roving gaze degraded every place it landed, from her head to her sheet-covered crotch. If she were buck naked, she wouldn't have felt less exposed.

"I've been thinking. Why shouldn't I have a taste of both? It's been a while since I've enjoyed anything so feisty." His leering grin exposed white teeth against deeply tanned skin.

Bending her knees only tangled her legs in the sheet covering her, further enforcing her confinement. Without any advantage or the free use of her limbs, she couldn't devise the weakest defense strategy.

Triumph marked arrogant steps forward as his gaze defined each portion of her body, marking her, leaving her queasy and paralyzed with fear. Her unusual lifestyle and upbringing ensured she'd remained untouched by man, and she'd

prefer her life end that way rather than submit to the guide. Physical violation obliterated her boundaries of tolerance and threw her into the mindset of a wounded animal when the sick smile stretching across his mouth fostered an evil intent her spirit wouldn't survive.

Knots in her chest became more acid in her throat. She dry heaved. Outside sounds muted due to the blood roaring through her veins. "You animal, filthy bastard. Stay away from me!"

In her attempt to draw her legs up and kick out at him, she'd inadvertently helped his cause as he caught the sheet and used it to force her flat. A heartbeat later, he lay on top of her, effectively weighing her down.

"Now...let's lay some ground rules, babe." His calloused grip twisted in her hair to pull her head back painfully. He used his other hand to freely roam her body. "No words, unless it's a scream."

It didn't surprise her when he reached in his pocket and pulled out a strip of cloth. Its foul odor came from dried blood, anybody's guess at who'd shed it. Again, she gagged as he jammed its bulk in her mouth, leaving the ends to dangle against her cheeks. Amid much twisting and tangling in her hair, he managed to knot the ends at the side of her face. Tears streamed down her cheeks as he shoved the thin sheet covering her out of his way.

Remnants of drugs still in her system ensured little reserves of strength remained and even less control of her extremities. Death couldn't come soon enough.

The ripping sound of fabric preceded a waft of cool air on her bared breasts. He threw her tattered bra aside. Thoughts of what could've been a blissful experience with a cherished man descended into the humiliation of what she knew would come.

Closing her eyes barred the sight of his smug, satisfied grin but did nothing to ease the pain from an excruciating twist of her nipple. Her muffled scream reverberated in her mind.

At the same time, he rammed his knee between her thighs and wedged them apart. "Hope you're not on your period, bitch. But I'll have you either way."

Agitated discussion outside jerked his attention to the tent opening. "What's going on out there?"

"Dunno, something's wrong. The jungle has stilled, and the jungle never lies. We need to leave here." Regardless of gender, panic scored a universal tone in any language, any situation. It writhed within the wavering words mere feet away.

* * * *

Brielle's distress was a living slithering beast, coiling in Tiago's chest and squeezing his heart. No woman should ever feel such humiliation and agony.

The bond formed from his healing touch vibrated with tension to the very depths of his soul. Taking a deep, calming breath, he found the more he concentrated, the better he could hone in on her location.

Instinct had always guided him. Now, it led him deeper into the forest, traveling high along the biological highway. All manner of beast, feathered and scaled, flew or scurried from his path as he raced limb to limb, tree to tree, Brielle's mental state now guiding his steps as each interconnecting branch barely felt the weight of his passage.

Images of how the poacher had choked her replayed in his mind on a continuous, nightmarish reel while remembering her fall to the ground and thinking the hunter had stolen her last breath delivered a torment he couldn't bear.

A lifetime of jungle living shaped him into a sure-footed predator while monstrous fear for Brielle synthesized a speed he'd never known.

Three tents framed the small clearing a short distance from the waterfall. Their openings faced a fire pit whose dwindling tendrils of smoke circled lazily up toward the canopy. Two native men's frantic movements breaking camp, one at each far tent, bordered on desperation, something he'd use to his advantage. Each harbored questionable integrity and morals but lacked the ever-darkening aura that continued to swell inside the third tent. The one failing to contain Brielle's fury.

From the nearest enclosure, Brielle's shrill, muffled scream split the morning air. Her fear formed tangible contortions in his gut to threaten his tenuous grasp on composure. All these men would pay—one for terrorizing her, the others for allowing it.

Through his connection with the rainforest, he felt the surrounding wildlife freeze once more. Whether from Brielle's scream or his inner turmoil he could no longer tell since their spirits had merged and twined to form something new, something different.

Dealing with the two natives would take a new and special approach. Either way, they wouldn't live long enough to alert Brielle's tormentor. No doubt, the coward would kill her if Tiago made his presence known. The situation required a sideways approach, one they wouldn't see coming.

* * * *

Pain exploded in her groin as Gus brutally shoved his calloused fingers through her dry folds, pulling the soft, fine hairs and bringing a new flood of tears staining her cheeks. The taste of fear and regret burned acrid in her throat.

His upper-body weight rested on one elbow while that hand held her bound wrists above her head. Her worst nightmare now held substance including a jagged raised scar on his cheek and foul-smelling breath.

How had she ever missed the evil emanating from his soul? When she'd first arrived, he seemed sincere, compassionate. She would remember the look of triumph now dominating his expression until the day she died. *Which might be today.*

Automatic gunfire followed a leopard's growl, wringing Gus' attention away from his filthy aspirations. "Shit. Not now, guys. You can hunt later."

His impatient pursuit in getting her naked using his knife had resulted in several long, shallow but painful cuts along her right hip. She probably wouldn't live long enough for them to get infected.

She didn't have the strength to fight as he rearranged his clothes and settled between her legs. Now, his jeans bunched around his thighs as he lay poised to cleave his hard length where no man had ever ventured.

Stinging from the twigs pressing through the tent's cloth floor into her back spurred her whimper as much as the pain yet to come. When she arched her spine in hopes of throwing him off, he pressed her more firmly into the Earth's unforgiving surface.

"Watch us join, Brielle. I bet I'm your first jungle lover. If you're good, I might even make you come." For several seconds, he just laid there, his cruel gaze burning in her memory as he brushed his calloused fingers along her face, down her neck and across one breast.

When he lifted his weight, she knew a searing pain would soon split her apart. Her eyes remained clenched tight until his sudden intake of breath and a shrill scream fractured the shell of panic holding her mind hostage. Was it her screaming?

No. It was Gus.

Fear widened his eyes. The look of horror foreign to such a hardened character, unbelievable until he lurched to his feet and stumbled back, granting a view no sane man could imagine.

The short reprieve should've allowed a few breaths and a little sanity to return. Instead, shock filled the gaps in her mind at the scene unfolding. Several blinks didn't change her perception of his waking nightmare.

Before his swearing, jumping around, and pulling at his clothes blocked her view, she saw that a swarm of leeches had crawled up his jeans and even as she watched, inched one over another to reach his shaft.

"Leeches don't act like this! They shouldn't even be here this time of the year!" Though what he said made sense, his shrill wailing had no effect on the determined little buggers.

Two-inch, segmented, bloodsuckers clustered together, some attached, and some squirming over each other to get to the tender flesh Gus had seemed so proud to share just moments before. Anesthetizing substances emitted from their unique, three-jaw structure assured Gus hadn't felt their teeth making Y-incisions and latching onto his quickly shrinking shaft.

Gone was the superior and smug, sadistic, self-assured man. He screamed like a little bitch.

Scooting as far away as the small confines allowed, she watched as he frantically yanked and pulled at the determined parasites with no regard for which end sucked blood from his quickly shriveling member. Thin, crimson streaks dripped from his shaft and nuts as he plucked the small carnivores off and flung them haphazardly in all directions.

Despite her backing away, several landed on her naked skin yet failed to attach and avail themselves of her life-giving fluid. Instead, they dropped to the floor and crawled toward the opening. *What the hell?*

In a fascinated and numb awareness, she slowly rolled her shoulders then checked her body for any stragglers looking for a meal. White knuckled fingers had little feeling, but no bloodsuckers had remained in places unseen. *Thank God.* Blood on her wrists and between her legs after Gus' brutal attack should have drawn them, yet they went for Gus' unmarred, proud flesh as if guided by unseen hands.

"Damn it! Sorry, Brielle. You're just not worth all this shit." His jeans came off in a flurry agitation.

In several angry jerks, he'd secured another pair from his pack and yanked them on after checking for more parasites. Giving his ruined pair a wide birth, he stepped up to grip her hair in a vice-like hold, pulling until tears spilled from her eyes. "If I see any sign of your boyfriend, I'll be back to kill you before I finish him."

"I don't have a boyfriend, asshole."

Shoving her to the side, he reached for his rifle.

"If whoever rescued you from Jules is back, I'll see you dead for it. Count on it." Audible clicks defined the checking of his rifle as he used the barrel to push aside the tent flap, visually inspecting then sidestepping the leeches navigating their single-file path through the tent opening. "Ain't fucking natural being around you."

The temporary reprieve would've granted her aching, tight muscles a moment to relax if she wasn't shaking so hard her teeth rattled. Despite her situation, a trembling, almost hysterical laugh bubbled from between chattering teeth. *Please, God, let it be Tiago out there.* The strange connection they'd formed in the cabin blossomed in her mind and warmed her battered and bruised body as her shivers grew into shudders. A certain numbing euphoria clouded her mind. Shock?

She'd survived relatively unscathed—for the moment.

Day-to-day living became minute-to-minute here in the jungle where the normal principles of civilization didn't apply.

She could fathom out her next step if she survived the next five minutes, then the next hour.

Tiago had put her to sleep with a single touch to her forehead, which instigated more questions to which she had no logical answers. Now, the same tingling in her chest that had coincided with his presence yesterday suffused her with hope.

Deep snarls and rasping yowls warned of several leopards hunting nearby. *Leopards don't hunt in packs.* Perhaps her present circumstances overwhelmed her senses or the drug remnants still in her system caused an auditory hallucination. *Were the leeches real?*

A look around betrayed no evidence of the parasites' presence or their passing. Gus had doped her, the remaining dregs wreaking havoc on her body. Being a native, his experiences with indigenous plant life and their effects would far surpass her meager knowledge. Perhaps he'd used something that caused her to see and hear the things her heart and imagination conjured to keep mind and body safe. That didn't settle her immediate problem of how to survive and get back to the village.

Even if she could free her hands, she'd likely end up as food for the large cats. A slight coppery scent advertised the blood slicking her wrists and her weakness, ringing the dinner bell for any predator within miles. The leeches had already left. Maybe she'd at least live long enough to ferret out the mystery.

"*Bastardo*, come out. Come out now, or I'll put a bullet through her head!"

More angry shouts from Gus let her know his two companions were missing, yet she'd heard no gunfire or sounds indicating the large cats tearing and ripping into fresh meat.

Fear and confusion combined with hope to give her strength. Free of the sheet's constraints, she eased toward the small gap of the tent's entrance while avoiding Gus' bunched-up jeans. *No need to tempt fate.*

Morning light stabbed her eyes and compounded her headache, yet if death had arrived, she'd rather see it coming. *At least I'll die a virgin.*

Gus stood three feet away with his rifle quiet and ready, waiting for a target. None of nature's predators announced their presence with growls, hisses, or snarls. Nothing crawled, slithered, or jumped to challenge him.

"Come out now, or I'll shoot this bitch." A thin slice of fear threaded his anger.

Off to the left, behind or amid the stretch of Bengal bamboo, the low growl of a large cat made her shiver. In the next instant, other cats' screams resonated in the quiet morning air, adding another layer of complexity to the inexplicable situation. The sound confused her. Not only were there many large cats, but it seemed a coordinated effort, cooperation among creatures not known for such behavior. The alternative—she and Gus shared an auditory hallucination.

Gus' sudden shuffle-step sideways kicked sand and rotting leaves in her face, stinging her eyes and obstructing her airway. His peculiar demeanor became contagious amid her coughing and spitting, as she attempted to identify what spooked someone normally at home in the jungle. Directly ahead, leaves and large fruit hanging from the durian, sub-canopy trees, further blocked her ground-level viewpoint.

"Holy shit!" Gus hissed through clenched teeth.

When he turned to her, she expected to see a smug, superior visage at the very least, possibly a sneer followed by the bite of bullets tearing through her taut muscle and shaking bones.

Shock and confusion radiated from him in waves. "Time for me to run, sweetie. Sorry, but you're on your own. I don't do...ants." The ribbon of uncertainty in his tone grew until his anxiety was palpable, his speech thin and halting as he glanced over his shoulder at the approaching threat. "Thanks for the crystal. I'll figure out what this key opens on my own."

After sliding the tent flap farther open, he reached in and grabbed his backpack before leaning down to leer in her face. "There's a swarm of army ants coming, Brielle. Sorry I can't waste a bullet to spare you the agony of them eating you alive 'cause I'm hearing a bunch of cats close by. I may not have you, but at least I'll live in style, away from the jungle." The feral animal in those coal-black eyes reveled in victory before he slipped out of the tent, his deep chuckle further evidence of his superiority.

"Damned convenient I don't even have to dispose of your body. What the horde leaves behind, their following of scavengers will finish."

The ominous crunch of dead leaves from his retreating steps drifted back to prompt a memory of long ago when her mother and Tashuin sought to teach her how to move with stealth in the jungle. Apparently, Gus didn't care.

With nothing nearby to cut her bonds, she had no hope of escape. Naked, in pain, numb hands, cold, and shivering in spite of the heat—all factors combined to overload her mind. In defeat, she lay her head on outstretched arms. A deep breath of courage would help right now, but her lungs constricted with a ferocious pressure, powered by abhorrence of the unknown.

A second later, Gus was gone, leaving an eerie silence to fill the atmosphere. The flap he'd released had brushed her forehead before coming to rest and denying her the sight of what her mind conjured while a sour sample of what her stomach yearned to heave burned the back of her throat. Even if she had the ability and strength to run, she wouldn't get far before one predator or another brought her down. Bleeding from her wrists issued an open invitation to one and all carnivores.

In her mind's eye, she could see the elongated mandibles of the soldier ants chomping through anything in their path, the formic acid venom they emitted would dissolve her flesh in a consistent and organized fashion. Though blind, they were sensitive to movement. She didn't stand a chance with the drugs lingering in her system and other predators nearby.

Her mom had once told her one could hear the miniaturized army coming through the forest—and she did. Over the sound of the gentle mist which had begun falling, she heard the ant swarm's chomping through decayed leaves with each tick of an imagined clock.

As she awaited death in the form of millions of stings and dissolving flesh, she thought of her mom who'd wanted her to live and find contentment in the Amazon. Now she would die here, alone and terrified. Off to her left, the warning hisses of many leopards continued to grow in volume. The staccato spitting of rapid gunfire followed angry curses, which then morphed into pathetic screams. Perhaps Gus wouldn't survive this either.

To hear the guide beg from the very creatures he'd endeavored to kill lent a primal satisfaction even if it was the last she'd ever enjoy. At least the residents of the jungle and women in nearby villages would remain safer.

Digging her elbows and toes into the tent's canvas floor, she crept forward with morbid fascination, compelled to watch death approach. Swishing and slapping leaves beyond the last tent brought her attention to her final threat. Only minutes existed between life and feeling her mom's arms around her again. Since fear wouldn't lend enough strength to attempt escape, she'd meet this final threat with as much dignity as she could muster despite the tears trailing down her cheeks.

She'd been drugged, overcome with grief and pain. It was just—too much.

Acid released from the ants' mouths would be painful beyond anything she'd ever endured, yet a calm and peaceful mantle settled about her shoulders. Nothing lasted forever despite what her mom had declared. *"One day you'll join with an incredible man who'll stand by your side for eternity. From that point on, you'll know peace as you never have."* How could she believe such nonsense? She was no fairy princess.

Deeper in the jungle, Gus' strident voice echoed in the morning stillness. His gun remained silent except for the metallic clicks announcing his lack of ammunition. "Move, damn it! They're coming. You'll die, too, if we don't leave. Why are you surrounding me and not attacking?"

Confusion bore down faster than the oncoming ant swarm, compounded by her inability to sort the facts before her. Perhaps the mind couldn't comprehend some horrors so instead exuded a sense of euphoric bliss in its place.

From the other side of camp where she expected to see the multitude of ants any minute, a warm glow bathed the drooping durian leaves, not from above but seemingly from within. A glow she associated with Tiago.

In the midst of all the chaos, a chestnut-colored arm brushed the small branches aside to reveal Tiago's chiseled and carved form.

"Run! For God's sake, run. There's a swarm of army ants..." After a quick inhale, she struggled through the tent opening on bruised hands and skinned knees, desperate to warn him away.

Another labored breath and she stood, naked, on legs trembling so hard she wouldn't stay vertical long. Soothing rain washed the air clean even as it drizzled down her face to slide over the slope of her breasts to the valley between. Goosebumps had raised along her arms and shoulders, cooled and multiplied with the slight breeze.

Air exploded from her lungs as she dropped to her butt, taking sanity with it in one loud *whoosh*.

Thousands, millions of ants had parted for and surrounded Tiago, not attacking but remaining a constant distance, as if he directed their every step.

In mesmerized horror, she watched the insect army's destruction of all vegetation in its path on either side of the man who walked between their ranks. From her mother's teachings, she remembered they generally traveled in either some type of fan wave or even a line but never alongside a human being. *He isn't human*. The thought came unbidden in a moment of blind inspiration—along with the realization that no one would live to tell his secret.

The iridescent shimmer surrounding him brightened to near-blinding intensity in the following heartbeats, adding fluency to his predatory grace. *Light seems to originate from the pendant he wears*. Cupped hands shaded her eyes from the blinding light.

Even with his glowing form and death approaching in stilted movements, the heat in his penetrating, cobalt gaze reminded her—she wore no clothes. Warmth curled inside to stir the same excitement she felt with his prior touch of her forehead.

Though she still heard Gus' angry and confused shouting in the distance, she no longer feared for herself, despite the fact she could now see the army of death heading directly toward her. *What the hell?* Their alternating tripod system of angular movement held her in thrall while each half-moon shaped body of ants coordinated their movements to march beside Tiago, maintaining their distance as if knowing his intended path.

"How...?" The thought of holding her breath to still her slightest movements before the blind advancing horde suddenly seemed a ridiculous option in light of his obvious control.

She gulped.

Thousands of ants stopped two feet away from her, their small, segmented bodies swaying side-to-side to an unheard

beat. Looking beyond Tiago, she realized she'd misjudged their numbers.

"There must be millions..." As stunningly beautiful as they were deadly, astonishing didn't come close to describing the spectacle before her. In unison, the miniature waves undulated in their coordinated and fascinating shift. Each ripple drew her further into their mesmerizing spell.

Gus' wailing became white noise in the background.

Intuition became fact. Not only did Tiago command every aspect of her being, but he also commanded non-human creatures as well. That understanding came on an elemental level, innate knowledge verified by the images playing out in front of her. He directed the distant leopards surrounding Gus, more innate knowledge. Yet here he stood, looming, towering over her, making her feel small yet significant in a way she'd never imagined.

"I am sorry he took you. He will never do so again."

Tiago's intoxicating, husky tone, edged with a restrained magnetism, did nothing to calm her frantic pulse and whirling chaotic thoughts.

The unfathomable depth of his gaze cut deep into her mind to leave her ruminations dried, shriveled, and drifting away on the slight breeze. As he stepped closer, the ants parted to let him pass. Whatever he was, dangerously beautiful and strangely powerful didn't touch the tip of the iceberg.

"I'm not hurt. Only scared...and naked."

"You've been drugged. I feel the effects in your system." The harsh sound from his throat morphed into a low growl as his gaze wandered over her naked form, lingering on her cuts and abrasions as if he were somehow responsible for each and bore the wounds on his own body.

When he kneeled before her, she became more aware of her femininity than any other time in her life. Tucking her fisted hands under her chin allowed her arms to cover her breasts while pulling her knees up further protected her modesty.

With reverence in his eyes, he reached out, his hand hovering over one of the shallow cuts on her hip. Ever so slowly, he lowered it. *Contact*. The muscles in her belly jumped and bunched under his branding touch, a tidal wave of tingling sensation crashing through her body. She gritted her teeth against the undertow of excitement pulling her down a path she'd never traveled.

The burning, which began as a light prickle, grew into an active sting. From there, the warmth of his fingers bathed her surrounding flesh in a comfort she'd never known until the pain was gone.

Nothing compared to the searing heat in his gaze.

Pressing her lips together prevented her from blurting out vapid or asinine comments. So consumed with the gentle touch on her wounds, she couldn't organize her thoughts, much less trust herself to speak. Whether she shivered from the cool air brushing places not meant to feel it or trembled from the brush of his healing caress, she didn't know. Closing her eyes tight, she took several measured breaths to clear her mind.

It didn't work.

"Look at me, little one. You have more courage than any human I've ever met."

She'd endured lecherous grins, snide comments, and raunchy suggestions since her breasts grew from an A to a C cup. Never had she seen such carnal hunger combined with admiration and devotion. Again, her mother's words regarding eternity floated back to her. *How can this be?*

"Brielle. My name is Brielle." She wanted to hear him say her name in that low and husky intonation while his gaze pulled all the heat from within to spread across her skin.

"Brielle, I will finish healing you, then we will talk." With a slow, methodical precision, he covered each wound until her flesh held a healthy pink glow.

Talk? Definitely not on her mind. *Oh God*. Was he going to send her away again? Gazing down, anywhere but at his face, hid her tear-brimmed eyes from the force of his penetrating awareness.

"Brielle?"

When her gaze met his, it immediately dropped to his mouth, a safer zone, or so she'd thought. His lips, sculpted for kissing, appeared firm with a twist of irony. She knew this without touching them. Like his words, they'd be gentle while conveying more than his eyes or touch could express. She'd kissed men before, but the experience had left her feeling neutral, like stepping into a spa to find it lukewarm.

The slow, sexy smile that kicked one corner of his mouth up revealed even, white teeth, perfect and straight. What would they feel like nibbling on her flesh?

"How did you know I was in trouble, and how did you know where to find me?" Her eyelids grew heavy when he reached up to cup her face. Like a rabbit caught in a snare, she held perfectly still, far too aware that he too was a predator, one with magical teeth. Intuition told her, he'd never bring her harm as the imposing bulk of him drowned her in a wash of longing to explore every fine detail of his rough-hewn form.

"We have much to discuss. For now, you will sleep."

As he touched her forehead, her eyelids drooped, her eyes no longer able to gather information for her muddled mind to sift through and decipher later.

The last things she saw before darkness claimed her were two wide columns of ants marching toward the section where Gus had fled into the forest.

Chapter Nine

Opening her eyes so close to the umbrella of lush, green foliage should've jolted Brielle. Instead, peace and tranquility permeated the air and invaded her mind as well as her body. Above and within arm's reach—thick, green leaflets danced in the meager air currents, releasing their subtle scent to soften the memories of what she'd escaped.

A slow, deep inhalation allowed the harmony of nature to infiltrate down to a cellular level while distant cobwebs of sleep buffeted her desire to sort things out. Silk-smooth fiber cushioned her body, so soft the threads could only have one origin. Without looking, she recognized the fine texture of Java cotton, or kapok fiber, cocooning her frame. Tight weaving of interlocking branches underneath it formed a smooth pallet that when combined with the thick layer of cotton, put any manmade mattress to shame.

Her slow, drifting gaze along her downy-soft t-shirt indicated the same smooth fiber. She'd often marveled at how the local tribeswomen hand wove their garments with a dexterity and precision she would never match.

Had she slept for hours despite her normal energetic lifestyle? Her biological clock indicated the morning sun should be approaching its zenith, yet the canopy domed a mysterious world of its own design while blocking the atmosphere's sharp radiance. She didn't want to open her eyes again and find her new reality had vanished in some horrific, waking nightmare.

Mental acuity sharpened with flashbacks of recent events. Ants. Thousands upon thousands of driver, legionary ants had headed for her tent yet stopped just feet away. Yes, she'd been in a tent—*on the ground*.

Her eyelids flew open again on a gasp. Gus had almost succeeded in raping her, stopped only by leeches, jaguars—and ants. The instant her muscles tensed, a light, gliding caress down her forearm conveyed a sense of peace and eased her anxiety. Tiago sat cross-legged beside her, watching over her while she slept.

The half-grin she now associated with his ability to reach inside and calm her worst fears lent a rugged nonchalance that tugged her into his world with no spoken words.

"Army ants..."

"You are safe here. Nothing will harm you."

The smooth and resonant tone created a deep tranquility within, cocooning her in its soothing borders to deny entrance to anything that might threaten. It was the first time she'd felt not just safe, but insulated and cherished.

"Where am I?" The reassuring, warm touch retraced its path then moved to her neck, her cheek, her forehead. "Don't put me to sleep again. Please." When he grazed her lips with the lightest of caresses, a tingling bolt of tension invaded her belly. Her hips squirmed. Fabric as soft as her shirt tightened around her thighs with the movement. These weren't her pants either... They appeared identical to those of her rescuer.

"I've no intention of doing so. You are healed."

His low rasp pulsed with the palpable hunger she felt skimming just underneath his touch, warming her in places she shouldn't be thinking about.

White teeth contrasted rich-hued skin, enhancing his healthy glow. The slow, sexy smile ignited a passion she'd never experienced yet knew she'd beg to explore—if he didn't send her away.

"We're in the canopy, but I don't know how..." Flashbacks of the horrible assault induced shudders she couldn't suppress. "If you hadn't arrived when you did..."

"Yes, but you are safe."

Never in her life had she felt such a connection with another living being. She and her mom had been close, but this man fueled a need for touch, a need for...more. Was that part of his aura? His— "You're magic." The thought had popped unbidden into her mind and made sense once she'd realized the ants had surrounded him and followed unspoken directives. Only now did the full reality of it sink in.

The brilliant glow she'd seen twice in the forest now pulsed as a slight luminescence around him. Her mom had always said there was magic in the world; she just had to find it. *Now I have.*

"Only someone magical or mythical could do what you've done."

The lazy patterns he traced on her temple compelled her eyelids to drift down until he lifted his hand away. Such an amazing look of wonder encompassed his face she had to smile. *He feels this strange connection, too.*

"Yes. And I've come to learn that you share an affinity with it, also."

"But how? Why? You told me to leave the forest." The combination of innate alpha status tempered his gentle touch and easy mannerisms to create a swirling vortex of chaotic sensations she couldn't describe or deny. A master hand had

created this being, built from strength, honor, and integrity, yet eased with compassion, candor, and cunning.

"You will not leave. You belong to the Amazon Basin, just as I do. I've consulted others of my kind. You are meant to live here with me. The fact you appeared as a foreigner took me by surprise."

His statement, issued as a foregone conclusion, created a sense of belonging, allowing her mind to seek out peculiarities that had always set her apart but now reconciled and harmonized her spirit with the rainforest. The rightness of her presence here completed her in a way nothing ever had before. "There are others like you?"

"I am one-of-a-kind. Each of the Kurupira is unique in their own way, yet we share an allegiance and obligation to oversee the protection of all within our realms."

Unconsciously, she reached for the necklace, her crystal and key now returned. "Thank you for retrieving this." The crystal lay nestled between her breasts under her t-shirt as a reminder of everything she'd endured. Bits and flashes of memory forced her to think about the events of the last twenty-four hours, fitting pieces together in a living jigsaw puzzle. The jungle had always felt like home, a place where she fit. Now, she had a more specific definition—in Tiago's presence. "How'd you know Gus had it?"

"Animals of the forests shared Gus's activities. Then, Gus was only too happy to tell me about how on occasion, men and women are taken and used for experimentation."

Goosebumps rose in the wake of his caress down her arms and over the back of her hand. When his touch glided over her inner wrist, her womb spasmed with a foreign hunger. Heat rose from her chest to spread up her neck. Her mom had always told her to wait for the man that swept her off her feet. *How could she know?*

"Can you read my thoughts? Is that how you found me?"

"No. My instincts guided me to you after panic released its grip. As long as you remain in or near the rainforest, I will always know where you are."

"How?"

"The same way I know you belong here. It is written in every leaf, every branch, and every living creature in the Amazon. I know what the trees whisper to each other, just like the jaguar, the scorpions, and the snakes. I only had to open my eyes to see it. I've been alone so long that I have forgotten what it is like to be a part of someone."

Deep in her soul, she already knew. Stories from the time she could toddle came back to her in her mom's soft, spoken tales, explaining the adventures of a young man, older than time yet never aging, protecting the rainforest with his mate by his side. Over and over, the same two people, one native and one native-bred but foreign-raised, together they'd make a life for themselves in the canopy of the kapoks, barrigonas, and capirona crowns.

Why didn't Mom tell me?

"I see you already know this." Again, the low sexy purr caressed her tension away. His tone mesmerized while the depth of his gaze commanded her attention.

"Yes, my mom has told me the same story for years. I just never realized she was referring to me."

"Tell me about your mother."

"You're a Kurupira, a myth."

"Does this feel like a myth? I am as real as you."

The caress along her neck elicited a moan as she shifted to give him better access. His touch was gentle, commanding, beguiling, making her stomach knot and her heart race. The soft words that stroked and excited each nerve ending curled inside, soothed and incited her emotions until chaos reigned, followed by a carnal hunger which wouldn't be denied.

With the dawning of her situation came the realization of his true nature. "I want to see your feet." Turning her head to the side, she discerned nothing unusual about his legs, the turn of his ankles or toes.

"You meet a magical creature and your first thoughts concern my feet?" The humor in his reproach matched the devilish gleam in his eyes. Tiny laugh lines bracketed the corners, adding character to someone already containing an overabundance.

"I grew up on stories about you. A Kurupira is supposed to have backward feet...My earliest memories of jungle vacations with my mom included tales of your adventures. We'd always planned to settle here until she got sick. We wanted a little cabin in the village."

"Tashuin is your father."

"He—*was* my father. How did you know?" Tears filled her eyes with the flashback of finally finding her father only to have him die in her arms. "I found his home this morning. He'd been poisoned. He's d-dead."

"By the guide?"

"No. I went up first and found Tashuin struggling to breathe. He was fighting the poison but couldn't continue any longer. He died a few minutes later."

"What did Tashuin tell you?"

"To not let them have the other half of the crystal and link to the jungle. What does that mean?"

"Tashuin has been my friend for decades. Years ago, he said he'd fathered a child, a very special girl. Born of his blood, she would be at peace in the jungle. He would say no more except that she would be priceless to me. Why did

your mother not tell you of this?"

"My mother was murdered the day before I left the States—by someone searching for my half of the crystal." With reverence, she tugged at the heavy chain nestled between her breasts, the stone's slight clink against the mysterious key beside it adding more intrigue to her life. Thin shafts of light able to breach the canopy reflected through the many-faceted stone to create a multi-colored rainbow across her chest.

"Did Tashuin know his aggressors?"

"He—couldn't say." When tears trailed down her cheek, Tiago plucked her from her bed to sit on his lap. The comfort of his arms around her couldn't take away the pain of loss, but to know she had a like soul to share it gave a brief respite.

Resting against the tree's trunk, he wiped her tears with the pad of his thumb while caressing her back. More gooseflesh spread from back to hairline as he gently twined his fingers in her hair and made soft swirling motions on her scalp.

"You must think I'm a baby, crying like this." To have him shoulder some of her grief meant she was no longer alone in the world, no longer an outcast, making her tears as much from relief as from grief.

"I think you've endured great suffering in the last few days and need to excise it."

"Tell me how you learned to use magic, where you come from. Everything."

"It has been a long time since I've discussed my history. Not even Tashuin knew it all. We are a select race, born and bred to protect the rainforests. In the beginning, there were twelve. Now, we number eleven."

"You can die?"

"Yes, by the use of powerful and very specific magic. With the advent of your new weapons and technology, we are more susceptible to injury and death."

"And the magic? How did you learn? Who taught you?"

"Ahh, the heart of the matter. Magic is ingrained, born to my kind. Many eons ago, we were trained together then spread out over the jungles to protect them and their inhabitants."

"Do you—have parents?"

"Not as such. We are solitary, created from nature and the Earth, and as such we are one with the forest."

The following hours passed in quiet discussion as Brielle explained the details of her mother's murder, her unique if quirky lifestyle, and her lifelong intent to live in the rainforest. Memories spilled in a torrent of nostalgic flashbacks, reaffirming her mother's gentle but strong heart.

Tiago listened and asked questions about details of her life he didn't grasp. For one who'd spent his entire existence in the rainforest, his knowledge of the outside world surprised her.

"You will miss it? Your work in the States?"

"The work? I suppose, but I won't miss my home. Without Mom, well, there's just nothing left for me there. This is where we'd always intended to settle. This place draws me, makes me feel at home in my own skin. If mom hadn't got sick, we would've already settled here."

"Now you will stay here, make this your home. Tomorrow, I'll retrieve the other half of the crystal. As long as it's out there and the doctor is alive, you will be a target."

"What do you know about this doctor?"

"Otherwise known as TJ, he settled here many years ago with promises to keep foreigners from stripping the land. On the surface, he's kept his word plus distributed medical supplies and provided education to many in this realm. I've suspected he harbored ulterior motives but saw no proof until now."

"How will you know where to look?"

"I will sense his aura, and the forest's animals will help. The hunter who attacked you gave the crystal to the Doc. Once I retrieve it, you will have both halves just as your father intended. Then, I believe you'll feel the same alliance with nature I do. I suspect Tashuin used his half of the crystal to track you, hence he'd always known when you were close. You've always worn it, yes?"

"Yes. Before she died, my mom said one half finds the other."

"It also mutes your aura in a way. I believe it's why I had difficulty tracking the poacher. I didn't find him until he'd given it to the doctor."

"Which means the doctor can track me now..."

"No. Not up here."

"But I wore half and you found me..."

"You and I share a bond that's stronger than magic performed by mortals."

The tingly vibes dancing on her skin from his petting suddenly flared with his darkening gaze. As if tiny threads had woven their souls together, heart and mind, sinew and synapse, growing and strengthening, addicting and comforting, she felt it in the deepest reaches of her being. All the while, he kneaded her back and neck, twining his fingers in her hair and sending waves of heated desire to overwhelm her senses.

Unable to resist, she let her fingers glide through the black silk of his shoulder-length hair while wondering what it

would feel like against her neck, her chest, her belly. Life in the jungle had honed his body in to hard angles and slabs of sleek muscle. Though he appeared no older than herself, something in his cobalt-blue eyes suggested an old-world knowledge that remained just out of her reach.

"Connecting with others has never been easy for me, yet I feel we have so much in common with the rainforest. We're both a part of it. How old are you?"

"Let's just say I was here before man settled in the jungle."

"Oh...So I'll be dating an old, older man." The giggle bursting from within took her by surprise, the first sign of grief relinquishing its hold, if only for a brief moment. It felt good, and she knew her mom would approve.

Conversation flowed with the give and take of sharing secrets and choice tidbits of their lives. His elemental understanding of every natural facet of the rainforest would take her years of study to even scratch the surface.

The combination of strange symbiotic relationships amid the plants and animals in the land yielded a balance in nature she'd studied all her life. To see Tiago arising from the shadows and mist and assuming responsibility for its continuance restored her lost faith in the higher powers.

"How do you know so much about things you've never experienced? Technology, city life, my work."

"I keep track of certain people and their activities—the shamans in my domain, the others like myself. We share information of it all."

Through his eyes, she saw the great Mayan empire rise and fall, effects of acid rain from industrialization, and creatures from the pink river dolphins to the capybara rodents struggling to survive the encroachment of humanity. Though they sat over a hundred feet in the air on cushioned, thick matted branches forming a natural highway, she felt at ease in his arms.

"Tomorrow, I will visit Tashuin's home. Every shaman maintains significant artifacts. Those items comprise a physical diary of sorts and will let me know more about his life—and possibly his death. I want to know as much as possible before confronting the CEO of TJ homeopathic industries."

"TJ industries? I've not heard of it."

"The doctor runs the facility and treats the natives' medical problems among other things."

* * * *

To hold this beautiful woman in his arms stirred a warmth to the depths of his soul that would last for eternity. In all his centuries, he'd never valued one human above another, yet didn't question the rightness of absorbing her heat and letting their energies entwine, making her his most treasured gift.

"And you'll be able to read these things belonging to my father?"

Her soft, puffy breaths on his neck ignited an all-consuming need to touch every inch of her and learn each hollow, each muscle, and each curve. "Yes, I will. He has weaved a complicated web of magic and circumstance that began as small as a seed then grew into an elaborate architecture of game and subterfuge. He was a master."

The soft contours of her body, smooth and tan, now belonged to him. Whether through a higher power or the meddling of a man he'd called friend didn't matter. He would protect her, teach her, and guide her in the ways of the jungle until she could stand by his side as an equal. She would develop similar powers upon their joining. For now, she needed to process all that had happened and grieve for the loss of her parents. He saw no need to rush; eternity stretched out before them.

"Are you hungry?" The silk of her hair between his fingers brought images of long summer evenings coiled around her body, sated and resting in the treetops. He had to smile as the soft, circular fondling on her scalp induced the reaction he sought.

Pure and earthly lust clawed his abdomen when she squirmed on his lap. The quickening rhythm of her pulse reassured even as it stirred his desire. Images of how he'd take her to the brink of carnal sanity and hold her on its edge before shattering her thoughts in mind-numbing bliss encouraged a southern blood flow he couldn't control.

Yet she needed time to adjust and adapt.

"Just a little, but I can wait. This feels so good. I don't want to move."

"Hmm, you don't have to." Her blonde curls, mussed in sensual disarray, eliminated every thought but one, bringing her fully into his world.

She startled when he held out his other hand, and a bright red-skinned *cuiju* fruit suddenly appeared.

"How'd you do that?"

"I am Kurupira."

"Will I be able to do that?"

"Yes. I will teach you to match your aura to that of the rainforest. No animal will ever harm you. The jungle will provide everything you need."

"What else will I be able to do?" Biting lightly into the fibrous fruit yielded an explosion of sweet, juicy flavor.

"You will know the placement of animals, human and otherwise, that roam the jungle unless magic shields them."

"What about that glow? It seemed to come from the pendant on your chest."

"This medallion focuses my magic, just as I suspect the crystal will do for you once it's united."

"What if I don't have magic inside?" Twisting off the nut below the apple yielded the cashew inside.

"I feel the magic within you, like a low hum beneath your skin. You've probably felt it as a sixth sense but never learned to harness and focus it." In response to the direction of thought, his glow brightened, just as when he'd first touched her.

"Whoa. You're glowing brighter. And your touch tingles like when you were healing me." Pressing her hands against her stomach as if trying to keep her body from squirming, she groaned.

"Do not be alarmed. You'll feel more of this as our auras continue to merge." Her body shivered under his touch. The slight arching of her back when he traced her collarbone betrayed her growing need.

"M-my mom and I made plans to relocate here. I realize now she'd planned to reunite with Tashuin and become a family." Her green eyes darkened, appeared slightly unfocused.

"We will be a family." When she tucked her head under his chin, he smiled at the blush spreading across her cheeks. With a finger under her jaw, he raised her gaze to his own then let his fingers drift to the soft base of her neck.

The startled-doe expression revealed her lack of experience with romantic situations. Practicing remained foremost in his mind.

"The rainforest will provide everything?"

The hunger in her gaze sped his pulse to beat in perfect rhythm with the steadily increasing throb under his fingertips. He both scented and sensed her rising desire in the fine sheen of perspiration on her skin, dilated pupils, and quickened breath. It was only fair she felt a fraction of what stirred in the depths of his soul.

"Everything that I do not. Don't feel alarmed or rushed. We have as much time as we need." Regardless of what she made him feel, he would not take her until she understood and processed all that was involved concerning her destiny.

Faint shafts of morning light pulsed through fluttering leaves of the organic veil overhead to shimmer in her hair, each strand seen as a dazzling thread to derail his train of thought. Most of his concentration centered on the amazement that they now belonged to each other. He spent hours braced against the tree watching her sleep after they'd spent half the night talking. Her soft snores against his chest kept his body stirred and ready. With each moment that passed, possessiveness swelled until it consumed his soul.

When her eyes fluttered open, the lush depths captured his spirit the same way the rainforest took his breath each rising.

"Good morning. Sleep well?" Anticipation of searching the hidden depths of her gaze again had kept him awake, not wanting to waste one minute of being in her presence with sleep.

"Very well. First time I've slept in the canopy." Her early morning stretch tightened the fabric against her breasts.

"I prefer it to an enclosed hut."

"I keep thinking I'll wake up and this all will have been a dream." She smiled lazily before yawning and squirming to rearrange her position.

"This is no dream. Once in every Kurupira's lifetime, destiny will provide a mate, one who'll become immortal and share his life and responsibilities." He'd probably never know how or why Tashuin became involved with his destiny but would spend eternity in gratitude.

Now, with the morning sun's tortoise-like ascent in the east, it seemed his entire world teetered on a fragile axis. One wrong move and he'd be lost forever. Brielle wasn't immortal yet.

The vile creature hunting his mate possessed great cunning and most likely magical skill considering he'd hidden his despicable aspirations for so long. *What else has the doctor planned?* "Hungry?"

"Starving."

With a sweep of his hand, a vast array of berries, nuts, and vegetables appeared on banana leaves in front of them.

"I can't wait 'til I can do that." After the audible complaints from her stomach had urged her off his lap, she reached for some berries. Closing her eyes, she moaned in pleasure as she swallowed their uniquely flavored juices.

"When the crystal halves are combined and in your possession, your soul will unite with the rainforest to become one." Unable to stop himself, he reached over to wipe the dab of liquid at the corner of her mouth with his thumb. Their bond flared with the contact to create a slight shimmer surrounding them both.

"Our bond... Sometimes, it flares."

"Yes. With your emotions."

"It didn't flare as brightly yesterday while I sat in your lap." Curling blond locks filtered the view of the blush spreading across her cheeks when she ducked her head.

"It was there, still new but there nonetheless, plus—you'd been drugged. Now it is stronger. Together, we will learn to control it, use it to our advantage." Blood surging south kept him feeling a little off keel, aggravated by the way she nibbled her lips.

With thousands of tiny electrical jolts blasting their lust through his system, the last thing he wanted was to leave her alone. Her inexperience and the recent attack had reinforced his restraint and kept his hands from exploring the curiosity

shimmering in her gaze, but now her innocent yet provocative body language challenged his self-control.

Leaning back against the trunk once again, he cautioned her. "I have to go to Tashuin's home today, then another errand. I will return with the other crystal half before the sun has reached its height. You will be safe here."

"I want to come with you."

"No. You are not fully protected out there. As long as you stay here, you are shielded from their sight."

"But we can use this half of the crystal to find the other..."

"No, I know who has it. Brielle, don't ever take that stone off. Tashuin crafted it for you."

"What about this key my mother gave me? Do you have any idea what it unlocks?"

With a reverence he'd rarely seen, she removed the key from the chain and handed it to him, trusting him with her mother's precious legacy, whatever it entailed.

"No, but I can feel an aura of magic around it similar to Tashuin's. I will let you know what I find."

Leaving her alone had left a virtual knife wrenched in his gut. These new and disturbing sensations clawed at his mind amid the compounded frustration of the doctor's betrayal.

Moving away from her instigated new and unsettling thoughts. Would she remain in the safety of the canopy? Determination and strength of will had buoyed her spirits thus far while allowing her to cut previous ties and relocate to make a new home—complete with new dangers. He'd known strong humans before. They all had breaking points.

Mankind tended to be pack oriented, seeking the nurturing relationships that gave their lives substance and meaning while striving to maintain their identity. Her compassionate nature in caring for the forest and her desire to remain, away from her familiar home and life were only two of the reasons that set her apart. The same energy that thrummed just underneath his skin thrived in her aura, waiting for release.

How did they track her from the States? And how had they found her in the States when she didn't use the shaman's name?

Oaths sworn by foreigners always came with the risk of greed and treachery. That risk had blossomed into perilous proportions, leaving Brielle in the crosshairs of a shrewd and dangerous man. What other aspirations breathed life into the dark under TJ's guidance?

Today, the organic pathway of the treetops offered a new hope he hadn't expected to feel. Each step revealed fantastic sights and sounds he would share with Brielle, his mate. Her love of the Amazon Basin stemmed both from her origins as the daughter of a shaman and her mother's frequent trips to a place they'd wanted to call home. She'd have the life she sought as soon as he dealt with the director of TJ Chemicals.

Minutes later saw him standing outside of Tashuin's hut. The tanned-hide door did nothing to prevent the odor of dead flesh permeating the morning air and reminding him of Brielle's vulnerability—until they mated.

"I'm sorry, old friend, that you met your end in this way. I will see those responsible pay with their lives." After stepping inside, it became apparent that even in death, surrounding wildlife left his form undisturbed. Neither insect nor animal hovered near the shaman's body.

Several minutes of concentration saw his friend's inert remains glow with a preternatural light before vanishing. The body would reappear in the nearby village where natives would honor Tashuin's remains in compassionate cannibalism.

Tiago didn't normally deal with the human aftermath of life in his realm, Tashuin proved a worthy exception. Western cultures shied away in disgust at the thought of these rites respected by tribesmen since the beginning of time. Westerners would never understand the deepest secrets of his lands, either.

Memories of their previous interactions brought the shaman's spirit to life in his mind with their many conversations and his obsession over a Kurupira's ability to withstand all Earth's elements in any form. He never did understand his friend's fascination with heat and lightning.

Of all the humans who'd traveled through his existence, this man distinguished himself as the closest thing to family other than the Kurupira. The fact that Tashuin had fallen in love yet sent his woman and child away, knowing they'd be safer with greater distance between them until the child had grown took great courage, sacrifice, and love.

Only now did Tiago realize how much of the future his friend had foreseen.

On a side table by the bed, a leather-bound book sat on one corner. He'd not seen it in recent years during his occasional visits. A small bit of nostalgia urged him over for a closer examination.

As out of place as a poacher in his land, the tome beckoned him, *look closer at the well-marked pages*. Thumbing through it now, he noticed precisely written notes left in the margin that hadn't been there when the shaman had taught him to read English years ago.

He chuckled at the memory of the wise man's insistence that one day he would need this learning. Even then, the medicine man was plotting and planning for his daughter's future happiness by ensuring they had as much in common as possible. Again, the shaman's enchantment with modern technology came to mind, always wanting to share what he'd learned about the newest devices.

No doubt, he'd joined his daughter and her intended mate mystically.

At the end of the book, a single paragraph caught his eye. Though the words appeared to be part of the story, it described a ritual designed to unite two halves of a stone. *Tashuin knew he wouldn't live to see his daughter join with me.*

Chapter Ten

“For twenty-six years, I’ve played doctor to these damned primitives, pretending to care about their petty problems, dispensing medicines during epidemics, and keeping businessmen from setting up shop.” A jerk on the chain rope hanging between broad wooden beams overhead added a sour-yellow light to the rough-timber desk. The swish and slide of shuffling papers reminded him how much he missed the most basic electronic equipment.

No doubt, if he booted up his laptop again, Tiago would somehow detect the signal. Old-fashioned pen and paper would suffice for the time being. Welcome back to the nineteenth century. It was enough to learn his nemesis was on the move. *Right on schedule.*

“The fact they’ve never caught on to you introducing viruses and bacterial strains to obtain their cooperation in developing the cure just meant you’re smarter and have stayed one step ahead of them.” For someone born and raised in the village downriver, Ermano held little sympathy for his people.

“Time and again, you’ve brought me perfect specimens to be vaccinated with one of my special serums mixed with some type of anti-malarial or other antitoxin. We’ve done well, and now we’ll reap the benefits of our hard work.”

Living among them, Ermano monitored the severity and spread of disease after each insertion. The only downside—greed and lack of conscience increased the likelihood of his employee turning traitor at some point, which meant he’d have to put the man down. *Nothing lasts forever.*

“You have both halves of the crystal, Doc?”

“No, just one. You’ll retrieve the other half soon. When you do, bring it and the girl directly to me.”

“Ahh, so you want the pretty little blonde, too. I wouldn’t mind having a piece of that one.”

“After I unite the crystal halves and deal with Tiago, you can have her once I obtain sufficient genetic material. However, you must keep her alive until I am finished testing.”

“How do you know where she is?”

“I’ve made it my business. That’s all that matters.”

“Aren’t you afraid Tiago will find you?” Ermano’s words held a tinge of indecision.

“I’ve taken steps to see that he doesn’t. Make certain you tranq her on sight. It’d be best if she didn’t see your face at all. I’ve spent years setting this up, schmoozing the locals and obtaining what I need. I can be very charming. That damn Tashuin was the only holdout.”

“He sure as hell was the hardest to find.”

“Speaking of the little bitch, don’t leave until I’m ready for you to retrieve her.”

“Yeah, all right. I haven’t heard from two of my men since yesterday when one left your facility. The other was with your girl.”

“Jules was handsomely paid for the crystal. Probably left for easier climes lacking claws, teeth, or stingers.” Satisfaction swelled with the thought of his imminent success.

“Which is what I’ll do once I fetch the bitch. I’ve had enough of the heat, humidity, and mosquitos, not to mention these clothes.”

“Developed a highbrow taste, have you? You’ll be able to indulge very soon, but since you haven’t heard from your guide, he’s probably dead, which is why I want you here until I have everything in place.”

“And you’re sure she has the other half of the crystal?”

“Yes. It is still in the area and not far from here.” Doc opened the top, right-hand drawer of his desk.

“Where? I’ll get her now. How much trouble can one girl be?”

“Wait. Tiago’s out of the canopy now. I just want enough distance between them to give you time to snatch her and get back here. I’m luring her out of the treetops now.” Doc removed Tashuin’s half crystal from a specially prepared box with a reverence not felt for anything in years.

“Huh, if the tree-huggers knew what you’ve used their satellites for, they’d burn your shop to the ground.”

“Which is why I’ve spent so many years cultivating the right approach with the right people.” Weak shards of light slanted down from the high window to angle through the crystal, displaying a muted rainbow across his white shirt. Victory would be his, very soon.

“How do you plan on dealing with Tiago?”

“Once I unite both halves of the crystal, he can’t use the forest’s creatures against me. And after all these years, I’ve found his weakness.”

"So you'll destroy him with—what?"

"A combination of heat, electricity, and magic. Mind you, once you take Brielle, you must move swiftly. Tiago isn't far from the facility. When you do get the crystal, transport it in this container. It won't be hard to find. It'll be glowing red." The secrets of Doc's small, specially lined box required a great amount of coercion of a distant shaman. Too bad the medicine man didn't survive the encounter. "Oh, and don't forget the fire extinguisher."

"What? You're gonna start a fire in the jungle?"

"Just a small one that Tiago will extinguish. You should be there before it starts. Keep your eyes on the crystal. I need the other half."

The small hut felt claustrophobic compared to his office in the facility yet insured his concealment. Decades ago, upon entering the jungle's domain, he'd scoffed at the idea of magic. Now, artifacts adorned the walls of his two-room hut, making all auras within its borders invisible to anyone of magical origin or inclination.

Doc studied the treasured crystal dangling from its long, gold chain. Words of old formed in his mind and spilled into the humid air. It had taken many hours of cajoling to coerce the spell from a particularly reticent medicine man. In the end, the convincing argument came in the form of treating a tribesman in shock whose lower metabolism and temperature would not sustain life. Years of experimenting gave him the tools to ramp up the enchantment.

Excitement coursed through his system with the increased temperature generated by the spell. Within minutes, the blistering heat emitted from the crystal made it impossible to hold the chain. "Hmm, didn't count on this much heat so quickly." Without hesitation, he settled the gem on top of a brick sitting on his wooden desk. "It only needs to glow for a moment."

"What is it doing?"

As Ermano settled in the rickety and worn chair beside the desk, Doc wondered if the native-born man would survive the mission. *It would be nice if Tiago did my dirty work for me, as long as I get my hands on Brielle and her crystal.*

"Because the other half will do the same with considerably more heat, which will start a fire and drive her toward the river." In his usual efficient manner, Doc booted up his laptop.

"I thought you said you wouldn't use that here..."

"Only for a second." The satellite imagery he relied on for information to prevent loggers from invading the forest would pinpoint her position, thanks to a crystal and a little magic.

"Ah-ha. Gotcha. God, I love technology. Here are the coordinates and a new compass. Go. Don't go near the facility. I suspect Tiago and his many friends are invading it now."

"Hmm, haven't seen one of these in a while. Translucent baseplate to see the map underneath, half-degree bezel resolution and quick dampening. This should be a breeze."

"A native who loves technology...Huh. Dart gun?"

"Got it." Ermano patted his back waistband.

"Remember, your time is limited, so hurry."

"She's out of the treetops now?"

After another glance at his computer, Doc shut it down. "She will be by the time you arrive."

* * * *

Nervous anticipation denied Brielle the ability to remain still when Tiago had descended from their cozy haven. "What will he learn from my father's belongings? Will he find the other half of the crystal and the bastard who ordered my parents' death?"

Too much information overloaded her senses. Tiago warned her not to leave the canopy for her own safety, yet her restless mind needed relief through exercise.

"He probably thought I couldn't get down by myself." Nearby monkeys quirked their heads to the side as if she'd lost her mind. "Maybe in some ways, I have." Time would tell.

"Ahh, that burns." Sizzling heat from the crystal hunched her shoulders forward even as she leaned over to escape the burn.

"Tiago?" The stone was connected to him indirectly and had never glowed much less burned before. *Has he found the other half? Is he hurt?*

Reflexive action compelled her to remove the crystal snuggled between her breasts. *Tiago must be in some type of trouble.* When the gem cleared her t-shirt's collar, its glow suddenly intensified into a blinding radiance. A brilliant multi-colored shimmer bled to crimson, becoming the drop in a pond sending colorful ripples in all directions. Several nearby macaws took flight in screeching alarm.

As she watched in stunned silence, the chain bearing the crystal heated to the point of burning her fingers. She flung it away in instinctual self-preservation.

Near her feet, dry cotton fibers sparked into tiny blades of flame on contact. Within seconds, a small curtain of fire grew, its tendrils reaching greedily for more fuel. A heartbeat later, the swath of flame had devoured its food, and the crystal began a free fall to the Earth. Light flared into a dazzling display with shooting sparks in all directions.

“Damn it. What's happening?”

A glance at the forest floor revealed small flames not far from the base of her tree. If she stayed to douse the flames in the canopy, fire spreading from the base would consume her. If she moved laterally along the treetops, she had no guarantee of getting down.

Nearby, the growling threat of a large cat doubled her pulse. *Why hasn't it followed its natural instincts and run?*

From the middle of their temporary shelter, liana vines spiraled down the trunk to the base of the large tree. Accelerated pulse matched fleeing steps in her race down the natural stairway. The rain Tiago would bring could douse the treetop flames quickly but would take longer to smother those on the forest floor. Without a blanket or anything to smother the growing menace, she'd use her shirt. Not a good plan, but choices were limited.

Below, tendrils of smoke curled around wispy fern leaves masking the growing fire. Lacking a breeze to direct its path, the small blaze fanned out in all directions.

“What is happening? Has Tiago met a force he can't overcome?” The threat of new weapons and technology flitted through her mind.

Reports of previous forest fires in the Amazon warped through her memory with the mass devastation left in their wake. Now, the most dangerous perpetuating including El Nino and the driest season of the year would increase the damage. Those alone combined to make even the smallest fire capable of burning thousands of acres while killing all plant and animal life in its path.

By the time she'd descended half the distance, flames crackled among the dry leaf litter around the tree's base.

After a couple more spirals, she'd have to jump.

Between the ruckus kicked up by nearby monkeys, the repetitive *whe-e-e-e* of a harpy eagle, and dozens of macaws squawking in fright, her startled gasp disappeared in the chaos when she lost her footing.

Moisture slicked her palm as she scrabbled to reclaim her balance using the spiral overhead. A fall from this distance would either kill or impair her mobility enough that the growing fire would consume her in mere minutes. Smoke veiled a growing diameter of the forest floor, drifting up to devour precious oxygen. After rounding two more spirals, she came face to flame with approaching death.

Fifteen feet to the floor.

She'd have to jump clear of the expanding blaze that continued to blister and scorch, reaching for more dry fare in eager anticipation. Burgeoning heat and air thickened with ash stung her eyes and clogged her throat. With a silent plea for Tiago, she vaulted from her perch, praying for any nearby wildlife to flee.

Pain exploded in her right ankle on impact.

Rolling with the momentum, she screamed as shooting pain radiated to her right hip before her shoulder landed on another sharp bough. Several branches under the floor's leafy blanket had crippled her hope of a soft landing, generating a fear that now flourished to epic proportions. *Dear God, this can't be happening.*

She'd just become more fodder for the blaze. Even if her ankle wasn't broken, she couldn't bear any weight, which meant she couldn't stay ahead of encroaching death.

Of all the times she'd needed a little luck, today proved once again that fate held a different course for her.

Heat from the fire glazed her face and chest with sweat while shriveling grasses and killing tiny inhabitants with no chance of escape. Roaring in her ears rivaled that of the growing flame. With no way out, this was where her journey would end, alone and charred to ashes.

Flames spread quickly along the dead leaves and rotting branches, roaring up dried brush and vines, licking up large trunks, and flashing through the cotton-like fluff of seedpods in the canopy. Trailing long limbs, it created an animated wall of flowing death, a pyromaniac's dream come to life.

Amid the scorched earth, her crystal glowed in a brilliant spectrum of colors. She couldn't get to it without succumbing to the blaze, which brought to mind the admonishment of both her mother and Tiago to never take it off.

Precious seconds passed. Soon, the rolling flames growing in height and intensity would devour her, burning her hair and melting the flesh from her bones while particulate matter, carbon dioxide, hydrocarbons and other organics created a dense fog to thicken the air and kill any other creature unable to flee. Yanking her shirt up to cover her nose and mouth provided little relief.

Never had she prayed so hard for rain. Tears of guilt and shame dried on her jaw as she choked on the billowing clouds of poisonous gasses.

Above, a mass exodus of wildlife headed toward the river, their fight for survival brought on by her carelessness. The cacophony created by desperate screams, howls of pain, and roars of rage warned surrounding animals of impending disaster. How many creatures would die? How many more would lose their homes? *Will Tiago forgive me?*

“Shit!” A stinging in her right arm brought her gaze to a tranq dart's needle protruding from her bicep. “What the hell?” By the time she reached for the fibrous fluff that had stabilized the projectile's flight, the drug's effects were already making her weak and dizzy.

“Hello there, pretty girl.” Stepping from behind a large Brazil nut tree, the disembodied speech took on a fuzzy shape. Dark eyes, darker hair, and scruffy beard all lent an ominous twist to the malevolent smile.

Foggy thoughts degenerated into frightening chaos as her mind substituted current reality with future probabilities, images of rape and enslavement any woman would rather die to avoid. Her world dissolved into a blackened abyss where noises and blurred images melded to form a blank screen in her mind.

Was that a fire extinguisher he'd held or part of a hallucination?

A grip in her hair, pulling her head up and the smell of tobacco amid foul breath registered somewhere in her thoughts.

Then blackness.

* * * *

For a being who lived by his instincts, Tiago felt the weight of his error pull hard on his soul. Though something about the foreigner's mannerisms had always felt off, he'd kept his experimental dealings from coming to light. Perhaps if Tiago had interfered with the natives just a bit, he would've foreseen and averted the catastrophe.

A split second of apprehension flared in his mind when an entire section of rainforest wildlife raised a tumultuous alarm. A deep calming breath helped differentiate the mixed images received from various species.

The pictures coming to mind depicted Brielle's terror after self-recriminations after her crystal started a fire. *Doc's magic?* Through the eyes of a jaguar, he watched her fleeing down the liana vines to safety.

Several jaguars watched as she jumped clear from the tree where the flames spread in an ever-widening arc. In fear, the great cats set out toward the river. She'd know he would send rain to extinguish the flames.

Hundreds of animals flew, crawled, or scrambled away to escape annihilation while others too small to move quickly enough, succumbed to death's burgeoning grasp. He felt each animal's shock, pain, and battle to survive. *This doctor must have accumulated more magic than I've suspected.*

Fires could burn thousands of acres in the right conditions. Unfortunately, conditions were prime for devastation on a mass scale. Again, he thanked the strange gifts that would allow him to extinguish the blaze before it escaped his control.

With hard-won composure stemming from centuries of experience, he centered his thoughts and concentrated on what he needed—life-giving rain.

Within seconds, clouds condensed and darkened, boiling across the sky to carry their heavy burden in lifelike animation on a mission of protection and preservation. Influencing the weather this way rivaled using a broadsword to slice a fruit, but it would work. In the distant, midafternoon sky, skeins of water sluiced down trees, blossoms, and shrubs in energetic abandon to silence the raging wildfire. He let the rush of wind across his face temper the rising anxiety over the extent of the doctor's magic.

North of the animated heat, a small flock of macaws watched the labyrinth of smoke balls curl and twist to disintegrate in the afternoon breeze. The birds' keen sight allowing him to direct the deluge until the hiss of dying flames filled his mind, silenced by the water's onslaught. Damage to the jungle would heal with his attention but could not bring back those creatures taken in the senseless act of violence. He'd use the incident to teach Brielle how to care for the forest.

Once again, his mind reached for her. He felt nothing. *Why?* Did she pass out from panic? With so much chaos surrounding the fire, he'd acquire no help from the wildlife. Even in their haste to escape, the animals would pose no threat to her. She would be safe.

As soon as he set his current plan in motion, he'd return.

This section of the jungle didn't suffer the extensive intrusion of industrialists attempting to invade his lands since he'd made a deal with the soon-to-be victim of the rainforest. Doc, the deceitful bastard, had provided medical care, educational programs, and other benefits to indigenous tribesmen, ensuring their gratitude and winning their trust. Tiago had spoken with the visiting shaman to make sure of what transpired during their meetings but never received any indication of the doctor's nefarious dealings.

To his knowledge, only Tashuin had remained unapproachable, maintaining his privacy and not succumbing to the foreigner's bribes of technology, education, and in some cases, simple, basic supplies.

All morning, he'd searched the forest for his prey, yet the doctor continued to elude him. For the second time today, he gazed through the tall wire fence surrounding the facility. *I still don't feel him and the forest's animals can't find him.*

Doc had half of the crystal and at least some magic, judging by his aura's sudden disappearance. Very few could evade him for long, but that combination could prolong his search. The only problem—every minute he remained free lengthened Brielle's vulnerability.

Two buildings stood side-by-side in stark, grotesque defiance of their surroundings. Over time, chips and crumbles of block and mortar settled around their edges to lend their weight of gaucherie and insolence in cold disrespect to his lands, a fact he would no longer tolerate.

White sandy soil formed from erosion over the millennium shaped a nutrient-poor paradox. Whereas inside the fence, not one fern, blade of grass, or palm tree endured the barren soil, outside the fenced area and still lacking mineral content and fertility, the jungle flourished.

The distance between the metal enclosure and the first block building equaled the length of a good-sized kapok tree.

The second building, directly behind and with only feet of separation, provided living quarters for the workers—or at least had at the time he'd viewed the facility.

Other than the inspection following its construction, he'd not ventured inside again. It was time to see what the doctor had been doing.

He'd tolerated the security fence since patients would spend time recuperating outside and the workers took their breaks at any of the half-dozen covered, picnic benches. He'd chalked the foreigner's fear of predators up to ignorance and inexperience.

Now, there appeared an almost imperceptible hum traveling through the metal links with a slight glow the human eye couldn't detect. Electricity, very high voltage, circled the perimeter in a deadly dance from one link to the next.

After he'd dealt with the Doc, this structure's function would end—every block, every wall, and every piece of equipment. Calm satisfaction suffused his soul as he let his senses drift out among the thousands of large and small life forms to make a connection and request.

In answer to his silent call, a dozen jaguars approached the perimeter and began digging under the barrier, mindful not to touch the bottom, metal rail. Sand and grass spumed up and back under their powerful claws to create dirt falls and eventually, moderate mounds of soil. Through their eyes, he noted the bottom of the fence as mere inches above ground. Nine holes in all, each deep enough to allow various species of predators to fit under the fence, waited for the invasion to come.

The second part of his plan commenced even as the security systems remained silent, unlike the cats that roared in triumph before backing away, waiting for the rolling gates to open and their games to begin.

A perverse pleasure filled him while thousands of army ants traveled in columns and lined up with the trenches dug by the pride of jaguars. Each column flowed into the gap then circled out with mandibles full of dirt. The pile of soil and partially digested leaves soon bore the weight of the ever-increasing mound of sand.

The next call to nature implemented the final element of his plan. After the ants had entered the fence's perimeter, lines of scorpions, poison dart frogs, pit vipers, and deadly centipedes made their way inside. Though not considered top predators, wandering spiders, normally nocturnal creatures, came to join the expedition. If nothing else, they'd add their number to the mix and terrify the workers into fleeing.

A grin tugged one corner of his mouth with the thought of this building existing as a husk of what it now mocked. He'd find a way to help the local tribesmen after dealing with the doctor. He hadn't burdened Brielle with the details of how TJ, or Doc, used kidnapped men and women in his medical experiments. Eventually, she'd learn about it through her connection with the wildlife.

On the far side of the electrified fence, assassin bugs with their poisonous saliva, darted among the deadly snakes and biting insects, each species aware of but not wary of the other. Their common goal of infiltrating the two structures and ensuring that once empty, they remained devoid of humans, kept them focused on their task.

Thousands of diverse and intimidating predators scaled the first structure to seek entrance while an equal amount divided from the main surge forward and entered the second building with like intent.

Soon, the influx of wildlife would overtake the facility in a state of excited disregard and incite the mass exodus of workers that would open the doors for snakes and larger prey to search and terrorize anyone not confined to a cell. Though he wouldn't see the staff killed, he'd make sure none of the humans working here would ever return to these buildings. He'd release the prisoners without harm.

There would be time later to ferret out the contents of each section of the structures and decide what to do with it. With his strategy taking shape, it was time to find Brielle.

Chapter Eleven

Brielle woke to a pounding headache and searing light stabbing her eyes. Vague shapes slowly took form around her, organizing into the pattern of a battered, wooden desk, rough-hewn table and tattered curtains, all in a state of gross disrepair. A small sliver of gratitude remained that she was still in cotton pants and a filthy, white t-shirt smelling of smoke. She shivered, as much from fear as the air conditioning unit on the opposite wall. The prickle and itch factor of the wool blanket underneath shifted her shoulders in search of comfort.

"Where am I?" The stench emanating from the tightly woven hemp binding her hands to the cot indicated recent weaving. Yanking only snugged them tighter.

Pungent air reminiscent of the atmosphere after high voltage discharges filled her nostrils to compound the misery reverberating in her skull. A strong link between the odor and the memory of she and her mom sitting on the back porch during a thunderstorm created anguish as much physical as emotional.

Muffled sounds of the rainforest brought a small measure of peace, no sign of the fire she'd started, no screaming monkeys or birds, no tendrils of smoke drifting to her nose. Tiago must have put it out. *Thank God for his gifts.* Which begged the question—where was she now? If the shack stood within his realm as she suspected, Tiago would find her.

"Ah, Brielle, you're finally awake. I'd hoped you'd join us for the evening's festivities."

The open door to her bedroom allowed little backlight to flow around her visitor's great bulk, but his voice was unmistakable. "Uncle Jack? Thank God, it's you. Get me out of here."

"I've waited so very long for this day. We have so much to discuss."

The tenor of his satisfaction carried a note of glee she'd never heard in the years of his infrequent visits. His approach to sit on her bedside held a swagger she'd never seen. Six feet tall and heavily muscled, he'd never intimidated her—until now.

"What's going on? How did you get here?" With the muddled speed of a caterpillar climbing a palm frond, pieces of the larger puzzle dropped into place.

"I've been here for decades." A sweeping gesture encompassed the world outside. "It wasn't until now that I've gained the knowledge and technology to achieve my dreams, which is why I've waited to acquire you. Though at this point, my facility is probably overrun with all manner of vermin."

"You? You're the Doc? You sent that bitch to kill mom? Why?" The realization brought a new combination of anger to flood her mind. The man she'd known since childhood had betrayed her on every level and at every turn in her life.

"First of all let's not forget, I've succeeded on all counts. And your mom is in the facility's cold storage if you'd like to visit with her later. Her genetics are fascinating, by the way, just like yours. Too bad Ermano won't get you as soon as he'd hoped."

"Where. Am. I?"

"Think of this as a magic box. You're inside, safe and sound where Tiago can't locate you."

Too stunned to object when he retracted first her left, then her right upper eyelid to examine the whites of her eyes, she stared in disbelief. "Why do you want the crystal? It was designed specifically for me."

His sweeping caress tucked a stray hair behind her ear, a fatherly gesture if one's father happened to be a magic-wielding, psychopathic, narcissistic killer. "Ah, you have no idea of its power. With it, not only am I safe from the rainforest's creatures, but I can control the elements, too. Thanks to many years of research, I have the ability to destroy Tiago himself."

"How?" *Jesus. This can't be real.*

"Why, modern technology combined with shaman magic, of course. I've dedicated most of my life to this end. I've already combined the crystal and unlocked the key to its power."

"Tiago has abilities you'll never understand."

"I couldn't tell you how my sports car works either, but I can drive the hell out of it. Once I've killed your man, there'll be nothing to stand in my way."

"Others like him will come and stop you."

"They'll try, but they'll be too late, for I now have the ability to destroy anyone who challenges me."

All those years, Uncle Jack had visited her home and sweet-talked her mom. It was just an act, a very convincing charade. The new gleam in his gaze spoke of madness unchecked, even though he didn't drool, mumble continuously, or talk about commands heard in his head.

As if addressing her unspoken fear, the lunatic untied her wrists and raised her arms above her head, holding both in one meaty paw. She was no match for his greater strength. Fear slithered through her mind and spirit, dulling her other senses as her entire world narrowed to the monster hovering over her.

"I'm thinking I'll breed you to see what we can create. Who knows, maybe it'll be something I can use to my advantage." A deep sigh preceded his gaze sweeping her length. "Otherwise, the cayman will get another sweet treat." As if caressing a cherished lover, he grazed the back of his knuckles down her cheek.

"Bastard. I'll kill you myself." She ground out the words through clenched teeth. Hate and frustration crushed confusion and fear; the combined weight formed a jagged finger of icy heat cutting deep in her soul.

His sudden grip on her right breast tightened and twisted forcing a scream as he leaned forward, mere inches separating them.

"Oh, how I wish I could stay a little longer and enjoy your shock and misery, but I must finish preparations for our guest of honor. If you're a good girl, I'll let you see his body before I dissect it, or maybe wear it after..."

Chairs scraping old floorboards in the other room accompanied the flurry of activity and several low, alarmed admonitions.

"Hmm, looks like he's here already, earlier than expected, but okay. I do love punctuality."

Abrupt freedom of her hands didn't relieve the anxiety setting up shop in her mind since she knew the worst was yet to come, whether in the form of seeing Tiago murdered or her fate, didn't matter. Even without drugs slowing her responses and stealing her energy, she'd never defeat Uncle Jack's strength plus whoever was in the other room.

"Jungle's gone quiet. He's here, boss."

When a large, native-garbed man poked his head around the doorjamb, recognition struck with the speed of a tranquil dart flying true to target. His words drifted through her memory until finding its mark—the bastard who'd shot her at the base of the kapok tree.

"Ermano, you and your man stay here to watch over our little guest. However, no touching. Got it?"

Jack's fists clenched as he stood. The sick desire radiating from his gaze ruled out the possibility of finding a thread of humanity or reasoning. The warning glare he tossed over his shoulder at Ermano elicited a closed expression in the native.

She wouldn't breathe easy in his presence either.

"I'll be back after I've killed your intended, Brielle. This shouldn't take long. The effects of the spell on your half crystal worked better than I'd planned. Thanks to the small fire it started, we now have the perfect conditions for a storm, which I can also use to my advantage. After all, water and electricity are never a good mix."

The retreating, gritty squeak from Jack's rubber-soled boots thundered in her mind, competing for space in the jumbled confusion surrounding her previous conversations with Tiago. *Can he survive electrical threats?* If not, she'd be the catalyst for his demise. Dropping the crystal and the consequent fire both played a part in the plan Jack had plotted well in advance.

In the doorway, he stopped to bestow an evil if not foreboding smile. "Don't worry about your boyfriend. Pretty soon, you'll have a whole new set of circumstances with which to deal."

* * * *

Rain-laden, black clouds hung low in the small clearing around Jack's cabin. The induced instability drawn from the global atmospheric electrical circuit, or charges surrounding the Earth's surface, pulsed invisibly toward the devices he'd set around the perimeter of the clearing.

Now, all I need is a test drive.

Once he directed the lightning strikes at Tiago, the reaction would be instantaneous—and final. Even the protector of the rainforest couldn't withstand over a hundred million volts, especially once combined with the gamma rays he'd amplify and direct toward the smug bastard. If by chance that didn't finish him, the fifty-thousand-degree temperature would surely fry his ass.

Each digital SLR camera placed along the corners of his cabin sported wide-angle lenses set to trip every second with the touch of his remote while below them, video cameras would catch anything missed by their slower cousins. He wanted shots from every angle to showcase his ultimate victory.

Uniting the crystal halves had proven easier than anticipated and granted great satisfaction. It had been the one detail he wasn't sure he would easily overcome.

It took little concentration to detect all the wildlife in the vicinity. For the final step, removing Tiago would pave the way for imminent success. *Sweet.*

In anticipation of Tashuin's clever mind, he'd disinfected each crystal half with UV light before coating in a thin film of Brielle's DNA. In essence, he'd removed all traces of his genetics from the gems, allowing for a smooth and perfect seal. Each piece had contained a small hollowed indent and a cleverly disguised protrusion that fit into the other half. When he'd held them together and chanted the unification spell, an audible click preceded a cerulean-blue glow spreading from its new center. Brilliant showers of animated sparks had exploded from the gem but lacked the

anticipated heat.

Now he stood ready for the final act.

Central to the open area in front of his hut, he'd created a pit for experimentation, secure in the knowledge that torturing one of Tiago's precious animals would bring him to its rescue. Though he rarely misjudged people, this mythical creature stood in his way and was unlike anything ever encountered.

Four meters down the straight-walled pit, a female jaguar paced the perimeter of her prison. Warning snarls and low, rumbling growls punctuated each circuit. In her bid for freedom, deep furrows marked the highest points of her jumps over trenches gouged in her desperate descent.

Each time he'd tasered her, she'd screamed her rage into the thickening late-afternoon air, silencing the surrounding wildlife. To increase the cat's agony and fury, he'd altered a flamethrower to shoot narrow beams of high-intensity flames where he could adjust the length of the fire's stream. Several burns marked his trials. The odor of melted hair and scorched flesh reminded him of how he'd disposed of several bodies before discovering the thoroughness of the Amazon's scavengers.

* * * *

"Since our first meeting, I suspected you harbored a soul as black as a gorilla's hide, but you buried it beneath false smiles and insincere, grand gestures, TJ. Or should I call you Uncle Jack?" Though some form of magic dampened Tiago's link to Brielle, their tie proved stronger than Jack's magic. Her anger combined with fear to provide a strong beacon, which he'd followed straight to the devil's lair.

Tiago stood on the edge of a deep, muddy pit, assimilating the recent experiences of the great cat held prisoner within its depths. Barely-contained fury built an inferno inside with the mental pictures forming in his mind to cause a starburst of energy radiating a brilliant glow from his medallion.

On his approach, he'd seen the perimeter's metal poles protruding from the ground and odd-looking equipment TJ held tight within his grasp. What remained—figure out the nature of the devices and how TJ intended to employ them.

The impressions he received from the compound-eyed mosquitos inside the hut revealed a kaleidoscope of thousands of men surrounding his mate. In separating the images, he realized two stood guard, close by, each holding a long-edged blade against a woman whose anger radiated in clenched fists and jaw.

TJ's low chant brought forth a fine spitting mist. Though premature, his malignant, self-satisfied smile declared his victory, results of the coming battle a foregone conclusion. The arrogant scum had much to learn.

"Either is fine. I've been waiting for you." Fat drops of rain drizzled from the low clouds down TJ's face, soaking his shirt, his sneer reflecting the vulgar spirit squatting in a husk devoid of humanity.

Cracking his knuckles and rolling his shoulders to alleviate excess energy, Tiago never broke eye contact with the crazed doctor. "Brielle is unharmed." Said as a statement, he continued to work out the puzzle of the implicit trap.

"For now, yes. I promised her a blanket made from your burned and blackened hide."

The slight drizzle morphed into a deluge pouring from sizzling, black clouds while bolts of lightning punched through thickened air to dance all around them. If not for Brielle's present danger and pain, he'd be amused with the man's audacity in an attempt to turn nature against an immortal.

"You think to burn me with that contraption? Nothing manmade can harm me." As they stood on opposite sides of the pit, Tiago glanced at the jaguar. Smoldering fur ringed a fresh bloody patch of skin.

TJ would die for his sins.

Poachers were commonplace in his world; sadists were not.

"Oh, this little thing? I just used this to ring the dinner bell." TJ tossed his fuel tank aside then clicked a remote pulled from his pocket.

Tiago enjoyed a grim satisfaction unfurling inside after analyzing the trap prepared on his behalf. "What has begun of the Earth should end with the Earth."

"Agreed."

No one had ever gone to such trouble in preparing an elaborate snarl of technological foolishness. Such egotistical aspirations did not belong in the jungle.

"I am here. What do you want?" Subtle clicks and flashing red dots brought his attention to the cameras on the corners of the shack. Their small, almost imperceptible hum indicated TJ's final moments would be caught on tape. Tiago would destroy the evidence once the scenario played out.

"Oh, nothing much. Just immeasurable riches and unchecked power. That's all."

"It is time to end this. I've seen the facility. You've been making the villagers sick, using them for experiments."

"I've always wondered how long it would take you to catch on, or if you even cared. Kudos, jungle man." TJ flicked an imaginary piece of dust from his white shirt. "I had to perfect my processes before exposing world leaders to my genius." His gaze flicked skyward as he began another low chant.

Instant jagged forks of lightning struck several of the copper rods surrounding them in the surreal showdown. The following detonation of thunder rumbled in the ground and through Tiago's chest.

Static electricity forced TJ's hair to stand out.

"Your psychotic dreams will die today along with your physical body." Tiago didn't flinch when concurrent lightning strikes flashed around him. The deafening noise did, however, cause the doctor to duck his head and raise his hands as if he could fend off the millions of volts. What these men labeled protons and electrons were a natural part of the Earth.

"Not curious about your girl?"

Two, one-foot balls of glowing spheres drifted horizontally after an electrical strike hitting the ground converted silicon and other minerals to a burning gas.

Each orb, greater than fifty-three thousand degrees, danced from one rod to the next before exploding and sending out small sprite-like shapes in all directions. Sulfur odor hung in the air while scorched ground marked their paths.

TJ grinned and inhaled deeply. "Not even a little curious?"

"I know she's in the cabin behind you. Our bond is stronger than your magic. But I am curious how you managed to put the crystal halves together."

"Simple genetic hacking. I won't go into detail with such a primitive man as yourself...But now I am immune to the fury of your animal friends..."

Again, TJ chanted words not meant for his ears just before another volley of forked electricity hit four protruding poles simultaneously. Each produced a ball of flashing multi-hued sparks three feet in diameter. This time, the doctor stood his ground without flinching when the booming explosions dissipated into a fantastic, deadly light show.

"You have no immunity from me. I would not ask my friends to dirty themselves with your blood."

"Hmm, so I'm not only immune, but I'll be able to communicate with them actively. How wonderful. I've been wondering about the limits of this thing." As he spoke, TJ lifted the crystal from under his soaked shirt. A brilliant red glow reflected a demonic countenance.

"You will be no more than ashes— and by my hands."

Tiago understood TJ's next chant clearly as he shouted from the top of his lungs. Only a few shaman knew the spell to produce lightning, and none had the power to direct the bolts once formed.

Once formed, the balls of electrical energy flew directly to the pendant on Tiago's chest, encasing his entire body in a brilliant display of flaring heat and scintillating light. Fire exploded out concentrically, racing along his nerves and increasing his natural glow to a near-blinding luminescence. Phantasmal shapes of high voltage permeated the atmosphere in streaks of blue, red, orange, and white.

TJ covered his eyes and turned away. "Jesus! I'm too close."

"No. You're not close enough." Despite what his enemy obviously hoped, Tiago had never felt so energized, super-charged. Tingling from head-to-toe told him he'd carry this power for a long time if left to disperse naturally. He had a better idea.

In measured steps, he rounded the pit to stand before his enemy, waiting for the human's vision to clear—to know what came next. "You have plagued my land for decades. Your reign now ends."

"What? No. You should be dead! No man can survive that."

"You're right. No. Man. Can. I am Kurupira, protector of the rainforest. I am of the Earth, from the Earth." With the last words spoken, he gripped TJ's shoulders in an unbreakable grasp and emptied the full excess energy through his hands and into his prey. "A fitting end for a foul enemy."

Millions of instant explosions took place in TJ's body from one heartbeat to the next. One second, he stood in a predator's grip. In the next, he vanished in a vast array of dust and soot to leave few ashes remaining to drizzle down with the storm's currents.

Destruction of the man's body fouled the air with the dispersion of trace elements, but the rain and forest would cleanse all. The crystal, now broken into its respective halves, fell to the ground alongside a small but undamaged key.

Tiago's attention turned to the puzzle of Brielle in the hut. If he stormed in, one guard could kill her while he dealt with the other if his timing altered by a fraction of a second.

They probably expected hordes of animals or insects to swarm them. Through the mosquito's eyes, he saw curiosity mixed with trepidation in each man. High windows had denied the occupants a spectator's view, leaving their minds free to create worse scenarios from the cacophony created outside.

"TJ?" The muffled speech of the guard holding a knife to Brielle's throat held a note of uncertainty.

"He is dead, as you will be if you've harmed my mate."

"Don't send no animals in here. I'll kill her if I see even one."

"Ahh, you want to trade. Her life for the both of yours. Fair enough." Rain continued to pour from the heavens, washing the air of the foul human's contaminants. Tiago directed further lightning strikes away from their area to help settle the men's nerves.

"Yes. Yes! We'll trade. You let us walk out of here, guarantee that no animals harm us, and we won't hurt her." With each word, confidence infused the man's voice.

"So it will be. No animal or insect will challenge you. You are free to walk out as long as Brielle is unharmed."

Seconds later, the door opened to emit two men, each looking warily at the scorched mark where TJ had previously

stood. The leader blinked away the water dripping in his eyes while the grip on his knife tightened.

"Where's TJ?" Confusion and suspicion kept the taller man in the doorway.

"He is gone. I suggest you leave. Now."

Each man looked to the other before deciding he needed no other encouragement.

Without another word, both ran for the forest with heaving and sputtering grunts punctuating the air as sandy soil kicked up from their fleeing steps.

Before either reached the edge of the cleared perimeter, Tiago relaxed his hold on the overhead cloud's electrical discharges.

In the next instant, two more lightning strikes on the copper poles flared into giant balls of burning electricity, each suspended several feet off the ground.

The immediate roar of thunder brought both men to their knees. Each looked back, granted a split second to see what lay in store for them. Giant spheres of burning electrical charges flew to engulf them in a brilliant display of multi-colored balls of dazzling heat and light.

A deep sigh cleansed Tiago's thoughts regarding their depravity. When he turned toward the hut, Brielle stood framed in the open door, her eyes wide and jaw slack. The bruise blossoming on her cheek made him wish he could kill TJ and her abductors again.

It took little concentration to silence the storm.

Holding her right foot off the ground, she hopped toward him. "Hmm, you kept your word." Grim satisfaction threaded her expression.

"I always do. No animal or insect touched them." Three strides brought him to face her. For long seconds, he held her at arm's length, taking mental notes of her injuries.

He wanted nothing more than to bury himself deep inside her, completing their bond and making her immortal, but once again, she'd suffered due to his inability to protect her. "I need to heal you." This wasn't the first time TJ's men had kidnapped her. At least they hadn't assaulted her sexually.

"Just my ankle."

"Hold still while I mend it." Anger flared with the sight of her injuries, bruises and scrapes from vaulting from the tree. Within seconds, abraded skin and a torn ligament recovered and knitted under his touch. The tingling she'd feel under his care couldn't compare to the desperate hunger her presence stirred within his mind and body, amounting to electrical charges surpassed by what he'd transferred to TJ.

Healing her foot was easy, sweeping her up in his arms—natural. The hunger in her gaze, however, tested his restraint.

"The fire...You put it out. How much damage?"

"Very little. All will be repaired shortly."

"He tortured a jaguar. I knew what he'd done and was going to do but couldn't stop him."

Reluctance in setting her down kept his hand at her waist. He couldn't bear to lose the tingling up his arm their connection provided. Satisfaction in her snuggling under his shoulder only increased his need to claim her once and for all time.

He smiled at her thin mewl when he stepped away. "You can help her now. I will show you how." Retrieving the crystal halves, he gripped each one and fitted them together. A slight click, a low chant remembered from the last notes in Tashuin's book, and the two halves snapped into place with a subtle snick. Brilliant light leaked from spaces around his knuckles as he concentrated on his desired outcome.

When he opened his fists, the crystal glowed briefly with a soft blue light before becoming transparent. "I believe this belongs to you. Once you put it on, no one can interfere with its designed purpose again."

The second he settled the chain around her neck, the light from within flared a bright, cerulean blue before clearing to its natural translucent state.

"Ahh, I feel everything—the animals, birds, even the insects. This is amazing. I can see what they see."

"This is your father's legacy. He has joined you with the rainforest. I will teach you to focus, to understand all within our realm."

Chapter Twelve

Healing the jaguar ranked as the biggest thrill of Brielle's life to date since nothing could compare to the pulsing tingles coursing through her, watching torn skin weave together and the tiny new hairs of the cat's beautiful coat appear.

Tiago's teachings continued on their leisurely walk away from her living nightmare. Patient and considerate, he watched her closely, encouraging her to embrace and cultivate her natural gifts, gifts that would increase after they'd joined.

"You learn very quickly. Tashuin and your mother prepared you well for life in the Amazon."

"Where are we going? Not to the same place as this morning?"

"No. I want to show you what your father had planned for us. We don't have to stay. Plus...there's something else I need to show you."

When they came to the odd bench near Tashuin's hut where she'd rested yesterday, tears misted her eyes. "This is where my father lived." After sitting to one side on the smoothed wood, she let her hand glide lovingly over the surface as if she could absorb the memory of her father carving the wood, placing it in this spot, for this moment. "My father did this."

Tiago sat beside her, his gaze compassionate, allowing her to absorb his strength.

"Yes. In the journal, he left notes. He built this second home for you—for us. I'll understand if it's too much to take in right now. This second house is a replica of my home. I'm not quite sure how he knew..." His expression radiated sincerity while his hand holding hers infused strong slivers of excitement with each caress of his thumb on her sensitized skin.

From a hidden compartment carved into the underside of the bench, Tiago removed a stack of folded letters. "These are for you, Brielle, written by your father."

"He wrote me letters?" Tears filled her eyes at the thought of her father sitting on the very bench she now occupied, writing letters she would one day read. Setting the stack in her lap, she opened the first and let the words form pictures in her mind, things he described in her future, things he wouldn't live to see. "Oh, God. He loved me so much, Tiago."

Settling her in his arms, Tiago continued to read when her throat choked on the words. When he'd read the last one, he folded and placed them in her hand.

"I wish I'd known he was my father. I knew he cared very much for us...I just didn't know why." Minutes passed as her tears filtered through and matted the fine hairs on his chest. Every sobbing breath hurt, choking until her chest and throat burned. Still, Tiago held and soothed her while she grieved for her parents and the love they didn't get to share. "The sacrifices they made..."

"They made them because they loved you, Brielle. They both believed in your destiny."

"And I will thank them every day for the rest of my life."

When her sobs dwindled, and the shudders subsided, he maintained his soothing caresses, brushing his lips across her hair, smoothing his hand down her back, and supporting her with his warmth and compassion.

"You must think all I do is cry. Fine way to begin a new life, huh."

"I believe you are the strongest and most incredible woman I've ever met."

An hour passed, maybe more, time spent cuddled in the safety and comfort of his arms, time she would always treasure, not because of destiny or her parent's gentle direction. The light rasp of his fingers along her sensitive flesh held a love she'd never experienced but needed with every cell in her body as if everything she'd never known or craved suddenly came crashing into existence through their contact.

With her grief spent, the tinder of his caress ignited into flame, like a flash fire devouring dried fuel, hungry, hot, insistent. When she squirmed on his lap, one side of his mouth kicked up in that slow, sexy and knowing smile.

"Do you want to stay here or..."

His words trailed off when she feathered her fingers through his hair, biting her lip at the feel of such soft silk contrasting the hard bulges of a well-muscled body. Turnabout was fair play. She wondered how far she could push him before his restraints crashed and he sprung with cat-like grace, unleashing the powerful beast inside. Even so, he'd never hurt her.

"Yes, I want to see it but I don't want to stay here right now. It's too close, too painful. My mom's diary didn't detail this. I had no idea my father had done all this work in preparation for our move. No wonder mom would never commit to a particular section of the rainforest."

"I didn't know of his plans. I've always lived as part of the jungle, away from others. It's been a long time since I'd visited him here. Tashuin planned this many years ago, but built the second home recently, according to his journal."

"I'm sorry he can't see us now."

"His soul is at rest and with your mother's. They both see us. I think he always knew his fate, so he paved the way for you to discover your destiny. He described the power you would wield one day. I will teach you about all your magic and how to focus your strength through the crystal."

"If he saw the future, why build the second home?"

"Nothing is set in stone. He was a man who believed that where there was life, there was hope."

"What of the facility and the local tribesmen?"

"The native prisoners have been transported to the nearest medical facility. The structure will be destroyed."

"Or—we could use it to our advantage, help the local population and maybe even others, anonymously of course."

"Hm. We will discuss this."

In all her years of failing to fit in, she'd finally found the place where serenity was more than just a word or a description she and her mom used to describe a hope for the future.

"In my heart, I realize I'll never grow tired of the forest and all its miracles, but this location will always be special." She'd found where she wanted to be, needed to be—by Tiago's side.

"We can return when you are ready."

She knew he'd never push, only gently guide.

The afternoon had passed in excited anticipation that lent an edge to her thoughts as well as her movements. When they'd walked along the forest floor, Tiago had kept a hand at her waist, his heat branding her with the lightest of pressure, letting her know he'd always be there. Each glance in his direction renewed the fluttering in her chest, the feelings so new and raw yet exploding inside to fill the darkest reaches of her soul with his light.

The piercing scream of a nearby jaguar redirected her attention with the understanding of its loss. "He's lamenting the death of his mate."

"Yes."

"Poor thing. There was nothing I could do to stop those poachers. There were too many of them."

"I will teach you to blend with the jungle and all its inhabitants so that in time, together, we will protect them. You will fear nothing of the natural forest. Mankind will be our biggest obstacle. We will face that together."

"I belong here, in this rainforest."

"You belong with me."

"I feel the rightness of it. This is where I want to be...How long will I live?"

"According to Tashuin's journal, once we are mated, you will exist as I do, for as long as I do."

"I'll never have gray hair..."

"And the butterfly tattoo on your lower back won't turn into a dragon, nor will your perfect breasts turn into teardrops."

Surprise halted her next step. "You looked."

"I examined what was mine to make sure you didn't need further healing." A wide grin betrayed his enthusiasm.

The circuitous route back to his primary home in the canopy allowed her time to see the natural progression of their relationship as something predetermined long ago, foretold by her mother and unfurled by a destiny that would not yield.

With each new step forward, a certainty took hold. Grace had not only known Brielle's fate but also had taken steps to ensure a smooth transition, instilling a love for the jungle from her earliest memories. Semi-annual trips to the rainforest allowed had Grace to be with the man she'd loved and Brielle to learn about the responsibilities she would inherit.

"Thank you for giving my mom a proper burial. She'd wanted the Amazon to be her final resting place."

"You are welcome. I was glad to honor Tashuin's wish to have certain items accompany her in the next portion of her journey after this life."

"His letters. I understand why he never sent them, but it just seems so—sad. He must have loved her very much. How could he know you and I would stand side-by-side? Or that we'd find the letters?"

"As far as our uniting, I think he took that partly on faith. The letters...in his journal, he noted a natural safe, built into the underside of the bench he'd carved. The key you gave me unlocked one of his greatest treasures, letters written to your mother."

"And the letters to me..." Tears filled her eyes with her father's last words. His love and devotion filled the empty corners of her heart, spaces she'd not realized waited for the courage and inspiration only a father could impart.

"His magic ran strong and deep within the jungle. He loved you both, which is why he gave everything to protect you. It was his greatest hope that we would come together to protect this land."

"In the letters, he spoke of a love so strong it would abide for eternity. What I feel—it feels like an incredible craving and compulsion in my mind and my heart..."

"Love develops over time, Brielle. We start with what we have and let it grow. No one will ever force you to do

anything against your will—unless it is best for your health or safety.”

“Of course.” Her slightly mocking tone faltered as their gazes met. Her tongue sticking to the roof of her mouth had everything to do with the way her name had rolled off his tongue, as if he could taste the attitude she’d prepared to give him, and decided on an appropriate response. Her gaze slid away, not in fear, just an uncertainty, an unbalance where she teetered on the edge of some great precipice. He’d already proven he’d be there to catch her.

He stopped her at the base of a giant kapok where a natural spiral staircase made from twisted, woody vines spiraled its length.

“How many homes do you have?”

“There are several throughout the basin, some covered, some open.”

“I love the built-in steps.”

“Sucker roots attach to the young sapling and grow into and around the tree over the years. They cover the entire trunk for ease of passage. It is a simple matter to train them. You will learn.”

Each step provided a greater view of the wonders of the rainforest below.

“So you can control the flora, too?”

“To an extent, yes.”

As she closed the distance to the canopy, skittish expectation moderated her speed. She wanted this man with every fiber of her heart and soul, yet without knowing a man’s gentle touch, how could she hope to please him, one who’d existed for centuries? “The bed—the fibers are fresh. How?”

“It will always be thus.”

“Ahh...This is incredible.” The natural bed felt like a cloud beneath her. With her heart thundering against her ribcage, she sat amid the soft, natural bedding. She had no clue how to proceed.

“Do not be alarmed. I will never force you.”

“It’s not fear, well, not exactly. This is all so new and overwhelming. I’m nervous.” She felt small, feminine in a way she’d never experienced with another man, not to mention at an incredible disadvantage.

Lying down beside her, he extended his arm and patted his chest. “Come, rest while we talk.”

“You know, worrying about the home where I’ve lived or the place where I’ve worked, none of those things matter anymore.”

“Because you’ve found where you belong.”

“I love that evening comes earlier and lasts longer under the canopy than in the village because of the tightly woven foliage.” With his presence came a certainty of her future, both long-range and her present overwhelming circumstances. She felt the passage of every second in the warmth of his breath stirring her hair and the rhythmic expansion of his chest under her cheek.

Macaws screeched in protest when a harpy eagle settled close by, its piercing scream letting all know its status as avian king of the canopy. Several sloths sleeping in the fork of nearby branches roused and hissed their displeasure at the disturbance before squirming to better their position and returning to sleep. In its way, the normalcy of it all settled her apprehension.

The easy flow of conversation allowed her to focus on the amazing rainforest from his unique and compelling viewpoint. Though he’d lived an entirely different life, they held similar views on many aspects of the Amazon.

Cuddled against his powerful frame, she let her fingers comb and swirl through the fine hairs on his chest, which combined with her edgy anticipation to keep her in a state of excited expectancy. “You seem to know what I’m thinking most of the time.” The promise in his gaze produced a warmth in her cheeks and a knot in her stomach. *He probably realizes where my thoughts are going now.*

The steady beat of his heart beneath her cheek never wavered until her light caresses followed the narrow smattering of hair down his abdomen to the waistband of his pants. Light furring, so soft, contradicted the granite-hard slabs of muscle underneath. His quick inhalation accorded her a deep satisfaction.

“Hmm. Understand where you’re going with this, Brielle. Once done, it cannot be reversed. There is no severing the bond, no escape. We will exist as one soul, now and forever.”

“I know exactly where I’m going if not what to do.”

“Ahh, you are afraid...”

“Only that I won’t please you.”

“That is impossible. Your mere presence gives me great pleasure.”

“I want more. I choose you. I choose this life.” Even though her intent was obvious, her words came out as little more than a thread of shivery breaths.

In the next heartbeat, she found herself pinned underneath him yet bearing little of his weight. The warmth of his skin branded her through the thin cotton of her shirt, causing a surge of desire to spread like liquid fire before settling in her belly.

The devotion in his expression humbled her. Above her was a warrior, unsurpassed, but in his gaze there was no doubt. She was his equal in this place and time.

"You're glowing again." The faint luminescence she associated with hope and freedom now anchored her thoughts in a sanctuary where fate bonded her to a man she would love for eternity.

"We are glowing. But what comes next is so much better."

Concentrating on steadying her breathing as he held her stare was impossible. She'd waited all her life for this. Now that the time had come, she feared her inadequacy would spoil the moment.

Still, he hesitated.

"The man who kidnapped me, he didn't..."

"Still, you knew his intentions. I don't want fear between us, for any reason. This can wait until you are ready. We have eternity." His concern contradicted the savage masculinity evidenced in the harsh angles of his face and the warm breath on her cheek. When he cupped her chin in his hand, she could see the strength of his desire in his darkened gaze, coarse breathing, and firm set of his jaw.

"I don't want you in my head."

"That's not where I want to be, at the moment."

"I don't want to wait. Make me forget everything else. Make me yours, forever."

Darkening eyes reminded her of the jungle and the storm earlier—wild, natural, dominating. There was something compelling about his proximity, the way his muscles flexed and bunched with such sensuous grace, reminding her of a great, sleek cat. A thousand years with him wouldn't be enough to discern why they were perfect mates, but in her heart, she knew the truth of it. His look declared her the most desirable woman in the world. That was enough for now.

The first touch of his lips on her trembling mouth paralyzed her thoughts. Soft yet firm, they brushed lightly across her own, leaving her breathless and lightheaded, needing more. So much more. When he settled his hard frame deep in the cradle of her body, a warm rush of heat radiated from her core, willing him not to stop.

The glaze of his shoulder-length hair against her cheek invited her to twine greedy fingers in its silken mass, thick, luxurious, soft as satin, and so at odds with the brutal nature of his duties. That complexity held her in thrall, wrapped her in layers of elemental craving, a prisoner of desire.

Swallowing her fear gave her the freedom to explore. Instinct told her this was her time and her man. Each of her caresses glided over the angles of his lean face, learning, committing to memory every hollow and every angle, shadows and light so complex, mimicking his soul.

Staring into the depth of his intense gaze enabled a startling awareness. More than passion, he radiated a sincere, voracious hunger that would never end, a wild thing who'd locked onto the scent of his mate. "You will always want me. How is it I know this?"

"Accepting me as your mate frees you from uncertainty and insecurity." The rasp of his thumb pad over her lips caused her womb to clench in hungry expectation. His powerful, dark gaze burned over her, devouring every aspect of her being, even those hidden from the average human eye, for he was so much more. The predator's smile that followed melted her insides.

As if reading her thoughts, his caress followed the curve of her hip to her waist before lightly grazing her abdomen, then sliding up to cup her breast. When the warmth of his fingers penetrated the thin material of her shirt, she gasped. Her nipples hardened into tight, desperate peaks in need of his touch.

His first kiss was as light as his touch. The ferocious craving she felt leashed inside him induced a broken whimper as the velvet lash of his tongue insisted access to her own. He plunged deep, twisting, licking, taunting her with a primeval knowledge so basic, her body accepted and understood while leaving her mind splintering with a dark, carnal lust. So hungry for the taste and feel of him, she didn't realize her breasts were bare until cool air teased her nipples. "Tiago..."

"Easy, Brielle, my heart, my soul, my mate."

His soft voice stroked and soothed while snaking its way, heating, seducing, as his kisses produced a languid heat suffusing every muscle, every cell with raw desire. His grazing touch could have stroked between her legs, considering her heightened arousal and the warm moisture seeping to her thighs.

"How did you get rid of my clothes? And your pants?"

The rest of her words were swallowed in a scorching kiss as the branding heat from his shaft, pulsing against her belly, sent more aching ripples of desire surging from her core.

"The same way I dressed you earlier. The fibers come from the jungle."

Nuzzling her neck induced a stronger wave of desire and reminded her of a great jaguar, strong, sleek, and predatory.

The raspy warmth of his tongue slipping between her lips to tangle and slide against her own created a heated delight, overcoming any doubt her mind could conjure. At the same time, he cupped her breast, flooding her chest with a tidal wave of liquid heat. Her world became the scent of him, the feel of his hard frame brushing slightly against hers, the lust emanating in hot waves from his body.

No one had ever instigated these feelings, this need. A low burning, sensation thrummed through her limbs and spread to her core. Her hips tightened with uncontrollable need, twisting side-to-side and smearing the few drops of warm liquid from his shaft against her sensitized flesh.

Goosebumps from the combination of his caresses and fresh air brought shivers of pleasure coursing through her.

When his finger circled then brushed across her nipple, quivers turned into shudders of need that sharpened her basest instincts.

Supplemental knowledge of his hunger came in the form of the wide erection swelling against her soft belly. A wash of desire, thickened with carnal curiosity, overwhelmed any doubts as she let her hands drift over his back and down the rigid muscles of his buttocks.

A slight side-to-side twist of her hips resulted in his thick flesh flexing against the juncture of her legs. Jolts of electrical awareness warped between her breasts and core, fanning a vortex of carnal greed into a cyclone of urgent demand.

With each kiss that trailed down her neck, an unearthly sensuality ignited unsurpassed craving in its wake, spreading to every corner of her mind and body, sweeping her into a great storm, burning hot, fast, and out of control. His innate knowledge and sensual torture sent more shudders of anticipation to take control of her body.

The rough rasp of his tongue on her sensitized nipple arched her back despite his weight. When he suckled, taking one bud deep into his mouth, tugging, rolling it with his tongue then biting down lightly, she cried out.

"Please, Tiago. Now." He'd lived on the fringes of society and their laws. Their ways didn't apply to him. Yet, as he stared into her eyes, his gaze holding her prisoner for all time, she realized she'd tamed his wild nature with a mere touch. The gentle caress of his hands and the concern in his expression combined to tell her she was the most precious part of his world and would always remain so.

Her stomach bunched under his light, gliding caress as it drifted down her flat belly and making her womb spasm and spill the result of her arousal in preparation for what she knew would be the most exquisite sensations she'd ever experience.

His light touch around her sex made her cry out in frustrated, animalistic hunger, abandoning all sense of propriety. Urgent demand coiled in her abdomen, circling up her spine and banding around her heart.

He found the tight bud with unerring success, his lips curving gently as his slickened finger circled, adding more pressure to immerse her in a maelstrom of fiery and crazed demand.

She gasped as the tip of his erection traced the moist seam of her folds, and his eyes darkened with unearthly knowledge. A wild wickedness poured through her, sweeping through her like melted chocolate, sweet, warm, addicting, yet tinged with a hint of fire and spice.

The first nudge of his broad crown against her slickened center brought a thin mewl from her throat. Her body felt feverish, dampened with a fine sheen of perspiration and anticipation. Without conscious control, she arched her hips up to meet him, begging him to fill, stretch, and consume her. Even with the shallow depth of his penetration, he swelled inside her sheath with his burning, slick flesh, electrifying her with a shock of pleasure-pain she couldn't refuse.

Moisture beaded his lightly furred chest while his arms shook as if his restraint cost the last ounce of his will. The intensity of his gaze brought moisture to her own.

"Yes, Tiago. Yes."

Instinctively, she knew he moved slowly, giving her time to accommodate his wide girth, watching for signs of hesitation or doubt. She had neither.

The sudden pain surprised her, considering her recent assault. *Did Tiago heal me, or did the thug not penetrate that deep?* Either way, he was her first, her last, her only love. A low rumbling sound of approval filled the air with pure male satisfaction, transcendent of species, time, or place.

Inch by inch, he entered her, sank to the root, touching then throbbing against the very end of her channel. The probing fullness was exquisite. When his hips mashed against her own, he waited, holding them locked together and letting her acclimate to his length and breadth. His gaze penetrated the depth of her soul, just as his flesh penetrated her body, holding her, loving her.

She'd never imagined being filled so full, but impatience made her squirm despite the slight sting of his wounding size. When he rotated his hips and sank a fraction deeper, she realized the tight clasp of her flesh registered each ridge of his erection, even the beat of his heart.

The slow, steady tempo he settled into left her gasping with each deep thrust, even as he lowered his chest to gently slide against her nipples, maintaining their hardened peaks.

A light vibrating intensity gained strength as it saturated her body with a piercing insistence, devouring all thoughts except one. More. His flesh stroked her desire until it seemed her body would fly apart.

"Don't look away. This is me, loving you with every part of me, letting you see into the deepest reaches of my soul. It will always be this way."

"Oh God." His words reached inside her, piercing so deep, she felt raw, exposed and vulnerable in a way only Tiago could manage.

As her stomach muscles tightened, her back arched. She felt the storm building inside and wondered if she'd survive. Nothing in her life compared to what he ignited in her now. Unbidden and uncontrolled, her nails raked down his back, sinking into his ass as he thrust again and again, driving her to a place she'd never been, except in her dreams.

When her orgasm burst inside and around her, the tide of sensations swept her into a world of their making.

Rhythmic waves rippled through her delicate tissues, provoked and prolonged by his wickedly knowledgeable strokes to leave her breathless and trembling. All she could do was hold on tight as her body spiraled out of control and tears seeped from her eyes. Panting breaths mingled, his own becoming coarser while his gaze locked her tight to him, excluding all else.

His hoarse shout accompanied a final thrust as he held her hip firm and his teeth clamped on the muscle where her neck and shoulder joined. Just short of pain, the increased pressure ground her into another violent orgasm, a whirlwind of bliss that stole her breath and painted her vision in a myriad of colors and stars.

Ragged pants warmed her neck when his body relaxed into hers. Minutes passed before he shifted, unlocking them, then curled her frame against his harder, larger mass.

A lifetime of this would not be long enough to explore the depth of this intimate connection. He'd awakened something inside she'd never known existed. Lying on a native bed with her head pillowed on his shoulder seemed the most natural act in the world.

"Are you okay, little one?"

"Hmm, I'm not sure I can put a coherent thought together, much less express it adequately. I've just never felt such peace in my soul, no matter where we lived at the time. In thinking back, my mom always encouraged me to come here, to live here, regardless of what happened in our lives. This was our anchor."

"And now you're where you belong."

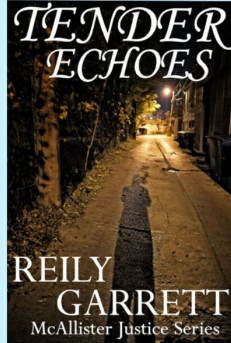
A night of loving brought forth dreams of both present and future. She was free to discover and learn everything about the man she'd come to crave with every fiber of her soul. The passion they shared involved more than their bodies; it took sustenance from every aspect of their beings—mind, body, and soul. He would guide her, protect her, and love her. What more could one desire?

The End

Thank You for reading Tiago. I hope you've enjoyed Brielle and Tiago's journey. If you have a minute to rate the book on [Amazon](#), I would greatly appreciate it.

With every new release, there will be a raffle on Reily's [blog](#). Feel free to enter. Visit Reily's [website](#), to sign up for her newsletter and on [Facebook](#) for news on the continuation of the series along with blurbs, contests and other exclusives.

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About Reily

Reily is a West Coast girl transplanted to the opposite shore. Past employments as an ICU nurse, private investigator, and work in the military police has given her countless experiences in a host of different environments to add a real world feel to her fiction.

Over time and several careers, many incidents have flavored the plots of her stories as man's cruelty and ingenuity for torment and torture are boundless, not contained by an infinite imagination. Witnessing the after-effects of a teenager mugged at knifepoint for a pair of tennis shoes, or an elderly woman repeatedly stabbed with a screwdriver for no apparent reason, left an indelible impression that will forever haunt her subconscious. In counterpoint, she has observed a woman stop her vehicle in severe, snowy weather to offer her own winter coat to a stranger, a teenager wearing a threadbare hoodie. Life's diversities are endless.

Though her kids are her life, writing is Reily's life after. The one enjoyed after the kids are in bed or after they're in school and the house is quiet. This is the time she kicks back with laptop and lapdog to give her imagination free rein.

In reading, take pleasure in a mental pause as you root for your favorite hero/heroine and bask in their accomplishments, then share your opinions of them over coffee with your best friend (even if he's four-legged). Life is short. Cherish your time.

Tender Echoes
Enjoy The McAllister Justice Series
from the beginning
Free on [Amazon](#)



Theft of spirit is no one's birthright.

A quirk of her X chromosome furnished Alexis with an edge few others enjoyed. After fate plunged her into orphan status and an intolerable foster home forced her to the streets, a group of prostitutes sheltered her from their vicious pimp. Seeing something special within, they nurtured and shielded her from their harsh reality until she could forge her own path in life.

Destiny frequently takes us back to our roots. Lexi's return journey begins when a serial killer attacks one of her adopted sisters. Relying on courage and wit, she must stay a step ahead and secure evidence to free her family from a psychopathic murderer.

...Having read DIGITAL VELOCITY first this reader approached the prequel wondering if it could be up to the high standards. The answer is a resounding 'Yes!'. The infectious flavor of Reilly's writing hit us as she opens her story with the following... Short, but tense and a terrific introduction make this a terrific novel from a writer of immense skill. This is a series to follow! Grady Harp,

Five stars by Grady Harp, HALL OF FAME TOP 500 REVIEWER

Digital Velocity
The McAllister Justice Series
Book One



The deadliest weapons are the ones we never see.

Keyboard prodigy, Lexi Donovan has risen from teenage orphan of the streets to complete independence with little help along the way. When a friend is threatened, Lexi sends an anonymous message to police, leading to a firefight that leaves a cop wounded.

Detective Ethan McAllister's well-ordered life turned upside down the day an obscure text message led to a sexual predator's identity and arrest. Since then, Callouston PD's finest can't trace the elusive hacker sending him tips. The latest text leads him to a brutal mutilation and a riddle indicating the identity of the next murder victim.

The dark net houses a playground for the morally depleted and criminally insane. When Lexi discovers a killer's digital betting arena, she finds herself centered in the cyber stalker's crosshairs, a psychopath bearing equal talent. Street life strengthened her while toughening her protective shell, but nothing could shield her from the shrewd detective forging a path to her heart.

"Digital Velocity is a fast-paced romantic suspense thriller that sophisticatedly weaves drama, excitement, grit, raw emotions and mystery. Garrett takes her readers on a journey where suspense and romance are taken up several notches as she unfolds and reveals the identity of a murderer that is on the loose. With her vivid prose, Garrett entices readers to see the bond that is brewing between Detective Ethan McAllister and his unlikely informant." [RT Book Reviews](#)

Bound By Shadows
The McAllister Justice Series
Book Two



The architect of fear employs many forms

Kidnapping and murder never crossed Kaylee's mind when seeking a fresh start in Portland, a new beginning to shed the remnants of tragedy dogging her steps. After escaping from an underground cage, she fights to stay one step ahead of the killer bent on silencing his only witness. Kaylee.

Two months after dodging a sociopathic murderer's best efforts, Caden McAllister flounders within a social sink hole, unable to move forward, too stubborn to step back. Guarded and wary, the private investigator's stagnant lifestyle detonates into chaos when a battered and bloody young waif stumbles into his care.

Framed for a murdering a past lover, Caden must clear his name and overcome his charge's doubts while keeping her out of the sex-slave trade. When betrayal ends with Kaylee's re-capture, Caden must conquer his past and risk all or lose the one he has come to love.

Murder, mystery, underground tunnels, and romance are intertwined in this standalone romantic thriller, the second installment of the McAllister Justice Series.

Inconclusive Evidence
McAllister Justice Series
Book Three



Coming Spring 2018

Braiding nanotechnology and advanced surgical techniques equals magic to the psychopathic mind.

Megan Chauner finally achieves her dream of starting a veterinary practice when a mysterious package and dire warning from her college roommate turned investigative reporter changes the course of her life. Determined to unravel the plot involving microchips and a deadly solution, she sets out to discover who murdered her best friend.

From chick magnet to wounded cop is not a fall anyone predicted for Lucas McAllister, who now faces the biggest upheaval in his life. Coming home to start a forced retirement, he finds a sassy enigma with as much brain as beauty in his sanctuary.

Stalkers and assassins draft reality checks that test Luc's survival skills and endurance in keeping Megan and her furball alive while uniting the McAllister brothers to thwart a bi-coastal conspiracy.

Erotic Romantic Suspense
Carnal Series Book One
Carnal Beginnings



A split-second decision can alter the course of your life.

Adara's enigmatic and sexy boss asks a simple question.

"How will you celebrate your twenty-first birthday?"

Adara's plan to escape the lie she's lived since her parents' death is so close she can inhale freedom. Days away, it holds the key to her survival. Finagling a job at a private investigations firm has added the final touches to her strategy to live under the radar. Her hunters are as sadistic as they are persistent.

Julien Crofton, an ex-Special Forces, private investigator, is unable to forge a connection with his beautiful personal assistant. Submissive by nature, she holds a will of steel underneath the haunted exterior. When he learns she comes with her own psychopathic stalker, determination to keep her safe tests his skills.

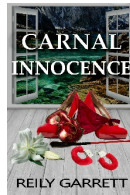
Passions ignite while evading her perverted family and a psychopathic stalker.

Warning: adult content and ramifications of rape discussed.

Carnal Innocence

Carnal Series

Book Two



Who can you count on in your darkest hour?

Callie, an extraordinary genius raised in a Think Tank superstructure, has unique talents sought by scientists and terrorists alike.

A botched rescue attempt hurls her into a world of spies and terrorists while leaving her to adapt to a sexual mutilation that will last her lifetime.

Nate, an ex-Special Forces private investigator, is unprepared for cyclone Callie sideswiping his life during a meet and greet at his BDSM club. After an old team mate is assassinated, he must ferret out a traitor while keeping Callie from the radicals' clutches.

From their first meeting, Callie embodies an otherworldly aura with mysteries neither his heart nor mind can refuse to unravel as he helps them navigate a world of sensual exploration and betrayal.

From the winner of The Romance Review's Top Pick award comes the sequel to Carnal Beginnings. If you love a combination of BDSM/romance and suspense, don't miss this action packed adventure.

Warning: Genital mutilation subject ramifications discussed in this book.

Bending Fate:
Prequel to Carnal Whispers:
Mind Stalker



The strength to bend fate lies in our minds as well as our actions.

An extraordinary ability cursed her existence, but Dani's alienation from society's mainstream can't dampen her commitment to help another genetic oddity hunted due to a unique DNA sequence.

Through the terror of avoiding a sniper's bullet and nature's temper tantrum, she struggles to deliver a warning in hopes of saving a like-minded, young woman. Dani's ability is both a blessing and a curse. Those who would use her for their own ends would kill to control her, yet it's her ability that allows her to seek out and help others.

Here is a riveting, fast-paced prequel to entertain while kindling contemplation of the metaphysical world.

Carnal Whispers: Mind Stalker

Carnal Series

Book Three



To delve into another's mind is to revel in the depths of truth, cringe in the face of past and imagined horrors, and suffer their dreams, all while searching for balance and serenity.

Daniele is a mysterious, gentle, and loyal young woman harboring knowledge capable of destroying millions. Thumbing her nose at fate, she hides in plain sight while concealing her extraordinary talent, enduring isolation despite her fantasies of a normal life.

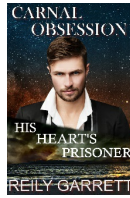
Marc, owner of the BDSM club, Ambrosia, is determined to protect the elusive beauty stalked by a psychopathic killer. Hidden underneath her vulnerability, he senses a courage and determination forged from horrific circumstances. While adapting unique scenes to free her from fear and low self-esteem, he strives to stay one step ahead of a branch of the government answering to no one.

Each must rely on the other to survive a world where betrayal and deception, desire and trust, weave a fabric that threatens their sanity.

Carnal Obsession: His Heart's Prisoner

Carnal Series

Book Four



Life on the street molds emotional athletes.

Three years ago, her brother's death marked the beginning of Kendra's new life, an existence with no home, no family, and no friends. Time in the underground byways toughened her emotional shell with the loose association of like-minded street rats where survival meant compromise and constant vigilance.

Before he died, Billy had sent her a package in care of his teammate, Conner. For Kendra, re-entrance into polite society comes with a deadly price, as betrayal comes from both sides of the grave.

Conner Crofton owns the BDSM club, Ambrosia. After failing to protect his teammate on their last covert mission, penance takes form as a promise to safeguard Billy's little sister, a girl he'd unknowingly remanded to a world of darkness and uncertainty, deception and psychopathic stalkers.

The past will always haunt us. Each must earn forgiveness and trust as passion, guilt, deception, and betrayal, interweave a destiny formed long ago. A romantic suspense with a twist.

Unholy Alliance
Immortal Lover Series



Can fated love poised between the illusion of immortality and the certainty of death find new life between hope and adversity?

In securing a relic destined to destroy humanity, Lukas is mortally bitten by a unique breed of demon. Before he succumbs to his fate, a stranger offers her blood, allowing him time to complete his mission.

Sariel has spent most of her life destroying demons and vampires alike. With a witch as a mentor and a ghost for companionship, she's always had everything she's needed, or so she thought until three demons cross her path, noting her angelic origins and changing her entire worldview.

As the prophecy unfolds, the vampire, angel, and witch must join forces to face demonic powers never experienced while navigating the murky waters of desire and betrayal, paranormal talents and malevolent cunning.

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Tiago

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