

MOON'S FURY

Chapter 1

Cara pressed down harder on the accelerator as she replayed the phone message in her mind. *I hope you can make it here before I'm gone.* The old man's voice had sounded shaky and out of breath, which worried her. He'd always been such a tough old bird. She flipped the switch to turn on her cherries, but not the siren, and watched the lone vehicle in front of her on the highway dutifully pull into the emergency lane and slow to let the sheriff's truck pass.

Sheriff. She still hadn't gotten used to the title—even if it was only temporary, until Carl recovered from his stroke.

The sun was low on the horizon, making the clouds bleed with fiery intensity over the towering live oak trees lining the highway. By the time she reached Ten Bears's tiny hut, it would be full dark. She hated climbing that steep path to his house at night, and the sky smelled of rain—the bad kind. Nothing like a flash flood to spur a girl on.

Great.

A flickering light far ahead on the left caught her eye just before she spotted the red stain, and a limp furred body sporting a massive rack of antlers in the opposite lane. She hit the sirens, because headlights shouldn't be looking out from the middle of a field, and bobbing up and down.

Picking up her radio she hit the button as the car behind her disappeared into the distance. “Dispatch, T-2 . . . um . . . I mean, *T-1*, southbound on 377, at mile marker . . . aw, hell, someone snapped it off . . . let's say about fourteen miles out of town, rolling code. We've got a deer flip with possible injuries.”

Maggie's voice was calm and professional. “Dispatching an ambulance now, Sheriff, and calling for backup. I just saw Dave's trooper car pull in to the Branding Iron. Want me to notify THP and wait for them to reach him, or should I just call the restaurant? You know how bad the radio reception is before a storm. I'm probably going to lose you in a minute.”

“Copy that. Call the restaurant. Good catch. I'll secure the scene and set some flares. It's almost dark and on a blind curve. Oh, and see if y'all can dig up a number for Sam Kerchee and call him. Apparently, he finally broke down and bought a cell phone. If he needs medical assistance, get T-6 over there, stat. If not, then tell him I'll be late for our meeting. T-1 out.”

She parked well off the road, leaving on her lightbar to warn other drivers, then sprinted across the highway and down the embankment—sniffing carefully as she stepped through the knee-deep grass and weeds for the distinctive dusty scent of any of the variety of rattlers that lived in the region. It was hard to smell anything over the deer musk and blood that hovered in the still air, but she fought past her hunger caused by the rising moon. Tonight she had to be a cop first, a werewolf second. Company would be arriving soon and she couldn't afford to get distracted.

“Hello? *¿Hola?* Can anyone hear me?” Cara couldn't see any bodies in or around the

vehicle as she walked toward it and couldn't decide whether that was good or bad. But then the sound of shallow, ragged breathing and a small whimper made her turn her flashlight away from the black SUV to the nearby brush. There, nearly hidden in the mesquite and cactus was the pale, red-stained arm of a child who must have been thrown from the vehicle. In seconds, Cara was by her side, checking her for injuries.

Still clutching a soiled pink Care Bear in one hand, the girl, who appeared to be about seven, opened her eyes slightly and tried to focus. "Mommy?"

She touched the girl's blonde hair lightly and moved the flashlight around, looking for broken bones or deep cuts. Other than a variety of scratches and embedded cactus spines, she seemed remarkably healthy. "No, honey. My name's Cara, and I'm a dep . . . the sheriff. Y'all had a little accident. Were you driving with your mommy? Was there anyone else in the car with you? What's your name?"

She nodded and tears welled as she finally noticed the uniform and badge. "Brittany Foster, ma'am. Me and Mommy are going to Grammy's house." The light twang in her voice had a regional flavor which said she lived somewhere nearby. Her little chin started to quiver. "Where's Mommy? My leg hurts." The thick, wet scent of her fear was giving way to ammonia panic. Not good.

Cara kept her movements light and calm and took a quick sniff of the leg. Then she scanned the ground for any evidence of fire ant mounds or other wildlife that might have bitten the girl the girl before replying. "You just got some cactus spines in your leg, Brittany. You've had that happen before, haven't you? I've got some tweezers in the car and we can fix you right up. Y'all just stay right here, don't move, and I'll go get your mommy. Okay? You keep—what's your teddy's name?"

A snuffle and a nod said Brittany understood. "Mr. Bear. He falls in the cactus a lot, but he never cries when Mommy pulls the stickers out."

Pulling a small penlight from her utility belt, she turned it on and handed it to the girl. "Well, Mr. Bear is very brave, 'cause I know those spines can hurt. Now, you stay right here in the light and make sure Mr. Bear doesn't get scared while I go get your mommy. I want you to listen for sirens for me, okay? They're going to come and put your car back on the road so y'all can get to your Grammy's house."

Brittany nodded and started to play with the flashlight, turning it toward her surroundings. Cara hated leaving the girl alone, but she had to find the mother. The SUV had finally stopped rocking on its roof. She played the bright beam of the flashlight around the wrecked vehicle, searching for the driver. The pungent odor of dripping antifreeze and gasoline made it impossible for her to smell the woman. "Ms. Foster? Can you hear me? Please answer if you can hear me."

No sound, other than punctuated hisses from drops of hot fluid on the engine block, met her ears. One entire side of the vehicle was buried in a mass of young mesquite trees, making it difficult to see. She crawled down on her belly under the branches and played the light around—
There she was!

Cara shook her head slightly in the small space. Also thrown from the vehicle when it flew off the road, the car must have flipped and landed right on the woman . . . well, actually not much more than a teenager, and a mirror image of the girl. She was alive, but unconscious and bleeding badly from a cut to her forehead. And . . . the roof of the vehicle was resting right on her

pelvis and legs. “Motherf—”

A tentative voice from the darkness made her cut off what she was going to say. “Mother? Cara? Did you find Mommy?”

She wiggled backwards, ignoring the multitude of mesquite spines that ripped at her hair and shirt, thinking desperately. “I sure did, Brittany. But she’s sort of stuck, so I have to help her out of the car. You just stay right there, ‘kay? Don’t come over here, because there’s antifreeze all over the ground. It’ll make you sick.” If she acted quickly, there was a chance not only to save the woman’s life, but ensure she didn’t wind up in a wheelchair for the rest of her life.

She’d never tried to use her Sazi magic to lift an entire car. She was barely alpha enough to lead her pack and hold the members in an emergency. Still, it would only have to be for a few moments until she could drag the woman out from underneath.

Or . . . hmm, maybe the reverse would work better.

She walked around to the back of the vehicle and inspected the terrain with the flashlight. Yes, that could work. If she braced her back against the massive live oak butting up nearly to the rear bumper, she could lift the entire car and then use her magic to move the woman.

But there would be a witness. There was no way she could pull this off without the girl seeing, and humans didn’t know the Sazi existed.

To protect and serve.

Cara played the light over the woman’s still, barely breathing form. There was no escaping her duty. She had to risk it. “Brittany, honey. I need you to turn off the flashlight for a minute, ‘cause it’s making it hard for me to see. Can you do that for me?”

There was a long pause and she knew the girl was getting scared again. Her voice was barely audible and trembling a little, obviously wondering what was happening and why her mommy wasn’t talking. “Okay.” The light went out and she breathed a sigh.

“Now, this door is going to be really hard to get open and it’s gonna make a lot of noise. But you need to trust me. Just ignore what I’m doing and you keep listening for the sirens. Tell me if you hear them, and I’ll have your mommy out in just a second.”

The girl’s voice was getting panicked again, rising and falling with a sing-song, breathy quality. “Cara? Mr. Bear is scared of the dark.”

She was going to have to make this quick, or the girl would come over looking for her mom and there was no way she was going to let her see her trapped by the car. “Um, do you know any songs, Brittany? Sometimes singing in the dark helps . . . *bears* that are scared. Do you know the song about the spider climbing the water spout?” Cara braced her back against the trunk of the old oak and spread her arms wide to grab both sides of the car, digging in her fingers with enough supernatural strength to bend the metal slightly. She had to keep hold of the frame. She couldn’t afford for the bumper to shear away and drop the vehicle back on the woman. With a barely audible grunt, she dug in her heels and began to lift.

“Uh-huh. Grammy has a CD with lots of songs. I know all of them.”

Forcing her voice to remain calm was the hardest thing she’d ever done as the vehicle began to move. “Okay, then why don’t you sing it for me? I don’t remember the words too well. But I’ll join in and then your Mommy can too.”

The girl’s pure, clear soprano filled the night. “Eensie weensie spider, climbed up the—”
Cara forced her mind away from the song to concentrate on keeping the vehicle level. It

was trying to fall forward to its heaviest point—the engine. But she couldn't let that happen. She forced her elbows to lock so the roof wouldn't shift or fall over onto the woman's chest. She felt her muscles ache and then begin to burn as she lifted the entire vehicle a fraction of an inch.

“—washed the spider out! Out came— c'mon Cara. You said you'd sing with me.”

Sweat rolled down her forehead and she panted out a few words. “Finish it once for me first. ‘Kay?’”

“Oh, okay.” The sullen tone in her voice vanished when she started over from the beginning.

Inch by inch the SUV rose from the ground as her heels dug in deeper. The oak bark cracked, and sharp branches splintered under the force, cutting through her shirt and wedging into her back. Now her neck muscles were starting to spasm and she wanted to scream from the exertion. When she thought it was high enough, she pressed outward with her magic, searching for the woman with senses she couldn't explain. Power swelled and flowed, a subtle wind that touched every surface—caressed the blades of grass, each flower and leaf until . . . she touched a leg. She knew it was a leg, but even after years of training, she still couldn't explain *how* she could sense a body from among the surrounding rocks and branches.

She let the woman fill her mind until every nuance of her body was memorized. The world disappeared as she surrounded the woman with magic, felt the almost sensual tingle as she became one with another living, breathing being. She grieved at the damage to the woman's legs and went an extra step—one she hadn't planned, and mended the fractures, attached torn ligaments and let blood flow again through undamaged veins.

Then, as she felt her arms failing and her legs buckling, she lifted the woman's form—pulled it from beneath the twisted metal and floated her a few feet, to safety.

Seconds later, gravity won the battle and the vehicle slipped from her hands, crashing down to the ground loud enough to make Brittany scream, turn on the little flashlight and start to run crookedly toward the tree. “*Mommy!* Cara! Is Mommy okay?”

Cara took a moment to catch her breath before hurrying toward the girl and stopping her from limping around the back of the SUV. “Your Mommy will be okay now. But she's hurt, so I don't want you to see her until I wake her up. But I promise you she'll be fine. Now, you take my big flashlight and give me the little one.” She removed the penlight from the girl's hand and gave her the large flashlight. With four D cells, it was heavy enough to force the girl to concentrate to keep it steady.

Tears were flowing freely down the girl's scratched, dirtied face, and she looked up into Cara's face with desperation. “Mommy's okay, isn't she? Daddy got hurt once and he never came home. I don't want Mommy not to come home!”

Cara heard a car door slam from behind her squad car, although she hadn't seen headlights or heard it arrive.

A pleasant baritone spoke from the darkness. “Your mommy is going to be fine.” The girl pointed the flashlight up and smiled when she saw a man wearing a Texas Ranger white hat and uniform walking toward them. She didn't ask a single question, but just ran over and hugged his leg and walked away to sit down on the ground, telling Mr. Bear that everything would be fine now.

Cara lowered her voice to the lightest whisper and shook her head in amazement.

“Y’know, Ranger Kerchee, that’s just weird how you do that magical persuasion thing. I didn’t even see you drive up, and I’m supposed to be the Alpha around here.”

He smiled brilliantly, softening his Comanche born Roman nose and high cheekbones. “Yeah, you’re the Alpha, but I’m a Wolven agent. We’re *supposed* to be able to sneak up on other Sazi. And if you’d stuck with the program instead of running off to the police academy, maybe you could do *that persuasion thing* too.”

“People here would say you’re a bruja, you know, for the way you can make people see things that aren’t there. A witch.”

The humor dropped away from his face. He glared at her and crossed arms over his chest. The white hat couldn’t hide the darkness—the death—in that gaze. “And people would say *you’re She-Hulk*.” Cara flushed and glanced at Brittany, only to find that she was frozen in place, mouth open as though to speak, unseeing of everything around her. Damn, he was good!

His voice hissed into the darkness. “What in hell did you think you were doing, Alpha Salinas? I could have your *life* for the way you’ve fucked up this accident scene. You think nobody’s going to *notice* there are marks on the ground and on the roof that match up with that woman’s legs, or see your torn shirt and bark in your hair? You think your colleagues are *stupid*? Think they won’t ask questions—investigate? Maybe even question the girl or find your fingerprints . . . or finger *dents* on the SUV?”

Cara absently ran her fingers over the normally tight bun at the back of her neck to discover it was disheveled and did indeed have bits of bark littering it. She had no excuse, and she knew it. He was right. She’d overstepped her bounds—risked her entire pack, their entire kind in fact, with exposure. The Wolven agent had the right, and the authority, to take her life on the spot. It was their way. All she could manage was an embarrassed shrug and a whispered, “She would have been a cripple, Will.”

“And you think she didn’t *deserve* that fate? She risked her own life, and her child’s, by not wearing seat belts. Have you measured the skid marks in front of that eight-pointer yet? She was doing at least ten over the limit. What gave you the *right* to change the future she brought on herself?”

She looked up then, met his eyes—accepted whatever fate he would give, and told him the reason, the one truth in her life. “To protect and serve.”

He emitted a sound that shouldn’t be produced by a human throat: the angry, frustrated cry of an eagle denied a dinner. He stalked away, leaving her unable to breathe for a moment. Was he really going to let it go? Would she live to see morning?

He grabbed the buck by the antlers with one hand and pulled the heavy animal to the side of the road as easily as if it was empty skin. As sirens began to fill the air, he turned to her with his face set in cold stone. “Keep your mouth *shut* and don’t make any excuses or statements about anything. I’ll fix anything strange after the reports are filed. But the three of us *will* be discussing this tomorrow at lunch. Plan on it being a *long* lunch.”

The three of us? She opened her mouth to ask, but he suddenly wasn’t there. He was just . . . gone. But then she heard a sound overhead and realized he’d turned to animal form and flown into the darkness, and Brittany was again quietly singing to Mr. Bear. When she looked behind her squad car, there was no sign of another vehicle.

Damn, he’s good.

##

Adam Mueller let his foot off the accelerator when a flare came into view on the side of the road, causing the car behind him to close rapidly before the driver finally hit the brakes with a quick squeal of rubber. The flashing lights in both emergency lanes and the smear of red on the road ahead started his adrenaline pumping. He automatically slowed even further and started to scope out the accident scene.

“Adam? What’s happening?” Vivian Carmichael’s voice from the back seat was thick with sleep. “Are we there yet?”

He glanced in the rearview mirror to catch her gaze. “Nope. Not yet. Looks like someone hit an animal and flipped. Only county mounties and state patrol on the scene, so we must not be near the city yet.”

She snorted slightly and turned deeper into her pillow. “Well, for God’s sake, don’t stop and offer to help. You’re not a cop in this state, you know—and we’re on vacation. I’m sure they can manage without you. Let’s just get there and find a hotel room. I’m sick to death of sleeping in this truck’s miserable excuse for a back seat.”

A slender young woman in uniform stepped into the road, put out one hand to stop him, then started to wave an ambulance forward. He turned his face just slightly toward the back seat, because he couldn’t seem to take his eyes off the deputy. “They’re moving out the ambulance, Viv. It’ll just be a second and then we can go.”

She just grunted and covered her head with the pillow to shut out the bright red lights that filled the truck’s cab. He couldn’t figure out why the uniformed woman held his attention so completely. She was certainly gorgeous . . . had that whole Jennifer Lopez thing going on, except more heavily muscled and curved. But no . . . that wasn’t it.

There’s something about the way she moves. The woman turned when someone in the field shouted at her, and he noticed the back of her uniform was ripped and covered with bits of leaves and bark. Adam abruptly wondered what she smelled like . . . and whether she would taste salty from exertion. But before he could open the window to catch her scent, she’d turned back around and was waving him, and the growing line behind his truck, into the opposite lane to go around. Her movements showed annoyance, bordering on anger, but it didn’t appear to be directed at anyone in particular.

He slowed briefly as he passed her, turned on the interior light and their eyes met. He nodded as he would to any other officer on duty—with a sense of comradery, but it was more difficult to pull his eyes back to the road than it should be. A shiver raced through him because her eyes had been those of a predator.

And there was nothing he liked better than a dangerous woman.

Chapter 2

The darkness in the woods was absolute, forcing Cara to use her nose to find her way. The clouds overhead had an oppressive weight to them and the scent of rain taunted her dry tongue. She wouldn't mind if a few inches fell. The crops could use the water, even if her backpack, and the clothes inside, would get wet.

Maggie had been able to find a phone number for Sam and learned he wasn't injured or sick, relieving her mind a little. Since, by the time she was done at the accident scene, it was later than she'd planned. She pushed herself along the familiar trail even faster, her claws digging deep into crumbly limestone as she climbed higher up the steep hillside to the stone and grass hut the elder Kerchee called home. She couldn't afford to be distracted, but too many things roiled around in her mind. The rescue team *had* asked questions—ones she couldn't, didn't dare, answer. They'd accepted her calm statements about tearing up her shirt in the mesquite bramble, but there had been more than one raised brow of disbelief. Still, they were pleased enough about the condition of the woman and child that they'd let it drop. But what would the reports say? Who was the third person that Will was bringing to . . . *lunch* tomorrow, and would she wind up being the main course? What would happen to her pack if she was put down?

She nearly missed the sharp bend at the top of the cliff during her mulling, but caught herself at the last moment. Perched on an outcropping where no sane person would live, the little hut managed to withstand the harsh weather and still look new, even after the more than twenty years she'd known the old Comanche shaman. There was no arguing the view from the cliff edge was stunning though, especially in spring. It was the sort of landscape painters trek for miles to use as inspiration. Cara was sorry she wasn't arriving in daylight. She'd have loved to see the stark white cliffs covered with wildflowers. They'd been especially beautiful this year, turning the barren land into a kaleidoscope of color.

Still, I wish he'd put a damned road up here.

She was huffing a little by the time she scented the buckskins she knew were stretched out on frames on the back porch. Allowing herself to revel in the scent, she paused to catch her breath. For the tenth time since she'd stripped and turned into her wolf form, her mind started to wander, this time to something a little more pleasant and, as such, more disturbing. What was it about that guy in the black truck she couldn't get out of her head? He'd just caught her eyes for a second, like every other rubber-necker in the line had done, but that one look just kept nibbling at the back of her mind—

“Welcome, Sheriff Salinas. Congratulations on your promotion.” She let out a little yip of surprise because she hadn't even noticed him, nearly invisible behind a massive turpentine-scented juniper. That was twice tonight she'd been caught flat-footed.

She shook her furred head before sitting down on her haunches. “I hate it when you do that, Ten Bears! I'm supposed to notice *you* first, not the other way around. You really know how to embarrass a Sazi. And I'm only the *acting* sheriff since Carl had that stroke. The voters will decide whether I go back to being chief deputy in November.”

Sam Ten Bears Kerchee chuckled low and stepped out from behind a tree. His prominent nose and broad mouth bore a strong resemblance to Will's, but his shoulders were stooped with

age and his face deeply wrinkled. He walked like a man decades younger, though, without limp or cane. The moonlight broke through the clouds for a moment, making his eyes twinkle merrily. “There are so few people I’m still able to surprise at my age—any small thing amuses me. Please pass along my sympathies to Sheriff Howersen’s family for his illness.” He swept his hand gracefully toward the hut, suggesting she precede him. “Now, come in before the rain. I know you prefer to use the back door.”

She wagged her tail and huffed lightly, standing up and stepping past him onto the porch. “Only because you insisted on building this place so you have to put one foot off the cliff to get in the front. Have y’all *ever* used that door?”

He chuckled as he held open the door. “Not as often as in my youth, I admit. Still, Will appreciates the door location. He often flies in from Austin to visit, now that he’s working there. He’s a good grandson.”

They fell into their usual routine. Ten Bears helped her off with her backpack, and pulled an elegantly painted rice paper and black lacquer screen from under his twin bed. He carefully unfolded and erected it so she could shift forms and put on her clothing in private. She watched his silhouette step to the other side of the hut and busy himself with filling two mugs with hot water from a nearly whistling kettle on the two-burner propane camp stove.

“I saw him tonight. Will, that is.” Cara concentrated on her human form and felt the transformation begin. It was never easy for her, even after so many years. Some alphas could shift from form to form without a second thought. Boy, not her. Shifting into wolf form wasn’t too bad—mostly it made her jaw pop for a few minutes and her toes tingle where the nails turned to claws. But the shift back to human became the deep ache of old joints on a cold wet day, combined with a sinus headache from a slender muzzle shortening to her normal nose. She had to take a deep breath and blink a few times before she could concentrate enough to complete her thought. She knew Ten Bears would wait for her to finish. He always did. “But you probably already know that.”

She coughed to clear her throat, and stretched her arms high over her head to ease the muscle spasms. She heard the slow clinking of a silver teaspoon against the ceramic mugs and smiled. The real silver was one of the few luxuries Ten Bears allowed himself. The thought was pleasant and soothing after the mad rush to get here.

“There are disturbing things going on in both the Sazi and human worlds, Carlotta. It’s true I’ve had many visions lately, and know of your encounter with my grandson. I didn’t call you here tonight merely to share your company over tea.”

She paused, her hands still behind her back hooking her bra, trying to imagine what things the Sazi police force would need to be involved with in her state. There were only a dozen Sazi families in the entire state of Texas, and a mere eight members of her far-flung pack shifted with the moon. “Do these *disturbing things* involve my pack? Is one of us in danger?”

The old Comanche didn’t answer. He just kept stirring, apparently waiting for her to finish dressing so he could look her in the face. Her mother had always said being around Ten Bears was like trying to watch the blossom on a flower unfold. It always did, but you never saw it happen. Since he was fully human, he couldn’t rely on scents to tell him what she was feeling or thinking, and he kept his own emotions enough in check that Cara couldn’t smell anything over the strong scent of his homemade wild rose hip and clover tea.

She hopped out from behind the screen, still putting on the last moccasin, her curiosity strong enough that it should be visible in the air. Ten Bears held out a box of tissues as she approached the small wooden table. She gratefully took one. A few snorts and sneezes cleared her sinuses and she carefully folded the tissue and tucked it in her pocket. He didn't have trash pick-up and there was still a burn ban in effect.

Next to the steaming, oversized pottery mug on the table was a small bag of mixed dried herbs and she smiled in relief. The bag smelled strongly of sage and pepper, along with things she couldn't easily identify. She'd never been foolish enough to question the contents for fear of insulting him. Clutching it to her chest briefly like the lifeline it was, she tucked it in her pocket. "Thank you, Ten Bears! I don't know that it'll last for a full month, but I'm grateful for even this small amount. Are you out of supplies? Do you need some money for more? I know you've always made my tea for free, but I don't mind paying—really. I'd pay nearly anything to keep getting it. This is the first remedy that's actually *worked* on my condition."

Ten Bears pulled the spoon from his mug and tapped the liquid off on the rim before setting it carefully on a folded piece of paper towel. He fixed her with a piercing gaze. His dark eyes were a little more cloudy than last time she'd visited. He really needed to visit an eye doctor to get those cataracts checked. "You were very merciful to save that woman, Carlotta. While I may not say why or how, your kindness will be returned ten-fold in the near future."

Cara breathed a sigh of relief. If Ten Bears said it, that's what would happen. While he wasn't a Sazi seer in truth, because he was full human, his gifts had served her pack well for many years. "Thank God! Could you maybe tell Will that when you see him next? I'm pretty sure he was ready to put me down on the spot."

His head cocked slightly, and the thick sweet scent of his confusion and curiosity slapped her nose just as a roll of thunder sounded overhead. In seconds she understood why he was bewildered. "And how would my vision help you avoid your punishment, Sheriff? You made a choice, knowing the consequences. Wrong done for pure motives is still wrong. Does the *reason* for a crime matter when you're arresting a suspect?"

A leaden feeling in the pit of her stomach began to grow. She hadn't received a Wolven punishment since . . . well, since she began training to become a Wolven *agent*. She still had to cover the scars when she wore shorts. "Are you saying I'm still going to be punished? Will I—" She coughed and took a sip of tea before continuing with fingertips tapping on the rim. "Will it be bad?"

He shrugged. "My visions haven't included any image of you where you didn't look whole. They have been of larger events. But that doesn't mean you weren't in pain." He picked up the silver spoon again and stirred for no apparent reason. "Pain is something we all must face—young and old, Sazi and human. There is pain that can kill, and some we only *wish* would kill us."

She frowned and leaned back in her chair with arms crossed over her chest. Another flash of lightning was followed by the dull thumping of rain on the grass roof. "You're being unusually obtuse tonight, Ten Bears. Why don't you just say whatever you're going to? What are the *larger events* that involve me and my pack?"

He fixed her with a stare that seemed to bore through her, and his scent was the hot metal of determination that blended with the dusty rain from outside. "I will be going away for a time,

Cara. I've been invited to be the head dancer at the All Nations Pow-Wow. It is a great honor . . . one I'm not certain I'm worthy of." His nervousness was evident in his scent, which was unusual.

A laugh boiled up out of her, easing the creeping dread that had been threatening to overwhelm her. "So all these predictions of doom are just because you're going away for a few days and won't be around to tell me the future? I'm a big girl, Sam. I can run my pack until you get back. When do you leave? Do you need a ride to the airport?"

He shook his head, but his mood didn't lighten. "As my fathers did before me, I will walk to the great gathering. It has been many years since I've undertaken such a journey, but my totem has made it clear that such a vision quest is necessary. I will gather more herbs for your remedy while I'm there, as well, so it will be many weeks before I return."

"You're *walking*? Where is this pow-wow?"

"It will be held in Albuquerque this year and it will take several weeks to make the journey each way. Will bought a map for me with the route marked. But because I will be gone for so long, I felt I should tell you—" He paused, his emotions chasing and crawling over each other for prominence in her nose. A wistful sort of sorrow finally won, which made her rear back a little in surprise. "I have come to care for you during the many meals you have shared with me, Cara. You remind me much of my daughter when she was young. I often found it difficult to bear the knowledge of her . . . *pain* in a murky, possible future—especially if I knew it would happen in *any* possible future. I made many journeys when I was younger."

The lead was back in her stomach, and had been joined by flutters that made bile rise in her throat. "So, you're telling me you accepted the invitation to the pow-wow because something bad is going to happen here . . . to *me*? Something you don't want to watch?"

He nodded and a buzzing filled her ears. "Something I cannot stop. Still, great pain can blossom into great joy, if you allow it." A warm smile eased the years from his face, and he reached across the table to pat her suddenly clammy hand. "You, and your pack, will be tested in the coming days, Cara. I believe you're strong enough to bear this challenge, or I wouldn't leave. But true strength is sometimes marked by knowing when to let go—and that will be *your* greatest challenge. You live for your pack, and they for you, as it should be. But very soon, your vision will have to expand to encompass the whole of your kind, rather than just your own pack."

Cara shook her head, trying to wrap her head around the strange, cryptic words. "I don't understand, Ten Bears. Expand how? If not my pack, then . . . *who*?"

"That, I cannot say. But from now until I return, you must always consider the consequences to the whole of your people. You must not fail when the danger makes itself known. You must not fail, and *you* must not fall."

She rested her elbows on the table and leaned forward with a strangled sound that was close to a scream of frustration and rising panic. "Please, Ten Bears. If I mean anything at all to you, *please* . . . just tell me. What's going to happen?"

He sighed. It was a rasping, tired sound that made her wonder if he would ever return from his journey. She'd never seen him look so worried, and *defeated*. Lightning flashed outside the window and the skies opened to flood water down on the roof so loudly it hurt her ears.

Nothing could have prepared her for what came out of his mouth next. Thunder and lightning arrived as one in a cacophony of sound and motion, but it was his words that made her

heart nearly stop in her chest. “In the coming weeks, Cara, several of your pack, your *family*, will die in terrible, bloody agony—and you must be the one to knowingly send them to their deaths.”