

## Chapter One

Rhys watched the agitated feline pace back and forth in her cage, throaty growls vibrating the silence. "Don't worry, baby. I'll get you out." He clamped the wire cutters, pinching the cable between its jaws. A ping echoed as the steel mesh of the cage snapped, making him wince, though he didn't slow down or stop. He did the exact same thing six more times then, after dropping the cutters to his side, pushed on the wire split, widening the hole. "How the hell did you let poachers find you?" he admonished the cat.

Glancing over his shoulder, he stilled his breathing. *Shit. Footsteps.* "We have to hurry," he told the cheetah. Golden eyes rested on him. At least she'd stopped pacing. His gaze quickly sought any wounds with her standing still, or at least calmer, but he couldn't find anything physically wrong with the cheetah before him. She was scared, and probably pissed beyond all sanity at being snagged in a damn trap, but otherwise fine.

The warehouse was dark, the mustiness of its interior telling the tale of its disuse. Dawn was only an hour away, giving them little time to sneak out. It had taken him all night trailing the ones who'd captured her and then having no choice but to leave her to come back with the cutters to rescue Mira.

With a grunt, he created a gap in the razor-sharp wire ends, and the cat slunk through the hole. Once on his side of the cage, she practically wrapped herself around him, butting his shoulder and chin with her head. He held her in his arms for a minute. "I got you, baby," he whispered, burying his face in her neck. He'd been terrified when he'd realized what had happened to her. Rhys didn't even know how the poachers had caught on that they'd gone up to the mountains to let Mira run. Cheetahs were not native to North America, much less the Catskills. They would have to find a new running ground, but they'd worry about that later. Right now, he had to get them both out of there. "We have to go." Reluctantly, he set her on her feet. She brushed against his leg, staying close.

He inched with a cautious step along the wall, her padded paws silent beside him. Rhys had to fight his urge to run like hell to escape. They'd get out. The window he'd come in through was only a few yards away. Sounds of a waking city slipped in on the breeze.

A moment later he froze, the cat beside him going stock still at the same time. A phone rang. Steps retreated. *Damn.* He let out a slow breath. Whoever was there, was pacing a path in the flooring. The hair on the nape of his neck stood on end, warning him he was running out of time. Nearing the window, he motioned for Mira and she cleared it with one flying leap. Hoisting himself up, he fell through to the other side, landing in a crouch. Leaning against the wall, buried in shadow, he paused, listening for any sound of pursuit, then he pointed and she whirled, taking off at a run. Rhys fell in behind.

Three seconds later, a volatile shout filled the warehouse. He didn't stop to look over his shoulder to see if they'd been spotted or who it was. His only goal was to get

them both out of sight and disappear.

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Mira collapsed on the leather front seat, Rhys already turning over the engine of the SUV. "There's clothes in the back," he told her once she'd completed her shift. She nodded, gasping for breath.

"Just go."

He didn't argue.

A moment later, shivering and naked, she reached behind her seat and found a pile of clothes. "Thank you." Slumped down, she couldn't see where he was going, just grateful it was away from that cage.

"Like I'd let you out in public naked," Rhys scoffed with a playful grin.

She lay in shivering silence for a moment, her eyes closed. Adrenaline surges sent shivers down her frame in rivers. Mira had never been captured like that, and she never wanted it to happen again. "For coming to get me."

A hand threaded through her blonde curls a second later, drawing her gaze to him. "Like I'd ever let you go." Her heart thumped and a heavy sheen moistened her eyes at the absolute adoration in his gray-brown eyes when she locked hers with his.

Mira was still getting used to having Rhys in her life. She knew he loved her. She loved him like no one else. But he'd taken a huge risk tonight. Sliding the sweater over her head, she heatedly admonished herself. He'd done it because she'd made a bad choice and had been caught for it.

"Do you think they know?"

He raked his bottom lip with his teeth. "Honestly, I don't know." He turned right at a light, his attention on his driving. "I'm not sure if they were just poachers, or if someone else has figured out what you are and is actively hunting for you guys."

She groaned. The tears continued to well. "Damn it!" She swiped a stiff finger beneath her lashes when she couldn't make them stop.

"You have to admit, anyone reporting cheetahs and lions and tigers to the wildlife department is going to be laughed at. Get enough calls from more locations and someone's going to ask questions." He glanced her way. "Catch one and you're an instant media rock star."

"I don't think he was waiting for the news vans," she said. Mira curled up tighter on the seat, wanting to sink into it and disappear. "I need to lay low for a while. I thought it was safe here. I got careless." She pressed, as though to hide, against the rear of the seat.

Rhys pulled over into a diner parking lot miles from where he'd found her and stopped the vehicle. Shoving the gears into park, he turned and faced her. "It'll be all right." Warm, solid and steady, his palms cupped her face, calming her frantically racing heart. The sweep of his thumbs over her skin made him feel so real, soothing her like no one else could. "I love you. I'm not letting anything happen to you."

Her breath caught. It always did as his lips descended to hers. She purred and

moaned at the same time, the flash of desire so hot, she shook. All it took was a kiss and she went up in flames. A touch and she'd be demanding he strip and take her. And he wouldn't argue. He couldn't deny her when he was usually just as eager. The intensity of what they'd found together was staggering, and so once in a lifetime, she was determined to never let him go, provided incidences like yesterday morning didn't take her from him unwillingly.

She'd never known anyone like Rhys Jamison Rowls. Her fingers dug into his thick bay brown hair, holding on as his kiss heated the interior of the vehicle, chasing away her chills. Memories of the day spent in the confines of a cage faded as his lips molded to hers. She opened to his query, giving him access, craving the feel of his tongue. Pushing forward, she danced with him, and felt the shiver of want rush down her spine. Her womb clenched, and her body grew damp. She had to shift on her seat to ease the climbing ache.

"Shh," he breathed, grinning knowingly above her lips, his voice rich with his own desire. "Me too, baby, but you need to eat. You haven't eaten since this morning." Technically yesterday morning, but he was right. She was starving.

Heat rose into her face, her gaze dropping when his concern deepened the gray in his eyes. His thoughtfulness always caught her off guard. She'd been on her own for so long away from home and avoiding detection at the best of times, it was taking time getting used to someone watching out and caring for her.

Only a handful of her kind still existed. The closest translation from their original language was Felid-shifter, where the males and females could shift into several feline forms. In the human form, they were as nondescript as the next person. Unfortunately, their limited numbers meant their survival was crucial for every one of them. They all prayed to find the one person that would help their continuity because they could only procreate when the chemistry was right, to stimulate the mating and ovulation of the species. Not all of the remaining Felids had been lucky, dwindling their numbers further. For her, finding her mate among the human men had been a miracle. She knew before she was old enough to shift that the one she needed wasn't going to be among the males of her race. Mira was an ancestor of a scientific group that had arrived on Earth over a century before to research and catalogue the environments because it was so similar to their own home. Only the original group never had the chance to return to their home world. Unable to flee when their ship was discovered by a small hunting party, they'd destroyed it and were forced to scatter.

Now integrated with mankind, the existing descendent generation knew nothing of their home world. Each day was a fight to remain in secret, to hide the real animal in their skins, because even if she looked human, she was a far cry from it.

And Mira might have just blown it for all of them.

She bit her lip. "I'm so sorry," she finally choked out, fighting the sobs that burned her throat.

Rhys cradled her into his shoulder, his hands soothing her, running up and down her back.

"I'm not going to lose you now, kitty-cat," he said, nuzzling her ear.

Mira chuckled through her tears. *That stupid nickname.* Lifting her up in front of him, he wiped her tears away with a thumb, gazing at her like she was his entire world.

"I never should have left after the argument."

"All couples fight, baby. The bigger question is how they knew to set the trap, there near the cabin, and also when we'd be there alone and not with anyone else from the family. A trap set to catch a big cat? That was no accident."

She nodded, looking out the window beyond his shoulder, the threat of what she'd discovered firing chills and shakes deep into her body. Someone was hunting for her, or for the cats. In either case, she was in danger. She didn't mention her own fears, praying for the moment that she was wrong and it had just been a fluke, a very rare mistake.

Streetlamps up and down the street left little in shadow, cars flowing easily through the traffic lights with the approaching dawn not too far away. Just another morning, like so many others. It seemed almost too normal after the last eighteen hours.

"Let's grab a bite then go home."

Mira nodded with Rhys slipping out of the driver's door, then waiting for her to join him. Curling her hand in his, he guided her inside.