

Slave to Sensation

NALINI SINGH



BERKLEY SENSATION, NEW YORK

Table of Contents

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

[Dedication](#)

[CHAPTER 1](#)

[CHAPTER 2](#)

[CHAPTER 3](#)

[CHAPTER 4](#)

[CHAPTER 5](#)

[CHAPTER 6](#)

[CHAPTER 7](#)

[CHAPTER 8](#)

[CHAPTER 9](#)

[CHAPTER 10](#)

[CHAPTER 11](#)

[CHAPTER 12](#)

[CHAPTER 13](#)

[CHAPTER 14](#)

[CHAPTER 15](#)

[CHAPTER 16](#)

[CHAPTER 17](#)

[CHAPTER 18](#)

[CHAPTER 19](#)

[CHAPTER 20](#)

[CHAPTER 21](#)

[CHAPTER 22](#)

[CHAPTER 23](#)

[CHAPTER 24](#)

[CHAPTER 25](#)

[CHAPTER 26](#)

[EPILOGUE](#)

[Teaser chapter](#)

Animal Instincts

She was tall but there was nothing willowy about her. The woman's body had more dangerous curves than should be legal on one of her race. In spite of the black pantsuit and stiff white shirt she wore like corporate armor, he could tell her breasts would overflow his hands. When she bent to examine something on the ground, he almost gave in to the urging of his beast. The curve of her hip was sensually female, her bottom a heart-shaped enticement.

Her head turned as if in response to his intent gaze, and despite the distance separating them, he could almost taste the earthy sensuality she tried to bury. Frowning at his own thoughts, he began to walk toward her. The Psy weren't sensual. They were about as close to mechanical as you could get and still remain human. But there was something different about this one, something he wanted to sink his teeth into . . .

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NALINI SINGH



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This one is for my wonderful editor, Cindy Hwang, and my awesome agent, Nephele Tempest, for being so enthusiastic about this book from the start, and as always for my family, for being there no matter what.

PROLOGUE

Silence

In an effort to reduce the overwhelming incidence of insanity and serial killing in the Psy population, the Psy Council decided, in the year 1969, to instigate a rigorous program called Silence. The aim of Silence was to condition young Psy from birth. The aim of the conditioning was to teach them not to feel rage.

However, the Council soon discovered that it was impossible to isolate that one emotion. In 1979, after a ten-year debate over the millions of minds in the PsyNet, it was decided to change the aim of Silence. Its new mission was to condition young Psy to feel nothing. Not rage, not jealousy, not envy, not happiness, and certainly not love.

Silence was a resounding success.

By the year 2079, when the fifth or sixth generation of Psy are being conditioned, everyone has forgotten that they had ever been any other way. The Psy are known to be icily controlled, inhumanly practical, and impossible to push to violence.

They are the leaders of government and business, eclipsing both humans and changelings, races that would allow their animal natures to rule them. With mental capabilities running from telepathy to foresight, telekinesis to psychometry, the Psy consider themselves a step up the evolutionary ladder.

In keeping with their nature, they base all their decisions on logic and efficiency. According to the PsyNet, their mistake rate is close to nil.

The Psy are perfect in their Silence.

CHAPTER 1

Sascha Duncan couldn't read a single line of the report flickering across the screen of her handheld organizer. A haze of fear clouded her vision, insulating her from the cold efficiency of her mother's office. Even the sound of Nikita wrapping up a call barely penetrated her numbed mind.

She was terrified.

This morning, she'd woken to find herself curled up in bed, whimpering. Normal Psy did not whimper, did not show any emotion, did not feel. But Sascha had known since childhood that she wasn't normal. She'd successfully hidden her flaw for twenty-six years but now things were going wrong. Very, very wrong.

Her mind was deteriorating at such an accelerating rate that she'd begun experiencing physical side effects—muscle spasms, tremors, an abnormal heart rhythm, and those ragged tears after dreams she never recalled. It would soon become impossible to conceal her fractured psyche. The result of her exposure would be incarceration at the Center. Of course no one called it a prison. Termed “rehabilitation facility,” it provided a brutally efficient way for the Psy to cull the weak from the herd.

After they were through with her, if she was lucky she'd end up a drooling mess with no mind to speak of. If she wasn't so fortunate, she'd retain enough of her thinking processes to become a drooling slave in the vast business networks of the Psy, a robot with just enough neurons functioning to file the mail or sweep the floors.

The feel of her hand tightening on the organizer jolted her back to reality. If there was one place she couldn't break down, it was here, sitting across from her mother. Nikita Duncan might be her blood mother but she was also a member of the Psy Council. Sascha wasn't sure that if it came down to it, Nikita wouldn't sacrifice her daughter to keep her place on the most powerful body in the world.

With grim determination, she began to reinforce the psychic shields that protected the secret corridors of her mind. It was the one thing she excelled at and by the time her mother finished her call, Sascha exhibited as much emotion as a sculpture carved from arctic ice.

“We have a meeting with Lucas Hunter in ten minutes. Are you ready?” Nikita's almond-shaped eyes held nothing but cool interest.

“Of course, Mother.” She forced herself to meet that direct gaze without flinching, trying not to wonder if her own was as unrevealing. It helped that, unlike Nikita, she had the night-sky eyes of a cardinal Psy—an endless field of black scattered with pinpricks of cold white fire.

“Hunter is an alpha changeling so don't underestimate him. He thinks like a Psy.” Nikita turned and brought up her computer screen, a flat panel that slid up and out from the surface of her desk.

Sascha called up the relevant data on her organizer. The miniature computer held all the notes she could possibly need for the meeting and was compact enough to slip into her pocket. If Lucas Hunter stuck true to type, he'd turn up with paper hard copies of everything.

According to her information, Hunter had become the only ruling alpha in the DarkRiver leopard pack at twenty-three years of age. In the ten years since, DarkRiver had consolidated its hold over San Francisco and surrounding regions to the extent that they were now the dominant predators in the area. Outside changelings who wanted to work, live, or play in DarkRiver territory had to receive their permission. If they didn't, changeling territorial law went into force and the outcome was savage.

What had made Sascha's eyes open wide in her first reading of this material was that DarkRiver had

negotiated a mutual nonaggression pact with the SnowDancers, the wolf pack that controlled the rest of California. Since the SnowDancers were known to be vicious and unforgiving to anyone who dared rise to power in their territory, it made her wonder at DarkRiver's civilized image. No one survived the wolves by playing nice.

A soft chime sounded.

"Shall we go, Mother?" Nothing about Nikita's relationship to Sascha was, or had ever been, maternal, but protocol stated she was to be addressed by her family designation.

Nikita nodded and stood to her full height, a graceful five eight. Dressed in a black pantsuit teamed with a white shirt, she looked every inch the successful woman she was, her hair cut to just below her ears in a blunt style that suited her. She was beautiful. And she was lethal.

Sascha knew that when they walked side by side as they were doing now, no one would place them for mother and daughter. They were the same height but the resemblance ended there. Nikita had inherited her Asiatic eyes, arrow-straight hair, and porcelain skin from her half-Japanese mother. Even the time the genes had been passed on to Sascha, all that had survived was the slightest tilt to the eyes.

Instead of Nikita's sheet of shimmering blue-black, she had rich ebony hair that absorbed light like ink and curled so wildly she was forced to pull it back into a severe plait every morning. Her skin was a dark honey rather than ivory, evidence of her unknown father's genes. Sascha's birth records had listed him as being of Anglo-Indian descent.

She dropped back a little as the door to the meeting room drew closer. She hated encounters with changelings and not because of the general Psy revulsion to their open emotionalism. It seemed to her that they *knew*. Somehow they could sense that she wasn't like the others, that she was flawed.

"Mr. Hunter."

She looked up at the sound of her mother's voice. And found herself within touching distance of the most dangerous male she'd ever seen. There was no other word to describe him. Well over six feet tall, he was built like the fighting machine he was in the wild, pure lean muscle and tensile strength.

His black hair brushed his shoulders but there was nothing soft about it. Instead, it hinted unrestrained passion and the dark hunger of the leopard below the skin. She had no doubt she was the presence of a predator.

Then he turned his head and she saw the right side of his face. Four jagged lines, reminiscent of the claw marks of some great beast, scored the muted gold of his skin. His eyes were a hypnotic green but it was those slashing markings that grabbed her attention. She'd never been this close to one of the changeling Hunters before.

"Ms. Duncan." His voice was low and a little rough, as if caught on the edge of a growl.

"This is my daughter, Sascha. She'll be the liaison for this project."

"A pleasure, Sascha." He tipped his head toward her, eyes lingering for a second longer than necessary.

"Likewise." Could he hear the jagged beat of her pulse? Was it true that changeling senses were far superior to those of any other race?

"Please." He gestured for them to take seats at the glass-topped table and remained standing until they'd done so. Then he chose a chair exactly opposite Sascha.

She forced herself to return his gaze, not fooled by the chivalry into dropping her guard. Hunters were trained to sniff out vulnerable prey. "We've looked at your offer," she began.

"What do you think?" His eyes were remarkably clear, as calm as the deepest ocean. But there was nothing cold or practical about him, nothing that belied her first impression of him as something wild and barely leashed.

“You must know that Psy-changeling business alliances rarely work. Competing priorities.”
Nikita’s voice sounded utterly toneless in comparison to Lucas’s.

His responsive smile was so wicked, Sascha couldn’t look away. “In this case, I think we have the same ones. You need help to plan and execute housing that’ll appeal to changelings. I want an inside track on new Psy projects.”

Sascha knew that that couldn’t be all of it. They needed him but he didn’t need them, not when DarkRiver’s business interests were extensive enough to rival their own. The world was changing under the noses of the Psy, the human and changeling races no longer content to be second best. It was a measure of their arrogance that most of her people continued to ignore the slow shift in power.

Sitting so close to the contained fury that was Lucas Hunter, she wondered at the blindness of her brethren. “If we deal with you, we’ll expect the same level of reliability that we’d get if we went with a Psy construction and design firm.”

Lucas looked across at the icy perfection of Sascha Duncan and wished he knew what it was about her that was bugging the hell out of him. His beast was snarling and pacing the cage of his mind, ready to pounce out and sniff at her sedate dark gray pantsuit. “Of course,” he said, fascinated by the tiny flickers of white light that came and went in the darkness of her eyes.

He’d seldom been this close to a cardinal Psy. They were rare enough that they didn’t mingle with the masses, being given high posts in the Psy Council as soon as they reached any kind of mature age. Sascha was young but there was nothing untried about her. She looked as ruthless as the rest of her race, as unfeeling and as cold.

She could be abetting killer.

Any one of them could be. It was why DarkRiver had been stalking high-level Psy for months, looking for a way to penetrate their defenses. The Duncan project was an unbelievable chance. Not only was Nikita powerful in her own right, she was a member of the innermost circle—the Psy Council. Once Lucas was in, it would be his job to find out the identity of the sadistic Psy who had stolen the life of one of DarkRiver’s women . . . and execute him.

No mercy. No forgiveness.

In front of him, Sascha glanced at the slim organizer she held. “We’re willing to offer seven million.”

He’d take a penny if it would get him inside the secretive corridors of the Psy world but he couldn’t afford to make them suspicious. “Ladies.” He filled the single word with the sensuality that was so much a part of him as his beast.

Most changelings and humans would’ve reacted to the promise of pleasure implicit in his tones, but these two remained unmoved. “We both know the contract is worth nothing less than ten million. Let’s not waste time.” He could’ve sworn a light sparked in Sascha’s night-sky eyes, a light that spoke of a challenge accepted. The panther inside him growled softly in response.

“Eight. And we want rights to approve each stage of the work from concept to construction.”

“Ten.” He kept his tone silky smooth. “Your request will cause considerable delay. I can’t work efficiently if I have to traipse up here every time I want to make a minor change.” Perhaps multiple visits might allow him to glean some information on the murderer’s cold trail, but it was doubtful. Nikita was hardly likely to leave sensitive Council documents lying around.

“Give us a moment.” The older woman looked at the younger.

The tiny hairs on the back of his neck rose. They always did that in the presence of Psy who were actively using their powers. Telepathy was just one of their many talents and one that he admitted came in very handy during business negotiations. But their abilities also blinded them. Changelings

had long ago learned to take advantage of the Psy sense of superiority.

Almost a minute later, Sascha spoke to him. “It’s important for us to have control at every stage.”

“Your money, your time.” He put his hands on the table and steepled his fingers, noting how her eyes went to them. Interesting. In his experience, the Psy never displayed any awareness of body language. It was as if they were completely cerebral, shut into the world of their minds. “But if you insist on that much involvement, I can’t promise we’ll hold to the timetable. In fact I’ll guarantee we won’t.”

“We have a proposal to counter that.” Night-sky eyes met his.

He raised a brow. “I’m listening.” And so was the panther inside him. Both man and beast found Sascha Duncan captivating in a way that neither could understand. Part of him wanted to stroke her hair and part of him wanted to bite.

“We’d like to work side by side with DarkRiver. To facilitate this, I request that you provide me with an office at your building.”

Every nerve he had went taut. He’d just been granted access to a cardinal Psy almost twenty-four hours. “You want to be joined at the hip with me, darling? That’s fine.” His senses picked up a change in the atmosphere, but it was so subtle that it was gone before he could identify it. “Do you have the authority to sign off on changes?”

“Yes. Even if I have to consult with Mother, I won’t need to leave the site.” It was a reminder that she was Psy, a member of a race that had sacrificed its humanity long ago.

“How far can a cardinal send?”

“Far enough.” She pressed at something on her tiny screen. “So we’ll settle at eight?”

He grinned at her attempt to catch him unawares, amused at the almost feline cunning. “Ten, or you walk out and you get something lower quality.”

“You’re not the only expert on changeling likes and dislikes out there.” She leaned forward, her face a fraction of an inch from his.

“Yes.” Intrigued by this Psy who appeared to use her body as much as her mind, he deliberately echoed the movement. “But I’m the best.”

“Nine.”

He couldn’t afford to let the Psy think of him as weak—they respected only the coldest, cruelest kind of strength. “Nine and a promise of another million if all the homes are presold by the time of the opening.”

Another silence. The hairs on his nape lifted again. Inside his mind the beast batted at the air as if trying to catch the sparks of energy. Most changelings couldn’t feel the electrical storms generated by the Psy, but it was a talent that had its uses.

“We agree,” Sascha said. “I assume you have hard-copy contracts?”

“Of course.” He flipped open a binder and slid across copies of the same document that he undoubtedly had on their screens.

Sascha picked them up and passed one to her mother. “Electronic would be much more convenient.”

He’d heard it a hundred times from a hundred different Psy. Part of the reason changelings hadn’t followed the technological wave was sheer stubbornness; the other part was security—his race had been hacking into Psy databases for decades. “I like something I can hold, touch, and smell, something that pleases all my senses.”

It was an innuendo he had no doubt she understood, but it was her reaction he was looking for. Nothing. Sascha Duncan was as cold a Psy as he’d ever met—he’d have to thaw her out enough to gain information about whether the Psy were harboring a serial killer.

He found himself oddly attracted by the thought of tangling with this particular Psy, though until that moment, he'd considered them nothing but unfeeling machines. Then she looked up to meet his gaze and the panther in him opened its mouth in a wordless growl.

The hunt had begun. And Sascha Duncan was the prey.

Two hours later, Sascha closed the door to her apartment and did a mental sweep of the premises. Nothing. Located in the same building as her office, the apartment had excellent security, but she used her skills at shielding to ring the rooms with another level of protection. It took a lot of her meager psychic strength but she needed to feel safe somewhere.

Satisfied that the apartment hadn't been breached, she systematically checked every one of her inner locks against the vastness of the PsyNet. Functioning. No one could get into her mind without her knowing about it.

Only then did she allow herself to collapse into a heap on the ice-blue carpet, the cool color making her shiver. "Computer. Raise temperature five degrees."

"Complying." The voice was without inflection but that was to be expected. It was nothing more than the mechanical response of the powerful computer that ran this building. The houses she'd built with Lucas Hunter would have no such computer systems.

Lucas.

Her breath came out in a gasp as she allowed her mind to cascade with all the emotions she'd had buried during the meeting.

Fear.

Amusement.

Hunger.

Lust.

Desire.

Need.

Unclipping the barrette at the end of her plait, she shoved her hands into the unfurling curls before tugging off her jacket and throwing it aside. Her breasts ached, straining against the cups of her bra. She wanted nothing more than to strip herself naked and rub up against something hot, hard, and male.

A whimper escaped her throat as she closed her eyes and rocked back and forth, trying to control the images pounding at her. This shouldn't be happening. No matter how far out of control she'd gone before, it had never been this bad, this sexual. The second she admitted it, the avalanche seemed to slow and she found enough strength to push her way out of the clawing grip of hunger.

Getting up off the floor, she walked to the kitchenette and poured herself a glass of water. As she swallowed, she caught her reflection in the ornamental mirror that hung beside her built-in cooler. It had been a gift from a changeling advisor on another project and she'd kept it despite her mother's raised brow. Her excuse had been that she was trying to understand the other race. In truth, she'd just liked the wildly colorful frame.

However, right now she wished she hadn't held on to it. It showed too clearly what she didn't want to see. The tangle of darkness that was her hair spoke of animal passion and desire, things no Psy should know about. Her face was flushed as if with fever, her cheeks streaked red, and her eyes . . . Lord have mercy, her eyes were pure midnight.

She put down the glass and pushed back her hair, searching. But she hadn't made a mistake. The

was no light in the darkness of her pupils. This was only supposed to happen when a Psy was expending a large amount of psychic power.

It had never happened to her.

Her eyes might've marked her as a cardinal but her accessible powers were humiliatingly weak. So weak that she still hadn't been co-opted into the ranks of those who worked directly for the Council.

Her lack of any real psychic power had mystified the instructors who'd trained her. Everyone had always said that there was incredible raw potential inside her mind—more than enough for a cardinal—but that it had never manifested.

Until now.

She shook her head. No. She hadn't expended any psychic energy so it had to be something else that had caused the darkness, something other Psy didn't know about because they didn't feel. Her eyes drifted to the communication console set into the wall beside the kitchenette. One thing was clear—she couldn't go out looking like this. Anyone who saw her would have her sent in for rehabilitation in a heartbeat.

Fear gripped her tight.

As long as she was on the outside, she might one day figure out a way to escape, a way to cut her link to the PsyNet without throwing her body into paralysis and death. Or she might even discover a way to fix the flaw that marked her. But the second she was admitted into the Center, her world would become darkness. Endless, silent darkness.

With careful hands, she pulled off the cover of the communication console and fiddled with the circuits. Only after she'd replaced the cover did she press in Nikita's code. Her mother lived in the penthouse several floors above.

The answer came seconds later. "Sascha, your screen is turned off."

"I didn't realize," Sascha lied. "Hold on." Pausing for effect, she took a careful breath. "I think it's a malfunction. I'll have a technician check it out."

"Why did you call?"

"I'm afraid I'll have to cancel our dinner. I've received some documents from Lucas Hunter that I like to start going through before I meet with him again."

"Prompt for a changeling. I'll see you tomorrow afternoon for a briefing. Good night."

"Good night, Mother." She was talking to dead air. Regardless of the fact that Nikita had been more a mother to her than the computer that controlled this apartment, it hurt. But tonight that hurt was buried under far more dangerous emotions.

She'd barely started to relax when the console chimed an incoming call. Since the call identification function had been disabled along with the screen, she had no way of knowing who it was. "Sascha Duncan," she said, trying not to panic that Nikita had changed her mind.

"Hello, Sascha."

Her knees almost buckled at the sound of that honey-smooth voice, more purr than growl now. "Mother, Lucas Hunter."

"Lucas. We're colleagues, after all."

"Why are you calling?" Harsh practicality was the only way she could deal with her roller-coaster emotions.

"I can't see you, Sascha."

"It's a screen malfunction."

"Not very efficient." Was that amusement she could hear?

"I assume you didn't call to chat."

“I wanted to invite you to a breakfast meeting with the design team tomorrow.” His tone was pure silk.

Sascha didn't know if Lucas always sounded like an invitation to sin or whether he was doing it to unsettle her. *That* thought unsettled her. If he even suspected that there was something not quite right about her, then she might as well sign her death warrant. Internment at the Center was nothing less than a living death anyway.

“Time?” She wrapped her arms tight around her ribs and forced her voice to even out. The Psy were very, very careful that the world never saw their mistakes, their flawed ones. No one had ever successfully fought the Council after being slated for rehabilitation.

“Seven thirty. Is that good for you?”

How could he make the most businesslike of invitations sound like purest temptation? Maybe it was all in her mind—she was finally cracking. “Location?”

“My office. You know where that is?”

“Of course.” DarkRiver had set up business camp near the chaotic bustle of Chinatown, taking over a medium-sized office building. “I'll be there.”

“I'll be waiting.”

To her heightened senses, that sounded more like a threat than a promise.

CHAPTER 2

Lucas prowled to the edge of his office and stared down at the narrow streets that led into the sensor explosion that was Chinatown, his mind on Sascha Duncan's night-sky eyes. His animal nature had sniffed something in her that didn't quite fit, wasn't quite . . . right. And yet, she didn't have the sick smell of insanity but a delectably enticing scent that was at odds with the metallic stink of most Psy.

"Lucas?"

He had no need to turn around to identify his visitor. "What is it, Dorian?"

Dorian came to stand beside him. With his blond hair and blue eyes, he could've passed for a surfer hanging out, waiting for the right wave. Except for the feral edge in those eyes. Dorian was a late leopard. Something had gone wrong in the womb and he'd been born changeling in all ways except one—he lacked the ability to shift forms. "How did it go?"

"I have a Psy shadow." He watched a car glide by on the darkening street, the energy cells that powered it leaving no trace of their passage. The cells had been created by changelings. Without the race, the world would've sunk into a quagmire of pollution by now.

The Psy thought themselves the leaders of the planet, but it was the changelings who were attuned to the Earth's heartbeat, the changelings who saw the intertwined streams of life. Changelings and the occasional human.

"Think you can pump her?"

Lucas shrugged. "She's like the rest of them. But I'm in. And she's a cardinal."

Dorian rocked back on his heels. "If one of them knows about the killer, they all do. Their web keeps every single one of them in contact."

"They call it the PsyNet." Lucas leaned forward and pressed his palms to the glass, luxuriating in the cool kiss. "I'm not so sure that's how it works."

"It's a damn hive mind. How else could it work?"

"They're very hierarchical—it doesn't track that the masses would be allowed access to everything. Democratic is the one thing they're not." The Psy world of cold, calm survival of the fittest was as cruel as anything he'd ever seen.

"But your cardinal would know."

As the daughter of a Councilor and a powerful mind in her own right, it was almost certain that Sascha was a member of the inner circle. "Yes." And he had every intention of finding out what she knew.

"Ever slept with a Psy?"

Lucas finally turned to glance at Dorian, amused. "You're saying I should seduce the information out of her?" The idea should've revolted him but both man and beast were intrigued.

Dorian laughed. "Yeah right, your cock'd probably freeze off." Something bright and angry glittered in those blue eyes. "I was going to say that they really don't feel anything. I went to bed with one back when I was young and stupid. I was drunk and she invited me to her dorm room."

"Unusual." The Psy liked to keep to themselves.

"I think I was some kind of experiment to her. She was a science major. We had sex but I swear it was like being with a block of concrete. No life, no emotion."

Lucas let the image of Sascha Duncan run through his mind. His panther senses stilled, sniffing

the echo of her memory. She was ice but she was also something more. “We can only pity them.”

~~“They deserve our claws, not our pity.”~~

Lucas looked back at the city. He hid it better but his anger was as deep as Dorian’s. He’d been with the other man when they’d discovered Dorian’s sister’s body six months ago. Kylie had been butchered. Coldly. Clinically. Mercilessly. Her blood had been spilled with no thought to the beautiful, vibrant woman she’d been.

There had been no animal scent at the scene but Lucas had picked up the metallic stink of the Psy. The other changelings had seen the brutal efficiency of the kill and known exactly what type of monster had done this. But the Psy Council had claimed to know nothing, and the authorities and Enforcement had done so little, it was almost as if they didn’t *want* to find the murderer.

After DarkRiver had started digging, they’d discovered several other murders with the same signature. All buried so deep that only one organization could’ve been behind it. The Psy Council was like a spider and every Enforcement station in the country was caught in its web.

The changelings had had enough. Enough of Psy arrogance. Enough of Psy politics. Enough of Psy manipulation. Decades of resentment and fury had built up into a powder keg that the Psy had unknowingly ignited with their latest atrocity.

Now it was war.

And one very unusual Psy was about to be trapped in the middle.

When Sascha arrived at the DarkRiver building at seven thirty sharp, it was to find Lucas waiting for her by the entrance. Dressed in jeans, white T-shirt, and black leather-synth jacket, he looked nothing like the business-man she’d faced yesterday. “Good morning, Sascha.” His slow smile invited a similar response.

This time she was prepared for him. “Good morning. Shall we proceed to the meeting?” Nothing but the coldest practicality would serve to keep this male at a distance—she didn’t have to be a genius to understand that he was used to getting what he wanted.

“I’m afraid there’s been a change in plans.” He raised his hands in a placatory gesture but there was nothing submissive about him. “One of my team couldn’t get into the city in time so I postponed the meeting until three.”

She smelled deception. What she couldn’t figure out was whether it was because he was trying to charm her or because he was lying. “Why didn’t you call me?”

“I thought that since you were already on your way, we might as well go check out the site I’ve scouted.” He smiled. “A very efficient use of our time.”

She knew he was laughing at her. “Let’s go.”

“In my car.”

She didn’t protest. No real Psy would. He knew the way so it made sense for him to drive. But she wasn’t a normal Psy and she wanted to tell him to keep his autocratic commands to himself.

“Have you had breakfast?” he asked when they were both in the car and he’d brought up the manual controls.

She’d been too nervous to eat. Something about Lucas Hunter was accelerating her descent into madness but she couldn’t stop the tumble, couldn’t stop herself from continuing to tangle with him. “Yes,” she lied, not quite sure why.

“Good. Wouldn’t want you to faint on me.”

“I’ve never fainted in my life so you’re safe.” She watched the city flash by as they neared the Bay Bridge. San Francisco was a glittering jewel by the sea but she preferred the areas beyond, where nature held full sway. In some cases the forests stretched all the way to the border with Nevada and kept going.

Yosemite National Park was one of the bigger wilderness areas. At one stage a couple of centuries in the past, it had been mooted that the park be limited to an area east of Mariposa. The changelings had won that war and Yosemite had been left to sprawl to the extent that it had merged into several other forested areas, including the El Dorado and Tahoe forests, though the lake city of Tahoe continued to thrive.

It now covered half of Sacramento and curved around the lucrative wine-growing region of Napa and hug Santa Rosa to the north. To the southeast of San Francisco, it had almost swallowed Modesto. Because of its ongoing sprawl, only part of Yosemite was now a national park. The rest was protected from general development but habitation was allowed under certain circumstances.

As far as she knew, no Psy had ever sought permission to live so close to the wild. It made her wonder what their green, wooded land would’ve looked like had the Psy had total control of California. Somehow, she doubted that most of California would’ve been a series of giant national parks and forests.

Suddenly aware of Lucas sending her a questioning glance, she realized she’d been silent for over forty minutes. Luckily for her, lack of small talk was a Psy trait. “If we agree to buy the site you’ve chosen, how long will it take to close the deal?”

He looked back at the road. “A day. The land is in DarkRiver territory but owned by the SnowDancers through an accident of history. They’re happy to sell for the right price.”

“Are you an impartial party?” She took the chance afforded by his concentration on driving to look at her fill of the markings on his face. Savage and primitive, they tugged at something hidden inside her. She couldn’t help thinking that they likely told the true story of his nature, the smooth business persona merely a mask.

“No. But they’re not going to deal with anyone else so you’ll just have to hope I don’t screw you over.”

She wasn’t sure whether to take him seriously. “We’re well aware of property values. No one has yet managed to ‘screw’ us.”

His lips curved. “It’s the best location for what you want. The thought of living in that area gives most changelings wet dreams.”

Sascha wondered if he was being crude in an effort to rattle her. Had this far too intelligent leopard figured out that she was flawed in the most basic way? Hoping to throw him off the scent, she made her next words completely toneless. “Very colorful, but I don’t care about their dreams. I simply want them to buy the properties.”

“They will.” Of that Lucas had no doubt. “We’re almost there.” He pulled off the side road they were on and headed down another before parking the car beside a huge open space dotted with trees. Situated near Manteca, the area wasn’t heavily forested but it was definitely wooded.

He slid open his door and stepped out, frustrated by his inability to penetrate the layer of ice Sascha had wrapped around herself like steel. He’d engineered this drive and site-visit in order to start probing her for information. But getting a Psy to open up was like trying to get a SnowDancer to turn into a leopard.

The worst part was, he found himself fascinated by everything about his quarry. Like how the rich silk of her hair turned impossibly darker in the sun as she moved to stretch out her legs. Or how h

skin gleamed a dark honey. "May I ask you a question?" The hunger came from the panther inside but the man saw the possibilities in this line of questioning.

Sascha glanced up. "By all means."

"Your mother's ancestry is clearly Asiatic but your first names are Slavic and your last, Scottish. I'm curious." He walked beside her as she started to explore the site.

"That's not a question."

Lucas narrowed his eyes. He had the feeling she was teasing him but of course the Psy never teased. "How did you end up with such an interesting mixture?" he asked, far from convinced about this Psy.

To his surprise, she answered without hesitation. "Depending on the family structure, we take the names of either our maternal or paternal line. In our family, the last name has been maternal for the last three generations. However, my great-grandmother, Ai Kumamoto, took her husband's name. Her name was Andrew Duncan."

"She was Japanese?"

She nodded. "Their daughter was Reina Duncan, my grandmother. Reina had a child with Dmitri Kukovich and he chose the first name of their child—Nikita. My mother continued that naming tradition, as our psychologists believe a sense of history better enables a child to adapt to society."

"Your mother looks very Japanese, while you don't." Her features were so unique that they defied definition. Nothing about her said she'd been manufactured in the same machine as the rest of the bloodless, robotic Psy.

"The paternal genes appear to have held sway in my case, while in hers, the maternal ones prevailed."

He couldn't imagine ever speaking of his parents in such a cool fashion. They'd loved him, raised him, and died for him. Their memory deserved to be honored with the most powerful depths of emotion. "And your father? What did he add into the exotic mix?"

"He was of Anglo-Indian descent."

Something in her voice set off the protective instincts of his beast. "He's not in your life any longer?"

"He never was." Sascha continued walking along the pathway, trying not to feel the pain of the oldest of wounds. It was nothing that would ever change. Her father was as Psy as her mother.

"I don't understand."

This time she didn't tease him about it not being a question. "My mother chose a scientific method of conception."

Lucas stopped so suddenly, she almost betrayed surprise. "What? She went to a sperm bank and picked out a donor with good genes?" He appeared astounded.

"Very crudely put, but yes. It's now the most widely used form of conception among the Psy. Sascha knew Nikita expected her to follow the same path. Not many of their race chose the old-fashioned method any longer. It was apparently messy, wasted time that could be put to more cost-effective use, and had no advantages over medico-psychic selection.

"The process is both safe and practical." But she was never going to undergo it. There was no way she'd ever chance condemning a child to the flaw already pushing her to the brink of insanity. "We can weed out sperm and eggs that are damaged in any way. It's why the Psy have a negligible rate of childhood diseases." Yet mistakes were made—she was living proof.

Lucas shook his head and it was such a feline movement, her heart jumped. Sometimes he was so smooth, so charming, she forgot his animal nature. And then he looked at her with that naked heat in his eyes and she knew that what prowled behind the civilized facade was nothing tame.

“You don’t know what you’re missing out on,” he said, standing just a little too close.

~~She didn’t move. He might be an alpha used to obedience but she wasn’t one of his pack. “On the~~
contrary. I was taught animal reproduction at an early age.”

He chuckled and she felt the stroke of his laughter deep inside where no one should’ve been able to reach. “Animal reproduction? That’s one way to put it. Have you ever tried it?”

She was having trouble concentrating on his words with him so near . . . so touchable. He smelled danger and wildness and passion, all the things she could never allow herself to feel. It was the ultimate temptation. “No. Why would I?”

He leaned infinitesimally closer. “Because, darling, you might find that the animal in you likes it.”

“I’m not your darling.” As soon as the words were out, her soul froze. No Psy would’ve ever risen to the bait.

Lucas’s eyes blazed with challenge. “Maybe I can change your mind.”

Despite the teasing words, she knew he’d picked up her lapse and was even now considering what it meant. There was nothing she could do to retract the slip but she could bring the conversation back to purely business. “What did you want to show me?”

His wicked smile shot to pieces her hopes of getting this meeting under control. “Lots of things, darling. Lots of things.”

Lucas watched Sascha move around the lot and savored the lingering taste of her, as warm and exotic as her history.

The panther prowling the cage of his mind was intrigued by her, intent on licking at her to see if she tasted as good as he imagined. Her golden skin enticed the tactile nature of his changeling soul, while the lushness of her lips made him want to bite . . . in the most erotic way. Everything about her invited him to touch the senses.

What had him fighting the urge was the knowledge that it had to be some kind of Psy trick. Had they finally figured out a way to exert psychic control over changelings? His people had always been safe because the Psy were too cold to figure out what made them tick. Life, hunger, sensation, touch, sex. Not cold, ascetic sex like Dorian had described, but passionate, sweaty, low-down and dirty sex.

Lucas loved the scent of both human and changeling women, adored their soft skin and cries of pleasure, but never before had he been drawn to one of the enemy. He fought the attraction even as he traced the shape of Sascha’s body with his eyes.

She was tall but there was nothing willowy about her. The woman’s body had more dangerous curves than should be legal on one of her race. In spite of the black pantsuit and stiff white shirt she wore like corporate armor, he could tell her breasts would overflow his hands. When she bent to examine something on the ground, he almost gave in to the urgings of his beast. The curve of her hip was sensually female, her bottom a heart-shaped enticement.

Her head turned as if in response to his intent gaze, and, despite the distance separating them, he could almost taste the earthy sensuality she tried to bury. Frowning at his own thoughts, he began to walk toward her. The Psy weren’t sensual. They were about as close to mechanical as you could get and still remain human. But there was something different about this one, something he wanted to sink his teeth into.

“Why did you choose these sections?” she asked as he approached. Her night-sky eyes watched him without blinking.

“It’s rumored that the sparks of white light in a cardinal’s eyes can turn into a thousand colors under certain circumstances.” He searched her face for an answer to the puzzle of her. “Is that true?”

“No. Cardinal eyes can go pure black but that’s about it.” She looked away from him and he wanted to believe it was because she found him disturbing to her senses. It annoyed the panther that he was mesmerized by her while she remained unmoved. “Tell me about this lot.”

“It’s prime changeling real estate—just over an hour out of the city, in an area that’s forested enough to feed the soul.” He looked down at her sedate plait. The compulsion to reach over and tug it was so strong, he didn’t bother to resist.

She jerked away. “What are you doing?”

“I wanted to feel what your hair was like.” Sensation was as necessary to him as breathing.

“Why?”

No other Psy he’d ever met had asked that question. “It feels good. I like touching soft, silky things.”

“I see.”

Was that a tremor he heard in her response? “Try it.”

“What?”

He bent a little in invitation. “Go on. Changelings don’t mind touch like the Psy.”

“It’s well known that you’re territorial,” she said. “You don’t let just anyone touch you.”

“No. Only Pack, mates, and lovers have skin privileges.

But we don’t go crazy like the Psy if someone unknown touches us.” For some inexplicable reason, he wanted her to touch him. And it had nothing to do with learning about a killer. That should’ve given him pause but it was the panther who was in charge at this moment and he wanted to be stroked.

She lifted her hand and then paused. “There’s no reason to do this.”

He wondered which one of them she was trying to convince. “Think of it as research. Ever touched a changeling before?”

Shaking her head, she bridged the remaining distance and ran her fingers through his hair in a way that made him want to purr. He’d expected her to back off after a single stroke but she surprised him by doing it again. And again.

“It’s an unusual sensation.” Her hand seemed to linger before dropping. “Your hair is cool and heavy and the texture is similar to a satin-silk I once touched.”

Trust a Psy to analyze something as simple as touch. “May I?”

“What?”

He touched her plait. This time she didn’t react. “Can I undo it?”

“No.”

The panther in him froze, sniffing a hint of panic in her tone. “Why?”

CHAPTER 3

“You don’t have those privileges.”

Chuckling, he let the plait run through his hand. She stepped away the second it hit her back. Playtime was over. “I chose this land,” he said, answering her earlier question, “because of its closeness to nature. Though most changelings live a civilized life, we’re as animal as we are human—the need to roam the wild is in our blood.”

“What do you think of yourself as?” she asked. “Human or animal?”

“We’re both.”

“One must dominate.” A frown of concentration marred the perfection of her face.

A frown? On a Psy? It was gone a second later but he’d seen. “No. We’re one. I’m as panther as I am human.”

“I thought you were a leopard.”

“Black panthers exist in several feline families. It’s the color of our fur that makes us panthers, not our species.” He wasn’t surprised she didn’t know that. To the Psy the changelings were all animals all the same. That was their mistake. A wolf was not the same as a leopard, an eagle nothing like a swan.

And a stalking panther was danger and fury combined.

Sascha watched Lucas return to the car to pick up his phone in order to call the SnowDancer. Protected by his turned back, she allowed herself to appreciate his sheer male beauty. He was quite simply . . . luscious. She’d never used that word before, had never found anyone or anything worth using it for. But Lucas Hunter definitely fit the definition.

Unlike the cold formality of Psy men, he was playful and approachable. That only made him all the more dangerous. She’d glimpsed the predator lurking beneath the surface—Lucas might play nice but when it was time to bite, he’d go for the throat. No one made alpha of a predatory pack at such a young age by being anything less than the top of the food chain.

That didn’t scare her. Maybe because she’d seen true terror in the labyrinth of the PsyNet, things so vicious and vile that Lucas’s openly predatorial nature was as welcome as a breath of fresh air. He might’ve tried to charm her, but he’d never pretended to be anything other than what he was—a hunter to the core, a predator inside and out, a sensual male well aware of the effect of his sexuality.

He made her hunger, made her feel raw and wild things that threatened to crack the ever more fragile mask of Psy coldness she wore to survive. She should be running as far from him as possible. Instead, she found herself walking toward him as he headed back, a sleek silver device held to his ear that was light-years advanced from Bell’s original invention.

“They’ll sell for twelve million.” He stood a couple of feet from her and indicated that the connection was live.

“That’s double what this land is worth on the open market.” She wasn’t going to be bullied. “I’m offering six and a half.”

Lucas held the phone to his ear and when he didn’t repeat her offer, she realized the SnowDancer c

the other end had to have heard her. It was a reminder that despite her race's egotistical view of themselves as the supreme leaders of the Earth, changelings had some remarkable powers.

"They said they're not interested in enriching the Psy. It's no skin off their back if you don't buy it. They'll happily sell it to your competitor."

Sascha had done her homework. "They can't. The Rika-Smythe family group has already sunk all available funds into a venture in San Diego."

"Then they'll leave it empty. Twelve million or they walk." Lucas watched her with an intent look in those incredible green eyes and she wondered if he was trying to see into her soul. She could've told him it was a futile effort. She was Psy—she had no soul.

"We can't afford to put that much into the development. We'll never recoup the cost. Find me another site," she said, attempting to sound cool and in control despite the unsettling effect of Lucas's presence.

This time he did repeat her words into the phone. After listening for a moment, he said, "They're not backing down. But they have a counteroffer for you."

"I'm listening."

"They'll give you the land in exchange for fifty percent of the profits and a signed agreement that none of the houses be sold to the Psy. They also want covenants placed on all the deeds ensuring future owners can't sell to the Psy either." He shrugged. "The land has to remain in changeling or human hands."

It was the last thing she'd expected but Lucas's eyes said he'd known. And he hadn't warned her. It made her wary. Was he trying to provoke a reaction from her? "Give me a moment. This isn't a decision I'm authorized to make."

Walking a distance away, though it wasn't strictly necessary, she connected to her mother through the PsyNet. Usually they used a simple telepathic link, but Sascha wasn't strong enough to send over such a long distance. The blunt illustration of her weakness served to remind her to stay on guard. Unlike other cardinals, she was disposable.

Nikita answered at once. "What is it?" Part of her consciousness faced part of Sascha's in a close mental room in the vastness of the PsyNet.

Sascha repeated the offer and added, "It's definitely a prime location in terms of changeling need. With the SnowDancers putting up the land, our investment is halved so sharing profits isn't going to cut into our bottom line. We might even do better in the end."

Nikita paused before answering and Sascha knew she was doing a data search. "Those wolves have a bad habit of trying to take over anything they have a hand in."

Sascha had a feeling that most predatory changelings had a habit of doing that. Look at Lucas—he'd been trying to take her over since the moment he'd laid eyes on her. "They're not known for proper investments. I think this may be an emotional reaction against letting control of their land fall into Psy hands."

"You could be right." Another pause. "Draft an agreement stating we have control over everything from design to construction and marketing. They have to be a silent partner. We'll share profits but nothing else."

"What about their demand that no plots be sold to us?" Us. The Psy. The people to whom she'd never really belonged. But they were all she had. "It's legal under the Private Development laws."

"You're the head on this project. What do you think?"

"No Psy is going to want to live out here." This much space scared most of her race. They preferred to live in nice square boxes with defined limits. "It's not worth fighting over and we don't have to pay

Lucas his million if he doesn't sell all the units."

"Make sure he understands that."

"I will." Her gut said that the panther was way ahead of them. Lucas didn't strike her as anybody fool.

"Call me if you have any problems."

Nikita's presence winked out. When Sascha returned to Lucas, she found him rubbing the back of his neck as if something had irritated it. Her eyes followed the motion of his arm, fascinated by the sleek lines of muscle obvious even under the leather-synth jacket. Every move he made was fluid and graceful, like a big cat on the prowl.

It was only when he raised a brow that she realized she'd been staring. Fighting a blush, she said, "We'll agree to their demands if they agree to be a silent party. And that means not a sound out of them."

He dropped his hand from the back of his neck and put the phone to his ear. "They agree—I'll draw the contract." He closed the small flat communicator.

"We're not going to forget that you have to sell all the residences to receive that final million."

There was something distinctly smug about his slow smile. "Not a problem, darling."

It was as they were getting back into the car that she realized this was the first Psy-changeling fifty-fifty business deal she'd ever heard of. That didn't bother her—her instincts said they'd do very well out of this. Too bad that mentioning the word "instincts" would get her chemically lobotomized.

* * *

Lucas was utterly frustrated. Not only was Sascha refusing to reveal anything useful, she kept picking up on small changeling traits no Psy should've been able to sense. Even worse, he was having to fight the urge to educate her rather than subtly interrogating her for answers.

"How about this?" He showed her another line of the proposed contract. They were sitting in his office at the top of the DarkRiver building. He'd found her an office right next door. It was the perfect setup. If she'd talk.

She looked at the piece of paper and slid it back across the dark wood of the desk. "If you change the word 'at' to 'in,' it's fine with me."

He thought over the change. "All right. The SnowDancers aren't going to fight you over that."

"But they will fight me?"

"Not if the contract is fair." He wondered if a Psy even understood the meaning of integrity. "They trust me and I'll tell them the truth. So long as you don't try anything underhanded, they'll stick to their word."

"A changeling's word can be trusted?"

"Probably far more than a Psy's." He felt his jaw tighten as he thought of the self-righteous way the Psy claimed to be without anger and violence, when it was becoming damn clear they were anything but.

"You're right. Subtle prevarication is considered an efficient bargaining tool in my world."

He was more than surprised by her acceptance of his point. "Just subtle?"

"Perhaps some take it too far."

There was a stillness to her that made him want to cover the space between them and stroke her hair.

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