

## Chapter Two

“What the hell has happened here?” Rafe had had the long plane ride to think about his home. He’d pictured the neat village with his grandfather’s large lodge in the center. Dozens of houses surrounded the stone three-story building that was not only his grandfather’s home, but the meeting place for the shifter clan. Now, looking around, Rafe barely recognized it.

“Grandfather has been ill a long time. And you sure weren’t around to see to things.” Tomas wouldn’t look at him. He put the van in park and turned off the engine.

“What were *you* doing?” Rafe stepped out and looked around. There was trash in the courtyard. One of the houses had obviously burned down and the charred remains hadn’t been cleared away. This would never have been tolerated before he’d left. Roofs had missing shingles, paint was peeling and more than one had sagging shutters. He felt like he’d stumbled upon a village that was suffering from hard times, not the prosperous place he’d expected.

“I was busy.” Obviously glad for the distraction, Tom laughed when a beautiful woman ran into him, wrapping her arms around him.

“You took long enough. Where was this brother of yours, Antarctica?” She pulled Tom’s

face down for a kiss, then twisted his ear. “Or did you spend some time enjoying yourself before you looked for him?”

“Lucia, this is Rafael.” Tom dragged her around the car to meet him. “He was in Texas, if you can believe it. Right where we were told he would be. Have you looked at a map? It took a while to get there and back.”

Rafe nodded to Tom’s wife. “A pleasure to meet you, Lucia. My condolences on being tied to my little brother. We’ve been on planes for hours. First to Barcelona, then a puddle jumper to Santa Cruz.”

“Yes, your brother is a trial. If you are tired, then you must rest.” Lucia gave Rafe a brilliant smile. “I have a guest room ready for you. Or do you wish to see Grandfather first?”

Rafe felt a moment of panic. The last time he’d seen the old man they’d exchanged bitter words and he’d left vowing never to come back. He glanced around again. The clan was obviously needed leadership but it wasn’t his, damn it. He pulled himself up physically then mentally bracing himself, nodded.

“Take me to the old man. I might as well get this over with.” He winced when Tom slapped him on the back.

“That’s the spirit. Face him like a man.” Tom sighed. “Even sick as he is, I bet you a hundred euros that he has you begging to come back and serve him before you know it. Grandfather has always been a master manipulator.”

“Euros?” Rafe had a feeling the bet was a good one. He’d run because his grandfather had terrified him. He’d known that if he’d stayed he would have spent eternity doing the old man’s bidding and never become his own man.

“It’s our currency now. You’ve been gone way too long, bro.” Tom started to slap him on the back again but stopped at the look Rafe gave him. “Follow me. We’ve got Grandfather set up in a ground floor bedroom. He can’t make the stairs to the master now.”

“You’re kidding.” Rafe followed Tom into the main building. His grandfather had always ruled from his master suite. It featured a huge bed with carved animals that had frightened him when he’d been a small child. As he’d grown, he’d loved to hear the stories his grandfather had told about the mythological creatures pictured in the carvings. When Tom opened the door to what had been the study, the smell of medicine and urine hit him hard. He had to swallow to keep from gagging.

“Sorry, but he’s lost his control.” Lucia hurried ahead of them. They heard a sharp slap and rapid Spanish. A servant girl with a red cheek hurried out with dirty linens, her head down. Lucia stuck her head out into the hall. “Give us a minute to clean him up.”

“I can’t--” Rafe stepped back toward the living room, at a loss. Five long minutes passed before he heard a voice he had never forgotten.

“Get the hell in here, boy.”

Rafe stepped inside the darkened room. Lucia threw a fresh sheet over the wasted body in the narrow bed and hurried out. She patted Rafe’s shoulder as she went by then whispered something to her husband.

“Uh, would you like to be left alone?” Tom sidled toward the door.

“Leave us.” Grandfather didn’t sound as weak as he looked, his once robust frame obviously down to skin and bones.

“Yes, sir.” Tom stepped outside and closed the door.

“Do you want some fresh air?” Rafe didn’t wait for an answer, just walked over and pulled aside one of the heavy curtains and unlocked a window. He raised it a foot and took a deep breath. How could his grandfather stand it in here?

“Quit fussing and stand beside me where I can see you.” The order was in a softer tone this time. “It’s been a long time, Rafael.”

“Yes, sir.” Rafe moved to stand beside the bed. He looked down at the man who he

remembered as strong, virile, and invincible. The change was shocking. Sallow face, sunken cheekbones and dark circles under his eyes, Grandfather looked like he didn't have long to live. Rafe swallowed and blinked, appalled to find that he was tearing up.

“Man up. You going to weep over me like a woman?” Grandfather coughed, strangling. Rafe looked around and found a carafe of water and empty glass nearby. He filled it and helped his grandfather sit up to drink. When the coughing fit subsided, he laid him back down and wiped his grandfather's streaming eyes with a tissue.

“Are you okay?” Rafe set the glass back down. They were speaking English. Which was a surprise. His grandfather usually lapsed into the Old Language, a mixture of Spanish and something else Rafe had never bothered to identify. He guessed the old man was trying to please him. No, not possible. Matias Castillo never pleased anyone but himself.

“What do you think?” Matias waved a thin hand. “Don't answer that. I know I look like shit. I'm dying, boy. Otherwise, I never would have sent for you. You made it clear more than a century ago that you don't want to be here.” He cleared his throat. “It's a hell of a thing but I need you.”

“Dying? How did this happen? Who did it?” Rafe pulled up a chair and sat, his knees jelly. Seeing the old man like this... Matias had raised him, been more of a father to him than his own ever had.

“I have an idea.” Matias managed a rueful smile. Silver whiskers and thinning gray hair. Another reason for Rafe to freak out. Shifters didn't go gray.

“Tell me. I will bring this man to justice. I swear it.” Rafe laid his hand over his grandfather's. The fact that his skin was cool and thin as parchment made him try to will his own heat and vitality into it. “What do you know?”

“Poison is a woman's tool. And this started because of a woman.” Grandfather's chuckle was rusty. “I always did have lusty urges, much to your grandmother's dismay. Shiloh is a

beauty, belongs to the shifter clan that makes its base in Morocco.” He sighed and closed his eyes. “Hot blooded. I never could resist...” He glanced at Rafe. “Tomas says you are involved with a were-cat. Is that true?”

“Yes. We’re going to marry. She’s carrying my children.” Rafe dared his grandfather to start in on that.

“Children. More than one.” A short bark of laughter that ended in another coughing fit was all the reaction Rafe got. “Well now. That can be good or bad. Depending on what she gives you. But you know that. You always did what you wanted, damn the consequences. Too much like me, Rafael. I’m sure this cat is a beauty. Eh?”

“Yes, she is.” Rafe wanted to get back to why he’d been dragged here. “The poison, Grandfather. How--”

“How did it work on me? Damned if I know. We’ve sent men everywhere, looking for an antidote. There must be one. But so far, no luck.” His dark eyes had sunk into his skull but they were sharp as ever. “Your children could be the future of this clan, Rafael.”

“No, they couldn’t.” Rafe saw his grandfather’s mouth tighten. He wasn’t going to get into this now. “About this woman. Why would she poison you? What about Grandmother? Is she all right?”

“Iliana is fine, just furious over the affair. It’s not my first, of course. Your grandmother is used to my roving eye. She chooses to ignore it for the good of the clan. I’m discreet for the same reason. There have been hundreds of these little itches that I have scratched. Usually a generous gift of jewelry or gold will see the thing finished with the other woman happy enough to go away quietly. But this time...”

“You picked the wrong woman.” Rafe looked down at his own clenched fists. This was why he’d never married. Tying himself to Lacy meant he’d have to be faithful. Could he do it? Forever? The men in his family didn’t have a good track record. He needed to decide that he

could and would if he wanted to give his children a family like he'd planned. He'd grown up with a father who had sired children with several women because Rafe's mother had left the clan to return to her demon family. Tomas' mother was a clan beauty who had been one of his father's mistresses. It had been accepted, but left Tomas always trying to gain their father's attention without success. Rafe looked up at his grandfather's sigh.

"I was blinded by her beauty and kept the affair going longer than I should have. Shiloh became demanding." Grandfather looked away, staring at the shelves full of books that filled his study. His antique desk had obviously been moved out to make room for the hospital bed he lay in. "Shiloh wanted me to put your grandmother aside and declare her my mate. Can you imagine?" He finally looked at Rafe. "I've been with your grandmother for millennia. We have always ruled our family and this clan together. I would never set Iliana aside." He started coughing again. "Some would say I deserve a lingering death for my sins."

Rafe didn't disagree. His grandfather's infidelities weren't news to him. He'd heard the gossip when he had lived here. Instead of blasting the old man for failing to keep his cock in his pants, he stood. "Where is Grandmother? Maybe she finally decided enough is enough. You sure she didn't commission this poison herself?"

"Settle down, boy. Your grandmother would never jeopardize the clan by leaving it without a strong leader. I may be a 'faithless asshole', her words, but I do keep the clan strong."

"Do you? Why is this place such a mess then? I can't believe what I saw when we drove in. Obviously no one is overseeing the upkeep of the village. Are the finances in trouble? Can't you afford to pay for repairs?"

"Shut up. You exhaust me. Go see your grandmother. Ask her these questions. You have no idea how long I've been suffering, unable to see to my duties. Iliana left me and moved into a house at the other end of the village. Tomas can show you." He closed his eyes. "Leave." He opened them again. "But not the village, just my side. I need you to stay. You will see. It's time

for you to take your place here. You said it. We need leadership. Your father has taken off again and won't leave his demon bride. Tomas is weak, led by his *pene*, his woman stronger than he is. So you, my boy, are going to have to take over when I am gone."

Rafe stared down at the old man who he had never expected to look older than thirty. He wanted to argue, shift out of there and take the next plane home. But instead he found himself looking around the room and remembering the years when this man had been the father he'd needed, the man who'd taught him to fight, to shift, to confront a mother who cared more for her demon fellows than she did for the child she kept leaving behind.

"Have you seen a doctor?"

"What good would that do? We're not human." Matias opened his eyes and shivered. "Shut the window before you leave. It's cold in here." He pulled the sheet up to his neck.

"There are doctors who work on paranormals. I know of some. I will send for one." Rafe walked over to shut the window, even though he felt that the heat in the room was stifling.

"Whatever you wish. It will do no good. I know my time is almost at an end." His grandfather closed his eyes.

Rafe found a blanket on a chest under the window and spread it over his grandfather.

"Don't give up, *Abuelo*." He couldn't help himself and squeezed Matias's foot. "We fight in this clan. You taught me that. I'll find out who did this and make sure you survive it. But then I'm leaving."

Lacy dragged herself out of bed after a sleepless night. Not that there had been much night left after her sister had driven her home. It was after two in the afternoon. No wonder she was starving. She sat for a moment on the side of the bed and felt the babies adjust to the new position. She could barely breathe these days. God, but she wondered how she could go another six weeks. The bathroom seemed a mile away but she had to get there. So she dragged herself to

her feet and hurried, barely making it to the toilet. Relief.

Then she saw one of Rafe's socks on the floor. The tears she'd been holding back gave way and she grabbed a towel to hold against her face. Muffling her sobs, she leaned over, letting her grief and fear go. She had to. Feeling sorry for herself and worrying about Rafe weren't going to help anyone. She had to *do* something.

"I thought I heard you get up." Amy stood in the doorway. "Lace, please don't cry. I'm sure Rafe is safe with his family."

Lacy looked up then stretched out her hand. When her sister rushed to grab it, she felt better. Family. She knew the comfort her own could give her but had no idea what Rafe had in store with his. He'd made it clear that leaving his "clan" as he called them years ago had been necessary but not why. That was all she'd ever been able to pry out of him. He'd never talked about going back. But he hadn't hesitated when his brother had asked him to come with him. Of course there'd been guns pointed at him as persuasion.

"He's strong, able to protect himself, and he didn't look scared. Yeah, you're right. I'm sure he'll be fine." She looked down at her swollen stomach which stretched her cotton nightgown to the limit. "He'll be frantic to get back here before the babies are born though. He's going to be a wonderful father."

"And husband. You *are* going to say yes when he gets back, aren't you?" Amy squeezed her fingers. "He loves you, Lace. Don't be stupid about this. He's over his Glory St. Clair fixation."

"I hope so." Lacy winced when Amy tightened her hold. "Okay, I know so. He loves me. I'll marry him. But first I'm going to find out who the hell ratted him out. Clearly Rafe hadn't wanted to be found by his clan. So there's a spy here in Austin who told his family his location. I want to know everything there is to know about this shifter clan and where they live. That spy is going to spill it all."

“Great. Let’s go after him or her. You know who it is?” Amy helped Lacy stand.

“I have a good idea. Go make coffee and sandwiches while I take a shower. Decaf for me. And get out of here. I’m not a pretty sight naked though Rafe didn’t seem to mind seeing me that way.” Lacy held onto the glass shower door.

“And you doubted he loves you?” Amy laughed when Lacy threw a washcloth at her. It hit the floor. “Now I want to see you pick that up, cow.”

“Bitch.” Lacy realized her blue mood was lifting.

“We’re cats, not dogs, Sis. I’m a queen and you know it.” With a hair flip, Amy shut the bathroom door.

Lacy laughed. Her sister had the knack of helping her see the bright side of things. And action would do even more. She turned on the water and stripped off her gown. No way could she pick up that washcloth so she got a fresh one from the bathroom closet. Cow? More like elephant. But, as the babies started a soccer game in her tummy, she realized it was a small price to pay for bringing Rafe’s children into the world.

“Yes, I know where Rafe’s clan lives. I’m one of his cousins. Didn’t he tell you that?” Kira looked around the shop where they both worked. Vintage Vamp’s Emporium on Austin’s trendy Sixth Street was busy in the days leading up to Christmas. She was tearing off tags and writing up a sale for a customer who was going through the display of sweaters nearby.

“No. But I heard you two talking in a foreign language. Tell me where his family lives. Have you been communicating with them?” Lacy grabbed Kira’s arm. “Spying for them?”

“Excuse me?” Kira jerked her arm away. “Where’s this coming from?”

“His brother came to my mother’s place last night and took Rafe away. To see his ailing grandfather.” Lacy was very aware of the mortals in the shop. She smiled and took a dress from a woman who emerged from the dressing room. As long as she was here, she was going to have to

work. “How did it fit?”

“Perfect. I’m going to look for some earrings to go with it. Do you have some?” The woman noticed the jewelry case and pointed to a pair locked inside. “Those. I think those would look great.”

“I’ll help her.” Amy stepped behind the counter. “Kira, you look a little, um, pale.”

“Oh, give it up, girlfriend. I don’t get pale.” Kira had dark skin but she did look upset. “Did Tomas say what was wrong with Grandfather?”

“We can’t get into it here.” Lacy knew they had to keep the store open. It was Glory’s shop and they’d promised to hold down the fort while she was on her honeymoon. “What I want to know is if you’re the one who told Tomas that Rafe was here and how to find him.”

“You really think I spied on him? For the clan?” Kira drew herself up to her full height, which was an awesome six feet without the four inch platforms she wore today. “I didn’t.” She turned away to take the sweater the customer handed her and switched on a smile as she added up the total and took the woman’s credit card. Before either Lacy or Kira spoke to each other again, Kira finished her sale and wished the customer a Merry Christmas.

“Then who could it be?” Lacy sagged onto the stool in front of the counter. “Who else would know the family and report to them?”

“I have a suspicion.” Kira waved her hand around the packed shop. “Seriously, we can’t do this now. Every dressing room is full and I’ve got a customer waving at me from the locked case with the vintage handbags.” She grabbed a key ring. “I know you don’t feel like working, hon. You’re puffing like a beached whale.”

Amy looked up. “She’s right, Lacey. You don’t look so good. Go home, put your feet up.”

“Not a chance.” Lacy narrowed her gaze as she watched Kira help a customer select a Gucci bag. “I’m getting a name before I leave here. Do you believe Kira? She and Rafe share a grandfather. Why wouldn’t she send messages home?”

“Maybe she left for the same reason Rafe did. He didn’t tell you what it was?” Amy smiled and took the earrings the customer selected. “Did you see the matching bracelet? I think it would be a wonderful Christmas gift to yourself.” She winked at Lacy. “I always buy myself something when I’m shopping for others.”

“Let me see it. And that other bracelet, the sterling bangle. You two are sisters, aren’t you? That red hair is a dead giveaway.” The customer patted Lacy on the shoulder. “Do what she says, girl, and go home and put your feet up. What’s your due date?”

“February first, but I’m thinking these babies want to come sooner.” Lacy rubbed her stomach. Her maternity sweater was showing signs of wear. She’d be glad when she could get into decent clothes again.

“Multiples? Honey, they always come early. I had twins and they were six weeks early. But my preemies were perfect. You should see them now. Five year old terrors.” She pulled out a cell phone and showed a picture of blond twin boys.

“Early. I don’t know whether to pray for that or not. My fiancé is out of town.” Lacy bit her lip. Yes, she was calling Rafe that. She wished he’d left the ring here. If he had, she’d have it on her finger right now.

“She’s having triplets. Can you believe it?” Amy was wrapping up the jewelry the customer had selected. She’d taken the clerking job at the store for the holidays but Lacy hoped she’d stay on while Glory was gone. They were already short-handed and Lacy planned to take some time off after the babies were born.

“Oh, you’ll have your hands full.” The woman whipped out a credit card. “Good luck. Hope your man is home soon.”

“Me too.” Lacy blinked and refused to let a tear fall.

Kira appeared with the vintage Gucci purse in her hands. “Ed. The accountant who works for Rafe at his club. He and I have dated and I found out he has ties to the clan. He’s the only one

I can think of who might have reported to them.” She stepped around the counter and hugged Lacy. “He’s a decent guy, Lacy. If he did it, it was because he had a good reason.”

“Or for a fat paycheck.” Lacy knew she sounded bitter as she heaved herself to her feet. “I’ll get out of your way.” She smiled at the customers anxious to get their sales completed. “Merry Christmas, everyone. Thanks for shopping at Vintage Vamp’s.”

“Where are you going? Home to rest?” Amy couldn’t leave the counter while she waited for the credit card to go through.

“To Rafe’s club. Someone has to tell them he’s going to be gone for a while. I guess it’s me.” Lacy stopped next to the door as a new customer rushed inside. A cold front had blown in and the air was crisp, much colder than it had been at the wedding the night before.

“Remember, Ed is a decent guy, Lacy. Don’t go all, um, wildcat on him.” Kira smiled, like she was joking, but Lacy got the message.

“I’ll do what I need to. I’m going to get answers, one way or another.” Lacy pulled her black wool cape, the only thing big enough to go around her these days, tight and hurried out the door. She walked down Sixth Street, glad that it was almost dark. The club wasn’t open during the day but there was a happy hour that should be starting about now. It was only a few blocks down the street but by the time she saw the neon sign that said “NV”, she was out of breath and wondering if the babies were going to fall out on their own. It would almost be a relief.

Ed wasn’t at the door, which was sometimes his duty, but the man there waved her in. As Rafe’s lady, she was always welcome. Lacy looked around and saw that the bar and the free “build your own nachos” buffet were doing a lively business. Nachos. She could go for some of those. She headed over, loaded a plate and caught the bartender’s eye. He brought her the usual--a glass of milk--and settled her at a quiet table away from the singles scene ramping up at the bar.

“You happen to know where I could find Ed?” Lacy shoveled in a loaded nacho and

sighed in contentment. The babies were used to spicy food. She'd had cravings for chips, jalapenos and bean dip for a solid month.

"He's in back working on the books. You want me to send for him?"

"Thanks. I need to talk to him. If you don't mind." Lacy took a gulp of milk. Her stomach gurgled and she wondered if she should switch to water.

"No problem." The bartender hurried back to the bar and picked up the phone there.

Lacy had polished off the nachos and milk and was thinking about asking for a bottle of water when Ed came out from the office tucked under the balcony nearby. The club had been carved out of a vintage building with several floors. The high ceilings made for great acoustics and the disc jockey had cranked up the music for the bar crowd. Lacy wished she could tell him to dial it down. Her head was pounding and the nachos weren't settling like she'd hoped they would.

Ed was big, dangerous looking. It was a great look when he was on door duty and needed to discourage a bad element from entering the club. He was also a brilliant accountant and, to quote Kira, a nice guy. His hobby of dressing as Aretha Franklin and doing a killer "Chain of Fools" only made him more interesting. The fact that he was a shape-shifter who liked to shift into a gorilla just added to his resume. Rafe had talked about making him his assistant manager. Damn it.

"Hey. Where's the boss man?" He sat across from her when Lacy gestured.

"Gone. His brother came last night and strong-armed him into returning to his family. You know anything about that?" Lacy didn't miss the slight tightening around Ed's lips. She leaned forward. "You do! You sack of shit. You've been spying on him." Her fingernails morphed into claws which dug into the wooden tabletop.

"Calm down, Lacy. I admit I may have sent a message or two back to Matias. It was my duty."

“Fuck that. Rafe gave you a good job here. Responsibilities. He *trusted* you, Ed.” Lacy’s voice broke even while she grabbed his arm and held onto it. He didn’t wince. She had to give him points for that, even though she knew her claws were drawing blood. He glanced around to make sure no one was paying attention to them.

“You want to take this to Rafe’s office?”

“Why? So you can go gorilla on my ass? No thank you. We’ll stay right here where I have witnesses.” Lacy released him but made sure he knew she wasn’t going to let him leave the table. “If I have to change in front of a room full of mortals, I sure as hell will. I want answers and I want them now.”

“He’s not in danger, Lacy.” Ed’s calm voice made her want to scratch a path down his lean cheeks.

“Don’t you dare try to humor me! Where is this clan Rafe belongs to? Why did you tell them how to find him?”

“It’s an island off the coast of Spain. The place is remote. Unchanged for centuries. There aren’t that many shifters left. It’s about the survival of the clan.” Ed leaned closer, his voice soft. Of course Lacy could hear him, even though the music was loud and the customers crowding the bar were getting raucous as they hit hard the three dollar Margarita special.

“You and Kira are dark, Rafe is white. Are you all three part of the same clan? And you didn’t answer my question. Why, Ed? Rafe broke ties with his family. You should have asked him if he wanted to be found.” Lacy picked up a paper napkin and blotted her cheeks. Damned pregnancy hormones. She didn’t cry. She sniffed and shot him a look that made him sit back and widen his eyes. That was better. She wasn’t going to shed one more damned tear.

“Kira and I come from an offshoot of the clan in North Africa. There have been marriages...” Ed ran a hand through his short hair. “Shit. None of that matters. I did what I had to do. I respect Rafe, I do. He’s been good to me. I owe him. But Matias saved my father’s life.

He can call in a favor and I must do as he wills. It's clan law. I cannot refuse."

"This is bullshit." Lacy rubbed her stomach. Those nachos. The gas pains were getting worse. She was swearing off spicy food as of now. She dug in her purse for a Tums and chewed.

Ed frowned at her. "As a cat, I know you understand family loyalty."

"Sure. But you are going to help *me* now. Because you were disloyal to Rafe. First you need to figure out who can run this club while the boss is gone." She held up her hand when Ed opened his mouth. "It can't be you. You're taking me to this clan's hideout. I have to follow Rafe. Be with him. And I'm not taking no for an answer." She gasped when another pain hit her. She popped another antacid. "Second, I need to know what they want with Rafe. You say he's not in danger but they took him at gunpoint. That didn't look safe to me."

"Matias wants him to stay and lead the clan. That's the whole purpose of calling him home. He had to force a face to face, I guess." Ed studied her face. "Are you all right?"

"No, I'm not all right." Lacy stood and looked back at the wet vinyl chair seat. She couldn't ignore what was happening another minute. Could the timing be any worse? She wasn't ready. She looked at Ed's kind eyes and wanted to slap him just because he was there and Rafe wasn't.

"Lacy?" Ed stood next to her now, his hand on her elbow.

"My water just broke. Ready or not, I'm having these babies." Lacy gasped when a pain ripped through her. "Get me out of here. Now."