

HOWLING MOON

Chapter 1

Raphael's hand slapped against his clock radio several times before he realized it was the phone ringing.

"Hullo?" The word into the receiver was muffled by warm pillow. He turned his face a bit and cracked open his eyes.

"Raphael, it's Charles."

Throwing off the sheets, he sat bolt upright in bed, trying desperately to jump-start his sleep-fogged brain. "Mr. Chief Justice!" Morning was *so* not his time of day and it was only, he glanced at the red numbers of the digital clock, 5:00 a.m.

Shit. The sun's not even up yet.

"I need a favor."

The head of all shapeshifters was asking *him* for a favor? Granted, they were shirttail relatives of a sort, but it wasn't a relationship either of them had ever presumed upon. Charles Wingate was not a casual man. If he said he needed a favor, he *needed* it.

Heart beating frantically, he fought to keep his voice steady. "Of course sir. What can I do for you?"

Running his left hand through his bed-mussed tangle of curls, Raphael swung his legs off of the bed and onto the carpeted floor so that he was at least *technically* up.

There was a long, awkward silence. "I'm not sure where to start."

That did not sound like the Chief Justice. There were so many nuances to his voice—anger, sadness, and the one emotion Raphael would never have expected: fear.

"Sir?"

The old man sighed deeply. "I'm not *positive*, because someone has been trying to block my gift—"

"Is that possible?" There was shock in his voice. Charles was the Sazi's best foresight seer. *Nobody* should be able to block his ability to see the future.

"Oh, it's possible. It isn't *easy* but it is definitely possible." There was a heat to the words. He almost felt sorry for whoever had done it, because sure as hell they were gonna pay, and pay dearly.

"Jack Simpson has done it again," continued Charles. "He attacked a woman and killed her parents." There was a pregnant pause. "The woman's name is Catherine Turner. She's my goddaughter."

Oh fuck!

"The full moon is tonight." Raphael tried to keep his voice neutral. He failed. It was a little higher and breathier than usual. On the plus side, he wasn't groggy or sleepy any more.

"Yes, it is. And Catherine will be facing her first change."

"What do you need from me, sir?" Raphael was wary. He could guess where the conversation was leading, and it was nowhere he wanted to go.

"I just learned that Catherine is staying with her aunt, Violet Wildethorne, in Boulder."

“Right on our doorstep. I’ll contact Lucas.” Already his mind was weighing options on the proper procedures to deal with the situation.

“No!” Charles said firmly, then he backpedaled a bit. “Please don’t.”

Blinking with shock and the sudden derailing of his thought process, the obvious question popped from his mouth. “Why not . . . sir?” The last word was an afterthought.

There was a long silence on the other end of the line. “Lucas would simply murder the woman.” The Chief Justice’s voice softened. “I’d rather avoid that if I can. She—” There was a catch in his voice when he continued. “She means a great deal to me.”

“Sir.” Raphael chose his words very carefully. “There’s a good chance she won’t survive. But if she does—”

A slight rustling over the phone said Charles was nodding. “She may go feral. And *if* she is feral, she will need to be put down. I understand that. But I don’t believe she will be. Catherine has always been an exceptional woman.” He sighed. “And there’s something else you should know. Things could get complicated. I don’t *think* the press have traced her to Boulder, but there is always the possibility they might have. You’ll need to be careful how this is handled.”

“The *press*?” Horror fought with anger in Raphael’s mind. What in the hell was Charles trying to do, kill them all? Secrecy was the single greatest rule in the Sazi culture. Humans weren’t aware of their existence only because they didn’t allow the press to get wind of the reality of shapeshifters.

“Unfortunately so. Catherine was somewhat of a local celebrity in California in her twenties because her father was a leading hardware designer in Silicon Valley and she was a bit, well . . . *wild*. Things settled down while she was away at university. But when she became engaged after graduate school, there was a scandal involving her mother that got them interested in her again. Of course, when her parents were killed and she was mauled . . . well, I’m sure you can guess the rest. But Violet has always kept a low profile, so we might get lucky. She’s a romance author who writes under a pen name, and nobody in California ever connected the two families. I realize this complicates things, but if at all possible, we need for Catherine to come through this alive.”

Raphael took a deep breath. Wow. “Of course, sir. But I can’t make any guarantees. Um . . . not to question your authority or your absolute right to send me on any mission you choose, Sir, but are you certain that I’m the best person for this job? It’s been a lot of years since I’ve taken on a case like this.”

“I know. I know. Yes, you’re the person best suited to this task. Trust me.” Charles sounded tired, defeated. But beneath it all simmered rage. Raphael was very glad that he was in Boulder and the Chief Justice was wherever the hell he was. “Get a pen. I’ll give you the information.”

It took a minute of rummaging in the drawer of the nightstand and tossing dried up pens and broken-tipped pencils against the wall to find one that still worked. It wasn’t often he needed to take notes while still in bed. He started writing, pen flying across the notepad as the older man dictated details. The reality of the situation sunk home with the weight of lead in his stomach as the Chief Justice spoke. An attack victim—a jaguar, one of the large cats—in *Boulder*. Possibly feral, definitely turned by a homicidal madman. She might inherit Jack’s insanity, or his infamous temper, or both. It was a recipe for disaster. At least the address was on

the outskirts of town, near one of the big parks. But a cat that size could cover ground very quickly, and jaguars tended to roam. He would need his weapons—and plenty of silver ammo. Hopefully there'd be enough in the safe. He'd have to check. He hadn't needed any in years, not since he was in Wolven, the Sazi police force. At least he went to the range often, as much for entertainment as to keep up his skill. But this was the kind of thing Wolven sent teams of two or three agents to handle. There was nothing more dangerous than a feral were-animal.

Charles had finished speaking and was waiting for his reply. He needed to say something, but *what*? A woman the old bear loved like a daughter was facing death tonight—and there was a good chance that Raphael would be the one to dispense it.

“I’m going to need help, sir.”

The reply was a warning rumble. “I told you—”

Raphael shook his head, even though it couldn't be seen. Charles *had* to know what he was asking with the request. He was being asked to risk his life and his pack status. He would be violating pack law by not informing Lucas or Tatya about an attack victim that could endanger the pack and breaking at least a dozen Wolven regulations as well. Yes, to an extent, Charles's word was law, beyond the reach of the council, but this whole situation went beyond foolhardy, straight into suicidal.

Putting aside any fear of reprisal, he summoned all his courage and spoke to the head of the shifters as though he *were* still on the Wolven force. He made sure to keep any annoyance and condescension from his voice—but it remained firm, commanding. “I need information. I’m not in the loop anymore. At the very least, I need photos, vehicle descriptions, license plate numbers. Is there *anyone* I can call? If I have to step outside our law, then I want to have a marginal chance at succeeding. My son, maybe?”

There was a long pause and Raphael was afraid he was going to turn down the request. But his son, Raven Ramirez, was second in command of Wolven. He could get the information without anyone asking questions—even if he was on mandatory health leave. And, he held confidences like no other man Raphael had ever known. If Charles could trust anyone, it would be Raven.

Finally, the old man sighed. “Call Raven. Find out what you can. I could tell you myself, but I’m afraid that I . . .” He took another deep breath. “Just keep it in the family—no one else. I trust your judgment. It’s why I called.”

In the end, too many other lives were at stake. Raphael knew it and so did Charles. Neither of them would—*could*—risk all of the Sazi for one woman.

“I’ll do my best, sir. I swear it.”

“Thank you.” There was undisguised gratitude in his voice. “I appreciate that more than you know. Call me tomorrow on my private line. I’ll be waiting for your report.” Charles dictated the number where he could be reached, and when he finished, he hung up without bothering to say goodbye.

Raphael leaned back against the headboard once more and stared into space, desperately trying to think how to convince his son to ignore all protocol, disobey every rule that he lived by, to give him classified information. If Jack Simpson had attacked someone in Lucas's territory, it was a sure bet that Wolven knew all about it already. Would he have to find a way to the woman *around* the agents who would be arriving tonight?

The coffee was finished brewing by the time he decided how to approach the situation. If he called in a Beta Six alert, then *perhaps* Raven would get to a secure phone line to return a call without telling the higher-ups in the agency. But Beta Six was not only a seldom used code, it might well be so old that Raven wouldn't even recognize it.

Raphael stirred sugar into his coffee and took a sip, trying to clear the remaining fog from his thoughts. A rooster crowed in the distance. It was incredibly loud to his ears, reminding him all the more strongly that the full moon was just behind the rising sun, waiting to pull the animal out from inside him—and from inside *her*. He had to hurry if he was going to have any chance at all of finding her before her animal nature took control and forced her to change for the first time.

There was no time to lose.

He glanced at his watch as he reached for the portable phone next to his coffee mug. The sultry scent of the dark roast helped him relax and think in *cop* mode again.

The phone rang twice before he heard his son's familiar voice "Ramirez."

"Raven. It's me."

"Oh hi, Dad! It's good—"

"Raven. Beta Six." Raphael disconnected the phone and set it down, feeling his heart pounding and adrenaline racing for the first time in a very long while. He tried to imagine what his son would do next. Beta Six was an internal agent code that was the equivalent of *trust no one*. If Raven understood the code, he should know not to contact anyone in charge—there was a breach of security, and everyone was suspect. Even his own father.

Raphael didn't wait for the phone to ring again. Even understanding the code, it would take a while for Raven to verify that his father had indeed called him on his own cell phone. He would probably also check to see that the triangulation of the signal was Boulder, Colorado, and that he had not left the area by any traceable transportation before the call was placed.

There was plenty of time to get started on gathering what was needed to track a rogue feral.

Raphael was still a very young shifter, by Sazi standards, but since leaving Wolven, he'd been feeling old, out of shape. As an alpha male, he would probably live until he was two or three hundred, but there was no substitute for daily training and regular field work, and he'd had neither of those things.

Once all of his handguns were scattered across his desk, the sets of chairs, and rags spread out over the floor, he stopped to take stock. A rifle would be better, or even a shotgun, but all of his long guns were in the safe at his pack office at the school. Besides, handgun fire was much easier to muffle or "bend" using his magic so humans didn't notice it.

Checking his ammo cans determined his choice of weapons. He only had silver ammunition for the Ruger Blackhawk and the 9mm Colt. There was more ammo for the Ruger, so that would be his first choice. But the Colt would be handy to have along, too—just in case.

He checked the fit of the Kevlar vest. He'd bought it on impulse over the internet. Tonight he wouldn't be facing gunfire, but the Kevlar *might* stop jaguar claws briefly, if he was lucky. He was making adjustments for comfort when the phone rang.

It rang a second time before he made it back to the kitchen. "Ramirez."

"Okay, Dad. What in the hell was so important that you had to use a thirty-year-old code to drag me out of the office? I had to buy a brand new phone to call you!"

“What do you know so far?”

Raven sighed. “I know I had to dig through piles of paperwork before I could even *find* what Beta Six meant. Then I checked your position, and the phone’s position and did a satellite track. Then I made an excuse to leave the office, bought a phone and called Granddad.”

Raphael cursed under his breath. He should have expected that—he would have done the same damn thing. “He told you what the situation is?”

“He didn’t tell me a frigging thing. He just said, ‘Yes, your father called. Call him back.’ and hung up. Big help there.”

Raphael nodded even though he knew Raven couldn’t see it. “I need whatever information you have on Jack’s latest get. Background, aunt’s address, the car she drives, license plate—everything.” A long pause made him ask, “Raven? Did you get that?”

His son’s voice sounded strange when he responded. “Yeah, I got it. But Jack’s last confirmed attack was nearly a decade ago. Why would you need it?”

Raphael nearly dropped the phone. How could Wolven *not* know about this? They checked into every animal attack in the world, regardless of what the papers reported. Was that why Charles had called him? Didn’t he want the rest of the council to know? If not, *why* not?

“Dad? Talk to me. What’s going on over there?”

“*Shit.*” He ran his fingers through his hair again. “Are you *sure* you’re on a secure line?”

A pause. “As secure as I can make it in the middle of Paris.”

He blew out a slow breath and sat down. Then he proceeded to tell Raven about the call from Charles and what he had been asked to do. He concluded with, “So, do you have any information, or can you *get* any information?”

“Jesus, Dad! Just drop a nuclear bomb in my lap. This is the absolute *first* I’ve ever heard this. I know about the Turner woman, but no hint of Jack’s involvement ever reached Wolven. There were multiple witnesses to the event. Her parents were killed by a wild animal, all right. But all parties agreed it was a *cougar* attack. Hell, someone got a *photo* as it was running off, according to what I heard! Councilman Monier personally checked with all of the cougar shifters and verified their whereabouts, so it was shunted into the wild animal files. Are you *certain* our spotted friend was involved?”

Raphael took another sip of his now-cold coffee. Bright sunshine was bouncing off the copper bottoms of the pans over the stove, and he had to shift his chair to turn his sensitive eyes away. “I’m not sure of a damned thing right now. I can’t imagine why Charles would lie about it. He seemed *shaken* when we talked—almost afraid. He said that someone had been blocking his ability to see the future, so he hadn’t been able to stop the attack.”

“Good God! If you’re right about this . . . but why wouldn’t Charles tell Lucas, or Fiona, or one of the council? Why *you*?”

“He asked for a personal favor, which I’m hardly in a position to refuse. After all, it’s only thanks to him that I’m still *alive* right now.” Raphael’s chuckle had bitter overtones. This situation meant he was going to have to once again face the very thing that had nearly caused his death; the very same mistake that had made Jack Simpson his mortal enemy years ago.

“Right.” Raven paused. “So, what do you need me to do?”

Chapter 2

Catherine shut down the laptop she'd borrowed from her aunt and slid it back into the leather carrying case. She'd finally managed to fall asleep at 4:00 a.m., only to sit bolt upright, heart pounding in terror, less than an hour later from a nightmare re-enactment of the animal attack that had killed her parents. So she'd tried to distract herself with business. It had worked. It was now 9:00 a.m. and she was wide awake. Unfortunately, she also had a whole laundry list of problems that needed to be taken care of.

She stood and stretched until she heard the soft pop of vertebrae sliding into place, then bent to touch her palms to the floor. Stretching out always seemed to ease the muscles stiffened by sitting too long in one position at the computer keyboard. Funny how things changed: when she'd been in her late teens and early twenties the last thing she would've imagined herself doing was working with computers. That was her father's bailiwick. He'd earned his fortune the hard way, coming up from nothing to become the "Bill Gates of computer hardware." She'd simply enjoyed the fruits of his wealth and status as a local celebrity. She'd become a notorious "party girl."

But while her former friends never seemed to tire of the party circuit, she'd grown bored. She had gone away to college without regret, worked hard for her degrees, and settled down. When Brad had proposed after graduate school, she'd gladly accepted.

Cat winced. Thinking about Brad would tense back up the muscles she'd just loosened. There had been e-mails from him today, the first in a very long while. Probably condolences, but she'd deliberately skipped over them. What would it prove, or solve? He'd been horrified to find out from the local press that his future mother-in-law was *not* a well-heeled, southern socialite, but rather a former high-end call woman. He'd dumped Cat before the ink was even dry on the newspapers.

"Asshole." She said it to her reflection in the vanity mirror and fought down a wave of anger and pain. She'd loved him so damned much and *thought* he loved her. Maybe he even had. More likely, he'd loved the notion of being married to a beautiful blonde who just happened to be the only heir to the Turner Computer Industries fortune.

Was everyone this cynical when they closed in on their thirtieth birthday? She hoped not.

"Aunt Violet, can I borrow the car?" Cat called downstairs to her aunt. She had deliberately waited until Violet had been happily writing for an hour or so before she interrupted to ask the favor—time enough for Violet to get over her irritation of yesterday.

Cat sighed. She hadn't meant to cause a problem. But yesterday morning she'd woken up craving meat. So she'd borrowed her aunt's car before Violet awoke, and escaped the stifling confines of the organic, vegan household her aunt maintained. She'd found herself at Jake's Burger Joint, a local restaurant just a few miles down the road. The infusion of steak, eggs, bacon, and strong black coffee had been a welcome relief from oatmeal and herbal tea. Cat had enjoyed the lively discussions about video games she'd gotten into with Holly Sanchez, her waitress, almost as much as the food itself. She'd like nothing more than to go back, but she was a guest in her aunt's home and didn't want to risk a repeat of the argument she'd had with Violet on her return.

Fortunately, Violet was always happiest when in the throes of writing one of her romance novels, her imagination taking her away from the humdrum of daily existence. She loved her career, and it showed in the framed copies of book covers on the wall, each bearing her aunt's name in bold pink letters. Two hours was probably adequate time for Violet's normal good humor to reassert itself.

"Why? What did you have in mind?" Yep, the voice had moved from suspicious and angry to warm and anticipatory.

"I need to do some shopping." It was the absolute truth, as far as it went.

"Really?" Violet sounded surprised, and more than a little pleased. Cat supposed it was natural. After all, her first week at Violet's house had been spent alternately sleeping or crying in her bed, and the second week she wandered around like a zombie. Today was the first time she'd felt close to normal since her parents died.

They were dead. She was beginning to accept that fact. It seemed like forever, and at the same time as if it had just been yesterday. It made it worse that Violet wanted to talk endlessly about them. Cat just *couldn't*.

Therapy would probably help. But therapy was a long-term process, and she didn't want to stay in Boulder long-term. No, this was a stop-gap, a short respite before she resumed her real life. Colorado wasn't home for her. But there was no fiancé, no job, no *life* for her back in California, either. She couldn't imagine going home to her parent's house without them being there. Yet, it would be a good place to lose herself in business for awhile. She *knew* she could run her father's company given the chance. Unfortunately, none of the board members believed it.

She'd followed her father's advice, and started a small game design company. The plan had been to show her business savvy by running a small enterprise before he moved her in to take over for him. They'd assumed it would be years before he decided to step down and retire. There was supposed to be plenty of time. Plenty of time to learn his business, and teach him hers.

"Cat?" She blinked and realized that Violet had been speaking to her. Her aunt wore a hopeful smile. "I was wondering if you'd like a bit of company. We can make a regular day of it." She looked her niece up and down critically. "You could use a few new things. Why don't you change while I finish this chapter?" Cat hid her disappointment well, agreeing to Violet's plan with fake enthusiasm. *So much for a meaty breakfast.*

Finishing a chapter always took longer than Violet thought it would so Cat decided to take a quick shower and pull on some decent clothes.

She walked into the bathroom, marveling at the fact that she'd lost even the last traces of a limp. There was no explanation for it. The doctors said she'd never walk properly again. The wild animal that had mauled her took long muscle out of her thigh. It had been replaced with some muscle from her calf.

In the shower, Cat rubbed her thigh. The stitches had fallen out that morning—small bits of black covering her foot and the floor like tiny spiders. The skin was pink and shiny and new, soft to the touch. There was no pain when she pushed on the muscle.

Cat was thrilled, but also frightened. There was no reason for her to be healing this quickly. It wasn't normal. She couldn't find any information on the internet about rapid healing

in humans—except, of course, on comic book websites about mutants. And Cat wasn't a mutant, or a comic book heroine.

So how was she almost entirely healed from the attack by a vicious cat that had left her parents dead?

After her shower, she opened the dresser drawers and began rummaging irritably through the contents. Nothing appealed to her. The garments all seemed so bland, and they positively reeked of fabric softener.

The logical part of her realized her reaction made no sense. Just yesterday she'd been perfectly happy to wear anything in the drawers. Not today. Today they felt all wrong.

Finally, at the bottom of her underwear drawer she found what she was looking for, a sleek black bodysuit she'd used in a dance class years ago. She pulled it on, then went to the closet. Near the back, she found a blood-red silk blouse that had belonged to her mother but had somehow ended up among Cat's things. Although Janet and Cat had been blessed with same cool blonde looks and dancer's figures, they'd had wildly different tastes in clothing. Janet had preferred silk and rich, jewel tones, while her daughter dressed almost exclusively in pastels and denim. Still, the red seemed just right for today. She pulled it on, leaving it unbuttoned to fall around her hips. Black flats and a bit of makeup almost completed the look.

Cat examined her reflection in the mirror. It needed something. Maybe jewelry. She reached into her jewelry box to retrieve her silver earrings and bracelets, only to hiss in pain and drop the hoops on the floor. Her fingers turned red and puffy with what looked like burn blisters—but they disappeared as she watched, healing as fast as they'd appeared.

Rich, rolling laughter filled her ears, and she looked around frantically for the source, even knowing nobody would be nothing there. No *physical* body, that is.

Really kitten, you know better! *Silver?* Besides, gold is better for your coloring. But yes, I like the outfit . . . quite a lot. Very, very nice. You have a magnificent figure. You should definitely show it off.

“*Shut up!*” Cat slammed her hands against her ears and then down on the bureau top. She struggled to get back control of her mind from the dark voice—and prayed that Violet hadn't heard.

“Catherine, what was that noise? Are you ready to go?”

Taking a deep breath, she felt the voice recede with a final, creepy chuckle.

“I'll be right down,” she called to Violet, and then slumped against the wall. A few deep breaths cleared her head.

Why should she know better? Why did the silver burn her fingers? There was no time to dwell on it, and she definitely didn't want her aunt to come upstairs. So she grabbed a pair of gold hoops from the jewelry case, careful to avoid the tangle of silver jewelry, and slid them into her ears.

She pounded down the stairs to join Violet at the front door, forgetting to hide her lack of a limp. There was no way to hide the fact that her leg wasn't bandaged, either—the body stocking showed every muscle and curve.

It almost amused Cat to see her aunt take a long look at her appearance and swallow, hard. “But . . . you're *not even limping!* *How . . . when—*” She stopped speaking and just stared for a long moment. “I think we should call the doctor.”

“No.” Cat realized her voice sounded cold, and she didn’t know why. Nor did she care. “I do *not* want to be poked and prodded like some damned lab rat. We’re calling it a miracle and leaving it at that.”

She watched her aunt absorb the words. For a moment, it looked like Violet would argue, but apparently she thought the better of it. *Good*, thought Cat, *because I’m not giving in on this*. She decided to change the subject: “I’m ready to go now.”

Another long stare, this time at her clothes. “That’s a *different* look for you.”

“Yes. It is.” She waited for her aunt to pass judgment, but the older woman swallowed audibly and held her tongue. Instead, she smiled with false brightness and said, “So, would you rather go to the factory shops—or to Cherry Creek?”

Cat raised an eyebrow at the offer. Violet didn’t leave Boulder very often, either to drive down to Denver or to the Silverthorne outlet stores. Apparently her aunt really did intend to make a day of it. The Cherry Creek Shopping Center in Denver was situated in an enclave surrounded by elegant and expensive little shops, while the mall itself had a number of the larger high fashion chains and jewelry stores.

“You pick,” She was fairly certain she knew what her aunt’s choice would be. Along with all the boutiques, there was a major independent bookstore across from the mall in Denver. Violet could never resist a bookstore. She might be loathe to admit it, but she always made a point of checking with the manager to see how well her books were selling, and offering to sign some of the stock. Business, after all, was business. And business was obviously booming.

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“Thank God,” Raphael muttered as his quarry slipped into one of the better mall restaurants. It was a steak place, which meant he would actually get the chance to eat some meat. A good thing too; he could feel the pull of the moon, and it was making him antsy and irritable.

All morning he’d been keeping an eye on the pair of them, watching as Catherine Turner shopped with an abandon he hadn’t seen since he dated Fiona. And oh, how she looked like Fiona—the hair, the figure, the sparkling blue eyes—all the more reason why Jack had attacked her.

It was in the lingerie store that he’d caught the first good whiff of the woman’s scent. She’d be a jaguar all right, if she survived. Right now the scent was still mostly human—but it had the unmistakably musky undertones of a large cat.

Raphael waited a few moments, giving the woman and her aunt time to get settled in at a table.

He ran a quick comb through his dark brown curls and tucked the white dress shirt more firmly into the waistband of his best black jeans and waited until their backs were turned before walking through the door of the restaurant.

He stopped in the cool, dim entry and scanned the patrons until he found the cat. She chose that moment to look up. Their eyes locked across the room, and he gave her his best dimpled smile.

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“Oh!” Cat hadn’t meant to say it out loud. Her aunt, however, turned to see what her niece was looking at.

“Now *that*,” Violet said with an exhaled breath that wasn’t quite a whistle, “is a man.”

Cat couldn't help but agree. The man who stood in the restaurant entrance looked to be in his mid to late twenties, but he moved with the confidence of a much older man. If she had to guess, Cat would have put his height right at six foot, but with a wonderful build: slender hips, broad shoulders. His hair was a little long, falling in curls that just begged to be touched. And that wicked grin of his was enough to make her knees weak.

His slow, thorough examination of her brought a flush to Cat's cheeks and made her pulse race just a bit faster. It was a real struggle not to stare when the maitre'd seated him right in her line of sight. Never mind polite luncheon conversation with Violet either. Cat simply couldn't concentrate. She was just too aware of him over there. In fact, she was so distracted, it didn't even occur to her that she'd ordered a rare steak until she heard Violet's hiss of dismay.

"I'm sorry." Cat tore her gaze away from the stranger.

"No." Violet waved the protest away. "No, you've every right to eat what you like. I'd just *hoped*—" Violet's voice trailed off.

Cat felt a pang of sympathy for her aunt. Violet was so incredibly earnest. But Catherine was simply not cut out to be a vegan. She *liked* meat. She ate plenty of vegetables, but meat and dairy products were staples of her preferred diet.

And if Violet hadn't wanted her to order steak, why had Violet chosen a steak restaurant?

"I really am sorry," Cat apologized again, reaching across the table to take her aunt's hand. "I know it means a lot to you. But—"

"But it isn't going to happen." Violet sighed and patted her niece's hand. "Ned and your father are the same way, dear. They both *must* have their steak and potatoes. I understand."

Cat felt a stab of unexpected grief. It was like that sometimes. They'd be talking or doing something, and for just that one moment she or Violet would forget, and talk about her parents as if they were still alive. Just a half hour ago, when Violet had been picking up the ring she'd ordered for Ned, Cat had spotted a necklace in the shop window and called out to Violet, "Oh look! I've got to show this to Dad. Mom would love it for her birthday."

"Oh, dear!" Violet's distress was obvious to Cat the moment she realized she'd talked about her brother as though he were still alive. Her eyes widened, and her hand flew to cover her mouth, as though to stop more hurtful words from escaping.

"It's all right." Cat blinked back tears. "I do the same thing all the time. It just doesn't seem *real* somehow."

"No . . . It really doesn't." Violet sighed as the waiter brought their salads. Cat stuffed a bite of crisp lettuce into her mouth so she wouldn't have to keep talking—but, truthfully, she wasn't hungry anymore.