

Chapter One

“Why are his hands tied?” Robert Hamilton-Scott shouted over the wind that drove stinging rain against his face.

“Because I value my life,” Trevor Hardy yelled back. The leader of the resistance wasn’t a cautious man. Hardy was a bear even though he was one hundred percent human. Six feet three and at least two hundred twenty pounds, he dwarfed the other resistance fighters beside him.

His words caused Robert to squint his eyes against the weather to get a closer look at the fugitive shape-shifter Hardy and two others hauled to his front door.

Tall and muscular, the shape-shifter male they supported was also worse for wear. His jeans were mud-splattered, torn and dark with moisture. Pale skin flashed through them in many places. Of course, he could also see much more skin elsewhere, because the man’s torso was bare. His shirt, if the scraps of material hanging from his arms had been a shirt, was shredded almost beyond recognition, leaving the ridges of his abdomen to channel the streams of rainwater as if they were rapids.

Robert tore his gaze away from those ripples to help get the man inside. His home was a safe house among hundreds of others in a network that formed a trail from the United States to the Free Western Territories. Inspired by Harriet Tubman’s Underground Railroad, the Network provided aid and shelter to shape-shifters escaping government research.

This shifter was barely conscious. He stumbled and shuffled his feet as two men and one woman pulled him up

the porch steps to the door of Hamilton Croft. Even with his head down and his shoulders slumped, sturdy rope around his wrists and three people holding his arms, the man was threatening—savage enough to give Robert pause.

“He’s been in the labs for a year or more,” Merry Bridges gasped, explaining when the others didn’t. She didn’t let go of the big arm she held with both hands, though her grip threatened to slip on bare skin grown slippery in the downpour.

They all stopped, finally sheltered under the porch roof. It wasn’t the sudden respite from the torrential rain that caused them to pause. Robert could see his horror mirrored in the others’ eyes. They all knew what it meant for a shape-shifter to be in scientists’ hands for so long.

The scientists had less respect for shape-shifters than they had for lab rats, and the experiments they implemented put captured shifters in a living hell.

A bioengineered species was product not people.

And shifters were a product that had yet to yield maximum benefits for their creators.

“My God,” Robert choked out, shock and sympathy twisting in his gut.

For the first time, he reached out to touch the shifter. The muscled forearm he grasped was hard beneath his fingers, but those muscles had to hide a wounded soul.

At Robert’s touch, the shifter’s head jerked up, and he snarled through tangled strands of sodden hair.

“It’s all right, O’Dare. He’s a friend. We’re all friends,” growled Hardy, yanking the bound shifter back from Robert’s touch. As always, a little too solicitous for Robert’s peace of mind. Hardy wasn’t unattractive, but his overbearing attitude rubbed Robert the wrong way.

“Before he was captured and taken to the labs, Michael O’Dare was a gang baby, Robert. We probably shouldn’t

have brought him here, but there was no place else he could go," Merry explained as thunder rumbled above their heads.

A gang baby.

Born and raised in shape-shifter packs that owned the inner-city streets, gang babies learned to eschew the humanity society refused to share with them. He'd thought O'Dare was savage. He hadn't known the half of it.

"...lost cause," the third man grunted. He was a man Robert didn't recognize. The resistance was growing.

The shifter's vicious response to his touch and Merry's revelations had shaken Robert, but he opened the door and led them inside because tight, hot sympathy crowded out the fear in his chest.

"I can handle him," Robert said.

By that time they had made it upstairs to dump O'Dare onto Robert's bed. His was the closest bedroom, and he had led them there because he wasn't sure they could make it a single step farther. The storm continued to lash the house with fury, but its roar was muffled by solid walls.

O'Dare lay on the bed, quiet and shivering as if he appreciated being out of the wind and rain.

Hardy stepped back to look at Robert with skeptical eyes. His narrowed eyes and scowling lips caused Robert to square his shoulders and harden his own expression in response. He had never appreciated Hardy's scrutiny, especially because he worried *he* might be the reason Hardy was so devoted to the shifter cause.

"Michael O'Dare is notorious. There never was a more reckless shape-shifter. He grew up on the streets in a gang that may as well have been a pack for all its savagery. He didn't have a civilized bone in his body before the scientists got ahold of him. Now? He's so far gone, so wild, he might never learn to be human again. You know those bastards force the shift so they can run their 'studies.' I didn't want to bring him here..." Hardy said gruffly.

“There was nowhere else. We couldn’t put him with a family or near children,” Merry interjected.

“I can handle him,” Robert repeated, calling on generations of authority to brace his spine and firm his voice, though the inference that *he* had no family left made him ache. A Hamilton-Scott had never turned away a person in need; he wouldn’t be the first.

He moved to the bed and began to unlace O’Dare’s black boots.

“We have to go. We’ve got tracks to cover and a van to hide,” the third man urged from the doorway.

Hardy stepped close and placed a hand on Robert’s back. Robert stepped out from under its unwelcome weight.

“We’ll be back as soon as we can,” Hardy said, soothing no one but himself.

Robert nodded but didn’t look up from the muddy boots.

As the others left, the storm seemed to leave with them. The noise of the rain on the roof slacked off, and the next boom of thunder came from a distance. O’Dare’s furrowed brow and tight lips said the inner tempest he dealt with wouldn’t pass so easily. Robert moved quickly to get his “guest” warm and dry. He fetched a towel from the closet in the hall and used it to wipe O’Dare’s skin, but his quick, efficient movements still allowed for a brushing of his fingers over O’Dare’s chest, lean stomach and strong thighs. He was a beautiful man, perhaps seeming more so because of the knowledge that the scientists had stolen this body from him for extended periods of time.

Robert shuddered. His clothes were wet as well, but it was his imagination that made him shake. What O’Dare had been through exceeded Robert’s worst nightmares.

Averting his eyes as much as he could, Robert tugged wet denim from O’Dare’s legs. Then he did the same with his damp boxer shorts. Even though no one watched and O’Dare seemed oblivious, Robert’s cheeks still grew warm,

along with other things, before he had the cotton pulled free and thrown to the floor. To keep from staring, he reached for the scraps of shirt next, and they came free in his hands as if they'd never been a complete garment in the first place.

Finally O'Dare was nude and wrapped in quilts.

But one task remained.

Before he could second-guess his actions and change his mind, Robert left the room and walked down the stairs to the kitchen. There, he pulled open a drawer and took out a sharp butcher knife. Without pausing, he climbed the stairs and went back into the bedroom where he'd left O'Dare.

He might be unleashing a beast like Hamilton Croft had never seen.

That thought made him hesitate as he stood over Michael O'Dare with the knife in his hand. Though the shivering had stopped, O'Dare's body was still tense—his face tight, his jaw clenched. There was nothing reassuring about the big shape-shifter's appearance, but Robert still leaned forward and slipped the knife's blade under the ropes wrapped around O'Dare's wrists.

It took several minutes of sawing to sever the ties.

With sweat beading his upper lip and his breath held tight in his lungs, Robert cut the ropes. He readied himself for more snarls or worse.

O'Dare only moaned and sighed, turning into the pillow Robert had placed beneath his head.