

I Don't Want to Say Goodbye
by Havoc

Beep! Beep! Beep!

"Nnn...Five more minutes..."

Beep beep! Beep beep! Beep beep!

"C'mon...Barely got six hours..."

Beebeebreebeebreebeebreebeebreebeebreebeebree-

Sighing, Mark swung his legs over the edge of the bed and finally reached over to the bedside table to turn off the alarm clock. He looked at what time it was out of habit, although he got up at the same time every day these days. Six thirty in the morning, just in time to shower, have a quick breakfast, and get to work by eight.

The shower was a relief, as it always was in the morning. The cold water cascading over his bare skin did more to wake him up than any cup of coffee ever could have, and he came out of the bathroom ten minutes later in high spirits. He should have felt chilled; it was late December, after all, and light snow was on the ground in Raleigh, North Carolina. But the house had nice central heating, which was a lot more than could be said of the apartment that he had been living in until six months ago. He'd moved to Raleigh from the coast with his mates for work, and so far he'd had no cause to regret it.

As he came back into the bedroom, toweling off his hair, his bed mate was stirring. Mark went to his knees at the edge of the bed and spent a few seconds watching the drowsy tigress slowly wake up. Her jade green eyes blinked open, framed by stripey brown fur. A smile came to her lips, and she yawned, displaying her sharp predator's teeth.

Kitsune lifted her head up, asking without words for a kiss, and Mark was all too happy to oblige. She put a hand to the back of his head, teasing his damp brown hair, and slipped her rough feline tongue into his mouth. All in all, it was a very nice way to wake up.

Mark leaned back a little to look at the female fur whom he had spent over two years with. She was unusual for a tigress, and not just because she had taken up with a human. Kitsune was technically not a pure tiger, for while Mark knew her mother was a tigress he also knew that her father was a fox. She had inherited her father's brown fur,

while retaining the physique of her mother, as well as the stripes typical of her mother's species. Mark ran his fingers through her shoulder-length, tawny hair. A short time after moving to Raleigh from the coast, Kitsune had decided to let her natural hair color come back. Up until then, Mark had only seen her with magenta-dyed hair, but he had to admit that her natural color was very becoming on her. It matched the color of the fur on her underbelly, and because Kitsune took very good care of herself it was almost as soft.

Mark ran a hand along her belly, feeling how it was beginning to bulge slightly. He held his hand there, feeling pride swell up inside of him. Kitsune was nearly three months along, now, and she had that glow that pregnant women seem to get. Mark and Kitsune had not planned on becoming parents so soon, but now that it was happening they were excited about it. It would mean that Kitsune, who was in her first year of law school, might have to put her career plans on hold for a year or so, but she was willing to make the sacrifice.

"You're my beautiful girl, you know that?" Mark said, looking into her eyes. "I love you so much, kitten."

Kitsune gave a soft purr, closing her eyes rubbing her cheek into the pillow. "I love you, too, baby." She opened her eyes a moment later. "Where's Tai? I didn't hear her get up."

Mark stood up. "She had to get an early start today, remember? They're installing some new piece of equipment at work, so she had to be there at five. She'll be back early this afternoon, though." He went over to the closet to get dressed while Kitsune rolled onto her other side, intending to go back to sleep. She didn't have to work, after all, and classes didn't start until ten for her, so she didn't have to get up until eight. The tigress was attending law school at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill, so she had a bit of a commute to make every day, but she still got to sleep in quite a lot.

While Mark got into his uniform for work, he thought about Tai, the other inhabitant of their house. Tai was what made his relationship with Kitsune slightly complicated, but not really in a bad way. She was a gray tabby fur, and an old friend of Kitsune's. They had been roommates when they were all undergraduate students at Greenstone University, a small coastal school in North Carolina, and when Mark and Kitsune had moved into an apartment together, she had come along to help with the rent.

Soon after that, Tai had joined their relationship, as part of what Mark was coming to understand was a rather common feline practice of engaging in a harem. She was now just as much Mark's lover as Kitsune was, although everyone understood that Kitsune would always come first in his heart.

While both Mark and Kitsune had graduated from Greenstone with degrees in Criminal Law, Tai had studied Nuclear Engineering. She was now working at the Shearon Harris Nuclear Power Plant in New Hill, North Carolina, which was about an hour's drive from Raleigh. She was enjoying the work there, but she was looking for work elsewhere that might pay better, and had several prospects that she was looking into.

Mark, for one, was enjoying the work that he was doing now. He had managed to squeeze in enough credits to graduate with Kitsune after all, about one year ago. Last March, he had entered the Raleigh Police Academy, gone through his probationary period, and was now a full member of the Raleigh Police Department. Because the department was understaffed, he had been pulled from patrol duty to fill in with the Traffic Enforcement Unit on a temporary basis. He missed the patrol work he had been doing while with his training officer and for the few weeks he'd been a solo unit, but he reconciled this with the fact that he was working with one of the Special Operations teams. The experience with the Special Operations division would give him an edge on his application to join the Selective Enforcement Unit, Raleigh's version of a SWAT team.

Kitsune, on the other hand, did not like the work that Mark was doing. He guessed that part of it was because she was interested in becoming a defense attorney, but mostly he thought that she was just scared that one day he might not come home. No amount of assurance that he would be careful would keep her from objecting to his work, but she didn't try to stop him either, which he was grateful for. Tai was more supportive of his work, but then again she wasn't home very much these days. Her job at the power plant had her leaving early and staying out late a lot, which was part of the reason she was looking for a better job.

Mark finished putting on his dark blue uniform, and pinned his badge and name tag onto his uniform shirt. He reached for his gun belt, which lay on the dresser, and strapped it around his waist. Then he opened the bottom drawer of the dresser and pulled

out a black, keyed case. Kitsune was scared of guns, and always made him keep his service weapon locked up when he was at home. Taking the key from his belt, Mark unlocked the case and withdrew his weapon, securing it in the holster at his hip. He closed the case, replacing it back in the drawer, and then went over to the bed to say goodbye to Kitsune.

“Bye, Kat,” Mark said. He kissed Kitsune on the lips, brushing her forehead. She reached up to stroke his cheek.

“Don’t forget to be home on time,” she said sleepily, already drifting off again. “We’re going to visit Mom and Dad...”

“I won’t,” Mark promised. He kissed his tigress again, and then straightened up and walked out of the bedroom, closing the door softly behind him.

Going downstairs, Mark went into the kitchen and fixed up a quick breakfast. Considering the time constraints, he was pretty much restricted to toast, cereal, and fruit. He remembered fondly the days when Tai would wake up early and make a hot breakfast for everyone, since she was the only real cook among them, but those days were past now that both he and Tai were working. Ah, well, there were still the times when his days off coincided with the weekends to look forward to.

With breakfast finished, Mark cleared away his dishes and then headed for the door, grabbing his keys on the way out. Another day on the grind, but at least it was Friday, and he had the weekend off. That was something.

Towards the end of his shift it was growing dark, and Mark was very bored. He was sitting in his patrol car on the inside shoulder of northbound I-440, keeping an eye on his radar for speeders. It was early evening, and the rush through Raleigh was just coming to a close, so he was on the lookout for people taking advantage of the clearing roadways to get up to speed. Earlier in the day had been the busy times, and he’d handed out his fair share of citations while patrolling Raleigh. Contrary to popular belief, there was no such thing as officers having to maintain a quota of traffic citations. The illusion was created by there being a unit of officers who were dedicated to nothing but traffic citations, which was what Mark was doing now.

The downtime was giving him plenty of opportunity to allow his mind to wander,

and he found his thoughts drifting to what his and Kitsune's plans for the weekend were. After Mark got home at the end of his shift, he and Kitsune were going to leave for Chapel Hill to spend the weekend with her parents. While Kitsune was frequently able to visit her parents because she went to school in Chapel Hill, Mark had never had a chance to meet them in all of the two years he'd been with her. He was kind of nervous about it, but he was confident that he would make a good impression on them. It certainly couldn't be any worse than when he had taken Kitsune and Tai to meet his own parents. He still hadn't spoken to his father in the year since then, and his mother was only now just starting to become used to the idea of the relationship he had with the two female furs. Hopefully Kitsune's parents would be more accepting, since they would already be quite familiar with the lesser-known aspects of feline society.

An abrupt change in the pitch of the sound coming from his radar unit made him turn his attention from his own thoughts to his job. He listened carefully, and watched his rear view mirror for the traffic coming towards him from behind. As the sound intensified, he singled out the source of the speed indication. A black Mercedes sports car was cruising past the rest of traffic, doing a brisk pace for a 60 M.P.H. zone. He estimated the speed of the target vehicle at 85 M.P.H., and hit the button on his radar unit to lock the speed in. Only then did he look at the speed readout, and saw that his estimation had been pretty accurate; the actual speed was recorded as 83 M.P.H.

"Okay, showtime," Mark said to himself. He waited for the car to pass him, and then he threw his patrol car into drive and pulled away from the shoulder, quickly accelerating up to the triple digits in order to catch up to the offending car. When he was about twenty car lengths behind the Mercedes, he hit his lights and siren. Not very surprisingly, the sports car accelerated a little and changed lanes, trying to make it hard for him to stop it. While this wasn't technically fleeing and eluding yet, it still gave Mark more of a reason to issue a citation rather than a warning.

When the driver realized that Mark wasn't giving up, the car quickly decelerated and pulled over to the right shoulder. Mark cut his siren but kept his lights on, and pulled over behind the expensive vehicle. Before getting out of his vehicle, he radioed in his location and the vehicle's tag number to the dispatch center. Then he opened his door and put one foot on the ground, watching the other car carefully. At this point, some people

would peel out from the side of the road to try to catch him off guard and get away, but this driver seemed too smart, or not smart enough, to try that.

Satisfied that the vehicle was not going to run, Mark stepped out of his car and walked up to the stopped motorist. As he passed the rear fender, he let his hand touch the top edge of the trunk. This was a common practice for police officers during traffic stops; if something happened to him during the traffic stop, the car could be identified later from his fingerprints on the trunk.

When he got to the driver's side door, the window rolled down and he was better able to see the occupant of the Mercedes. It was a female tiger fur, dressed very well in professional attire. For Mark, it seemed odd to see a tigress in the normal orange shade of fur, rather than the brown that he had become accustomed to seeing Kitsune in. She had an air of regality about her, as though she were exactly where she wanted and deserved to be in life. Not to mention that she was very attractive, although she seemed to be about twenty or so years older than Mark. He found himself a little intimidated by her appearance until he remembered that he was the one with the badge and the gun. She seemed very impatient, as she was tapping her claws against the leather steering wheel and tapping her foot on the floor of her car.

"Yes, what is it?" she asked shortly, a bit of a growl to her voice. "I'm in a hurry."

"I noticed," Mark said dryly. "I need to see your license and registration, please, ma'am."

The tigress gave a little huff of exasperation and reached over into her purse, which was sitting in the passenger's seat, to withdraw her license. On the way back to Mark, her hand went into her glove compartment, and she withdrew her registration card. Both of these she handed through the window to him.

Mark glanced them over, and then nodded. "I'll be back with you in a moment." He hastened away from the car, not quite quick enough to miss the muttered word "profiling," and got back into his vehicle. Using his onboard laptop, he looked up the DMV records related to the vehicle he'd stopped. The registered driver was named Anastasia Migoto, married, 52 years of age, and that matched the registration card and driver's license that the tigress had handed him. The name sounded familiar to Mark, but he couldn't place it at the moment, so he dismissed it. In any case, the description of the

registered driver that the DMV had matched the woman in the car. He crosschecked her criminal records and found several citations for exceeding the speed limit in the past few years.

Sorry, lady, he thought. *Looks like you're getting a ticket, today.* Well, best to at least talk to her about it, first. She looked really high-strung to Mark. He got out of his patrol car and went back up to the Mercedes.

"About time," the tigress, Mrs. Migoto, snarled. She held out her furred hand for her license and registration, but Mark held them back for a moment.

"Ma'am, do you know why I stopped you?" he asked, keeping his voice as polite as possible.

Politeness did not seem to be in Mrs. Migoto's mood. "Because I'm late getting home and you have nothing better to do than make other peoples' lives miserable."

Mark frowned. "No, ma'am, not at all. You were flying down the road back there. I clocked you on radar at 83 just before Exit 12, and the speed limit is 60 around here. Were you aware you were going that fast?"

"Of course I was aware!" the tigress snapped. "I'm trying to get home!"

"Ah," Mark said. *Well, that was easy.* "I'll be right back, ma'am. Just a few more minutes, and then you'll be on your way." He retained her license and registration, and went back to his patrol car. Using the compact thermal printer mounted on his dashboard, he printed off a citation for traveling in excess of 20 M.P.H. over the speed limit in a 60 M.P.H. zone. Once the ticket was finished printing, he snatched it up and left his car. The way citations worked now compared with in the past, the offender did not have to sign a copy. Tickets were transmitted directly to headquarters, and the driver held on to the physical citation.

Anastasia Migoto was on her cell phone when Mark got back to her window. "...and he's being absolutely impossible, Rin. Totally unreasonable. If I'm home by midnight it'll be a fucking miracle..." Mark cleared his throat, and she held a hand up, continuing her phone conversation. Mark was dumbfounded by how rude she was being.

Man, this lady really doesn't want any breaks, he thought. Not wanting to come off as a jerk, he waited for her to get off of the phone, now just hoping that this incident would come to an end soon. He knew that he was going to be late getting home now, and

Kitsune was probably going to be angry with him.

Once Mrs. Migoto had snapped her phone shut, Mark proceeded to hold out her license and registration, along with the citation for her speed. “I’m citing you for 83 in a 60, ma’am. The fine amount is noted there at the bottom, and if you wish to contest it in court, your date is January 20th of this upcoming year, at nine in the morning. Do you know where the courthouse is?”

Ignoring his question, the tigress snatched her papers back. “What’s your name?”

“Officer First Class Mark Jackson,” Mark said, tapping his name tag. “Would you like my badge number, too?”

The tigress waved aside his barbed remark. “You’ll be hearing from me soon,” she said, her voice painfully sweet now. “The Offices of Migoto & Michaels. I’ll speak to the District Attorney, and come this time next week you won’t have a job.”

“You’ll pardon me for saying so, ma’am, but I’ve heard that about a hundred times before,” Mark said testily. He’d had just about enough of Mrs. Anastasia Migoto and her attitude. “Drive safe, and have a pleasant evening.” As he walked back to his patrol car, he heard the squeal of rubber on pavement, and looked back to see the Mercedes peeling out from the side of the road. A moment later, shreds of paper flew out the window, and Mark realized that the lady must have torn up the ticket and chucked it out of her car. He was sorely tempted to rush off and pull her over again, but he really didn’t want to deal with that woman a second time.

Mark checked his watch as he got back in the driver’s seat of his unit. It was already eight o’clock, the end of his shift. He sighed, knowing that he’d be at least half an hour late getting home. Well, not like he could help it. He’d hoped to be able to change out of his uniform before going to meet Kitsune’s parents, but it looked like that wasn’t going to happen.

Why do I always get the crazy ones? Mark asked himself, pulling back onto the road to head back to the station.

It was actually quarter ‘til nine before Mark got back to his house, and he knew that Kitsune would not be happy with him. He pulled up by the curb in front of the house, and then walked inside. When he went through the front door, a welcome face was there

to greet him.

“Hello, lover,” a pretty young gray tabby said, circling him with her arms as he came into the living room. It was Tai, and Mark was relieved to come across her before Kitsune. He gathered a handful of her long, fragrant black hair and stroked the soft gray fur on her neck, kissing her deeply and lovingly. His hands eventually descended to hug her tightly as they kissed. Mark loved hugging Tai because her body provided such a marvelous contrast to Kitsune’s body. While Kitsune was decidedly more trim and athletic than Tai, the gray tabby had a full figure with curves in all of the right places. Tai was delightfully squeezable, and Mark would have, at this point, been hard pressed to decide which of their bodies he liked more.

“Have a good day at work?” Mark asked, once their kiss was ended.

“Too long,” Tai purred wearily, looking up at him with those yellow eyes of hers. “I wish they didn’t need me to come in so early. How about you?”

“Pretty much the same,” Mark chuckled. “It’s worth it to come home to lovely ladies like you and Kat, though, my little tabby.”

“You flatterer,” Tai said, looking pleased. She kissed Mark again. “You should probably get upstairs. Kat’s going to need help bringing down your bags, and she’s really antsy about the time.”

Mark grimaced. “I figured she would be. I’d better get up there before she kills me.” He left Tai and went to the stairs, heading up to the bedroom. Inside he found Kitsune appearing rather frantic, straightening up her hair and looking towards the clock. She turned as Mark came into the room, and luckily for Mark it was relief that presented itself on her face rather than anger.

“Thank God you’re here,” she said, standing up. She was wearing a nice black skirt and a lime green blouse that was just a little bit too small for her pregnant belly. Mark felt a little thrill when he recognized the outfit; the clothes were the same as the ones Kitsune had been wearing on the day when they first became a couple. He recalled that her mother had bought them for her, so he figured she was wearing them to please her mother. “Where have you been?”

Mark explained why he was late, and Kitsune appeared sympathetic that he’d run into such a difficult driver. “If she hadn’t been such a bitch, I’d have been home on time.”

He went to the dresser and put away his gun, locking it securely in its case. "I wish I had time to change, but we need to get going, don't we?"

"Your uniform is fine," Kitsune assured him, winking. "You look handsome in it." She picked up the smaller of their two bags, and started for the door. "Come on, we'll take my car. I'll drive."

"Fine with me," Mark said, grabbing the larger suitcase and following her. They got back down to the front door, where Tai was waiting to see them off. Mark gave her a kiss on the cheek as they headed out the door. "Wish you were coming with us, Tai."

"I wanted to, but I can't," Tai said, sounding sad that she was being left behind. "I have to work, and I'm also expecting a phone call."

"Oh?" Kitsune asked. "What about?"

Tai glanced away, and Mark saw a flash of...something...go across her face. Was it fear? No, that didn't seem right. "I don't want to say," the tabby finally said. "I don't want to jinx it. But it could mean some big changes for me if it works out."

"Okay," Mark said, still trying to figure out what he'd seen on her face. "Well, good luck, Tai. I hope it goes well." Tai nodded, and Mark and Kitsune walked out of the house, going to Kitsune's car. Kitsune drove a dark green Jaguar XKR, and while it was a small car it was big enough for Mark, Kitsune, and Tai. They loaded their suitcases into the back seat, since the trunk did not have enough space, and then Kitsune got into the driver's seat and Mark got into the front passenger seat. The tigress started up the car, backed out of the driveway, and then drove away from the house in the direction of the road that would eventually lead them to Chapel Hill.

It was nine-thirty, almost half an hour later than Mark and Kitsune had planned to arrive, when they turned into her parents' neighborhood in Chapel Hill. The neighborhood was a very nice one. It was a short distance away from the campus of the University of North Carolina, and the houses all looked fairly old. They were pretty three-story houses with large lawns and lots of trees, a change from the sparsely treed, small yarded homes in their own neighborhood back in Raleigh. It also looked very quiet, and idly Mark wondered what the crime rate was in the area. Probably not very high; the police tended to keep an eye on the most expensive neighborhoods.

“This looks like a nice place to live,” Mark commented. “You grew up in this house, didn’t you?”

“Yep,” Kitsune confirmed. “Since I was five, anyway. We lived in a smaller house until my mother got her current job at her law firm.”

“That’s right, your Mom’s a lawyer. What does your Dad do, again?”

“He teaches Japanese history at the university,” Kitsune said, as they turned the corner onto a side street. “My dad’s from there, you know. His family moved to the United States when he was just a kit, though.”

After a few more minutes, Kitsune began to slow down as they approached a house that was large even for this neighborhood. The home in question was a three-story home like all the others, but it looked like it had about half again as much floor space as the others. The first floor had bay windows on the outer wall, and the front door was covered by an overhang that was held up by two columns that really looked like they might be real marble. The driveway had two entrances on the street, and it was in the shape of a horseshoe. In the “center” of the horseshoe there was a small fountain modeled to look like a fish standing straight up on its tail with water spouting from its mouth. The lawn was immaculate, and Mark thought to himself that whoever designed the home should have been given a medal. The layout looked opulent without appearing tacky, which was a very difficult balance to pull off.

Kitsune turned her car into the driveway, and Mark saw that there were already two cars in the driveway. One of them was a modern-design Mini Cooper S in British racing green, a nice little car that Mark really wanted to have for himself one day. The other car, in front of the Mini, was more luxurious. It was a black Mercedes sports car, and Mark thought that was pretty cool, too. Like most males, he had appreciation for the nice styling and sporty look of a good European-

Wait a minute..., Mark suddenly thought to himself. He took a closer look at the Mercedes. A sense of apprehension had flashed through him when his eyes had fallen on the car, and he’d learned while training to be a cop to always listen to his instincts. *What is it about that car that make me have a bad feeling?*

The driver’s side door of Kitsune’s Jaguar opened, and the tigress slid out of her seat, pausing to look back at Mark. “What is it, Mark? Something wrong?”

Mark shook his head slowly. "I don't know. I just got a feeling." He shrugged. "Probably nothing. Never mind." He opened his door and got out, and they retrieved their bags from the back seat. Kitsune took the smaller one again, and they walked up to the front door of the house. Mark glanced at the nameplate beside the door, and saw that it read "Migoto." Again, he got that flash of apprehension.

I know Kat's last name, he thought to himself, frustrated with his own emotions. I've known it was 'Migoto' since we first met. Why am I getting creeped out by seeing that name? He had the sneaking suspicion that he was forgetting something important, and already it was starting to drive him crazy. He looked back at the Mercedes, then back at the nameplate, and suddenly things began to click into place inside of his head.

Kitsune noticed the look on her human mate's face as she rang the doorbell. "Mark, honey, what is it?" She sounded worried.

Mark wasn't listening, as thoughts flashed through his mind at the speed of light. *Black Mercedes sports car. Kat's last name is Migoto. Kitsune Migoto. Tigress. Black Mercedes. Nameplate reading 'Migoto' by the door.* With a start, Mark made the connection. *Oh, crap...Her mother is a lawyer. Oh, Jesus Christ!* He wanted to back away from the house, jump into Kitsune's car, and get the hell out of there, but it was too late for that. Why the *hell* didn't he take ten minutes to change out of his uniform?

The front door opened after a minute's wait, and standing in the doorway was who had to be Kitsune's father. He was a short male fox fur, brown-furred and sporting a rather thick pair of glasses. The man was dressed in slacks and a shirt and tie, and Mark got the impression that he was the kind of guy who wore that sort of thing no matter where he was. He had a wide and warm smile when he saw his daughter standing there in front of him, though, so Mark also got the feeling that he wasn't as tight as he appeared to be.

"Kat, it's so good to see you made it safe," he said, holding his arms open for his daughter. Mark couldn't pick up a trace of accent in the man's voice, which only made sense after being in the country from such a young age.

"Hello, Daddy," Kitsune said, bending down slightly to hug her father, who stood about two heads shorter than her.

"And you must be Mark," the fox said, looking at Mark. "Kat has told us all about

you. It's nice to finally meet you."

"Yes," Mark replied, trying to keep the tension out of his voice. "It's nice to meet you, too, Mr. Migoto." He shook the shorter man's hand.

"Please, as long as you're here you can call me Rin," he said. He waved the both of them inside of the house, and they entered the foyer. Mark looked up, and saw that the ceiling here was very high indeed. It extended up past the second floor landing, all the way up to the third floor. Very luxurious, and it made him feel a bit smaller. "I expected you two to come here with Tai. Where is she?"

"She had to stay home," Kitsune explained, walking further into the house with her father. "She's waiting for an important call. Probably about a new job."

Mark followed Kitsune and her father, his feeling of dread growing as they headed for what he assumed would be the living room. Rin had Mark and Kitsune put their bags down by the stairs leading up to the second floor, and then they walked down a hall to a doorway through which bright light was shining. He got to the door first, and called in to someone.

"Tasya, Kitsune and Mark are here!"

The voice that answered was friendly and delighted, but Mark had no trouble recognizing it. "Well, Rin, send them in so I can see our daughter and this man she's been telling us about."

Kitsune's father waved them in, and she held Mark's arm as they walked into the living room. The room was decked out for Christmas, with wreaths hung up on the walls and a large tree in one corner. Mark was surprised to see that there was a real wood fireplace in the house, and a fire was crackling merrily, warming the whole room.

In a chair by the fire sat a tigress, wearing casual clothing and holding a glass of wine. She appeared just as regal as earlier in the day, but more relaxed than before. Mark steeled himself for what was to come.

"Mom, I want you to meet Mark Jackson," Kitsune said, laying her head on Mark's shoulder as they stood together. "Mark, this my mother, Anastasia."

Their eyes met, and Mark saw a blaze of recognition on the older tigress's face. Her eyes flicked back and forth between her daughter and the man standing next to her, and he could see that she was trying to decide how to react now that she was faced with

such an unexpected situation. She certainly remembered Mark from earlier in the day; that recognition was made all the easier due to Mark still having his uniform on. Finally, she stood up and walked over to Mark and Kitsune.

“Officer,” she said, her voice guarded. “I didn’t expect to see you again so soon.”

Mark felt a start of shock from Kitsune, and she picked her head up from his shoulder to look at him. Her father, standing to the other side of Mark, did the same. The human started to sweat a little, knowing that he was the center of attention in a situation that he didn’t really want to have gotten himself into.

“Do you know each other?” Kitsune and Rin asked at the same time.

“Er...More or less...,” Mark said, not knowing what else he could say. He met Anastasia’s eyes, sensing more than just a little hostility in them.

To his great surprise, however, the hostility quickly faded to be replaced by what he could have sworn was amusement. Even more shocking, she gave a short laugh, shaking her head slowly. Mark was completely taken aback, and he looked at Kitsune, who looked back at him with an expression of confusion that probably mirrored his own.

“Well,” Anastasia said, getting her laughter under control, “I feel like a perfect idiot now, don’t I? Give a police officer a piece of my mind, and it turns out to be the man my daughter has taken up with.”

Kitsune’s eyes widened. “You mean, *you* were the b-...person that Mark pulled over right before getting off work?”

“That’s me,” her mother confirmed. She actually looked sheepish for a moment. “If I had known he was your boyfriend, Kat, I would have gone easier on him.”

“Ah, well...,” Mark stammered. “No hard feelings, I guess.” He was trying not to look too bewildered, but it was a difficult endeavor.

“Don’t look like a little lost puppy,” Anastasia said. She stepped in and gave Mark a hug, all hostility apparently gone. Mark was still confused, but his relief was overwhelming. He had been afraid that the weekend would have been interminable, having to dodge Kitsune’s mother and avoid her wrath, but it looked as though things were going to work out for the better.

“I apologize,” Rin said, sounding amused. “My wife can be rather forceful at times.”

“I noticed,” Mark said. “I guess Kat gets that from you, Mrs. Migoto.”

Anastasia took a step back from him, her voice and smile warm and friendly once more. “Please, that sounds so stiff and formal,” she said. “I don’t want to be seen as the scary woman who cussed you out on the side of the highway. Call me Anastasia, or Tasya, if that’s easier to remember.” She went to hug her daughter, and the two exchanged a short whispered conversation that Mark could not make out. When Anastasia leaned back from her daughter, her hand was on Kitsune’s belly. “Well, you seem to be coming along nicely. Have you two decided what to name her, yet?”

“Her?” Mark asked. He noted that Kitsune’s eyes had widened.

“Mom...,” she said, the word drawn out with exasperation. “That was supposed to be a secret. Mark didn’t want to know.”

Anastasia covered her mouth as they all took seats. “Oh, I’m sorry.” She sounded apologetic. “I forgot.”

While Rin went to get drinks for Mark and Kitsune, Mark rolled that idea around in his head for a little bit. *A daughter*. His arm went around Kitsune’s waist and he pulled her close, his hand hooked around to rest on her stomach. *I’m going to have a little girl*.

“Now that the cat’s out of the bag, so to speak,” Anastasia said, smiling, “how do you feel about having daughter? I should warn you, feline girls can be a handful.”

“Don’t I know it,” Mark quipped, as Kitsune’s father came back with a glass of wine for him and water for Kitsune. She, of course, had not been able to drink alcohol for some time now due to her pregnancy. That response drew a laugh from both of Kitsune’s parents.

“He’s much more delightful when he’s not stopping you in the middle of ‘440,’” the elder tigress said to her daughter. “You should keep him at home more often.”

“I try,” Kitsune said, a hint of seriousness cutting through the jest. “Believe me, I do. You know he wants to be one of those break-down-the-door types? I swear he doesn’t want to live long enough to see his daughter born.”

“Hey, now...,” Mark said, slightly stung by the remark. Kitsune held his arm tight, and rested her head on his shoulder again. He knew that she loved him very much, and couldn’t help it if she was very worried about his work. Mark put a reassuring arm around her shoulders, ruffling the fur at the nape of her neck.

Anastasia broke the awkward silence that followed. “So, I trust you two ate before you came?” she asked apologetically. “We thought that since you’d be here at such a late hour, making a big dinner for everyone would be pointless.” Both Mark and Kitsune had eaten, Kitsune at home and Mark during his shift at work, so Anastasia stood up and escorted them up to the second floor, where Kitsune’s bedroom was located.

If the rest of the house had offered a view of a life much more wealthy than the one Mark had been raised in, Kitsune’s room served to emphasize that wealth. Her bedroom was easily twice the size of Mark’s own room back in his parents’ house in New Bern, and Mark’s parents weren’t exactly poor. Kitsune had a four-poster bed with sheer curtains around it, which were composed of some material that allowed what lay within to be viewed in silhouette, while still remaining discreet enough to afford some privacy. The furnishings in the room were clearly solid wood, and not a cheap wood, either, but expensive woods like mahogany and walnut. And, considering it *was* Kitsune after all, there was of course a wide mirror set into the wall over a vanity desk.

Anastasia made sure that the room was prepared for them to sleep in, and then she let them be. As soon as their bags were unpacked and their things were put away, Kitsune predictably went to the mirror to primp before bed. Mark, who was in desperate need of a shower at this point, went to the adjoining bathroom and washed away the reminders of the workday he’d had.

When Mark got out of the shower, Kitsune was already in bed, sitting up with a book as she often did before going to sleep. The covers were down around her waist, showing off her belly and her firm, medium-sized breasts. Mark smiled as he undressed for bed. Kitsune presented a proper image to the rest of the world, but in the bedroom she was a wildcat and a shameless tease. It was really remarkable how well she and Tai complemented one another, he thought. The tigress was so prim and well-mannered in public, while the gray tabby acted very rough and frisky. The opposite was true once they were in a private setting. Kitsune was quite domineering and wild, whereas Tai became quiet and rather submissive. Take them together, and Mark had to admit that he was hard-pressed to come up with an excuse as to why he was ever in any state of rest to leave the house.

“You’re staring at them like you want to taste,” Kitsune purred, and Mark realized

that he had been gazing at her breasts for the past two minutes, lost in thought. She was shaking gently with restrained laughter, but it took Mark several seconds to notice that his pants were halfway down, and that she was laughing because he was pitching quite an obvious tent underneath his boxers.

Mark joined in the laughter. "Well, can you blame me?" he asked, completing the task of undressing and sliding into bed next to her. "If you were a man as healthy and virile as me, you'd want to taste them, too."

Kitsune leaned over and nosed his neck. "I don't have to be a healthy and virile man to want to taste breasts, you know. You don't know what me and Tai do when you're not around." Mark knew she was doing it to get his heart racing. Beyond the occasional kiss and a friendly hug, Kitsune and Tai had little interest in getting intimate with one another when Mark was not involved. Still, just the thought of both felines entangled in a lovers' embrace turned him on to no end.

"You're such a faker," Mark teased, running a finger along Kitsune's collarbone. The soft, creamy fur that covered her chest, belly, and ran down to her tail and thighs, felt like silk underneath his fingertips. "One of these days I'm going to ask you and Tai to prove it when you joke like that. Then what will you do?"

"Perhaps we'll do it, and handcuff you to a chair so you can't join in," she shot back.

"Oh, my, you're in a playful mood tonight." He moved a hand down to cup her right breast, squeezing it gently. They were growing with her belly, preparing to provide milk for the infant that would soon be joining their family. Her chest rumbled, her eyes closing lazily as he caressed her. "Does the little kitty need some attention?"

The clawed hand that was stroking along Mark's leg told him the answer to that particular question, and Mark needed hardly to have asked it. Kitsune's sexual appetite, already healthier than most females', seemed to have almost doubled since she had become pregnant. There wasn't often a night where Kitsune was not in the mood, and it was only her desire to allow Tai her fair share that kept her from demanding it on a nightly basis.

Kitsune turned to her side, dropping her book to the floor next to the bed, and pressed up against him. She let her breath drift against his face and put her tongue out,

dragging it up along his neck and across his cheek. It made a rasping sound as it drew across his smooth skin, feeling like moist sandpaper. Felines were adept at using their unique tongues in the most interesting ways, and Kitsune was no exception. Her tongue made Mark shiver as a tingle of insane delight shot up his spine. He brought his arms around her, moving his hands in a roaming journey over her back as she lavished him with her tongue. She lapped at his cheeks, his nose, and the underside of his jaw, bathing his skin in a loving gesture that she saved only for the occasions when they were truly alone.

“Kat...,” Mark whispered, his voice husky. He moved a hand down her side, stroking her fur and grasping the base of her tail. He tugged gently, and the intensity of Kitsune’s purring nearly doubled. Pulling on her tail, he’d recently discovered, seemed to be something she really enjoyed, so long as he was careful about it. A too-hard pull had earned him a two-inch long scar on his shoulder several months ago.

A hungry mewl escaped from the tigress’s lips, and her hand dipped low, seeking its prize. Mark’s back went rigid as he felt a silky palm wrap around his penis, bringing him immediately to complete and full attention. He groaned aloud, and then stifled it as he remembered that Kitsune’s parents might be within earshot. It was hard to keep himself under control; Kitsune at once set to pleasing him with her hand, moving her fingers along his length. His hips began to move back and forth a little, instinctively thrusting in her grip.

“Yeah, Mark,” Kitsune breathed. She brought her hand to the tip of his length, and swirled her thumb over the head. Feeling moisture there, she brought it up to her mouth, and sensuously licked at the precum that was clinging to her fingers. “You’re ready, aren’t you, babe? You want this little kitten all for yourself, don’t you?”

“You know I do.” Mark moved his hand around from her tail and teased his fingers between her legs, feeling a pool of slickness and warmth there. “I can’t believe how sexy you are.” His index finger probed at her slippery folds, and he eased a digit inside of her vagina. Kitsune gasped with unrestrained pleasure, and bucked against his hand. Mark had scarcely seen her this turned on so fast when she wasn’t in heat, and he was overjoyed to be right here with her.

He slid his finger deep inside of her, feeling the soft, warm, moist walls of her

inner canal. Each push of his fingertip inside of her was accompanied by a sharp mewl from the tigress, and a clenching of her muscles. Mark looked into her eyes and tipped her chin up with his free hand, touching his lips to hers and kissing her deeply as he added a second finger. Her arms had again gone around his back, and he could sense her fists balling up and releasing rhythmically each time he pushed his fingers in and out of her. She was completely open to him, in an unusually submissive mood tonight, it seemed. He planned to take advantage of that submission to its fullest extent.

“No more...,” Kitsune managed to say. She curled her tail around his arms, rolling on top of him when he couldn’t move his hands. “I need it, Mark.” She rubbed her face against his chest, purring hard.

Mark moaned as Kitsune pushed back, bringing her pussy to the tip of his member. He was tempted to let her go on, but for once he wanted to be the one in control. He moved his hands down to her rump, getting them behind her and preventing her from easing back anymore. She looked at him with half-lidded eyes, her lips slightly parted, her breath hissing out. For a second he was scared by the ravenous gaze that she was giving him, and then she licked his nose.

“Well, Mark?” she asked, shaking her ass back and forth slightly. Her mewling voice had turned playful. “What’s it going to be? Are you going to take what’s yours?”

Grinning, Mark surprised her by quickly flipping her over, being careful not to be too rough with her, lest he harm their unborn child. He turned her on her belly, and her heart began to race, as memories of the past started to resurface in her mind. This was exactly how they had first consummated their relationship, back when their love had just been starting. All at once, the thrill and virginal excitement of their first time rushed back, and she moaned softly, raising up on her knees and swinging her tail out of the way. Mark placed his hands on her hips, and knelt behind her, his penis poised at the entrance to her sex. He leaned over her, and Kitsune could feel his breath against the back of her neck.

“Just relax, kitten,” her human lover whispered. He nibbled at the tip of her ear for a moment, and she tilted her head up, purring softly. “I’ll do all the work for you, tonight.” Mark leaned back up slightly, wrapping his arms around her body just above her belly, and eased forward. Ever so slowly, her warmth enveloped his member, and he sank into her affectionate depths. They groaned simultaneously, both feeling as though they

had been pent-up for weeks, although it had only been a day since the last time. The sensation was incredible, like iron wrapped in the softest velvet. Mark held himself inside of Kitsune for a while, not moving, just enjoying the feeling of being so close to her.

Kitsune was in absolute heaven. She had been looking forward to this the entire day and all during the car ride from Raleigh, and it felt all the better for having waited. She was getting a naughty, devilish thrill from the idea of being screwed in the bed she had slept in as a little kitten, in the room just underneath the room where her parents probably were right now. Her hands flexed, her claws pricking into the sheets and taking hold, to keep her steady. Who knew? Perhaps her mother and father were doing the same thing at this very moment...

When he could stand it no longer, Mark pulled back, going agonizingly slow, withdrawing from his tigress until he was barely inside of her. He looked down between them, and saw her fluids coating the skin of his penis, her vaginal lips hugging his member as he pulled out. Her inner muscles were clenching at him, fighting to draw him back in as the rest of Kitsune's body shuddered in pleasure. The human pushed back in, hearing a faint, wet slurp as he went in to the hilt, his hips connecting with her soft, furry buttocks. She felt so hot, so soft, and it was all for him.

Overtaken by a burst of passion like nothing he had ever felt before, Mark started to thrust in and out of his mate. He began slow, caution overriding feeling momentarily as he worried about hurting Kitsune or the unborn child that resided within her. The vigor with which she pushed back against him dispelled this notion quickly, however, and he began to speed up. The bed started to rock slightly, the curtains around the four-poster waving as they were disturbed by the movements of their lovemaking.

Mark was in a state of near nirvana, with shivering lightning bolts of delight dancing along his penis. His lover felt so soft, so wild, so perfect around him. He was going at a feverish tempo now, pumping her body with reckless abandon as he gave himself over to the sensations of being inside of her. Kitsune was no less enthralled by having him within her body, and she wrapped her arms around a pillow and bit down with her jaws, in order to muffle the screams of bliss that she felt sure were going to come from her mouth if this kept up. A small bit of disappointment went through Mark's head as he saw this. One of the things that he loved about fucking Kitsune was hearing

the primal, feline roar that she often made at the point of orgasm. Perhaps to overcome this soft, downy obstacle, he redoubled his efforts, forcing himself beyond what he thought his body could handle in order to give the tigress more.

“Ungh,” Kitsune moaned around a mouthful of pillow, sounding halfway between distress and unbounded ecstasy as Mark’s rock hard length hit all the right spots over and over again. “G-God, Mark...Stop...Stop...Ahhh...No...Don’t stop...Don’t ever stop!”

Mark did not answer her except with a deep groan of intense pleasure, halfway bending over her back as he reached around to cup her breasts in his hands. He squeezed her furry mounds, kneading them in his hands as he continued to piston in and out of her warm slickness. He was not far from his end, but he wanted to make sure that Kitsune would reach it before he did. Craning his neck forward, he licked at the nape of her neck, and then bit softly. Kitsune cried out, her mouth losing its hold on the pillow, and cocked her head back. Mark felt her insides jerk sharply, latching onto his member with a tight squeeze of muscle.

For the first time that Mark could remember, he and Kitsune climaxed at exactly the same time. Her vaginal walls spasmed around his member, and he pushed deep inside of her, as far as he was able to reach. With a guttural moan, he rested his chest on her back and hugged his arms tight around her, holding him inside of her as her vagina milked his penis for every drop of the hot, sticky semen that he shot into her. She wailed her pleasure, all attempts of silence forgotten, and curled her tail up and around his waist. For long minutes, the human and the tigress moaned back and forth with each other, as their orgasms fed off of each other and continued much longer than normal.

When finally it was over, Mark somehow managed to keep his hold on Kitsune. He lifted himself up and sank to the bed on his back, turning Kitsune over as he went so that she would not be resting on her stomach. She pressed up against him, her deep purring filling the room and making his heart swell with affection. The sheets lay bunched at the end of the bed, forgotten. They were too warm to bear them, in any case.

Presently, Kitsune found her voice, although it was the barest hint of a whisper. “Mark, never let me go...”

“Never, kitten,” Mark whispered back, kissing the top of her head softly. She nuzzled his neck, her eyes closed and sleepiness evident on her face. He smiled, and

brushed her cheek with one hand, scratching her jawline.

A moment later, she spoke again. "I think my parents might have heard us. I'm trying to decide if that's kinky or not."

Mark snorted with laughter, and Kitsune shook with suppressed giggles for a second or two. But only for a little while, because they were both exhausted from the day and from their exertions. Before long, both were fast asleep in each other's arms.

The next day was quite fun, even if there were a few things that made it a little bit awkward. When Mark and Kitsune made it downstairs for breakfast with her parents, there were some knowing looks being thrown around that made the couple quite certain that the elder Migotos had indeed caught wind of what had gone on the previous night. This was made even more obvious when Anastasia remarked that she was surprised to see them up so early, and commended Mark on his obvious vigor and stamina.

"I have to be honest," she said with a teasing look on her face, "that when I first saw you, I had my doubts as to whether or not you could keep up with a tigress. But I see now that my worries were quite unfounded."

"Mooooom," Kitsune said, her face coloring rather brilliantly. "Shut uuuuuuup..." Mark managed to laugh a little, but he was certain that his face was just as red as Kitsune's.

After breakfast, things got a little less awkward. Mark, Kitsune, and her father left her mother at home while they went to the campus of UNC-CH to have a look around. Mark had never had a chance to get a good tour of the university, so Kitsune and Rin showed her everything there was to see. Kitsune mostly just knew the parts of campus that involved the law school, but her father had worked at the university for many years, and had a thorough knowledge of the entire area. Mark was amazed by how much larger the school was than his and Kitsune's alma mater, Greenstone University. UNC-CH was more like a city unto itself than anything else, and even on a weekend there were still hundreds of people walking around here and there.

"This is the oldest university in North Carolina," Rin remarked as they passed by the well, a symbol of the university and one of the oldest structures on it. "And as such, we have one of the largest undergraduate and graduate populations in the state. And, I

believe, in the whole country as well.” They stopped by the well for a few moments, and Mark noted that there were traces of red paint scattered about on the ground. He pointed this out to Kitsune, and it drew a chuckle from both her and her father.

“Yeah, that’s part of the Big Three rivalry,” Kitsune said, referring to the rivalry between the three largest schools in North Carolina, which were Duke, in Durham, North Carolina State, in Raleigh, and UNC-CH. “The UNC-NC State game was a month or so back, and sometimes a few State students will come over in the middle of the night and paint the well red.” She grinned. “We get them back, though. Our guys go over there and paint their tunnel blue.”

When lunchtime came, they met Anastasia for lunch at a restaurant just off of campus, which was very pleasant. Kitsune’s mother was happy because she had a rare weekend when she didn’t need to go to her office in Raleigh, and the conversation was very pleasant, with only a few more references to the “disturbance” of the previous night. Thankfully, she kept her voice relatively low and avoided alerting the rest of the patrons as to Mark and Kitsune’s bedtime habits.

The rest of the day consisted of the Migotos showing Mark around Chapel Hill, and they had dinner in town as well. Plans were made to visit some historic sites in the city on the following day, and by the time they got home Mark thought that he had made quite a good impression on both Rin and Anastasia, despite the initial difficulties with the elder tigress.

Just as Kitsune had gone upstairs to freshen up, and Mark and her parents had sat down in the living room, the telephone rang. Anastasia was the first to stand up to answer it, and she went into the kitchen where the closest phone was located. While she was answering the phone, Kitsune came back down and sat with Mark. They could hear her mother speaking to whomever had called, and a moment later she came back into the living room holding a cordless phone. She had a funny expression on her face.

“It’s for you,” she said, indicating Mark. “I could barely understand the person on the other end. It sounded like a woman.”

Looking rather confused as to why someone would call Kitsune’s parents to reach him, Mark stood up and took the phone from Anastasia. “Hello?” he said. Almost immediately, he smiled as he recognized the voice on the other end of the line. “Tai, it’s

good to hear from you. How are y-..." The other three occupants of the room saw Mark's smile slowly melt away, replaced quickly by an expression of worry. "Tai...what's wrong?" He listened for a few minutes, the worry deepening on his face. By now, Kitsune was looking anxious as well. "Oh...Oh, honey, please don't cry...What's..." Mark was silent for another few seconds. "Okay...Okay, I'm on my way. We're leaving right now, Tai...Hang in there."

"What's going on?" Kitsune asked, standing up as Mark handed the phone back to her mother. "What happened? Is Tai okay?"

"I don't know," Mark said. He started heading for the stairs to get their bags. "I couldn't understand everything she was saying. All I know is she said she needs me, and she was sobbing." It didn't take Mark long at all to pack up everything that he and Kitsune had brought to Chapel Hill, and by the time he was back downstairs Kitsune was waiting at the door for him. Her parents were there, too, and Mark hoped Kitsune had explained what was going on because he didn't want to stop to do it. Thankfully, nobody asked very many questions, and goodbyes were exchanged in short order.

After they walked out the front door and tossed their bags in Kitsune's car, Mark took the keys from Kitsune. Normally she would have driven, but Mark wanted to have as much speed as possible, and he had a better idea of just how much he could break the traffic laws before he was likely to get pulled over. Almost as soon as Kitsune had buckled her seat belt, Mark had the Jaguar in gear and was pulling out of the driveway.

Neither of them talked much on the drive out of Chapel Hill and on the highway. Kitsune was absorbed in her own worries and Mark was focused on the road, keeping an eye on his rear view mirror for Highway Patrol vehicles. Whenever he saw one, he would slow down until they were gone, and then he'd bring his speed back up. All in all, he managed to cut the drive back to Raleigh from Chapel Hill by about twenty minutes, and that was in rush hour traffic, too. He might have been proud of his accomplishment if his mind hadn't been elsewhere.

Mark was a little more free with his speed and driving once he got into the city limits. This was his home turf, and there wasn't a police officer on the force who would have given him a hassle or a ticket if he was pulled over now, especially once he explained the situation. In record time, they were pulling into the driveway of their house,

and Mark had barely put the car into park and shut the engine off before his feet were on the front walk.

As fast as Mark had been, Kitsune was even quicker and made it to the front door before he did. She had her house key out and was working on the lock on the door when Mark made it up the front steps. At the same time, Kitsune's key was jerked out of her hand as the door was yanked open from the inside.

"Mark!" Tai cried, hurling herself out of the door onto him. He barely managed to keep his balance and avoid falling backwards down as the gray tabby hit him, wrapping her arms around him. All at once he felt himself going shaky as the adrenaline that had been driving his body bled away, and he was acutely aware that Tai was trembling and sobbing on his shoulder. It was all he could do to keep from breaking into tears, now that he had her in his arms.

"Shh...", Mark soothed, rubbing her back and guiding her through the door into the house. Her feet caught on the welcome mat so he scooped her up and carried her to the living room, with Kitsune following behind them. Sitting down on the couch, he held Tai in his lap, rocking her slowly and waiting for her to quiet down while whispering reassuringly into her ear.

When Tai was finally calm enough to start talking, she looked up at Mark with eyes full of tears and a wet face. "I...I'm so glad you're here...", she choked out, reaching over to take one of Kitsune's hands. "Mark...Kat...I...I don't know what to do..."

"Tell us all about it, Tai," Kitsune said, her voice wavering. Seeing her best friend of four years this distraught was leaving her quite unstrung, and she was fighting to keep a strong front for her. "What happened?"

Tai took a deep breath. "O-Okay...Well...Well, I got that phone call I was waiting for earlier this afternoon. You remember? The one I told you about?"

"I remember," Mark said, nodding.

"It...It was for a telephone interview," the gray tabby continued. "For a job. A great job. They're constructing a new nuclear power plant, and they need people to oversee the project. People who have experience working in the field." She brushed a hand across her face, wiping away tears that were quickly replaced by more. "A-And they'll want me to stay on after the project is completed, on a permanent basis. They want

me to be the plant manager. I'll be in charge of everything. Over a thousand people will be working at this new site, and they want me to handle the whole thing. It's almost twice the salary that I'm getting at Shearon Harris right now, and it'll be so much better work. Better hours, better benefits...Better everything."

Kitsune's voice was guarded. "Well...That sounds great, Tai. What's wrong with that?"

Tai broke into a wail and buried her face in Mark's shoulder again, her body wracked with a new round of shaking sobs. "I-It's in...C-California...!" she managed to get out.

Mark and Kitsune's hearts both sank at that, and Mark held Tai tight as she cried anew. He didn't quite know what to say to her, because he was stunned by what she had said to him. Tai had been complaining almost since she got the job at Shearon Harris about how rough the hours and how low the pay was, and that she barely got to spend any time at home with Mark and Kitsune anymore. Now she had the opportunity to take a job that would let her decide her own hours and would pay so much better, but at the cost of moving clear across the country. Mark knew what he wanted to say to her, and he knew that Tai probably wanted him to say it, but...he also knew that he couldn't in good conscience tell Tai not to take the job, and to stay in North Carolina. She had been given the opportunity of a lifetime, and if he told her not to take that opportunity he would never be able to live with himself.

"Tai..., " Mark said, nearly gagging on the words he was about to say. "I think you need to take this job. This is what you've worked your entire life for, and it would be wrong for you not to follow your dreams to the end."

"No!" Tai cried, shaking her head wildly. "I...I can't..." She sniffed loudly, not picking her head up from his shoulder. "If I take the job, I'll have to move away. I'll have to leave the person I love more than anyone in the whole world...The only person who has ever told me they loved me. I'll have to say goodbye...and I don't want to..."

Mark stroked her back, and looked at Kitsune. She was crying now, silently, with tears dripping down her cheeks. They held each other's gaze for several long minutes, and the strangest thing happened as they stared at one another. The sounds of Tai's crying went away, and it seemed almost as though the human and the tigress were making a

mental connection. Of course this wasn't literally happening, but Mark and Kitsune knew each other so well that they could read their trains of thought on their faces. Without saying a word to each other, already they had come to the same agreement, and Mark knew what he had to say.

"Tai," he said, resting his cheek on the top of her head. "We'll come with you." He heard a sharp intake of breath from Tai, and she drew back from him slightly.

"What...?" she asked, not sure she had heard correctly. "You...You'll what...?"

"We'll come with you, Tai," Kitsune said, squeezing her friend's hand. "You're not going to have to say goodbye. We won't let you go to California alone."

"But...But your school...," Tai protested. "And Mark's work, too. You can't just leave that behind..."

"Why not?" Kitsune asked. "It wouldn't be that hard to transfer to a school in California. I can have my father pull some strings and get me into UC Hastings."

Mark took over the thread of the conversation. "And there's plenty of jobs available for law enforcement in California. Departments are always looking for lateral transfers to save money on training. I'd be able to find work, no problem."

Tai was looking between Mark and Kitsune, and they could see the faintest glimmer of hope beginning to shine in her eyes. But that hope was yet dimmed by the shadows of doubt and misgiving that still existed in her mind, and they could tell that she would raise an objection despite her desire to accept their proposal. If Tai had one quality that might serve as both a weakness and a strength, it was her concern for the people she was closest to.

"But...Kat, you can't leave," Tai insisted. "You're pregnant. You're going to want to be here, near your family, when you have the kitten." She squeezed Mark's shoulder. "And Mark, you can't go with me, either. You need to be with your family as well, and with Kat. I know she's your true love..." There was the barest hint of bitterness, completely understandable, that nevertheless shocked him.

"Tai, listen to me," Mark said, his voice firm. "I do not care for you any less than Kat, and I wish you would stop saying things like that. I love you very much, and no event or distance is ever going to change that." He cupped her face in his hands, looking right into her eyes, which were locked rigidly on his. "Kat is..." Mark felt his voice catch,

and swallowed to push past the lump in his throat. “Kat is my true love, but you’re my dear heart. And neither I nor Kat are going to let anything keep us apart.” He kissed her then, and let the rest of the world vanish for a short time as he lost himself in the bliss of her warm lips.

When they broke apart, Tai wore the sweetest smile that he had ever seen on her face. Her eyes were shining, but her tears had stopped. For the first time since coming home, she looked like herself.

“Well,” Kitsune said, sniffing and wiping her eyes. She stood up, brushing down her skirt. “I’ll start looking at moving companies. We’re going to have a lot to do very soon, and we need to be ready to leave for our new home.”

“Yes...,” Tai said. She opened her mouth to say something else, but words failed her. The gray tabby took a few moments to compose herself, and when she next spoke, her voice was almost a whisper. “Th-Thank you...”

Mark kissed her cheek, and helped her to her feet. “Don’t wait another minute, my little tabby,” he urged. “Call and tell them you’re taking that job.”

“Right,” Tai said. She walked out of the living room, looking back fondly at Mark as she went. Once she was gone, Kitsune wrapped Mark in a tight hug.

“You’re a good man, Mark,” she purred, rubbing her cheek against his. She kissed him tenderly on the lips, twisting her tail between his legs. “You’ll take care of selling the house, won’t you?”

“Sure,” Mark said. He leaned away from Kitsune, looking out the window at the darkening sky and the bright moon in it. “The market is pretty bad right now, but we should be able to move it eventually. If we have to hold onto it a little while after we move, we can deal with it.” He hugged Kitsune again, tracing his hand over her back and pressing her belly against his. “Anything to keep the family together.”

“Family is the most important thing in the world.”

-Princess Diana