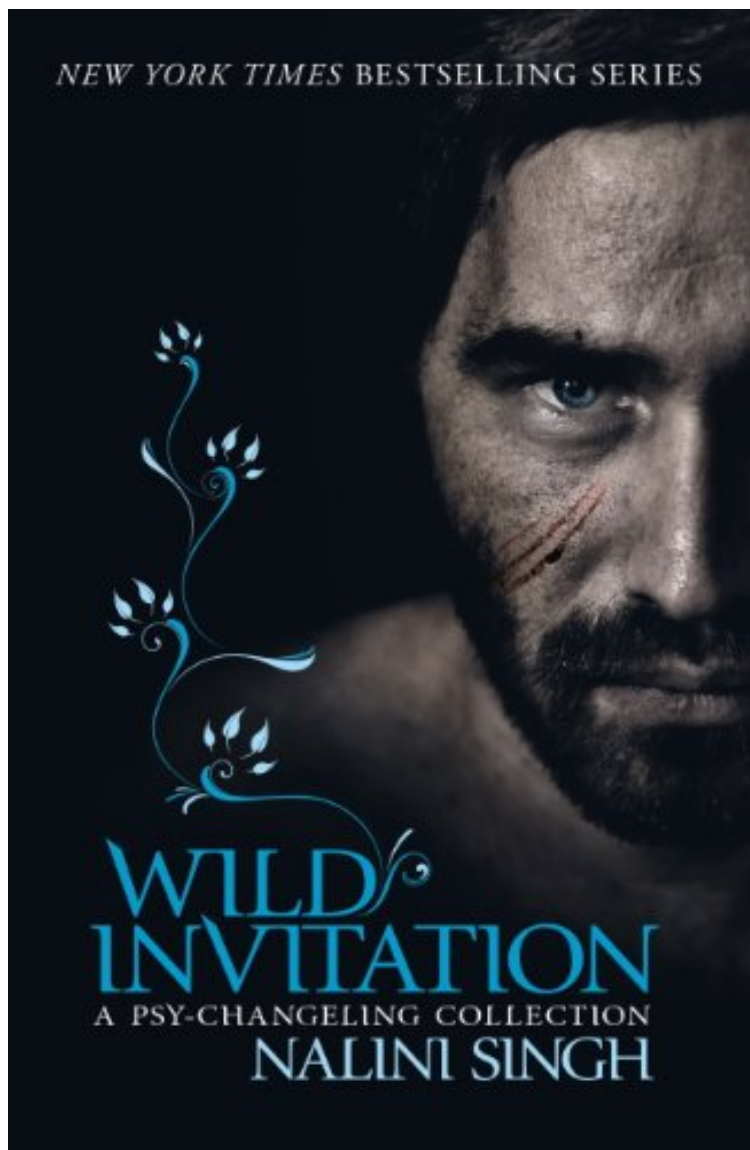


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Wild Invitation: A Psy-Changeling Collection (The Psy-Changeling Series) (English Edition)



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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurA collection of short stories from the Psy-Changeling universeDiscover even more of Nalini Singh's world of breathtaking passion ...This collection contains four novellas, two of which have never been previously published.ExtraitChapter 1TAMSYN LOOKED ACROSS the Pack Circle to the men and women who stood on the other side. Lachlan, their alpha, his hair going the white of wisdom and age, was saying something to Lucas, who was barely fifteen but carried the scent of a future alpha. The past and the future side by side. One day soon, Lucas would lead them. Everyone knew that. The boy had been

drenched in blood, his parents murdered in front of his eyes. But he would lead. It didnt matter that even if they waited a decade, hed still be far too young. Just like Tamsyn was too young at nineteen to be the senior healer for the DarkRiver leopard pack. Her mentor had been Lucass mother, Shayla. The attack on Lucass family had not only stolen their healer, it had left DarkRiver in a state of constant alert. That didnt mean they had given up. No, they were quietly building their strength until the day they could destroy the ShadowWalkersthe pack that had murdered their own. She knew Nate would be one of those who went after the rogue pack when the time came. He stood tall and strong beside Lachlan, his concentration on whatever it was they were discussing. At twenty-nine years of age, he was one of the packs top soldiers and would soon be a sentinel, assuming Cians position when the older man retired from active duty. The sentinels were the packs first line of defense. They were the strongest, most intelligent, and most dangerous predators of them all. Tammy, youre back! Startled, she looked away from Nate and into Lysas bright green eyes. I only got in an hour ago. Even now, she didnt quite believe she was home the six months shed spent at the teaching hospital in New York had been the hardest of her life. So the course is over? Yes. That part of it anyway. She could finish the rest of her medical training in nearby San Francisco. Most changeling healers relied on their inborn gifts, but Tamsyn had made the decision to study conventional medicine as well. It was one more way to compensate for her inexperience, for the healing gifts that hadnt yet matured to full strength. She refused to allow her youth to disadvantage her pack. Nothing went wrong while I was away? Shed hated leaving DarkRiver in someone elses care, though she fully trusted the healer whod stepped in to hold the fort during her absence. Maria? She left this morning. Itching to get back home exactly like you. Lysa smiled. It was nice of Marias pack to lend her to us and she was great, but damn, Im glad to have you back. Tamsyn returned her friends fierce hug. Im glad to be back. Lysa set her free. Go on. I know youre wanting to catch up with Nate. No. She glanced over her shoulder. Hes busy with Lachlan. The mans your mate, girl. You can drag him away. Mate. The word made her heart skip as it had since the day shed turned fifteen. That was when the mating instinct had awakened, when shed realized she was one of the lucky ones shed been born into the same pack as her mate, had known him since childhood. Its not official yet. Lysa rolled her eyes. As if that matters. Everyone knows you two are meant for each other. Maybe, but they were nowhere near to consummating the relationship. Nate was determined she get the chance to explore her freedom before settling down. What she had never been able to make him see was that he was her freedom. She didnt want to be apart from him. But Nate was stronger than her. And at ten years her senior, he was used to giving orders and having them followed. I should freshen up, she said, dragging her eyes away from him a second time. I just dropped off my bags before coming here. Searching for him. All right. Ill see you after youve settled in. Lysa smiled. I have to go talk to Lachlan about something. Nodding good-bye, Tamsyn began to move away from the large clearing ringed by trees that was the packs outdoor meeting place. NATE had seen Tammy arrive, waited for her to come to him. And now she was walking away. Excuse me, he said to Lachlan, no longer caring about the discussion at hand. Some Psy named Solias King was apparently making what he thought were discreet inquiries about DarkRivers territorial reach and ability to defend itself. Lachlan was fairly certain the man wanted to steal their land. This is important oh. The DarkRiver alpha looked up and followed the path of Nates gaze. His frown turned into a grin. No wonder youre distracted. Guess we wont be seeing you for a while. Well have to track this idiot down ourselves. Good-natured laughter followed Nate out of the Pack Circle as he tracked his mates scent through the trees. He caught her in under a minute. The second his palm clasped the back of her neck, she froze. Nathan. Her skin was delicate under his hand and he was very aware of how easily he could damage her. With her hair swept up into a long tail, her neck appeared even more vulnerable. He rubbed his thumb over the softness of her. When did you get back? Around four. It was now five thirty and winter-dark. Where have you been? The leopard who was his other half didnt like that she hadnt come to him first. She turned her head, eyes narrowed. Its not like you left a note as to your whereabouts. His beast calmed. Shed gone looking for him. Gentling his hold, he slid his hand to the side of her neck and pulled her to him. She came but her body was stiff against his. Whats the matter? Juanita was very happy to tell me where you were. He heard the jealousy. Shes a friend and a fellow soldier. She was also your lover. The beast wanted to growl. Who told you that? Im a decade younger than you, she retorted. Of course youve had women. I dont need anyone to paint me a sign. The jagged edge of anger turned his next words razor-sharp. I havent taken a lover since your fifteenth birthday. He was a healthy leopard male in his prime. Sexual hunger did not sit well with him. But neither did cheating on his mate. And if someones telling you different, Ill tear out their throat. She blinked. No ones telling me different. Her voice was husky. But I dont like knowing youve had other women in your bed, that

they've touched you, pleased you. Her bluntness shocked him. Tamsyn did not talk to him like that. What exactly did you do in New York? The possessive fury that hit him was close to feral, a harsh thing with claws and teeth. Her mouth dropped open. I don't believe this! Breaking his hold with a quick move of her head, she moved to face him, hands on her hips. You think I would? She gave a little scream. You know what, if I had, whose fault would that be? He folded his arms to keep them from hauling her back against his chest and proving to his beast that she still belonged to him. Tamsyn. No. I've had it up to here! She jerked the edge of her hand to below her chin. All the other females my age are taking lovers left, right, and center, and the only thing I get is frustration! Her raw need was simple truth. Newly mature females were very sexual, their scent intoxicating to the young males. Then there was the fact that the mating heat had shifted Tammy's natural hunger into higher gear. He could taste the woman musk of her, the lush ripeness just waiting to be bitten into; it was an exhilarating blend, and one he alone had the right to crave. Even the idea of any other male lusting after her pushed his temperature into explosive range. If I take you, he said quietly, it'll be for life. I know that! And I accept it. I need to belong to you in every way. His cock wanted to take her up on it. But she was nineteen. She didn't understand what it was she was committing to. He wasn't some cub who'd follow her around with his tongue hanging out like the young males did with the females. He'd take her and he'd keep her. Sexually, he was far more mature than she was, and a leopard's sexual needs only grew more intense with time. You don't know what you're asking. Damn it, Nate, I'm sick of needing you so much I can't sleep. Her hands fisted by her sides, caramel-colored eyes rich with heat. I'm sick of stroking myself to sleep. Jesus. The images that hit him were hot and erotic and so detailed they threatened to drive his beast to madness. We've had this discussion before, he reminded her. You're carrying too much responsibility as it is. Shayla's murder had forced Tammy to step into the older woman's position as Dark River's healer at seventeen years of age. She'd never had a chance to be a juvenile, to mess about, to play and roam. I've seen exactly how wrong things can go if a leopard's bond is made before they're ready. We are not your parents, she spit back. He went silent. I told you to never bring up my parents again. Why not? She was trembling. They're the reason you're being so stupid. Just because your mother was miserable after deciding to take a permanent partner at age eighteen doesn't mean I will be. His mother had been more than miserable. She committed suicide. If not in truth, then in effect. Her drinking had escalated to such an extent that even her tough changeling physiology hadn't been able to repair the damage. We are not your parents! Tamsyn repeated, her voice breaking on the last word. You're my mate. And I'm yours. Your mother and father didn't have that connection. No, his parents had fallen in love the old-fashioned way, without being driven by the mating instincts of the leopard. It happened like that sometimes. Though mating wasn't uncommon, not every changeling found his or her true mate, the one with whom they could bond on a level that was almost psychic. Mating will demand more from you than a nonbond relationship ever would, he told her, cognizant of the terrifying animal fury of his hunger for her. I don't want you walking into that before you're ready. And you're the one who decides if and when I'm ready? I'm older and more experienced. She had years to go before she caught up. She seemed to be gritting her teeth. Fine! Enjoy yourself in your perfect little world where everything goes according to your plans. Don't blame me if I get sick of waiting for you! She turned and began to stalk through the trees. Tamsyn. He used the tone of voice that made even the rowdiest juvenile stop and pay attention. She kept walking. What the hell? Striding after her, he caught up just in time to see her clothes disintegrate off her body as she shifted into leopard form. He froze, stunned as always by the beauty of her. Her pelt was glossy, the dark rosettes defined luxuriantly against the gold. Suddenly, she looked over her shoulder and gave him a look that could only be described as haughty. Her eyes were green-gold, not caramel, in this form, but they were very definitely all female. He growled at the implied challenge. She snapped her teeth in response and took off. He almost went after her; his claws were already out by the time he brought himself back under control. If he ran her down in his current state, well, she wouldn't be complaining about stroking herself to sleep again. Oh, hell. Now his mind was so full of images of soft feminine flesh and long stroking fingers that he was in danger of bursting out of his pants. Shit. Turning in the opposite direction from her, he ran toward a nearby waterfall. An ice-cold bath was exactly what he needed to knock some sense into his head. He wondered if she moaned when she brought herself to orgasm.

Chapter 2 TAMSYN SHIFTED BACK into human form near her parents' home. They lived fairly close to the Pack Circle and it was where she was staying for the time being, her life in limbo. She should have been living with Nate by now. Eyes stinging at the reminder of his rejection, she went to retrieve some clothes she'd hidden for just such contingencies. Nudity was no big deal in the pack, but she was already going to be a crybaby. At least she could be a clothed crybaby. Dressed, she walked to the front door. Her

mother opened it before she could knock. With her dark hair and pale brown eyes, Sadie Mahaire was an older, smaller version of Tamsyn. It was Tamsyn's father who had given his daughter her height. Her mother took one look at her face and opened her arms. Come here, my darling. Sobbing, Tamsyn went into her mother's embrace. I don't know what to do, Mom, she said, what felt like hours later. She was lying on the sofa, her head in her mother's lap and her legs curled up on the cushions. This need I have for him, it's clawing me to pieces. But he doesn't seem to feel the same. That knowledge crushed her, made her feel as if she were bleeding inside. Oh, yes he does. Sadie stroked Tamsyn's hair off her face with gentle hands. He's simply had longer to get used to it. Longer? How? The bond awakened at the same instant in both of us. He'd come to the door on her fifteenth birthday and she'd felt something in her snap taut, a connection so strong, it vibrated with how utterly right it was. Yes, but you were fifteen. Your sexuality was young, immature. She remembered the wave of heavy warmth that had uncurled in her stomach whenever she'd been around Nathan, the soft ache in low places. I wanted him even then. But as a girl wants, not as a woman. Sadie pressed a kiss to her brow. He, on the other hand, had to have had a brutal time of it. You were a baby and he'd never have allowed himself to touch you, but he was a man and his beast knew you were his mate. Tamsyn began to see what her mother was saying. He had to learn to chain the mating urges of the leopard, wait until I was ready. For the first time, she understood the pain it must've caused him. And he couldn't be with any other woman. Mates don't cheat. Sadie sighed. That's a very good thing, but it's also a hard thing to bear when things don't work out perfectly. But you understand about Nate now, don't you? He's as hungry for you as you are for him, just that he's had years to build up his will against the need. He's going to be a sentinel, Mom, she said, proud but afraid. You know the kind of men who become sentinels. His will was already as strong as steel before he found out about the bond. Now I'm pretty certain it's unbreakable. She rubbed a hand over her heart, where the bond was a savagely twisted knot. Though it was meant to be an instinctive link, Nate had somehow learned to block it. Her animal heart kept reaching out to him only to slam up against a solid wall of resistance. Oh, my baby. Sadie squeezed her shoulder and Tamsyn sat up, wiping away the final evidence of her tears. Now listen, her mother said, pure love in her expression. The man's will might be unbreakable for some, but not for you. You're his mate. You have a direct line to his soul. But he won't listen. He's made up his mind that we're going to wait and wait and wait and she shook her head, shoulders hunching in defeat. I know he's thinking in terms of years, not months. A wait that long would drive her insane. She wasn't being overly dramatic; the lack of tactile contact between her and Nate, the denial of what their beasts craved, it physically hurt. And it's not like I'm some sexy little thing that can seduce him. It was out before she could feel embarrassed. You're beautiful. Sadie's voice was full of maternal pride. You have courage and strength and such spirit. Tamsyn didn't have the heart to tell her mom that while those qualities might be nice, they didn't exactly make her a knockout. Her hands were practical healer's hands, her hair a plain brown, and her eyes well, her eyes were okay. Sometimes she thought they looked like dark amber. But what man would care about her eyes when women like Juanita with their seductive, curvy bodies were sashaying around? Tamsyn was all legs and strong bones. More horse than leopard, she thought morosely. If you give up, Sadie said, cupping Tamsyn's cheeks with soft hands, you'll regret it for all the long, lonely years that follow. So will he. Nathan thinks he knows what he's doing, but starving the bond will destroy both of you. How do I reach him? That's for you to figure out. Her mother smiled. But I'll give you a hint: he's a man. Treat him like one. TWO hours later, Tamsyn still hadn't a clue about what she was going to do. Frustrated in more ways than one, she stomped downstairs with the intention of finding something with which to take her mind off Nate. Maybe her mom was quilting and needed an assistant. But the house proved to be empty. Sadie had left a note tacked to the back of the front door. Your father and I decided to go for a bit of a roam. Translation: They were off feeding their animals' need for the wild and who knew when they would return. It could be days. Great, she muttered, feeling sorry for herself. Trudging into the living room, she had the beginnings of a good sulk going when she spied a box on the coffee table with her name on it. Another note: Tammy, darling, I thought you might like to do these while things are quiet (and you're sulking). We could do with some new ones. Love, Mom. Opening the box, she found it filled with homemade Christmas decorations. She smiled, unable to resist their magic. Every year until the horrible day when a bloody nightmare had forced her to step into the position of Dark River's healer, she had made these with her family. There were silver cardboard angels and beads strung on fishing wire and beautifully detailed paper dolls. But what held her attention were the round glass ornaments. Each was meticulously painted with scenes from fairy tale and legend. Most had been done by Tamsyn and her mother as they sat side by side for hours, her father content to supervise. She smiled. Every ornament held a memory of happiness, of love. Her

hand found one decorated with the image of a running panther. She stilled. Healings not just about bones and cuts, Tammy, sweetheart. Tears pricked her eyes at the memory of Shayla's patient voice. Lucas's mother had been a black panther like her son. She had also been Tamsyn's teacher, her friend, a friend whose advice and guidance Tamsyn missed desperately. But today, in this moment, it felt as if Shayla stood right beside her, telling her the truths she needed to hear. This would be the second Christmas since the attack. No one had been in the mood to celebrate the first, but perhaps it was time to heal her family, her pack. Even if she couldn't heal herself. Her eyes narrowed at the self-pitying thought. Snap out of it, she ordered herself.

Sulking be damned, she would not let Nate's idiocy ruin this Christmas for her. And she was going to make sure he knew it. Chapter 3 SOLIAS KING WAS a Tp-Psy, a telepath with a Gradient 8 ability. That meant he was strong enough to use mind control should he ever decide to. Solias had done so before; politics didn't allow for such niceties as high moral principles. His current plans, too, would have been far easier to implement had he been able to utilize his telepathic abilities to coerce and persuade. Unfortunately, changelings had rock-solid natural shields. He might be able to turn one of them and that with considerable effort, but he couldn't control the entire DarkRiver pack. However, that shouldn't be necessary. What, sir? his aide and son, Kinshasa Lhosa, asked. Nothing of note. Solias turned. Do you have the details? Yes. Kinshasa passed them over. Despite his youth, the eighteen-year-old was extremely efficient. Solias had made a good investment when he'd entered into a reproduction contract with the Gradient 7 Tp-Psy who was Kinshasa's mother. Both Kinshasa and the second child from the contract were high-Gradient minds, powerful in their respective abilities. Give me a price. Kinshasa spoke from memory, his dark skin unlined. The land in question is perfect for your needs. You can locate a small comm station and office there, then use it as a base for further expansion. The leopard pack? Solias didn't trust Kinshasa; he trusted no one, blood relative or not.

But the boy was undoubtedly good at research. Will they pose a problem? No, Kinshasa said, his tone holding the cool emptiness of Silence. DarkRiver is a small group with no real presence. If we were going up against the SnowDancer wolves, it would be a different story. They're somewhat more aggressive. That was why Solias hadn't looked into acquiring wolf land. Begin preparations for development. The leopard's animals shackled by the choke of emotion were clearly no threat. Yes, sir. Kinshasa paused. There was another matter, sir. Yes? The Psy Council has requested a meeting with you. Solias nodded. Forward me the details. The Council was likely interested in the details of his political aspirations; power never changed hands without the Council's approval. If Solias played his cards right, he might not only take over the leadership of San Francisco, he could rise to the Council itself. The Councilors would appreciate his firm hand with the animals. And if it all ended with a few dead leopards thrown into the mix, so much the better. Chapter 4 HAVING HALF-FROZEN HIMSELF in the icy chill of the waterfall, Nate finally hunted Tamsyn down well after sunset. It wasn't that he didn't know where she was. It was that he wasn't sure he could face her without doing something stupid. Like yelling, What the hell are you doing up there? Her eyes were night glow as she stood on a tree limb several dangerous feet off the ground, in human form. It would have been another matter if he'd found her there in leopard form. That was normal. The same couldn't be said for a woman with a rope of Christmas lights slung over one shoulder. Now, that woman snorted and began to string the lights around and along the boughs above her head. Tamsyn, I swear to God, he grit out, tracking her so he could catch her if she lost her footing, if you make me come up there, you won't be sitting without wincing for weeks. You won't lay a hand on me, Nathan Ryder, she said. That's the problem, as I recall. She was right, of course. He'd rather cut off his hand than hurt her. Fine. Slicing out his claws, he prepared to scale the tree and drag her down to safety. Don't you dare mess up my Christmas tree. He stopped. Your what? The fir was so tall it seemed to touch the night clouds. Only a crazy woman would attempt to decorate this.

But instead of asking if she'd lost her mind and chance getting his head bitten off, he decided to point out another fact. It's not Christmas for weeks. It's a big tree. She continued walking along the branch as she strung the lights. If you're not going to leave, make yourself useful and string the other side. There are more lights at the bottom of the trunk. Don't insult my cat by playing catcher. Knowing she was right about her leopard being agile enough to ensure she'd always land on her feet, he looked down, then wished he hadn't. Where did you get this many lights? He picked up the heaviest rope, shoved it over one arm, and started climbing. People liked the idea of a giant Christmas tree. It'll draw Psy to the area like magnets. The other race knew nothing of the packs network of lairs and aeries. It was a form of protection against the Psy hunger for power. You want to announce our Pack Circle? I'm not an idiot. The words were blades. The lights are special low-impact ones. They won't even show to the top of the tree, much less put out a detectable heat signature. He wondered if insanity was catching. I can't believe I'm having this conversation with you. Its ten

oclock at night. Feel free to leave if its past your bedtime. The bite of sarcasm made him grin. His cat liked being near Tamsyn, no matter her mood. And he was animal enough to appreciate her claws no leopard wanted a weak mate. So, what are you planning to do for an encore? A parade of giant jack o lanterns? Maybe we can use them to scare off the wolves? Good idea. He could hear her smirk. Shouldnt you be out doing important sentinel stuff? Im not officially a sentinel yet. Though he was already being allocated most of Cians work as the other man concentrated on his role as advisor to Lachlan and trainer to Lucas. I have the night off. And youre here? What, Juanita was busy? He let her hear the angry rumble of his growl. Are you really accusing me of cheating? Not possible to cheat on something that doesnt exist. Tamsyn, he began, intending to tear into her. Then his beast suddenly realized something. Youre still jealous of a relationship that was over years ago. He couldnt understand why, not when hed made it plain that hed been celibate since the mating bond snapped into being. Silence for several minutes. It hurts me to know a woman whos been allowed full skin privileges with you while Im not even worth a simple kiss. He froze at the amount of pain in that single statement. Dont you ever compare yourself to any other woman, he said, his beast raging at the mere idea. The instant hed realized shed been born for him, it had blinded him to anyone else. She didnt answer. Tammy. I dont want to talk anymore. He was certain he heard tears in her voice. It shook him. His strong, beautiful mate never cried. Tammy, dont. Dont what? Decorate my tree in peace? The acerbic edge was back. I thought He shook his head, relieved. Whats next, after the lights? Ornaments. Theyll take a while.

Im going to get the kids to make one each. He jumped easily to the ground and picked up the last rope. Stringing that took far too little time though he tried to stretch it out. Tamsyn was waiting for him when he jumped down the second time. Thanks. He fisted his hands to keep from stroking the delicate line of her profile. You going to turn it on? Not until its ready. She shoved her own hands into the pockets of her jeans. Id better get inside. Its chilly. He was one step from pulling her into a hug, would have done so for any other packmate who needed it touch was the cornerstone of who they were. But if he touched Tamsyn, it wouldnt stop at a simple hug. Hed take all of her, claim proprietary skin privileges from head to toe, spending extra time on every seductive feminine curve in between. His voice was leopard-rough when he asked, What are you doing tomorrow? Working with the kids on the ornaments. Going over some study papers. She turned on her heel. Good night, Nate. He frowned. Youre still angry. No. She gave him a tight smile. But Im also not a sucker for punishment. You might have had years to get used to resisting the full brunt of the mating heat, but I havent. So help me out and keep your distance. KEEP my distance. Nate paced across the length of his living room and back. Keep my distance. He was her mate she belonged to him and shed told him to keep his distance. Something growled deep in the forests that surrounded his home and he wondered which one of his pack was running under the moon. If hed had to bet, hed have said either Lucas or Vaughn, or maybe both.

The two were still juveniles, but both had already seen death firsthand, been scarred by their losses. Now they waited to grow up so they could claim vengeance. He would go with them when it was time to destroy the ShadowWalkers. The younger males would be fighting their demons, but he would be fighting for his mates right to be safe. Something dark and almost violent in him tightened at the thought of her, a sense of complete rightness filling his soul. She was his, wouldnt ever be anyone elses. The reminder calmed the visceral hunger of his beast. He would never forget the moment when hed realized what she was to him. Because of the disparity in their ages, they had had different friends, moved in different levels of the pack. But he had always known who she was, adored her in a way that was everything good her laugh soothed the rough edges of his beast, her smile made him want to smile in turn. On the night of her fifteenth birthday, she had hosted a small sleepover party at her parents home. Hed dropped in to wish her a happy birthday. It had been no fleeting impulse hed become used to swinging by to check if she was okay, especially during the times when her parents were out. As soon as she had opened the door, hed felt the bond snap taut. The knowledge had been in her eyes, too, shocked and bright. Hed touched her then, cupped her cheek with his hand. She had leaned into him, soft and welcoming and everything he had ever wanted. Hed known that, at that moment, he could ask anything of her and shed give it to him. That was what had made him draw back. Not until youre ready, hed said, ending the contact. It was a promise he refused to break. Tamsyn thought he was being cruel. She hadnt seen what he had with his parents. His mother had been too young, his father too demanding. Within a decade, they had destroyed each other and themselves. The idea of doing that to Tamsyn was his worst nightmare. Because he knew he was too much like his father he would not be an easy man to mate with. Hed expect total devotion, demand complete sexual surrender, take absolute possession. Tonight, his body hungered for her with a fury that was more animal than man. The cat had wanted her from the first. To the leopard, shed smelled mature at fifteen, but the man had known she was

nowhere near ready. Now now he could have her if he was willing to look into her eyes for the rest of his life and know he'd stolen what little freedom she could have had. No. He would not do that to her. She might be frustrated and annoyed with him, but she'd forgive him. It was what mates did. TAMSYN was never going to forgive Nathan for putting her through this! I can't stand it! Her skin was so sensitive even the sheets felt abrasive. The flesh between her legs was swollen with need and there was only one man she wanted to rub against, only one thing she wanted to do. Unfortunately, Nate didn't want to play. Why had he turned up tonight? To torture her? Her beast had become drunk on his scent, addicted to the proud masculine taste of him. It wanted more. So much more. Maybe that was why he'd come over because his beast was starving, too? She snorted. More likely he'd come to tell her off for daring to turn her back on him this afternoon. Nate was used to obedience. Particularly from her. As a fifteen-year-old, she'd taken everything he said as gospel. At sixteen, she'd given him the occasional moment of lip but had always accepted his decisions in the end. And he'd never let her down. He'd been her rock especially after that dark day two years ago when she had failed to save Lucas's father. Carlos wanted to die, Nate had whispered in her ear, holding her tight as she sobbed over the loss. He'd still held her then. He didn't want to live without Shayla. It hadn't taken away her sense of failure, but she'd understood. The bond between mates was beautiful, powerful. Separated mates could live without each other, but it hurt. As she knew too well. And she shouldn't! Unlike those whose mates had been lost to death, Nate was alive but wouldn't touch her. That was so incredibly wrong.

Changelings weren't Psy. Touch was as necessary to them as food and air. Tamsyn thought nothing of hugging and kissing a fellow packmate who needed reassurance. That her mate wouldn't even give her that! She didn't care, she lied into the dark. Hell, yes, I do. Shoving off the sheets and blankets, she slid off the bed and went to get a glass of water. Ice-cold water. God, even her skin ached. Filling up the glass, she took it and herself to the front window. Her plan to distract herself by admiring her tree disappeared the second she saw the leopard asleep on one of the branches. She couldn't make out his markings but she already knew who it was. Nathan. The man wouldn't take her as his mate in truth, but he thought he had the right to protect her? Damn him. Slamming down the glass, she was halfway to the door when she looked down at herself. All she wore was an old football jersey. It was Nate's. She'd stolen it from him in a blatant bit of thievery, needing his scent around her. But big as it was, it gaped over her full breasts and only hit her mid-thigh. Maybe she should change. And it was freezing outside. Nate probably wouldn't appreciate her walking around half-naked. She slapped her forehead. Tamsyn, sometimes you're an idiot. Of course he wouldn't appreciate her walking around half-naked. The sight of so much skin might incite his beast, tempt it enough to overpower the man's will. Her lips curved. Chapter 5 SHOVING HER FEET into a pair of fluffy slippers, she stamped outside and to the tree, knowing he'd have woken the second she opened the door. Nathan, you get out of here right now! She hugged her arms around herself, well aware the move plumped up her breasts, creating a deep cleavage. The leopard growled at her, its green eyes dangerously bright. Don't you growl at me, she said, and her breath turned the air to mist. You don't get to pick and choose which parts of the mating deal you want. It's all or nothing. Go away! He padded along the tree limb and leaped to the ground by her feet, a stunning creature she could stroke for hours. Then he butted at her legs, urging her inside the house. The touch of his fur against her skin made her shiver. I'm not leaving until you're gone. She'd meant to tease him, but already, her own leopard was scraping at the insides of her skin, so darkly needy it scared her. He bared his teeth and gave a short, husky roar meant to snap her to attention. His eyes told her to get her little butt back inside or he'd do it for her. She hoped he would. Because if he shifted now, he'd be naked. Skin to skin contact at last. Her thighs trembled, but she somehow found the strength to stamp her foot and point away from her home. Out! Leave! He began walking toward the house. She frowned, wondering what he was up to. He got to the door and looked over his shoulder. She wasn't going to fall for that. Then he walked inside. Her eyes wide, she hotfooted it inside, closing the door behind her. The leopard was sitting in front of the currently unlit laz-fire, the artificial heating system designed to resemble a live blaze but one that had zero chance of getting out of control. He glanced at her, his eyes night-glow in the darkness. Good idea, she said, half-frozen. Kicking off the furry slippers, she turned on the laz-fire. The flames shot to instantaneous life. Brr. Rubbing her hands together, she sat down beside Nathan. She couldn't quite think straight but that was okay. Nate was in her house. He was here. And they were alone. He butted at her hand with his head and she began to stroke him, her body warming up from the inside out. What were you doing out there, Nate? He laid his head on her thigh and growled softly in response. It's because my parents are gone, isn't it? She sighed and tried not to tremble at the proximity of him. He was so lethally beautiful, his body pure muscle under her strokes. When are you going to accept that I'm a grown-up? Huh? No response. The steady rhythm of his

breathing told her he'd fallen asleep. She couldn't bear to wake him. Tears pricked her eyes. If she shifted, they would both be cat andNo, she thought. She wouldn't use the animal's driving need against Nate. It was the man who wanted to give her freedom and it was the man she had to convince. The animal already knew what was right. If only Nate's human half hadn't gotten in the way. Except, of course, she loved that part of him, too. Sighing, she stroked her fingers through his fur over and over. It was a long while later when she curled up beside him and went to sleep. NATE waited to lift his head until he was absolutely sure Tamsyn was fast asleep. The last hour had been both pain and pleasure, torture and redemption. The animal couldn't understand why he didn't claim her. One thought, a split-second shift into human form, and he could take her right there on the softness of the rug. The temptation was shockingly strong. She was the most exquisite creature he had ever seen. A long, tall drink of woman. He could spend all night stroking his hand up and down the sleekness of her thighsexposed by that jersey she'd stolen years ago. He'd known, of course. It had given him pleasure to think of her covered in his scent. Since he hadn't seen her wearing it around, he had guessed, had wanted, it to be her nightwear of choice. His claws dug into the rug as he shifted his attention to the proud thrust of her breasts. There was no question about itTamsyn was every inch a woman. And so heartbreakingly young.No one would think to look at her that she'd been their healer for two years already.

Oh, the few packs they had trusted after Shayla's murderpacks with men and women seeded from DarkRiver had sent senior healers to complete her education, but it was Tamsyn the pack looked to. She was their own and she was deeply trusted. Because she had never let them down. He remembered her at seventeen. Her mentor was dead and Shayla's mate, Carlos, lay critically injured. Their son, Lucas, remained missing. Tammy had been so slender back then, a fragile reed he'd thought would snap under the weight of the dying sentinel's wounds. But she hadn't broken. Instead, she'd put every inch of her abilities into healing Carlos. She hadn't been able to save his life, but she had given him the strength to whisper his final wordsones that told them Lucas was still alive. Tammy had been completely drained by the effort to save Carlos, but when they had rescued a badly injured Lucas, she had somehow found impossibly more to give. And she'd kept doing it for weeks. She had slept only when Nate forced her to, worried she'd collapse under the strain. Even then, she would crawl out of bed after a few hours at most. Finally, Nate had had to half kidnap her. He'd held her in his lap and told her to sleep. And she had, curled up trustingly in his arms. The girl who had been that slender reed was gone. She'd grown into a woman of courage and beauty, but one who had never been given the chance to be a juvenile. Leopards valued their freedom to roammany left the pack and came back after spending time in the wild. He, too, had left DarkRiver for several years in his late teens. Tammy had never had that choice, her wings clipped at fifteen. Backing away from the lush temptation of her, he dragged an afghan off the couch using his teeth and pulled it over her. It would've been easier in his human form, but he didn't trust his willpower that much. One touch was all it would take. He'd crumble like so much dust. He decided to keep watch over her from the outside. TAMSYN woke up warm and alone. It hurt. I could hate you, Nathan. Getting up, she hugged the afghan around herself and stared into the laz-fire. Her internal clock told her it was morning, sometime around six. Despite the fact that she'd done all she could to entice Nate, he hadn't so much as kissed her. Was she that disgusting to him? A sob caught in her throat. It was the first time she'd considered that Nate's recalcitrance might spring, not from his overwhelming protectiveness, but because he didn't want to be tied to her. Her lower lip trembled. She hugged the afghan even tighter around her body in a vain effort to ward off hysteria. Being unwanted by a mate was a nightmare beyond comprehension. Mating wasn't marriage, wasn't infatuation, wasn't a connection you ever broke. She was tied to Nate on the level of her soul. More than that, she loved him. Some people said that there was no difference between the bond and love, but she knew there was. It was one thing to be compelled toward Nate, another to adore him like she did. She loved everything about him, from his strength to his laugh to his unashamed masculinity. But what if, for Nate, the bond was simply a compulsion? One he couldn't dissolve, but that he wouldn't have chosen if he'd been given the choice? She was hardly a prize, she knew that, had always known it. Added to that, Nate was older, more experienced. Maybe he'd expected and wanted to find a mate who could match him, a woman who'd seen far more of the world than just their small corner of it. In contrast, Tamsyn had always been tied to DarkRiver. That didn't matter to her. She was a woman of home and hearth. It was the way of most healers. They liked to be near their people, their lands. Healers built permanent homes before most others, took in anyone who needed their help, and cherished those who were their own. The months in New York had almost torn out her heart, she'd been so homesick. But Nate had roamed. He'd left the pack for years as a juvenile and come back a man, strong, loyal, and with wild horizons in his eyes. What did he see in hers? Homecalm, steady, enduring. But not very exciting. No wonder he

didn't want her! Tamsyn had worked herself into quite a state, something that would've flabbergasted those who knew her, when the comm console chimed. It was the emergency code. She blinked and snapped to attention, the healer in her taking over. Talk to me. Juanita's face appeared onscreen. Dorian broke his arm while we were sparring near the Circle. It's pretty bad. Don't move him. Turning off the screen, she got up, changed at the speed of light, grabbed her emergency supplies, and headed out. The cold air cut across her cheeks as she ran. If Dorian hadn't been so close by, she'd have taken a vehicle. But at this distance, her changeling speed was faster than the vehicle would have been on the rutted forest roads. The roads had been damaged on purpose. It was another line of defense, meant to bog down the unwary. DarkRiver was never going to be caught off-guard again. She found Juanita crouched beside Dorian, who was sitting propped up against a tree. Though the woman looked concerned, Dorian's face betrayed nothing. Barely into double digits, the boy was better at hiding his feelings than most adults. What were you two doing to break that arm? she asked, going down beside him. Karate. Brown belt. San-kyu, Juanita answered. Tamsyn didn't berate the other woman for using such advanced techniques against a boy. They all knew Dorian was no child. He'd been born latent and had no ability to shift into leopard form. Perhaps it was something that might have been held against him had he not made it his mission to become so dangerous, no one would dare treat him as anything but another cat. A single break. Clean, she told him. You were lucky. Pure blue eyes looked into hers. How long till I can use it? As long as I say. She put a pressure injector against his arm before he could object that he didn't need the anesthetic. Then, using the portable deep-tissue viewer to double-check the conclusions of her healing gift, she set the break and encased it in a lightweight but durable cast. Dorian had normal changeling strength and healing capacity; he'd regain the use of his arm far sooner than a human or Psy would have in the same situation. Nita, can you give me a minute with Dorian? She glanced at the beautiful woman. Juanita nodded. I have a perimeter watch to take over. I'll make sure he gets home. Dorian scowled as they talked about him but didn't say anything until Juanita had disappeared into the trees. What? Shaking her head at that stubborn male expression, Tamsyn moved to sit slightly behind him. Then she threw her arms around his neck and leaned down to press her cheek against his. San-kyu, that's the third level, isn't it? With the dominant males or with the young ones who would one day be dominant, you had to tread carefully.

Demanding would get her nothing from Dorian. He softened a little. Yep. I'm going for black next month. Impressive. When I left for New York, you were still on the first level of brown. He let her tug him further into her embrace. Touch was at the heart of a healthy pack. It was what bound them together, what gave them their strength. Smiling, she raised her hand and began to brush her fingers through his incongruously silky blond hair as he lay against her. I'm going to be past Juanita's level soon. It was a small boast and it was perfectly normal. Whatever had happened to break his arm, it hadn't bruised his pride too much. She grinned. Then who are you going to beat up? He actually smiled. You want I should do Nate for you? It seemed the whole pack knew how things were between her and Nathan. Brat. Yeah, but you like me. Laughing, she pressed a kiss to his cheek before rising. He followed, his bones showing the promise of a height that would top hers by several inches at least. Look after yourself, Dorian. If I see you one more time this year, I'm going to do something nasty like pull healer rank and ground you. Like you wish you could ground Nate maybe in your bedroom? Dorian! Mischievous in his grin, he backed away from her before turning to run off through the trees. She kept her smile hidden until he was gone. Then she bent down and began to gather up her supplies and equipment. She was pleased. Her medical training had come in very handy today.

Otherwise she'd have used up healing energy to no useful purpose. What she did come from inside hershe had to conserve her strength for the worst injuries as had happened with Carlos. Leaves rustled to her left and she looked up to see Juanita step out. Did you see my ah, there it is. Nita picked a slender black timepiece off the ground. Took it off while we were sparring. That boy is dangerous when he gets going. Nodding, Tamsyn continued to put away her things. Nita was the last person she wanted to chat with, especially after the horrible realization she'd had that morning. Then the other woman went down on her haunches beside Tamsyn. Hey, Tammy. I need some advice. Her healer core came to the surface, consigning the sick ugliness of jealousy to one tiny corner. Is something the matter? She looked into that sensual, exotic face and no longer saw a rival, but a packmate who might need help. You could say that. Dark eyes twinkled. I'm wondering how to bring up Nate without putting my foot in it. Chapter 6 TAMSYN FROZE. WHAT about Nate? she forced herself to say. Look Juanita tapped a finger against her knee. He's a wonderful guy and we had some fun together. Tamsyn shut her bag and prepared to get up. Revue de presse Praise for the Psy-Changeling series by the alpha author of paranormal romance. Booklist (starred review) A phenomenal series. Joyfully ed A phenomenal storyteller. Night Owl s I don't think there is a single paranormal series as well planned, well

written, and downright fantabulous as Ms. Singh's Psy-Changeling series. All About Romance I absolutely loved this book!...Way to go, Nalini! You truly are a phenomenal storyteller. Night Owl's Tender and sweet, captivating and superbly delicious. Fallen Angels [An] amazing series. Romance Junkies This entire series is great. Smexy Books Alternately playful and deliciously sexy. Publishers Weekly