



Hunger Undone

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Dedication

No one would be who they are without the people
who lift them up. Bells, this one is for you.

Chapter One

“Can I get you anything else, cowboy?”

Marshall Mackenzie shook his head and waved away the waitress without averting his attention from the large circular stage situated in the center of the room. Although his Stetson was low on his head, obscuring his face, he could see just past the peak to the dancer working the pole and engaging the crowd. She was a thing of beauty, just as breathtaking as he remembered. Her long, pale limbs moved gracefully as the sinewy muscles stretched and flexed, the disco globe directly overhead creating a rainbow effect that reflected off of her nearly nude body in shimmering holographic squares.

Three months had passed since she'd split from California without a trace and hauled ass to a different location, leaving him a wreck in the process. Not that he was surprised. Being singled out by his employer, Wolfe McCoy, always carried serious repercussions—especially when those being questioned or held under lockdown weren't of the human variety. The government wasn't as lax with things that went bump in the night, changed forms, or had the ability to cast magic.

It was a part of the reason he had been brought into the case that included the ever-private and impossible-to-get-close-to witch, Mira Jones, in the first place.

He stretched languidly in his chair, forcing the jaguar within to simmer down as he inhaled the succulent scent of the female who had haunted his dreams for weeks. He'd known what Mira was to him in the moment he snared her, drawn to her presence as only mates could be. Unlike vampires, who could identify their mates through smell alone, Therians required skin-to-skin contact to make the connection. As it happened, she didn't grant him the opportunity to touch her until it was far too late to stop what had been set into motion.

It was bad luck that had torn them apart before they'd even had a chance to start and forced him to remain behind on the preternatural case that involved Bad Boys Inc. when she'd fled. It was hard to recruit shifters, which

meant when the shit hit the fan, Marshall was usually spread pretty thin. Thankfully, he was due a vacation. It was a good thing he'd saved up his time, too, because it had taken weeks to find the sultry female mesmerizing the audience with lithe twists and turns of her supple body.

The music slowly died down, the lights dimmed, and appreciative hoots, hollers, and clapping followed as she collected her bra. Unlike the dancers before her, she didn't attempt to lure tips from those sitting ringside with lingering glances or air kisses. Instead she collected the money tossed onto the stage, murmured her thanks with a sinful grin, and held her head high as she sashayed past the pole to the curtain at the back.

Marshall rose from his seat and started making his way to the rear of the club. Drunken patrons began flashing their dollar bills the minute music spilled from the speakers and a new dancer took the stage. He barely masked his disgust as he waded through the thick smoke and pungent scent of body odor and sweat, livid that his female had been forced to exist in such conditions in order to hide among the masses. Once he took Mira out of this hellhole, he would ensure she never returned to it. After tonight, she would never be forced to sell herself in any fashion to survive.

The guard blocking the hallway to the back didn't give Marshall any trouble, not when he pulled his duster aside, flashed the badge on his belt, and revealed the sidearm nestled under his arm. His notable size and height were usually enough to get the job done, but having the backing of a Browning pistol and Uncle Sam in situations like these certainly didn't hurt.

Once he stepped past, he took his time, walking confidently toward the back of the building. Nude females crammed the dressing space he entered as he pushed aside the heavy curtain at the end of the hall. Most were staring into the mirrored vanities bolted into the walls, but a few were relaxed on the large leather couch on the far left of the room. He didn't pay attention to the lusty stares that darted in his direction, transfixed on the redhead who stood at a locker directly in front of him with her back turned. She closed the snaps on her blood red bra as he neared, her matching boy short panties already in place, hugging the luscious curves of her ass.

He knew that she could hear him as he approached, as she'd teased him the first night they'd met about his boots and the very distinctive sound they made as he walked. At the time he'd bullshitted his way around her observation, claiming they were the most comfortable footwear around, but what he wanted to tell her was that the heels of his boots were as essential as a belled collar, keeping him from getting shot by a comrade when he moved too quietly and caught them off guard.

He smiled at the memory. Even then, the desire to share everything with her was present.

"Stop right there, Marshall," she said quietly as she turned, sending long tendrils of vibrant, flaming scarlet over her shoulder. "Don't come one step closer."

He couldn't prevent the throaty growl that rose from his chest. Her voice was as sultry as her body and face. So damned sexy he couldn't help but respond. Blood flowed to his cock, firming the flesh that had not found release in the warm cradle of a female since he'd faced off against the witch who was now scowling at him.

"Do you think you can stop me after I came all this way, darlin'?" he drawled and continued advancing, purposefully ignoring her request.

"I think I could try." She met his stare without flinching, her hazel irises flashing a beautiful grass green. "Are you sure you want to go there? You can't trick me this time."

He stepped closer to her, placed one hand on the wall just over her head, and whispered as he bowed over her shorter frame, "You're surrounded by people who I'm wagering don't know a damned thing about who or what you are. I'm willing to take the chance."

"Damn you." She peered over his shoulder, undoubtedly validating his observation. When she returned her gaze to him, he could see the fury radiating through her thinned lips and furrowed brows. "What are you doing here?"

"Don't be coy, sweetness." He brought a hand up, slowly brushed his knuckles over the soft swell of her breast, and grinned when she gasped. Her

lower lip quivered, and her cheeks turned an alluring shade of crimson. Lowering his voice, he said, “You know *exactly* why I’m here.”

Muted whispers sounded from behind, and she caved her chest and moved away from his touch, slapping at his hand. “Don’t touch me.”

He arched a brow at her and leaned closer, until his lips were against the shell of her ear. “Funny, the last time were in this position, you were begging me to touch you all over.”

“Bastard,” she snapped, her eyes shimmering with anger and resentment as she arched her neck to glare at him.

She turned then and retrieved clothing from the locker. Her hands were trembling as she stepped away to slide into a pair of green velour pants and a matching cotton camisole. The red bra straps were visible underneath, and for some strange reason, the visual revved him up even more. She kept a distance as she folded her arms over her chest in a defensive gesture.

“Well?” she stated defiantly. “What do you want?”

He smiled, and she met the gesture with another scowl. “Do you really want me to put you over my shoulder and carry you out of here, Mira?” He noted the wince when he used her given name. The whispers at his back intensified, revealing that she had, in fact, been living under the alias of a dead woman as his sources had revealed when he’d finally struck pay dirt and learned where she had settled down.

She shook her head, struggling for words, and reached past him for the purse hanging from the peg inside the locker. As she closed the rectangular metal door with a click, she sighed. “Fine, we’ll do this somewhere else. But I’m not leaving the club with you.”

“Is that so?” he asked in a husky rasp and stepped into her personal space once more.

“Cut the shit,” she hissed and glanced around him again. Stepping closer, she continued, “Let me guess, you want me to track down someone else? Give you the location of some other soul so you can interrogate them for your bullshit agency?” She laughed, shaking her head. “What’s the plan?”

Seduce me again? Wait until I'm practically pleading for relief before you bring in the big guns?"

His grin vanished, replaced by anger. He forced his temper to cool before he responded. "I have a room upstairs. We'll talk there."

"No way." She stepped back, placing the bulky purse draped over her shoulder between them, her distrust evident. "I will not go to a room willingly with you. I learned my lesson the last time."

"You will go with me willingly, or I'll carry you." He snagged her arm when she tried to move and turned so that his back blocked out the room, preventing anyone from seeing her. "The last time was a misunderstanding that I take full credit for. I reacted impulsively, and you were embarrassed and hurt as a consequence. But I can promise you that the only big gun you'll meet tonight"—he yanked her close, wrapped an arm around her waist, and pulled her against him, until they were hip to hip and she could feel the hard outline of his notable erection—"will be this one right here, darlin'."

Despite the anger he could scent, he knew she was also aroused. Her full, berry-colored lips parted, and her pupils dilated wide. He shuddered when she brought her hand up, placed it against his chest, and pushed. Her touch was electric, her nearness heaven. He didn't bother asking for permission when he swept her off her feet and started walking toward the exit of the room.

Bygones would be bygones. He fucked it up before, but it was time to make amends. Hell or high water, she was his female, and he was not going to exist without her.

Not anymore.

Chapter Two

Mira scrambled away from Marshall the instant he placed her on her feet inside his room. She was angry. She was hurt. And she wanted him so badly that she despised herself for it. Her cheeks were flushed, and her body was quaking. For someone who made a living by shedding her clothes on the stage, she was now reduced to virginal schoolgirl mannerisms.

Because beneath the lust she was experiencing, there was also a sobering amount of fear.

This is what happened the last time she'd come in contact with the dangerous cat shifter so many months ago, something so powerful she'd felt as if she was enraptured by a spell or potion. A drink at the bar she'd visited to relax and unwind following an extremely long day turned into something more when he strode up to the counter, offered to buy her a drink, and after exchanging in some very explicit verbal foreplay, invited her to his hotel room. It was impossible to say no. In a town that was overpopulated by preening metrosexual men, Marshall's Texan accent, alluring smile, and scruffy features drew her like a cat to cream.

Her lapse in judgment had led to her spending several weeks inside a locked-down facility where she was forced to use her ability to trace locations and procure the names of several preternatural people her capturers were searching for. Marshall had tried to convince her that her confinement was a mistake, something he wasn't able to remedy but something he deeply regretted nonetheless. She'd done all she could to harden herself against the man, but it was always futile. The truth was he lit a fire inside her that no amount of space or anger could extinguish.

Armed with the bitter and powerful vestiges of fear, anger, and despair, she steeled herself not to react and to show no interest. Unfortunately—and to her dismay—Marshall Mackenzie hadn't changed at all since she'd last seen him.

His charming nature and gorgeous cowboy looks were deceptive in their ability to lure you in so you never sensed the trap. He was tall, standing well

over six feet, and built like a ball-busting running back who could also block or take a hell of a hit when necessary. Silken black hair peered out from his equally dark Stetson hat, and his squared chin with a slight dimple was lined with heavy stubble that she also remembered quite well. His full lips were a luscious shade of pink, complementing his bristled, tanned skin.

She glanced into his face, taking in his distinguished features, and turned away when his emerald gaze met hers. It appeared that hadn't changed either. His stare was a potent weapon, creating a hot pool of desire between her legs that she knew he could smell despite her efforts to hide it.

"Careful, Mira." His voice was rough, the syllables raspy. "I'm already primed for you."

"That's your problem, not mine," she said with more confidence than she felt and walked to the fridge tucked under the counter. If there was one positive thing to be said about Vegas, it was that alcohol was always in a ready abundance. Right now, drowning her fantasy of pouncing on top of the man standing across from her was sounding better and better.

Marshall chose to remind her of how different he was from ordinary men when he crossed the distance and stopped her before she could open the small squared door. His speed was uncanny, as was his ability to move so quietly his victims couldn't perceive the sound of impending danger in enough time to defend themselves. She stood silently as he rubbed his thumb across the smooth, vulnerable expanse of her wrist, his callused touch surprisingly erotic.

He hesitated before he spoke. "I know I've told you this before, but I'll say it again. That night was my fault. I admit it. I was so shocked to experience what it felt like to have you near that I reacted without thinking. I didn't mean for it to end like it did, and I would do anything to change it."

"You didn't do anything to change it. That's the problem."

She tried to pull away, and he held firm. "I did try to smooth things over. You were the one who sent me away," he reminded her. "Each time I came to you to explain, you refused to talk. I only left because you told me to. That was your choice, not mine."

She lifted her head and faced him with a bravado she didn't think she was capable of. "It doesn't matter anymore. You got what you wanted. Now I want you to leave me alone."

"Don't even go there, sweetness." The portion of his iris near the pupil shifted to a bright yellow. "I didn't get anything I wanted, and you know it."

Exhaustion and fury overwhelmed her, cracking her resolve to remain calm and collected. Here Marshall was, talking about missing out on a rip-roaring good lay, while she was living in a filthy slum, shaking her tits and ass for the masses and hoping like hell she could escape the heat that Marshall had placed on her head.

"You are such an asshole. You have no idea what I've been through because of you. *None.*"

Torment and shame flickered across his face. "I know more than you think."

She wanted to scream at him but knew it wouldn't do a damned bit of good. They'd been in this same place before, and none of their talking had ever resolved anything.

Wrenching her hand free, she told him, "It doesn't matter. It's done now. I've moved on, and I suggest you do the same."

He had her pressed against the wall in a flash, one hand at her waist as the other fisted in the hair at her nape. His eyes were shimmering peridot now, quickly turning canary yellow.

"You'd better not be saying what I think you are." He thrust his hips into hers, pinning her in place.

The firm ridge of his cock was hard and unrelenting against her stomach, the broad tip prodding her belly button. "You belong to me, Mira. I warned you before you took off like a thief in the night. Once we met, our fates were sealed."

She stopped squirming when that unforgiving length of steel became longer and harder against her, and liquid heat pooled from her sex in response. He did tell her that he believed she was his mate the night she'd fled. Shitty timing on his part, as she'd been informed that morning they

were setting her free, and she bolted the moment he'd been pulled from her room to take care of something on the premises. There was no way she would have lived a life in which she turned on her own kind, giving them up like candy-wrapped prizes.

It made her ill when she imagined Marshall coming on to her for the sole purpose of using her ability for his own personal gain. Sure, he'd gotten the shock of his life when the predator under his skin got wise to what she was to him the moment their skin touched, but the fact remained the same.

He worked for people who captured and disposed of their kind.

"What's going on in that pretty head of yours?" he asked softly, studying her.

"I'm thinking that you're a liar and a traitor."

His eyes narrowed. "Judging me without hearing my side? Why am I not surprised?"

"Because it's true?"

"Because you never would listen, no matter what I said," he corrected. "You were so determined to find deception in my motives. I hoped that when we had time alone . . ." He paused when she nailed him with a look of outrage at the remembrance of her time in what she considered a prison, despite the luxury accommodations he made sure she was provided. "Real time alone," he clarified smoothly and rotated his hips, eliciting a moan that she couldn't bite back. "We could talk and clear the air."

"Stop crowding me." She rested her palms on his chest, over the cotton T-shirt that was warm to the touch—a consequence of his unusually high body temperature.

"I can't help it." He dipped his head and brushed his cheek against hers, the bristles on his chin impossibly soft. "I've been aching for you. Going out of my fucking mind. Do you have any idea what it's like to yearn for the only one who can complete you? To know that she's out there somewhere, waiting for you come and claim her as your own?" Pulling away, he looked into her eyes. "It's maddening. So intense it's impossible to breathe."

For a moment, she nearly caved to their mutual attraction. He was the most beautiful specimen of masculinity she'd ever seen, so damned hot it made her insides wilt. Their shared time together was as combustive as their chemistry, impossible to deny despite the pain and hurt that arose as a consequence. Then, as if her mind was aware she needed to think of more than herself and her sexual desires, she remembered her horror when she'd seen the bloodied faces of the men she'd single-handedly brought to their demise, herded through the front doors of the building that was nestled in the hills of California where no one would come looking for them.

Men she had handed over using her ability.

She steeled herself for his rebuttal. "I won't sleep with you, Marshall. No matter what you do or how much I want to. You're an abomination who turns against his own."

When she tried to move away, the fingers twined into the hair at her nape tightened, forcing her to meet his level stare. "What are you talking about?"

Anger coursed through her, causing her to shake. "You had me locate those people so you could bring them in to do God knows what. I saw them through the window in my room when they arrived. I heard their screams through the walls." As his eyes shifted back and forth, searching for answers within her gaze, she whispered, "You're a monster. I won't let you make me one too."

"You think those men and women were innocent?" He growled, and when his lips pulled away from his teeth, she saw his canines were elongated. "Do you honestly think I'd have brought you to the compound if it wasn't important?"

"I think that you work for humans. I was taught from an early age not to trust preternatural creatures who placed more value in man than they did their own kind."

"Those people you located for us were moon feeders, Mira." His speech changed as the cat within surfaced, causing his chest to vibrate beneath her hands.

She stopped moving, disbelieving. "What did you say?"

“*Moon feeders*,” he repeated slowly, his irises glowing gold.

She recalled the image of the people entering the door of the compound around the back, situated just so she could glimpse but not stare, surrounded by uniformed, armed officers of some kind. All of the men with silvered manacles had been Therians. Their movements were too graceful to be anything else. The women with them, however, were something she hadn’t been able to identify from a distance. Their hands were tied behind their backs, meaning they couldn’t cast runes in the air, and they were gagged, meaning they couldn’t initiate any spells.

Could they have been witches? Using the bond with a familiar, the power of the moon, and ritual sacrifice to strengthen their magic?

Holy Mother of God.

She met Marshall’s intense stare and shook her head. “That’s not possible. The last moon feeders were tried and executed when I was a child. The practice has been abolished.”

“They were killing children—including infants.” For the first time, Marshall lowered his gaze, until the rim of his hat brushed the top of her head. “We’d tracked them for months, but we couldn’t get a fix on a location. That’s why you were targeted. We needed someone to trace them.”

“I’m telling you that it’s not possible.” She continued to argue even as her mind slid memories of the past together. “They wouldn’t risk the consequences.”

“What consequences?” Marshall quipped. “Your council hasn’t done shit to stop the dark magic that’s been occurring in the last decade. Trust me, I know. I’m the one who cleans up their messes.”

The truth was a harsh pill to swallow, but she couldn’t argue that black magic was becoming more and more prominent. Earth witches and white magic casters were too afraid to stand against them, cowed by the danger they represented.

She ran her tongue over her suddenly parched lips, grappling for words. “So the people you work for, they track down fallen witches?”

He lifted his head, staring her in the eye. “Among other things.”

This was usually when their conversations came to an end. She wanted answers. He said he couldn't give them. "Is that all you're going to give me?"

"I told you there are things I can't share, but you've seen firsthand what it is I do." He brought his hand up, until his knuckle brushed her chin. "You were never harmed during your stay at the compound, and not once were you placed in danger. That's because the minute I recognized you for what you were to me, I laid down the rules, ensuring you'd be safe. You're going to have to stop being so defensive and trust me."

"Trust you?" Her breath caught when he moved the back of his hand along her jaw in a teasing caress, his eyes tracking the movement. "I don't know anything about you."

After returning his gaze to her face, he shook his head. "You know the most important thing there is to know about me. What I am and who you are to me should tell you everything you need to know."

"I'm not your mate." Her stomach knotted as she said it, knowing it was a lie. "You let me go for weeks. There is no way—"

"Don't." He pressed his index finger against her mouth, preventing her from continuing. "Your excuses are one thing, but don't make up ones for me. You left at a bad fucking time, when I had obligations I couldn't leave behind. If it weren't for that, nothing could have kept me from you."

Pulling her head to the side, she said quickly, "But that proves it. The most important thing in the world to a shifter is their mate. Nothing else matters."

The grin he produced was menacing, and she stopped talking before he could tell her to, pressing back into the wall. His head lowered, coming closer, then closer, until his mouth hovered just above her lips.

"Someone made you, Mira. I got word the day you hauled ass out of town." When her eyes went wide and she gasped, the anger in his expression vanished, becoming reflective. "I'm guessing you knew that, though. Didn't you? That's why you took the identity of a dead woman, ran all the way to Nevada, and have been living in a shithole for the last few weeks."

Fear caused her heart to accelerate, her palms going clammy. It was true. When she'd instructed the guard at her door to take her home when she'd been given permission to leave, she'd been blindfolded, driven to an obscure place in L.A., and dropped off. When she finally managed to make it home, she discovered her apartment had been ransacked, the furniture completely destroyed.

The residue on the carpet—a large black stain in the outline of a pentagram—told her a vengeance demon was responsible, and the only magic wielders strong enough to conjure them killed first and asked questions later. She assumed someone had learned that she'd used her ability to locate preternatural beings for Marshall, and had sent someone to make sure it wasn't a habitual occurrence. It didn't take long to pack what belongings were left behind and head east.

"If you know that, then you know I can't go back." Her voice was a faint whisper, her terror very real. "Whoever wants me dead will make sure they don't make the same mistake twice."

The anger returned, causing his facial features to sharpen. "The person who wanted you dead was Bentley King."

Her knees caved at the admission, her entire body erupting into violent tremors. Marshall obviously anticipated her reaction, keeping her upright with a steady hand at her waist. She allowed herself to find comfort in his embrace, if only because the name he just provided was so much more frightening than falling into bed with a shifter and getting caught in the act than pissing off one of the most powerful warlocks on the West Coast.

Marshall buried his face into her neck, and she could hear him inhaling her scent. As he exhaled, he said, "You don't have to worry about the worthless sack of shit, Mira. As soon as I found out who was responsible, I tracked him down and took him out. It was a good thing, too. Seems Mr. King was reaping benefits from the moon feedings. He was the person behind the uprising. That's why he took you as such a threat."

"Y-You killed him?" she stammered.

“You bet your sweet ass I did. No one fucks with my female.” He pulled away to look her in the eye, desire replacing the anger in his expression. “No one.”

“The contract . . . the demon . . .”

She couldn’t formulate the words or say what she needed to. Fortunately, Marshall could.

“Done and done. When Bentley went down, his coven followed. No one is going to hurt you. I swear it. Nothing aside from a danger to you could keep me away. That’s why I didn’t come directly after you, why it took me so damned long to come to take you away from this hellhole.” He swiped at her cheeks when she blinked and the pooling tears in her eyes slipped free. “I had to make sure you were safe.”

Weeks of fear and anxiety vanished into nothing, and the result was staggering. The relief of learning she was safe now, that she could return to her normal life and assume her own identity, was so profound she couldn’t decide if she wanted to kiss him soundly or burst into tears. She hadn’t been able to eat or sleep decently in over a month, too afraid that one day she’d look up and find that the demon had returned and would drag her soul to the abyss of hell. There was nothing more frightening for a witch, especially one such as herself who had no magical defenses. She couldn’t cast magic or conjure any of the elements. Her talent, while handy, left her entirely vulnerable.

“I have to contact my family,” she murmured as she began planning aloud. “They must be worried sick.”

Before she’d fled, she’d called her mother in a frantic state, warned her about the demon, and told her to safeguard her childhood home and not to try to trace her until the danger had passed. That was three months ago—a lifetime. Her mother was always a worrier. Considering the length of time that had passed, she had to be frantic.

“Your parents know you’re safe.” Marshall’s voice pulled her out of her racing thoughts, and she peered up at him. He smiled, his full lips curving and parting, revealing the smile that had the power to bring her to her knees

before him. “How do you think I found you? The people I work for have a long reach, but it’s difficult for them to locate our kind. I had to think outside of the box.”

For a moment, she considered arguing, but stopped when she accepted it had to be true. She’d hidden herself too well, changing her name entirely and forgoing any magic that could make it possible to track her down. The only way it could be done, in her circumstance, was by a close relative using a direct blood tie and the calling that existed between them.

“They traced my location?”

He shook his head, smiling. “You hid yourself too well for that. All they gave me was a general area.”

“Vegas?”

His smile broadened, and he chuckled. “Nevada.”

“Nevada?” She stared at him in shock. Vegas would be hard enough to locate one person in, but the entire state?

“I called in some favors after they pointed me in the right direction.”

“So . . . you told them about us?” She breathed the words, chest heaving as her body began to warm and her skin began to tingle. The threat of danger was no longer present, her actions now becoming charged by something else altogether. Marshall’s unique scent was stronger, more potent. She recognized what it meant, knowing full well that her time of running was nearing an end—and for the first time since he’d betrayed her, she realized she didn’t want to.

“Well, that depends.” He removed his hat and tossed it onto the counter, sending strands of glorious raven black across his brow, and lowered his head until their noses brushed.

She swooned at the contact, the silken threads of his hair tickling her temple. “Depends?”

“On what you’re asking.”

He rotated his head, until his lips brushed hers softly, the bristles on his chin following the path as he lifted away only to return once more. “If you want to know if I told them about how we met, then no, I didn’t tell them.

Some secrets are meant to be kept. But if you want to know if I told them that you're mine, that I'm lost without you, that I'd do anything and everything in my power to make you happy and keep you safe . . .”

His lips hovered over hers, his breath warm against her mouth as his eyes lifted until their gazes were locked.

“Then yes, darlin’. I told them all about us.”

Chapter Three

Uncertainty, confusion, and desire—each emotion was right there on Mira’s face. She remained still and passive against him, but he could feel the racing of her heart, could see the pounding of her pulse beneath the tender skin of her neck, and scent the sweet and succulent cream of her sex as her arousal increased.

The time had come to take her, to lose himself in the haven of her body, to begin what would become the rest of their lives together. They would have issues to sort through, important decisions to make. Yet good or bad, none of it truly mattered—not really. This was what he was created for, and although she wasn’t yet aware of it, so was she.

When she didn’t respond, he continued, “They were shocked at first—your mother especially.” He grinned at her curious expression and clarified, “She told me that you were allergic to cats.”

She blushed again and glanced away, her cheeks becoming a cock-rocking shade of red. “Not all of them.”

Despite his determination to keep his own lust in check, he knew that his pheromones were increasing in strength, the jaguar within no longer willing to take the time to introduce the sultry female to their mating. The beast wanted to lap at her sex, nip at her flesh, and torment her until he finally buried his cock from tip to hilt inside her warm satin depths.

The one night he had been given a glimpse of her—just before his men busted down the door to bring her in—his fingers had parted her, slid inside, and teased her soft and incredibly snug vaginal walls. She’d been blistering for him, so hot she burned his fingers. The memory was enough to keep sleep at bay on more than one night, forcing him to take far too many cold showers as he stroked himself to empty release after empty release. Fortunately, there was no reason for that to happen again. Not with her clutched in his arms, her heady scent drawing him in and taunting him to take that final step, to bring her into his keeping, to cement their union and stake his claim.

“Mira . . .” He studied her from behind his lashes, aching with want, and surprised her when he nipped her lower lip only to soothe the sting with his tongue.

When she whimpered, went limp, and grasped his arms, he wrapped a hand in her hair, yanked her to his chest, and kissed her deeply. Taking complete control as her lips parted, he claimed her mouth, dominating her, mastering her. When he pulled away, her lids were lowered and her pupils were enlarged. He could smell the heavy scent of feminine honey at the apex of her thighs and knew if he slid his hand into her panties and sought the treasure hidden beneath the thin cotton, he would find that she was drenched with need.

“I’m going to carry you into the bedroom,” he warned as he bowed over and wrapped his free arm under her knees.

There was no resistance on her part, just a willing compliance as she wound her arms around his neck and did as he asked. Five long strides and he stood before the bed. He didn’t give her the chance to balk, too sexed to think of anything but getting her undressed and helpless beneath him.

His mouth covered hers as he bent over, placed her on the bed, and shucked free of his coat. The moment it fell from his shoulders, he removed his shoulder holster and gun, tossed the leather and metal on top of his coat, and pushed forward, forcing her onto her back as his body covered hers and pressed her into the mattress.

She tugged his T-shirt from his jeans, her fingertips brushing against his stomach as she pulled the garment free and pulled it over his head. When the obstruction was gone, she placed her hands on his shoulders, causing the muscles beneath her palms to ripple, and slid them down his pectoral muscles, across the planes of his stomach, until her fingers rested on his belt buckle.

He reciprocated her attention by tugging at her pants. They slid down her hips, revealing valleys and crevices protected by stretchy red cotton and lace. Goose bumps were scattered across her skin, her flesh slightly pebbled as he lowered his head, pressed his lips to her thighs, and followed the path the

pants created as he pulled them down. Her scent was so strong he had to hold his breath and strive for calm. Now wasn't the time to fuck her like a mindless beast. The first mating was intended to cement the bond, to bring them closer together.

“Marshall.”

Lifting his head, he peered up at her through his lashes, aware that, by now, his irises had to have changed completely, becoming yellow rather than green. He was greeted by a look of worry and hesitation. Although her eyes were clouded with lust, there was also a notable amount of fear within the dazzling hazel orbs.

“No biting,” she said softly. “Not yet.”

Disappointment coursed through him. There was nothing he longed for more than his mark on the pale skin at her shoulder that would claim her as his own and make her his mate in every sense of the word. However, even while the beast inside rebelled against the notion, the man knew she was right. Taking him into her body was one thing, becoming like him was another thing entirely. That required implicit trust and willingness, something she wasn't ready to give him yet.

“I won't do anything that you don't want,” he promised, remaining motionless as he waited for her consent to move things forward.

“All right, then.” She fucking purred the words, sending a rush of blood to his groin, until his usually soft and worn jeans felt as if they were chafing his cock and sac. She undid the belt buckle with deft motions of her clever hands, and he growled when her hand slipped past and her fingers encircled his pulsating flesh. “Where were we?”

This was the siren he remembered, a woman who was unashamed of her sexual desires. When they'd met at the bar for the first time and started to talk, he knew she was perfect for him. There would be none of the hesitant gestures or fear of the kind of sex he preferred, and the knowledge is what caused him to lose his head in the first place, driving him to take the lusty witch to his room above the bar and show her exactly what it meant to be worshipped by a shifter.

“Just like that, sugar.” He groaned the endearment, experiencing the most exquisite agony as she squeezed his cock and worked her soft hand up and down the length. “God, just like that.”

Pressing her face into the curve of his neck, she whispered, “Roll over, and I’ll give you something you really should be thanking God for,” and rubbed the pad of her thumb over the crown, circling it with soft, teasing motions.

The thought of her mouth cocooning him, drawing him deep, and suctioning his shaft in wet heat was too much. He forced her hand away and started removing the rest of his clothing. She watched as he stripped, taking off her camisole. His cock jerked when her hands glided down her stomach, smoothed over the indentation of her pelvis, and hovered just over the lacy rim of her panties.

“Don’t take anything else off.” His voice was also different now, raspy and hoarse, the result of his vocal cords thickening. She moved aside as he climbed onto the bed, situated himself against the headboard, and settled back against the pillows. When she arched a brow in question, he let her in on his fantasy. “You teased me with a taste of that body onstage. Now I want a private show.”

After scooting back on her knees, she rose to her feet like Venus. The hands she placed on her ankles rose as she did, tracing over the counters of her calves, thighs, and hips. She swayed seductively as she moved closer, brought her hands to her neck, and placed one leg on either side of his waist. Each gyration of her pelvis was slow and intentional, the muscles in her legs flexing as she danced above him. When he reached out to touch her, she bent at the waist and gently slapped his hand away, making a *tsking* sound.

“No touching the dancers,” she chastised playfully, shaking her head and wiggling her finger.

He shrugged and returned her grin with one of his own. “If you say so.”

Her startled gasp when he fisted his cock, squeezed, and moved from base to tip was music to his ears. She stopped moving, watching as he pleased himself, stroking up and down, slow and steady.

Her lips were parted, her pupils large. He knew what she wanted, could see it in her face.

“You want this”—he clutched his throbbing penis just under the glans, producing a shimmering bead of semen in the thin slit in the head—“don’t you?” She nodded, and he resumed his ministrations, gliding his callused hand up and down. “Then dance for me, darlin’. Get me so hot and bothered that I can’t think about anything but giving it to you.”

She complied without hesitation, rotating her hips from side to side as she brought her hands up and cupped her breasts. Grasping the lacy material in her fingers, she brought the flaps of scarlet lace down, until the lush globes spilled freely from the cups and bounced with her movements. Her nipples were hard, the pink areolas pebbled. She pinched the erect beads between her thumb and forefingers, rolling her pelvis as she whimpered and mewed.

“Does that feel good, sugar?” he asked hoarsely, timing the thrusts into his hand to coincide with the spinning of her hips. “Do you like watching me while you touch yourself?”

“Yes,” she answered in a voice laced with desire.

As she continued dancing, she stopped flicking one nipple to brace her hand on the wall and begin a smooth glide down as she bent her knees. The motion brought her nearer to him, and the scent of her sex was impossible to ignore, her mound so close to his face he could almost taste her. The outline of her cleft was visible through her panties, the lips of her core full and swollen.

He leaned forward and pressed his mouth against that vulnerable mass of flesh, inhaling the musk and sweetness that he had dreamed about for so long. She didn’t deride his touch a second time, twining her fingers into his hair instead.

“Please, Marshall.” He could hear the quiver in her voice and feel the tremors moving through her body.

It was painful as hell to pull away, but he did. He released his straining flesh and palmed her face in his hands, forcing her to look at him. Once

done, this could never be undone. The hunger was too strong to be denied. If she turned him away now, he wasn't sure he would survive it.

“Be sure, Mira.” Peering into her passion-glazed eyes, he warned, “Once I have you, I'll never let you go.”

He wasn't sure if his face mirrored the emotion that was heavy in his voice or, as she was his mate, if she was becoming receptive to it. Whatever the reason, she must have recognized the fear that assailed him because her own expression changed, becoming tender. She lifted her hands and smoothed the hair from his temples, stroking his skin with featherlight motions of her fingers. Then, versus answering verbally, she sighed, closed her eyes, and pressed her lips to his.

Eliminating any doubt.

Chapter Four

His tortured expression was too much, the oh-so-slight waver in his voice melting her heart. There was more than desire, need, and possession in his gaze. There was also uncertainty, worry, and fear.

Witnessing the striking juxtaposition from a man like Marshall was not only thrilling, it was also humbling. He was willing to lay it all on the line for her, something he'd sworn time and again. Only now, without the previous burden of fear and guilt she'd once carried, she recognized his declaration to be true.

Mira knew his concerns were obliterated in the moment she pressed her mouth to his. The large, callused hands that had been so gentle against her face were rough as they seized her hips, bringing her down until she rested on his stomach. She could feel the steely length of his cock nestled against the plush cheeks of her bottom, the cotton barrier between them thin enough to permit her to feel his hard, heated flesh.

Marshall squeezed her hips before he loosened his grip and began working his hands up and around her body, until he cupped one breast in each hand. He cradled the heavy mounds, skimming his thumbs lightly across the nipples, and captured the moan that crept past her lips with his mouth. His touch was so soft and tender, almost unbearable. Her skin was hypersensitive, so that each pass of his fingers along the hard peaks sent ripples of raw fire to her sex.

He pulled away, panting shallowly. "You smell so damned good, Mira. But there's something I have to know."

When he didn't continue, she questioned, "What's that?"

The corners of his mouth lifted into a wry smile. "If you taste even better."

The world shifted as he grasped her ass, leaned forward, and deposited her on her back. His lips brushed against her collarbones, made a trail down her sternum, and were accompanied by the sultry laps of his warm, wet tongue. When he made it to her breasts, he cupped the right and drew the

aching bud into his mouth, nipping lightly with his teeth. She gasped and arched her back, twining her fingers in his dark, silken hair, urging him closer.

None of her wildest fantasies even came close to the reality. He was so much warmer than she remembered, his body both harder and larger than she imagined. As he slid a knee between her legs and she parted her thighs, she embraced the weight that settled against her, reveling in the heaviness that blanketed her. When his cock slid across her cleft and nudged her clit, she gasped for air, on the brink of orgasm from the mastery of his mouth and his teasing touch.

His throaty chuckle should have infuriated her, but the vibration his laughter created against her breast prevented her from forming coherent words. Desperate, she rotated her hips and pressed the drenched area between her legs against him, searching for friction to alleviate the hammering at the top of her sex.

Releasing her nipple, he growled, “When you come for the first time, it will be on my tongue. You will not deny me that.”

He moved down her body then—nuzzling her stomach and lapping at her navel—and she parted her thighs to make room for his shoulders. Her entire body was quaking, longing to experience what he promised. Lower he went, then lower, until she felt the hot wisps of his breath through her panties. His mouth hovered over that part of her that wanted his attention most, the seconds ticking slowly, until she thought she would beg him to end her torment.

“Your scent has haunted me.” His voice was raspy, the words coarse. “Every fucking night I could swear that I sensed you—in my dreams, on my sheets, and in my bed.”

Claws sprang from his thumbs, and he slid the sharp talons under each side of her panties and ripped them in two. As the elastic gave way and the cloth slid from her skin, the cool air brushed her exposed sex. His loud intake of air told her he approved of the procedure she’d endured the

moment she'd decided to become a topless dancer—the essential Brazilian wax.

Remaining still as he trailed his fingers along the outside of her smooth, dewy folds was absolute misery. He took his time, parting her labia, studying her as if mesmerized. She fisted the sheets instead of plunging her hands into his hair and guiding him to where she wanted him, and shuddered as she remembered Marshall's touch all those months ago, his fingers spearing into her as she clutched his shoulders, riding his hand as she climbed toward release.

She didn't realize that she was whimpering until he ran his palms along her inner thighs in a soothing motion and murmured, "Shh, darlin'." He lifted his eyes, until their gazes met. "You have no idea how much this excites and pleases me."

"Then show me." She dared him to go further, to explore her in the manner they both desired.

He licked his lips, drawing out the tension until she thought she was dreaming when he finally lowered his head, extended his tongue, and flicked the tip against her hammering clit. Her body—hovering so close to the edge—tumbled over and she cried out as a climax tore through her, starting at the apex of her thighs and spreading through her stomach, torso, and limbs. The ceiling went out of focus as she brought her head back, pressing the base of her skull into the mattress.

Marshall ravaged her with his mouth then, lapping at her as she quaked and spasmed, licking at her as he rotated his head from side to side and growled against her sex. She could feel the hot gush of wetness that signaled her release and was too swept up in the moment to be embarrassed of the loud slurps that accompanied it. He fed on her like a starving man, wild and unabashed, until she was threading her fingers into his hair and pulling him away, unable to bear the sensation.

She was greeted by his flashing yellow-tinted irises when she opened her eyes. His chest was heaving, his canines long and prominent. There was an

unexpected thrill at the visual, the threat of his bite amplifying her fear even as it fed her libido, increasing the heat.

“Heaven.” He panted, licking his lips. “You taste like heaven.”

She pulled her legs toward her chest and tried to pretend the muscles weren’t as pliable as mush. Her entire body was spent, her limbs relaxed, but she didn’t care. Marshall had just given her something she was more than happy to reciprocate.

When his expression changed, she gave him a contented smile and answered his unspoken question.

“My turn.”

She almost laughed at how eager he was when he reversed their positions, but stopped short when he revealed his entire body to her. Dual lines ran from his pelvis down, symmetrical to the treasure trail that traveled from his belly button into a thick, downy thatch of black hair. His cock was fully engorged, the head swollen and almost purple, stretching from root to belly button.

He grasped the base in one hand and reached for her with the other. As she lowered herself, he pressed the mushroom-shaped head to her lips. He groaned when she opened her mouth, licked the tip, and collected the glistening pearl of semen that waited for her. It was a pungent flavor, heady and male, and she moaned as the taste burst on her tongue.

The hand in her hair clenched, forcing her to look up until she met Marshall’s lust-glazed eyes. He didn’t say a word, guiding his cock to her lips once more and twisting his fingers in the long strands at the base of her head until she arched her back and took him into her mouth. When she sucked softly, the pressure on the strands eased, and she heard a deep, resonating purr. He thrust carefully, encouraging her to take more of his length. When she complied, the pads of his fingers rubbed her scalp, his touch becoming gentle.

He groaned and rolled his pelvis. “Just like that, sugar. Suck me with that hot, sweet mouth.”

She waited until she was as far down his cock as she could go before she moaned, sending vibrations along the shaft. He cursed, and the fingers that were tender in her hair became harsh once more.

Ignoring the bite of pain that came as a consequence, she lifted away, using her hands to cover the portion of him that she couldn't sheath in the cavern of her mouth.

"Don't, Mira." His voice was hoarse and gravelly. "I'll come, darlin'. I don't want that for the first time." When she didn't comply immediately, his fingers became merciless and he ordered thickly, "Stop . . . *please*."

The importance wasn't lost on her. As a witch, she knew why he wanted to spill his seed inside her womb and not her mouth. It signified something that was just as powerful and frightening as his bite—more than a consummation, more than a paring.

An unbreakable union.

The moment he came within her, his scent would become a permanent part of her. Any male of the preternatural sort would know what it meant and would stay the hell away, respecting his claim. Not to mention it would bring her closer to a being who had the power to manipulate his form at will, thereby potentially increasing her own abilities. There was nothing so respected as a magic practitioner with a bestial mate. A mate who, if necessary, could become a witch's familiar.

When his hard, slick flesh slid from her lips, she gazed up at him once more—afraid yet exhilarated. As odd as it sounded, she repeated his words to her from before, ensuring there was no mistake.

"Make sure, Marshall. We can't undo this. You can't take this back if you want to later."

His facial features shifted, becoming feral as he snarled, "Never."

She gasped as he wrapped his hands under her knees and flipped her onto her back, tossing her into the pillows. He prowled over her form, forcing her thighs apart with firm hands. His erection jutted proudly from his body, the slick tip glistening. He snapped his teeth together, bringing her focus back to his face. His fangs were thick and elongated. Long tendrils of

hair cascaded around his ears and forehead, soft against the sharp planes of his face, his eyes glowing and intent.

“No biting,” she reminded him breathlessly.

He nodded, coming closer. “Not this time.”

Her ragged intake of air was loud in the quiet room, echoing off the walls as she felt the delicious heat of his cock flick against her enflamed labia once, then again. She watched as he fisted himself and rubbed the crown through her wet slit, coating the head in her arousal—up and down, so agonizingly slow. Then he was sliding against the mouth of her prepared sex and pressing inside. She bowed her back and lifted her hips, aiding him in claiming her, wanting to feel his thickness within as his heaviness covered her, keeping her trapped as he possessed her entirely.

When she started to close her eyes, he growled and wrapped his hand in her hair. Lifting her head from the pillows, she came face-to-face with the man above her. His hair was messy now, the strands falling in total disarray around his face. He brushed his lips across hers, the motion light, and pulled away.

“I want to look into your eyes when I claim you, to see the pleasure you feel as my cock slides inside you. From this moment forward, just as you are mine, I am yours.”

His body surrounded hers as he invaded her, pressing into the wet heat that was ready for him, aided by the cream that paved the way. Inch by inch, she took him, gasping at the sensation of his width pressing against her vaginal walls, driving her fingernails into his arms. The mystical threads that would unite them as a mated pair began merging as their bodies joined as one. Her body went flush as she felt an electricity coursing through her muscles, prickly lightning rushing through her veins. Marshall’s eyes changed, going from a deep hunter green to a vivid canary yellow. She felt the cat inside him, could sense its nearness.

For a moment, she allowed fear to override acceptance of the act and almost panicked. The mated familiar bond—forged through fate and instinct versus force—was something foreign and strange, so rare and hard to find.

Before she could dwell on her concerns, Marshall was kissing her deeply, alleviating her fears, reminding her of how right it felt to be with him. She felt the slight, cramp-like give in her abdomen when he nudged her cervix just as the heaviness of his sac went flush against her ass, informing her he was sheathed to the hilt.

“So good, Mira.” His body was trembling, his voice husky against her lips. “You feel so damned good.”

The tingly feeling under her skin remained as he pulled away to gaze down at her and slowly withdrew from her moist depths, exiting just as he’d entered. The thickness of his cock as it pressed along her clinging inner walls was the most pleasurable torture, so good that she felt bereft as the fullness went away. When she started to protest his absence, he thrust back inside, silencing her as she gasped for air.

His mouth surrounded a hard, aching nipple as he began pumping his hips, beginning a sensual dance that she eagerly followed. She rose to meet his forceful plunges, taking all of him, accepting the bond that grew stronger and stronger as they gave themselves over to raw pleasure, blistering desire, and each other. Their skin was slick as beads of sweat formed on their torsos, causing their skin to glide, stick together, and create the most maddening friction.

A sharp nick at her breast caused her to flinch, and Marshall cursed and immediately alleviated the sting with his tongue, sucking at what she realized was a cut created by his fang. When he lifted his head to peer up at her, she could tell he was fighting an inner war. His mouth was taut, and lines were visible along his furrowed brow.

“I can’t make them retract. The need to mark you is too strong.” Bringing his hand down, he began rubbing her clit with his thumb. “Once I’ve taken you like this, it will be easier to control my other half.”

She cried out brokenly as he caressed her in knowing circular patterns, applying just enough pressure as he timed his thrusts to accommodate the motions. Heat spread through her belly, expanding outward through her legs,

chest, shoulders, and arms. Her body quickened, that telling flush enveloping her in a suffocating fire as she neared the climax Marshall pushed her toward.

There were no words to describe the sensation that started in her stomach and moved through her, like the lethal second wave following a bomb blast. It was an orgasm yet far more, something so powerful she couldn't breathe, couldn't see, and couldn't think about anything aside from the bliss shrouding her from head to toe. She was aware that, as her sex squeezed and clenched Marshall, he was caught in the throes of the same thing.

He brought his hands to her hips, the sharp claws extending from his fingers piercing the plush skin protecting her fragile bones. The plunges he made into her weeping and sensitive flesh were no longer intentional. He moved against her in a primal manner, his beast fully unleashed. She watched him bite his lip as he moved faster, then faster. He roared as he came, the muscles in his arms, chest, and shoulders cording. She felt his hot semen jet inside of her, flooding her womb with his essence as the energy around them suddenly lifted and there was no longer the heavy air tickling the surface of her skin.

His features became lax as his eyes shifted from bright green, to bumblebee yellow, and finally reverted to the dark, comforting hunter green she remembered so well. He relaxed against her but kept his weight on his elbows, their heartbeats slowing down until she could feel that they were harmonizing, synching into a rhythm with each other.

For the first time in her life, she was *aware* of her magic, could feel the hum under her skin. As her talent allowed her to locate people using runes, maps, and a mental inclination, she wasn't sure of how strong it would now become. She could feel the difference, her ability suddenly magnified by the power she shared through Marshall. Without thinking of the ramifications, she sought the location of one of the dancers she spoke to from time to time and reeled as the world spun, the bedroom vanished, and she was able to get a clear visual of Trina. She was on the center stage, shaking her goodies for all she was worth.

“Mira?” Marshall’s concerned voice disrupted the vision, and she blinked several times until the smoky, spotlighted room became the bedroom. She realized he was cradling her head in his left hand, smoothing away random strands of hair with his right. “Are you all right? You spaced out on me.”

“I-I’m fine,” she stammered and met his worried gaze. Her heart spasmed and her stomach knotted as she considered something she should have from the start.

Marshall was a shifter and apparently worked for someone who was aware of the eccentricities of varying races, but was it possible that he didn’t understand the full ramifications of their joining aside from making her his mate?

She struggled for words, afraid to ask. “Marshall . . . you knew everything that would happen when we made love, right? You are aware of what happens when a witch accepts a bond with a shifter?”

“If you’re asking if I knew I’d become your familiar”—he brushed his thumb across her lower lip, drawing out his answer until she swatted at his hand—“then yes, I did.”

Relieved, she released the breath she wasn’t aware she was holding. A familiar bond was extremely dangerous to a shifter. If a witch wasn’t careful, she could sap the life from her bonded animal entirely.

“It doesn’t frighten you?”

Smiling wistfully, he shook his head. “You don’t get it, but you will.”

Curious, she asked, “I don’t get what?”

He became serious, and his eyes changed, green becoming peridot. Taking a deep breath, he grasped her left hand and placed it over his heart. “I am nothing without you. The moment we met, my life became yours. You hold everything I am in your hands, Mira. No other can, or will, yield the power over me that you do.”

Until that moment, she didn’t think it was possible for a person to feel as if they’d pooled into a boneless mass. She’d been on the receiving end of a spell when she was a child that was intended to relay the sensation, but it was nothing in comparison. While her body felt light and airy, her thoughts were

chaotic and her heart was pounding so loudly in her ears that it drowned out all other sounds.

Stunned and unable to find anything to say, she continued staring at him in awe, unable to believe that the gorgeous man staring down at her viewed her importance in his life so clearly, without restraint or reservation.

Marshall shifted his hips, bringing attention to the fact that, although he had achieved climax, he was hard and ready to go again. His fangs were gone, his face relaxed as he tucked her into his chest and rolled, until he was on his back and she was sitting astride him. She moaned as he moved to the headboard, remaining upright as she placed her hands on his chest.

“You don’t have to say anything. We have all the time in the world for words.” He waited until she looked at him to continue. “Right now, I just need you to show me, darlin’. You know what’s in my heart. Give it back to me.”

She lifted herself slowly, pulling away from the velveteen flesh inside her, and dug the tips of her nails into his skin. His lids lowered, his breathing became ragged, and he clutched her hips in a forceful grip when she was on her knees, with only the crown lodged at her entrance. For a moment, she basked in the emptiness, recognizing it as something that she never wanted to experience again. Marshall wasn’t the man she once believed. He was someone who cared for her enough to remove any danger to her, come searching for her in the aftermath, and love her with such devotion that he willingly placed his life and well-being into her hands.

“*Mira.*” He groaned, and she felt the tremor that shot through his body as his hands spasmed and the bite of his fingers into her skin intensified.

“Shh.” She lowered her body, leaned forward, and silenced him with a tender kiss.

When he relaxed, she began to move—up and down, slow and steady. As she lifted away, she took the image in, creating a mental snapshot she could always cherish. His shoulders were cushioned in the pillows, his hair was unkempt, and the look on his face revealed his adoration, his possessiveness—his love.

In that moment, she knew exactly how she was going to show Marshall how she felt. She would draw out his pleasure, bring him to the brink, and just as he fell over the edge, she would caress him, whisper sweet nothings to him, and hold him in the cradle of her arms until he asked her to do it all over again.

Their gazes merged and remained locked together as she rode him. Right then nothing else mattered. There was only the two of them, carving an uncertain, yet undeniable, future together.

Epilogue

New York, six months later

“Where are you?”

Marshall glanced around as he whispered into the cell phone, “The first floor.”

“Go all the way to the top,” Mira instructed tersely. “You’ll find your target in the penthouse.”

Shit. She was still mad. Not that he blamed her.

Longing and the unshakable need for his mate made his voice husky. “Thanks, darlin’. I’ll call you after I wrap things up.”

“You’d better,” she retorted before the line went dead.

Closing the phone and sliding it into his jacket, he studied the elevator for a split second before he decided to take the stairs. There were a few people in the lobby of the upscale hotel, and witnesses were never a good thing. Although his boots usually made a lot of noise, he moved quietly on the pads of his feet as he took the stairs two at a time, eager to burn some excess energy.

The last month had been absolute hell. Wolfe had so many cases that required Marshall’s attention that he hadn’t seen Mira in over two weeks—making it the longest time they’d ever spent apart. Each night when he called her, Marshall knew she was growing impatient. Part of it stemmed from their desire for each other, but he knew the true reason she was edgy and curt.

After arriving at the top floor, he paused for a moment to check his sidearm and attempt to get his head on straight. Now wasn’t the time to think about Mira, their mating, or the meeting with his family that had gone to hell in a handbasket. There was plenty of time for him to patch things up, make things right, and mark her properly in order to cement their union once and for all. One more job and he could go home to their ranch in Texas, take Mira to bed, and keep her there until there was no question of who and what she was to him.

To his shock, the stairwell door opened without protest—no need for muscle or the assistance of the tool kit in his pocket. As he stepped into the hallway, he glanced from left to right. There was no one around, the lone double doors of the Penthouse Suite the only ones on the floor. Long-honed instincts in the field told him something was off. Although the hotel wasn't the best in town, he didn't expect this job to be quite so easy. Not to mention the information packet—instructing him to contact his mate to procure the location of the target and hold him inside the room until further instruction—was completely out of the norm.

Unexpectedly, the double red doors swung inward, revealing the room in the distance. He could see the living area just beyond, the black leather couch, recliner, and coffee table clearly visible. “Fuck,” he muttered and unlatched the safety on the gun. Unless his target had died and become a poltergeist, something was *definitely* off.

Prowling down the hall until he came to the threshold, he glanced from left to right. His impeccable sense of smell told him there was no one in the apartment. The only scents he could distinguish were those from the hallway. Doubt resurfaced, a heavy weight bearing down on his neck. A nagging inner alarm told him not to step inside and remain on the other side of the doors.

Battling with his instincts and the knowledge he had to investigate, he was shocked when something nudged him from behind and he was thrust forward. The moment he fell to the floor, the doors slammed closed behind him, and he heard an eerie pop, as if the air had been sucked from the room.

Damn it. *Magic*.

Rolling to the side, he went into a crouch, calling on the cat within as he growled a warning. His gun was still steady in his hand, his finger resting on the trigger.

“You don't need that, lover,” a familiar voice purred just before the gun flew from his fingertips, soared across the room, and landed on the couch.

Marshall watched—eyes wide and mouth gaping—as Mira strode from the bedroom. Seeing his mate at the scene of a mission was shocking, but it was her clothing and the sway to her walk that caused his breath to catch.

She was dressed in a skimpy fire-engine red corset, matching fuck-me high heels, and white thigh-highs he wanted to shred with his teeth. Her thong was so transparent he could see every nook and cranny between her legs, the lips of her sex easily identifiable.

When she met his eyes, he saw she'd accented her lids with shades of green and black, her glossy red lips matching the stain on her cheeks. Her hair was pulled up and away from her face, the bouncy strands falling around her temples in a river of scarlet curls.

"Mira?"

Lifting a finger to her lips, she shook her head and stopped when she was almost within reach. Slowly, she lifted her hands, until her fingers rested on the snaps at the top of her breasts.

"Do you remember what I told you, Marshall?" She unclasped the first buckle, revealing a hint of pink nipple on each mound.

It was impossible to think coherently with the sight before him, having been starved for this very thing for so long, so he shook his head dumbly, mesmerized as her delicate fingers hovered over the next closure.

"I said . . ." Unhooking the next button, she caused the pale circular swells to bulge. "If you kept me waiting much longer, I was going to take matters into my own hands."

He heard what she said, understood the words, but was unable to tear his eyes away from her clever fingers and respond. Only four buttons remained, and as she slid her fingers down, he licked his lips, eager to see more of her fair skin and delectable curves.

"Marshall." The intensity in her voice was the only thing strong enough to rip his gaze from the temptation, and what he saw on her face iced his desire. Rising to his feet, he started to step forward to erase the sadness in her expression when she stopped him by extending her free hand.

"Don't touch me, not yet," she whispered, and he noted that her fingers were trembling. "We're going to come to an understanding right here, right now, and if I feel your hands on my body, I won't have the willpower to do

this.” Taking a deep breath, she exhaled slowly. “You’ve sacrificed everything for me, and I still don’t carry your mark—”

“Mira—”

She narrowed her eyes, wordlessly ordering him to remain silent, and he hoped like hell that he could mask his appreciation of her fire, her determination. Even now, shaken and nervous, she refused to back down.

“Your family was right. This isn’t a dalliance or casual encounter. We’ve been living together for months as a couple, but we’ve yet to come out to the world or our kind officially. That’s unacceptable. After all we’ve been through, it’s time to go all in. It’s all or nothing.” Bringing her hand back to her corset, she ran her fingers along the satin, grasped the opened edges in each hand, and ripped it from her body. Her breasts spilled free, the nipples erect, the rounded borders pebbled. “I’m ready to become your mate in all ways.”

Liquid fire coursed through his veins, heating him from the inside out, as he comprehended just how far Mira had gone to ensure they met at this time, in this place. “You planned this, didn’t you? You sent the packet and guided me here. I couldn’t pick up your scent in the building because you masked it from me.”

“Yes,” she answered, remaining motionless, so still he could see the fluttering of her heart through the slight quiver of her breast.

The reality of the situation allowed him to breathe easy even as his chest constricted. The time had finally arrived. His mate was here, willing and ready to take his mark—his bite.

“Come here,” he ordered softly and embraced her when she flew into his arms. She sagged into his chest, her slight form trembling in the cradle of his body.

“You didn’t have to go through all of this, you know,” he chastised against the top of her head before pressing a kiss to it. “Had I known how strongly you felt, I would have dropped everything and come home.”

She snorted. “I’ll believe that when I see it.”

Cupping her chin, he pulled back and peered down at her. Her eyes were closed, long black lashes lush against her fair cheeks. His gaze drifted, until he came to her mouth. Her lips were lush and full, glossy and red, and he couldn't help but envision them wrapping around his cock. Her lids fluttered open, and the moment their gazes locked, her eyes went cloudy, the hazel portion of her irises vanishing as her pupils dilated.

“Do you want me, Mira?”

“More than anything.” There was heat in her voice, but it was the sincerity that humbled him as nothing else could.

“You're sure? *Be sure.*”

She brought her hands up, until they rested on the taut muscles of his chest. “I've had weeks to think it over.” Meeting his gaze, she said, “I'm sure.”

He let go of her, removed his Stetson, and tossed it to the floor. “Then take me, darlin'.”

She dropped to her knees and began working at his belt buckle and jeans as he removed his coat and shoulder holster, then began taking off his shirt. He didn't have time to focus on the cool draft that caressed his rigid and straining flesh, silenced by the pleasure of Mira's hand wrapping around the base of his cock. He watched, struggling to keep the cat contained beneath his skin, as the bulbous head vanished between her lips.

Within seconds he realized it was a battle he couldn't win. Spending two weeks away from his mate had only increased the need to stake his claim, to warn any and all males away from his female once and for all. His canines were elongating, his fingers were throbbing where his claws were breaching the skin, and the jaguar let him know the time of waiting had come to an end.

“I can't wait. Not with you here, asking for...” He moved away from the ecstasy of her hot, suckling mouth. “It has to happen now.”

She rose to her feet and wrapped her arms around his neck, physically expressing her acceptance of his will, and buried her face into his chest as he scooped her into his arms and strode to the bedroom. The moment he placed her on the mattress, he ripped the remainder of his clothing free.

When he stood naked before her—skin tingling and vision shifting as the jaguar assumed control—she rested against the pillows and extended her arms.

There was no gentleness in him, no tender response. It was as if he was witnessing the moment from the eyes of a spectator instead of a participant. As Marshall advanced, on hands and knees, he lowered his head, nipped at her stockings, and when he reached her flimsy thong, destroyed it with two flicks of his claws.

She cried out when he lapped at her slit, licking from top to bottom, over and over again, until he felt her quicken and he fastened his lips over her clit. She erupted in tremors, crying out as she came, and he released her to bring them chest to chest, hip to hip, and drove into her in one firm thrust.

She arched her back, causing him to sink deeper into her, and he felt the piercing sting of her nails at his sides, her fingers clenching tightly as he began plunging into her, faster and then faster.

When he dipped his head to her shoulder, she pressed the side of her face into the pillow, baring her neck. The cat within growled in approval, and Marshall lapped at the skin just over the spot that would carry the scar that would identify her as his, proclaiming her mated in the eyes of their pard.

From this moment they would share everything as man, woman, and beast.

“I love you,” he rasped, words barely understandable.

“I love you too.” She didn’t move, compliant and soft beneath him, though he could feel and hear the adoration in her voice.

When he felt his sac tighten as his climax approached, he sank his teeth into the softness of her flesh, scoring her cleanly. She cried out and wrapped her arms around his waist, holding on as if she was afraid to let go. The metallic taste of her blood coated his tongue, warm and thick, and he continued driving into her until the last spasms of his release passed. The jaguar faded into the background, going silent, although he was aware of the loud purr that resounded in the room.

Mira remained as she was—an angel with fair skin, red hair, and a pink flush over her skin—as he stared at the circular wounds and gloried in what the deep punctures meant. The change was already taking place, creating a cat inside of her that would match his in strength, intellect, and possessiveness. When a line of blood trickled down her shoulder, he bent his head, traced the drop to her neck, and bathed the wounds with his tongue, taking care to soothe the savaged skin.

He felt his mate's hands in his hair and nuzzled her chin when she whispered, "I've missed you. I couldn't stand being away from you a minute longer."

Moving away, he echoed the sentiment. "Me too."

She grinned sheepishly. "I'm sorry I tricked you. You kept putting off your trip home, and after everything that happened . . ." Shaking her head, she shrugged. "I couldn't wait."

He frowned, knowing it was too late but needing to hear it. "No regrets?"

She paused and gazed up at him. "Just one."

Time seemed to stop, and he swallowed thickly before he asked, "And that would be?"

The fingers in his hair forced his head down, until they were nose to nose. "That I waited so long."

He started to respond when she interrupted him with a kiss, soft and sweet as opposed to hard and demanding, and pressed her breasts into his chest. As he felt his body respond, his length growing hard inside the haven of her body, he decided that the questions could wait.

Aside from Mira, nothing else mattered.

The End

About the Author

J.A. Saare is a multi-published author in varying genres and has written stories featured in horror magazines, zombie romance anthologies, and flash fiction contests. Her work has a notable dark undertone, which she credits to her love of old eighties horror films, tastes in music, and choices in reading, and have been described as “full of sensual promise,” “gritty and sexy,” and “a breath of fresh air.”

Currently she is penning numerous projects within the urban fantasy, erotic and contemporary, and of course, paranormal romance categories.

You can learn more about her at www.jasaare.com or explore her “naughtier” side by visiting her alias, Aline Hunter, at www.alinehunter.com.