

The Firm: Rogue Tuesday Morrigan

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Prologue

A Female is Born

The sound of her screams permeated the thick air. The evidence of her anguish cut through the man's false, calm demeanor. The heavy sound of his footsteps on the wood floor echoed through the hall. After several long, tense seconds he wrenched open the heavy wooden bedroom door and strode in.

The nurse was immediately by his side, pushing him into the hall and telling him that all was well. He did not believe her. He could not believe her when his wife's harsh screams of pain echoed off the walls.

All was not well. His wife, his mate, was in pain. And there was nothing he could do to ease her. All was definitely not well.

"She's giving birth. Pain is to be expected."

He could feel her amusement. She enjoyed the fact that he was squirming like a child. It amused her that even the most powerful of the Leo shape-shifters became a cautious, cowardly individual when his mate was in labor.

But it was to be expected from his kind. The Lionhearts were bonded to their mates in a way only another Leo shape-shifter could understand.

"Can't you do anything about the pain?" he growled down at the diminutive woman. She simply arched an eyebrow at his tone, before turning away.

"And harm the Lionhearts?" she threw over one bony shoulder.

"Lionhearts?" he questioned as his fingers bit into the skeletal flesh on her arm. "She is carrying twins?"

"No, she is birthing twins. Magda feels two souls, a male and a female."

* * *

He woke drenched in sweat and tangled in his sheets.

The vision came again in the cold, hard night. The intensity of the pain almost blinded him to the facts before him. He threw his legs over the edge of the four poster bed. The sound of his padded footsteps was all that could be heard.

He threw open the medicine cabinet and grabbed the small container of narcotics and dropped one of the heart pills his doctor had prescribed into the palm of his gnarled hand. He grimaced as he swallowed the bitter pill.

It was just another reminder that he was quickly running out of time. And time was of the essence.

The vision had been coming almost regularly lately. The powers that be wanted it to happen. They needed it to happen.

He needed it to happen.

The Lionhearts needed a female.

The vision was a premonition of what was to come... if he could get his son to follow his direction.

Chapter One

Mr. Naughty

9:15pm

I hate men. I hate big, blond beautiful men. Especially big, scraggly, charming men. They're all scum. The thought floated through Nicollet's mind as she took in the man across from her.

Nicollet Edenton hadn't felt so far in over her head since the night of her junior prom when Brian Benson had asked her to go all the way. Listening to him had been a bad idea. It had ended horribly.

This was definitely a horrendously bad idea. And it was probably going to end just as horribly. A man with a charming face was pure trouble. She never should have agreed to come along. There was no denying it was in her nature to over-achieve, but this... well, this was ridiculous. Apparently she had no self-preservation instincts, because no sane woman would be caught dead in this situation.

She was stuck in the country's largest department store handing out gifts to children from zero to ten and she was doing it wearing a Santa's helper's outfit. As if that wasn't bad enough, the damn skirt that came with the outfit barely covered her ass.

She had been horrified when the general manager held up her uniform. She was even more horrified when she put it on. Nicollet never wore skirts, not even long ones, and here she was, end of December, stuck in a miniskirt.

All because of Kaelyn.

As if sensing her thoughts he turned to her.

And she promptly forgot to breathe.

It really was a shame that she worked for his father. The man was too good-looking for her own good. It was a refrain that went through her head several times a

day, Mondays through Fridays, 9 AM to 5 PM. It was her mantra. It got her through her sex-starved days.

She still couldn't help but look at him out of the corner of her eyes. Six-foot-four, with a muscular frame that spoke of fitness and agility honed outside of the gym, bright flaxen hair, blue eyes that glinted like the ocean, and a hard square jaw offset by a perfect pair of plump lips, Kaelyn Lionheart was her living wet dream.

Too bad her mantra didn't work. For reasons she couldn't explain her mind sought to latch onto him after-hours and the visions said mind created could set her sheets on fire. More often than she wanted to admit she had woken up in a hot sweat, aroused and agitated from erotic dreams.

And Kaelyn starred in every one. The things he could do in her dreams were mind-boggling.

Nicollet shifted her stance, trying to ease the sudden ache between her legs. Her pussy had immediately moistened at the idea of Kaelyn between her thighs. It was always that way when she thought of him.

Damn, she needed to get laid.

She needed to get laid *now*.

And she needed to stay away from Kaelyn Lionheart. The man was pure dynamite and one of these days she was going to get blown to pieces.

Reality intruded on Nicolett's thoughts. She jerked her gaze down to figure out what was pulling at her skirt. Brown eyes collided with a soft blue gaze. She found herself staring down at a six-year-old boy. Nicollet squatted as best she could in her skirt until she was looking into the little boy's eyes.

"You're not Santa's helper."

"Oh yes I am, sweetheart," she replied in the sweetest tone she could manage. It was after all past nine on a cold winter night and she was wearing the shortest, tightest, itchiest velour skirt known to man.

"You are?" he asked with wide-eyed wonder.

"Yes, I am."

“Cool.”

At that moment his mother, a harried blonde woman, noticed that he was missing. “Nicholas,” she called out before grasping the young boy by the hand and pulling him away. “I’m so sorry,” she called over her shoulder before bending down to scold him. “Don’t you dare get out of line. If we get out of line, we...”

“He’s probably never seen a helper that looked like you,” Santa said with a wide smile.

Nicollet was instantly angered. She knew she didn’t look like the typical helper, but there was no reason for him to comment on it.

“Doubt there are many black people on the North Pole,” she said snidely. She was exhausted and starving. On top of it all, being around him was starting to make her feel sexually needy. And she was never good when horny and irritated.

Damn. She was really starting to hate Christmas.

“That’s not what I meant,” he said, glancing around. Kaelyn had seen that look in Nicolett’s eyes before. She was livid. Usually, an angry Nicollet meant quickly settled cases, but he wasn’t so sure he wanted her to settle his case so soon.

“What did you mean?” she asked, folding her arms beneath her breasts.

It took Kaelyn a moment to concentrate. Her new stance pushed her breasts up so they sat above the scooped neck of her red shirt. He immediately felt his cock stir. His mouth watered with the need to tongue those gorgeous mounds.

“Is it because I’m bigger than all the other helpers?”

“What?” he damn near yelled at her. How could she think she was fat? How could she think he believed she was fat? He had to stifle the urge to growl the truth at her. Unlike the rest of the female attorneys at the firm, Nicollet Edenton had the kind of body he could spend hours inside without fearing he would break her.

“I didn’t mean that either,” he whispered as he darted a glance around. People, children included, were beginning to throw curious looks their way.

“Then what exactly did you mean?” she asked, tapping her toes. The seconds seemed to drag on forever as she waited for him to dig himself out of a hole.

“Promise you won’t sue?”

“What did you mean, Mr. Lionheart,” she said in such a monotone voice that for one second he wished for the anger. At least then you knew what you were dealing with.

Kaelyn’s indigo blue eyes heated with stark desire. He started at her black leather knee-high boots and allowed his gaze to roam up her body, making sure he stopped at the delicious points in between. When he reached her face there was no doubt in either of their minds what he meant.

“Oh,” she said breathlessly.

Not once in her twenty-seven years had anyone ever looked at Nicollet the way Kaelyn Lionheart had just looked at her. As if he wanted to feast on her and spend an unheard of amount of time tasting her erogenous zones.

“Behave yourself,” Nicollet said as she felt the heat creep into her face. “Santa is supposed to be nice, not naughty,” she warned, shaking a finger at him. The rogue had the nerve to wink at her.

He had her blushing with just one look. Nicollet had to remind herself to breathe. The man had literally knocked the wind from her. And here she had been trying so hard to keep their relationship platonic. It was going to stay platonic, she reminded herself before striding away from his hot gaze to get the next child in line. Anything more than a professional relationship with Kaelyn Lionheart would mean losing her job at the prestigious Lionheart brothers’ law firm. And her job meant everything to her. It was all that stood between her and a default on her graduate school loans.

Hours later, Nicollet wasn’t sure who she wanted to kill more, Kaelyn or herself. The last few hours had been the most trying experience of her life. She felt like a tightrope walker, balancing between Kaelyn’s sexual innuendos and the legion of cranky children determined to see Santa this Christmas Eve. Apparently a good number of them either felt she was an obstacle they had to overcome or their savior, able to help them convince Santa to overlook their many transgressions in order to get the toys they didn’t deserve.

Nicollet was surprised she hadn't told any of the truly irritating children that their dearly beloved Santa was nothing more than an overgrown, randy blond man with the hormones and manners of a sixteen-year-old boy.

Thankfully, Nicollet didn't have to see Santa again for a while. She was going to be away from the firm for four whole blissful weeks. Nicollet was finally using her stored up vacation days.

And it's about damn time, she thought as she stripped out of her helper outfit. She might even be lucky enough to stand under a few mistletoes this holiday. Lord knew she needed the action. It had been a long time since she had anything but work and more work in her life.

With thoughts of her vacation on her mind, Nicollet quickly dressed in the long silk shirt and tights she had brought along to wear for the evening. From there she was headed straight to her aunt's house. At midnight the whole family would sit down for Auntie Bella's midnight dinner.

She was halfway through the kitchen and dining department when Kaelyn caught up with her. His body was so close to hers she could feel his body heat. "So have you been naughty or nice?"

She flinched, partly in fear and partly in awareness, as his hot breath grazed her ear. "I've been nice," she said after taking a quick glance at his handsome face.

"What a shame."

Out of the corner of her eye Nicollet saw him smirk. "And what about you?" she asked.

"I've been very, very naughty," he replied with a Cheshire grin. "I've done everything wrong and still I feel right."

Nicollet couldn't help but picture how right it would feel to get naughty with him. When Kaelyn caught her staring at him, she averted her gaze. "I'll bet you do," she muttered as she searched for her car keys in her overstuffed bag.

"So tell me, what are you hoping Santa will leave under your tree Christmas morning?"

"As far as I'm concerned, I've already got my present. Four weeks away from the firm is enough of a gift. No offense."

"None taken. It's about time you got away from the office. We were all beginning to wonder if you were human."

"What do you mean by that?"

"It's just that sometimes you're a little too perfect, Ms. Nice."

"*Ms. Nice?*"

"My father's idea."

"Your father?" His father was Lancaster Lionheart, senior partner of the Lionheart firm. She couldn't even fathom believing that *Ms. Nice* was an endearing term. Nicollet was one second away from a panic attack. The big boss thought she was a goody two-shoes? That didn't bode well for an attorney.

"It's a compliment," Kaelyn assured her. He had to reach out and grab her arm to get her to stop her from running away from him.

As soon as his fingers grazed her, she whipped around and confronted him. "This conversation never happened," she ground from between her clenched teeth.

"What conversation?"

Nicollet turned away with her keys in her hand and stopped cold in her tracks.

"What's wrong?"

"This can not be happening."

"Nicollet!" He pulled her against his chest. "Tell me what's wrong, sweetheart."

"Breathe, just breathe," she whispered to herself, eyes closed.

Kaelyn could see she was two steps away from having a panic attack right there in the entrance of the oversized department store. The question was what had set off the normally cool, calm, and collected woman.

And then he saw it. The thick metal gate had been pulled down over the doors and Kaelyn could see the security system light blinking over every entrance. The security guards had locked them in.

It seemed that Ms. Nice was going to be spending her Christmas with him.

Chapter Two

To Be or Not to Be

10:06pm

Kaelyn stared at the locked entrance for several seconds. They could not be locked inside of the department store. It just didn't make sense. *Son-of-a-bitch*, Kaelyn thought, pulling at the wired gate. It didn't budge.

"You've got to be kidding me." The muttered words drew him away from his morbid thoughts long enough to acknowledge Nicolett's presence.

"What's wrong?"

"No signal."

"When it rains..."

"It pours," Nicollet responded.

And it was definitely pouring. She silently chided herself on accepting the public relations assignment as Santa's helper. She could have just politely declined and told Mr. Lionheart she was going to be out of town, but she'd wanted to spend the day with Kaelyn. With the perfect vision of hindsight, Nicollet was willing to admit that she hadn't even considered taking on the project until Lancaster Lionheart had mentioned that his son Kaelyn was going to play the part of Mr. Claus. She'd been dying to play Mrs. Claus.

Now because of her out of control hormones, Nicollet was stuck in the store with a man who was too seductive for her own good and a phone that refused to dial out. And she desperately needed to make a call.

After her aunt's traditional midnight Christmas dinner, she was supposed to meet her long time crush, Jamisonson. They were going to spend her vacation together in the mountains. It was just going to be her, Jamison, and a thousand acres of trees.

She had personally stocked the fridge, checked the heating system, and made sure there were enough logs to last until kingdom come. She needed the cabin to be perfect. She wanted the cabin to be perfect because tonight was the night Jamison was to become her lover. She had purchased a bottle of champagne, a devastating pair of red four-inch heels and a matching teddy that left nothing to the imagination, and to top it all off, she had gotten every stray hair on her body waxed.

And now because of her stupid phone he was going to think she had chickened out, or worse, stood him up. She tried not to picture his face when he realized she was a no-show and failed. Jamison was going to be devastated.

Hell, she was going to be devastated. She'd waited seven years for this night and now... *You're screwed*, Nicollet thought as she darted a quick glance at Kaelyn. There was no way she was going to get out of this with her heart and pride intact. Over the last couple of months Nicollet had perfected a schedule that made sure she was never alone with Kaelyn Lionheart. And now all her hard work had gone out of the window. She was stuck with him and only him.

Kaelyn strode away from the front entrance to the back of the store. All the while he walked the long length of the store, he dialed and desperately prayed for a signal.

No such luck.

He slammed his phone shut, placed it into his pocket, and grasped with both hands the intricately tangled mess of iron metal that prevented intruders from entering the glamorous, iconic department store. The same chains and bars prevented him from leaving what was quickly becoming a nightmarish prison.

He contemplated pulling them apart with his bare hands. Then reality intruded. In order for him to do that he would need to allow the preternatural strength surging through his veins to come to the surface. And he couldn't do that tonight without jeopardizing his existence and letting Nicollet know he was not human, at least not fully human.

Kaelyn stood staring at the locked doors, his long, broad fingers tightening into fists as he counted off the reasons why he could not be locked in the department store.

Number one -- it was Christmas Eve and people only got locked in stores on Christmas Eve in Christmas movies, and last time he checked he wasn't an actor. He was an attorney.

Number two -- he'd played Santa tonight and the head security guard, Jonathan, knew this. Jonathan had watched him go into the dressing room, and had told him that he was going to walk him out of the store. It didn't make sense that Jonathan had locked the doors without making sure he got out.

But it was the third and final reason that made his skin chill. Tonight was the night of his Rebirth.

For those in his family, Lionheart wasn't just a last name, it was a description. All of the men and women gifted with the last name had been born with the souls and hearts of the magnificent beast. Within his human body lay the essence of the majestic beast that ruled over Africa's savage lands. And tonight was his Rebirth, the night when a male Lionheart either changed or mated, or worse, mated and changed. It happened every five years and tonight by midnight if he didn't mate, his human body would morph into that of a great golden lion.

Damn. He glanced at his watch. It was 10:11, five minutes had passed and he was no closer to getting the doors opened. With masculine grace, he flipped open his phone and started dialing again.

He had to get the doors open before midnight, because if he didn't, he would be forced to change into his lion form, and he didn't think Nicollet would appreciate that. And if he didn't morph, his libido would spike until he felt compelled to mate with the closest female, which he also didn't think Nicollet would appreciate.

Especially since a Lionheart who mates during the Rebirth phase mates for at least twenty-four hours nonstop. That is if he wasn't unlucky enough to change after the mating.

His mind wouldn't even allow him to consider how Nicollet would react to that.

Chapter Three

The Revolver's Dinner Date

10:29 pm

Nicollet liked to pride herself on her intelligence. She had, after all, graduated summa cum laude from both her undergraduate and law schools. But at the moment she couldn't manage a single thought. It was as if her brain had literally shut down. The production line had simply gone off schedule. All the emotions rolling through her body were chaotic at best. She was a churning furnace of unfulfilled desires. She wanted to get out of the department store and spend the night with Jamison. She also wanted to stay locked inside of it with Kaelyn.

Nicollet had worked beside Kaelyn for over a year now. And she had been privy to the ins and outs of his private life. Everyone in the office knew that Kaelyn had been gifted with a healthy dose of the Lionheart magnetism and raw sexuality. Their coworkers had even gone so far as to nickname him Revolver because of the revolving door on his love life. And Nicollet had no desire to be just another woman who came and went.

She wanted to mean something more.

You want too much.

One look around and she knew what she needed to do. When life hands you lemons...

* * *

"When life hands you lemons, you make margaritas?" Kaelyn asked as he took in the sight before him. Nicollet was bent over at the waist lighting one of the many candles clustered on top of the long, mahogany dining table. Kaelyn was enjoying the view of her full, plump cheeks.

She jumped at the sound of his deep voice. "Yes," she said, breathless, "I've never missed a single one of my aunt's Christmas dinners, and now... well... now I've missed it," she said after a quick glance at her watch. "So I decided to make the most of our little detour in life. Would you join me?"

Kaelyn was momentarily stunned at her offer. For the last several months, Nicollet had gone out of her way to avoid being alone with him. He wasn't a foolish man. He had noticed her carefully orchestrated maneuvers to stay away from him. And for reasons he didn't even want to acknowledge, it hurt.

The truth was it hurt because for the first time in his life he was drawn to a woman that wanted nothing to do with him. Kaelyn had always had a way with women, but he had to work hard just to get a smile out of Nicollet.

There was no denying the physical attraction they both felt for one another, but there was something deeper than sexual desire that pulled them together even as they both fought the emotion. But he could feel the connection between them growing. As they learned more about one another, the magnetic pull grew strong and deeper, becoming less physical, becoming something more.

And as much as Nicollet feared him, Kaelyn knew she wanted him. Whenever he caught her off-guard, he could see it in her deep brown eyes. The problem was she didn't want to want him. He'd overheard her talking about a guy she was seeing named Jamisonson. And still, she offered him a seat.

Just accept the change in the wind and fly with it. Maybe he was over-thinking the situation. Maybe nothing had changed. Maybe she was just being nice and considerate because of the circumstances.

With shaky fingers Kaelyn pulled out the chair for Nicollet. He breathed in her sweet perfume as she passed him. Then he slowly lowered himself onto the plush wooden seat next to hers.

There was a large ham in the middle of the dining table. Surrounding it was a collection of the various side dishes Nicollet had found in the Specialty Foods

department. There were several cheeses, breads, delicatessen meats, and for dessert there were many candies, cakes and puddings.

"You're trying to make me fat," Kaelyn said with a deep laugh. Nicollet looked him up and down and then gave him a slow smile. "I'd have to try very hard."

"Do you mind?" he asked with a quirked eyebrow as he eyed the ham before him.

"Please?" she said softly, her voice husky and thick.

The sound glided atop his skin before settling in his balls. Kaelyn instantly felt himself grow hard at the thought of her voice deepening as he plunged his massive cock inside of her.

Kaelyn gritted his teeth and focused on the moment at hand, knowing it was the combination of his desire for Nicollet and his awakening beast making him react so strongly to her mere presence.

With slow steady hands Kaelyn grasped the large cutting knife before him. He sliced the ham and portioned out the meat to Nicollet and then himself. Once the meat was dished out, they immediately began passing around the side dishes. Within moments both their plates were filled.

The conversation that ebbed between bites was pleasant and natural. For the first time since she'd grasped his hand in a handshake when she joined the firm, Kaelyn felt Nicollet let down her guard around him.

"Look up," Kaelyn said.

She flinched before glancing up. Her full lips parted on a breathless gasp. Hung above her head was a single sprig of mistletoe.

Her gaze slowly lowered to fall on him.

"It's a foolish tradition." His dark blue eyes were bright with fire.

"No, it's not," Nicollet muttered as her fingers tightened on the wooden arms of her chair. "It's Christmas Eve, and this dinner is all about traditions."

Kaelyn lowered his head slowly and brushed his lips softly against hers. A surge of aching desire rushed through him from the first press of her lips against his. The kiss

affected him like none ever had. And he wasn't alone. Nicollet sighed against his mouth. The soft sound echoed through his body, heating the churning desire that lay inside.

His wet and nimble tongue lightly flicked against the seam of her lips, daring them to open. She parted her lips, granting him entrance. His hands snaked out, pulling her closer to his warm, hard body as his tongue thrust past her lips to stroke and tease the sweet recesses of her mouth.

Her tongue met him halfway there. She tentatively touched him with a quick flick. Kaelyn groaned with pleasure before sliding his tongue against hers, allowing her to feel the wet rasp of his desire.

He growled when he felt her shiver against the hard planes of his chest. She was like honey... sweet, sticky, and devastating to his senses. He couldn't seem to get enough of her succulent lips.

"Damn, Nicollet," he groaned against her lips before grasping her head in both hands and plundering the inner cavern of her mouth.

It took Kaelyn a moment to notice that she was not moving against him with sensual abandon, but was instead pushing against his chest, trying to remove herself from his grasp. He slowly loosened his grip, setting her free.

"We shouldn't... we're coworkers," she muttered as she straightened her clothing.

Kaelyn noticed that she didn't once look him in the eye. She wanted something more stable, a relationship that was more permanent than a one-night stand, and that was all that Kaelyn was capable of.

She wanted the boy next door, not the playboy.

She wanted Jamisonson.

The low rumble of Kaelyn's growl raised the fine hairs on the back of Nicollet's neck. She glanced at him and lost her breath at the look on his face. "Is something wrong?"

Kaelyn shook his head no, but his mind was screaming yes. Something was definitely wrong. His mind was a jumbling whirl of potent emotions. Kaelyn could sense Nicolett's thoughts, her anger and confusion.

She didn't want to be here. She wanted to be home, away from him, and in the arms of another man.

As the clock got closer to the twelfth hour, his animal senses got stronger, and his human senses dimmed. When he was in full lion form, he would not be able to communicate with anyone but another lion.

There was only one exception to that limitation. A Lionheart could communicate with his human mate telepathically at all times, whether he was in human or animal form.

And he could feel Nicolett's thoughts.

At this point in time, at this phase of his transformation, he should have been able to scent her emotions, her anger, her fear, her arousal -- the emotions triggered by pheromones, chemical releases of the body.

He should not have been able to sense the words and actual thoughts behind her emotions. He shouldn't have unless Nicollet was his destined mate.

Chapter Four

Enchained Hearts

11:00 pm

Kaelyn ran trembling fingers through his thick blond hair. He could feel the fear and uncertainty creeping up on him, waiting to sink their claws into his fragile skin.

There had to be some other explanation for their connection.

There is no way in hell she can be my mate.

Kaelyn wanted Nicollet with a ferocity that could not be denied. But what man wouldn't want to spend hours between her thighs, licking, sucking, and kissing every inch of her pussy until he had gotten his fill, fucking her for hours until both their voices were hoarse from screaming?

Not this man, he thought with a wry grin, as he widened his stance, allowing room for his hardening cock. This man wanted her.

Just one thought of Nicollet, aroused, wet, and creamy, and bam! He was hard. All because he was in love with her. There was no denying it. He had been in love with her for a year now. He had kept his distance, sensing that was what she wanted and needed, but that didn't change how he felt. Kaelyn was in love with Nicollet and to make matters worse, she was his mate.

Kaelyn knew that if he made love to Nicollet, the Mark of the Mated would appear on the inside of his wrist.

Kaelyn glanced at his watch and saw the time. He had less than an hour to get both him and Nicollet out of the department store. Otherwise he would take her where he found her. Yeah, he had to get out of there, now.

"I just realized that there were some people I overlooked, people who can probably get us out of here. I'm going to make some more calls."

“Good. Hopefully, someone actually picks up this time.”

Nicollet watched Kaelyn’s retreating back, and retreating was exactly what he was doing. He was running away from what had happened between them. He was trying to ignore the attraction that simmered between them. Not that she blamed him. She had been running from it for almost a year now. But it was hard running away from yourself.

Nicollet had been running so hard, for so long, that she ran straight into Jamison’s arms. She could no longer deny the fact that while she loved Jamison, she was not in love with him. What she felt for him was not the burning inferno of sexual desire that she felt for Kaelyn. She didn’t blush at the thought of spending the night with Jamison. Hell, she couldn’t even envision herself making love to Jamisonson.

And she had tried. She had tried and failed, which was why she had put so much importance on tonight. She had in a sense forced herself to lust after Jamison. But he wasn’t the man she wanted.

The only man she could picture herself with was Kaelyn.

* * *

Kaelyn needed to get the hell out of the department store *now*. His long, nimble fingers dialed frantically as he glided through the darkened store. He tried his older brother, Kaden.

“Hello?” The other man’s deep bass voice vibrated along the phone line, sounding hurried and exasperated.

“Thank God,” Kaelyn groaned as he clutched the phone. “I need you to get me out of here.”

“Kaelyn? Where the hell are you? You’re fucking late for dinner.”

“I’m stuck at the store,” Kaelyn growled into the phone. “The damn security guard locked us in.”

“What?” Kaden yelled into the line. “I can’t hear you. What did you say?”

“Kaden!” Silence greeted Kaelyn. He slammed his phone off and hit redial. When he got nothing but dead silence, he pulled the slim, silver gadget from his ear and stared down at the screen. He’d lost the signal again. “God damn it!” The harsh sound of the phone shattering vibrated through the cavernous store.

His gut immediately dropped at the sight of the scattered pieces of his phone. Adrenaline pumped through his veins. The need to transform was making him lose control over his very emotions. The beast was clawing at his skin, intent on freeing himself.

He needed to change.

And once he changed, he would be forced to stay in animal form for twenty hours. He really didn’t think Nicollet would appreciate being caged in the store with a large golden cat. The other choice wasn’t a choice. He simply didn’t have the option of mating, especially when the only woman around was Nicollet.

Kaelyn forced himself to take a seat on a plush living room set and take a deep breath. He closed his eyes for long seconds as the endorphins coursing through his blood spiked. Sweat beaded on his forehead as he clenched his hands, gritted his teeth, and fought off the desire to transform.

He wasn’t sure how long it took his body to readjust to the level of tension flowing through his veins. When Kaelyn opened his eyes and gazed around the room, he realized that he was no longer on the couch. He was sprawled out on the floor.

He slowly reoriented himself as he straightened his long limbs and stood. He wasn’t sure how long he walked through the store. He only became aware of where he was when his starved, tense body took notice of the fact that he was standing several feet away from the lingerie department.

You have a death wish.

He couldn’t stop himself from walking through the aisles and touching everything that caught his eye. Kaelyn stopped short, eyes glued to a beautiful confection of swirling gold. He pictured the lace negligee on Nicolett’s curvy body. He

knew without being told that her ample breasts would spill out of the neckline and the slim cut skirt would drape over her hips and thighs perfectly.

The sound of his deep, thick groan echoed through the hollow department as his callused fingers stroked the silky fabric. He was barely conscious of the fact that he picked up the lingerie. He wasn't sure what he planned to do with it. He only knew that he had to have it. It reminded him too much of Nicolett's inviting beauty to leave behind.

Kaelyn tucked the lace gown under his arm. Then he immediately pushed aside all thoughts of the negligee and continued walking through the store. Within a few moments Kaelyn realized that he was back where he started. He was in the toy department. But now he wasn't rushing to put on a red fat suit and please an endless supply of eager children.

His vivid blue gaze lighted on an obscenely large stuffed lion.

Chapter Five

A Mother's Intuition

11:20 pm

Her skin was crawling with the unease that comes from being around a man one wanted, but couldn't have. As she stared down at her clenched hands, Nicollet realized she was finally at peace with her desire for Kaelyn. She wanted Kaelyn, and she needed her job.

But she wasn't going to be able to keep it after tonight.

She was going to have to find another job. Once again, the truth was unavoidable. Although Nicollet loved Jamison, she was not in love with Jamison. The two facts were divided by a thin line and a world of difference. Jamison was someone safe, a man she could turn to who would not break her heart, because she would never give it to him. Kaelyn was a different matter altogether.

Kaelyn could tear her heart into a million glittering pieces. She was in love with every inch of his being. She loved his devilish smile, his tenacity, even his abrupt attitude when focused on a case. She loved everything about him.

"Damn, I need to start looking for another job." She could not work side by side with the man she loved and watch him live his life without her. It would kill her.

Every smile would be a nick, every word would be a slice, and every one of his girlfriends would feel like an amputation. Eventually there would be nothing left of the woman she was now.

One day she would wake up and find herself a shriveled old woman who had spent her life pining after a man who didn't want anything to do with her.

"What's wrong?"

The sound of Kaelyn's deep voice vibrated along her skin, jarring her from her morbid thoughts. She shivered as his voice rolled over her. She silently wished he would press those full, hard lips of his against her skin.

"Nothing," she said automatically, as she twined her fingers nervously.

"Close your eyes," he whispered. His light words carried on the air. She instinctively wanted to turn and see his handsome face. "Close your eyes, Nicollet," he said when he saw her move. "I have an early Christmas gift for you," he whispered against the sensitive flesh of her neck.

Nicollet could hear the slight shuffle as he moved around her. "You can open your eyes now."

She slowly opened her eyes and then immediately gasped as the air left her lungs. She was truly shocked. Nicollet gingerly fingered the soft pelt of the life-sized stuffed lion before her.

Kaelyn watched her small, delicate fingers disappear in the giant lion's thick pelt and stifled a groan. He couldn't stop himself from breathing in the scent of her perfume and imagining her mahogany fingers running through his own blond hair with such awe.

"How do you know me so well?" At the sight of his confused face, Nicollet continued, "I've always had a weird connection with lions."

His vivid blue eyes glittered enigmatically. "Explain," he growled. He couldn't help the sound as the words were ripped from somewhere deep inside. Kaelyn needed to know how she felt about the beast that lived inside of him.

She wasn't quite sure if he really wanted to hear what she had to say, but she knew she wanted to say the words. She wanted him to learn about her. Kaelyn could see it in her slow, shy smile. And it warmed his heart.

"When my sister and I were really young, before my mother remarried, we traveled with her when she was a doctor for WHO, the World Health Organization."

"That must have been an interesting but trying experience."

"Yes, I learned a lot about myself during that time. I spent much of the time we were abroad alone. One of those times I went too far away from the camp and found myself in a large open plain with what felt like miles of grassland.

"When I looked up, there were two cubs in front of me. I was too young to know not to touch the cubs."

"So you touched them," he said softly.

"Yes. I couldn't help myself. I don't know how long I was petting them, but one of the cubs purred at some point, and when it did there was an answering roar."

"Dear God! What did you do?" he whispered, shocked, even though he knew she didn't hear him. She was somewhere else. She was on another plane altogether. Her eyes were unfocused as she looked back into the past.

"I looked up and there she was in all her glory. Their mother's dark amber eyes glowed in the dimming sunlight. I was sure that her eyes were going to be the last thing I saw. I thought that was it. But the lioness shocked the hell out of me. She simply watched me for several seconds before walking over to me. My heart was pounding so hard it took me a moment to realize that she wasn't charging at me.

"For some reason the lioness lowered her head and nudged my hand. I couldn't help myself; I petted her. She felt like heaven," Nicollet said as she closed her eyes and remembered the life changing experience.

Her beautiful brown eyes slowly opened. "And then she took her cubs and simply walked away. I never told my mother what happened. I was afraid she would tell someone and one of the village men would go after the lioness and her cubs."

"I can understand your connection to lions."

"Mmm," she said slowly before her hot pink tongue darted out to lick her full bottom lip. "Yes, because of the attention the lioness showed me, lions will always have a special place in my heart."

Kaelyn didn't need to meet the lioness in question to know that she had scented a lion's mating on Nicollet. From birth she had been destined to be his. She was his woman, the other half of the man.

The only question was could she accept the beast that was a part of the man?

“That’s good to know, because you will always have a special place in this lion’s heart,” Kaelyn growled as he slowly lowered his head to brush his lips against hers.

Chapter Six

The Lion's Lady

11:35 pm

Nicolett's heartbeat jumped, picking up speed, the moment she looked into Kaelyn's gaze. Her nipples puckered and her pussy muscles clenched in anticipation. She could feel his desire sweeping over her, washing her in its intensity. He wanted her. He wanted to make love to her.

Kaelyn's lips brushed against hers before taking her lips in a plundering kiss. It was as if he'd tried to go slowly, but hadn't been able to keep his hunger at bay.

His hands tangled in the dark strands of her ebony hair before moving down to skim her neck. The feel of his hot, rough fingers against her skin seared Nicolett's body.

It felt so good to be held by him. And he felt the same way too. She could feel his raging desire in his rough touch and the way his thrusting tongue ravished her mouth.

He was devouring her.

Suddenly Kaelyn broke off the kiss. "I shouldn't do this, Nick, but I can't stop. God, you taste good," he groaned before he pressed his lips against hers.

His large, callused hands drifted over her shoulders to finally land on the mounds of her breasts. Nicollet groaned "yes" against his lips as the scorching heat from his hands ignited the flame of pleasure teasing her nipples.

"I'm sorry," Kaelyn whispered before grasping two handfuls of her silk blouse and pulling. Belatedly, Nicollet realized that the sound of fabric tearing and buttons popping was a testament to the hunger coursing through Kaelyn's veins. He had ripped her shirt open.

Within moments the barrier was gone. There was no shirt to prevent Nicollet from feeling every brush of his fingertips against her breasts. His touch was feather

light. She was awed by the control it must have taken him to touch her so gently, so *reverently*. She felt adored.

But she didn't want to be taken gently. She wanted something more from the beautiful man who held her in his arms. "I need you. I need you to be a part of me," she said against his lips.

Nicollet shivered as the sound of Kaelyn's groan settled deep in her gut, sending her stomach muscles fluttering. Her pussy moistened as her arousal kicked up a notch. It was as if her words had woken something deep inside Kaelyn that he had kept on a thick leash.

Rough, hurried hands grabbed at the waist of her tights, tugging and pulling until the fabric was around her thighs. Kaelyn growled an expletive when Nicolett's knee-high winter boots hindered him. He deftly untied and loosened her boot strings before pulling them off of her. Seconds later he threw her tights and boots across the store floor.

Nicollet found herself exposed under his heated gaze. All she wore was her bra and panties. She'd never felt sexier, more beautiful, or more desirable in her life. His gaze scorched her skin, forcing her to acknowledge just how much her body turned him on.

She nervously licked her lips and his gaze followed the path of her wet, pink tongue. He lowered his head and the hard line of his mouth settled upon her lips. His tongue, hot and wet, entered her mouth and leisurely explored as his large hands caressed the hard tips of her breasts. She groaned against his lips as the texture of her lace bra and Kaelyn's touch teased awake every nerve ending in her breasts, especially those in her nipples.

Kaelyn's slow, hot kisses drifted over her jaw to the beating pulse at her neck, before settling on her collarbone. He slowly lowered the straps of her bra before unsnapping the beautiful cotton candy pink lace confection.

"God damn, Nick," he groaned as he gazed at her naked breasts.

His long-fingered hands stroked the blackberry tips of her breasts, teasing her nipples into hard aching points. He pulled and pinched the engorged buds until Nicollet couldn't take it any more and then he lowered his head and enclosed her aching nipples in his mouth.

Her head fell back as the intoxicating web of pleasure he wove flowed through her veins. His hot, suckling mouth was pure, delicious torture. Nicollet was so lost in the feeling, she never realized she'd threaded her fingers through his blond locks and held him to her breast as the wet rasp of his tongue flicked against her swollen nipple.

As he tongued her breasts, moving his head from one painfully aroused nipple to the other, his hands drifted down her body to settle over her quivering pussy. "I want to enjoy you," he growled before his strong fingers slowly massaged her pussy, rubbing the lace against the wet, swollen lips of her cunt.

"Dear God." It was too much. Nicollet was used to lovers who simply went in for the kill. No man had ever teased her, stroked her until she wondered if she would come from his sexual petting.

And then he pulled at her lace thong panties so that the soft textured fabric was between the lips of her aroused pussy. Kaelyn slowly moved the fabric up and down, caressing the sensitive lips and her engorged clit with every move.

"Oh... my..." she said as she threw her head back.

When Nicollet was sure she couldn't take any more of his touch, Kaelyn dropped to his knees and pressed his mouth to her soaking pussy. He moved her panties out of the way, he kissed her aching flesh. His tongue darted out and licked the swollen head of her clit with agonizing slowness, groaning her name and licked again. Fire streaked through her when she heard him say her name. She could feel his need to taste her arousal and feel her desire.

He wanted to please her.

He wanted to feel her pleasure.

"I've waited a lifetime for this," he growled before ripping the flimsy panty from between her thighs. His fingers gripped her thighs and widened them until she was bare to his fevered gaze.

With a half-lidded gaze, Nicollet watched as Kaelyn's bright blond head disappeared between her dark thighs. And then the scalding, wet rasp of his tongue was gliding along her clit.

Kaelyn licked, sucked, and tongue fucked Nicollet until her moans became a melody of arousal. He parted her flesh, held her pussy lips open with his thumbs as his tongue teased her clit. Then Kaelyn slowly slid his tongue from her clit to her slit and back again. He repeated the caress several times before sucking her clit into the moist, smoldering cavern of his mouth.

Nicolett's body immediately jerked and her body almost bucked right off the polished dining table. And then he slid one long, thick finger into her even as his mouth continued its sensual assault on her senses.

Her body stilled before jerking as her orgasm washed over her with its intensity. The feel of his finger caressing the inner walls of her pussy as the wet velvet texture of his tongue stroked her clit was too much for Nicollet, and just enough to send her crashing into wave upon wave of climax.

Before her body had come down from its glorious high, Kaelyn was there picking her up, holding her in his muscular arms and positioning her so that she sat before him.

With slumberous eyes she looked at him with a question in her brown eyes. He gave her a harsh grin in response and then slid his body down the length of the hardwood table until he was totally supine. Then and only then did he call her name.

"Nicollet."

"Yes," she whispered as she took in the man laid out before her like a sexual platter from the gods. At some point he had removed every stitch of clothing.

Her gaze started at the top of his wild golden mane. Her fingers had tousled the flaxen strands highlighting the sharp angles of his beautiful face. The sight of his

chiseled body with its highly defined washboard abs made her breath catch in her throat.

Nicollet slowly licked her lips in anticipation as she eyed the long, thick ruddy cock that bobbed with its heavy weight. Her eyes snapped to his at the sound of his harsh groan. "Later," he said with a growl. "I'm not done with you. First you, then me."

The shiny strands of her midnight hair flowed around her head as she shook it no. "We can have each other at the same time," she said with a shy, sexy smile.

"Fuck," Kaelyn said on a harsh rasp. "If you put your mouth on me I'm going to come."

"That's fine with me." She watched fascinated as his cock twitched and jerked at her words.

His long fingers clenched on the edges of the hardwood table. "I'm going to come in your mouth, Nicollet."

"That's fine with me," she said again with a seductive smile. His eyes squinted in response and Nicollet knew she had pushed him over the edge.

"All aboard," she murmured between wet, hot gasps of air as she climbed on top of Kaelyn and straddled his hips.

Nicollet jerked at the sound of Kaelyn's harsh groan. She knew without being told that he could feel her desire as she slid on top of him. Her moist pussy was drenching him with her arousal.

"Back up, sweetheart," he growled as he eyed the full globes of her milk chocolate ass cheeks. Kaelyn grabbed her thighs and lifted Nicollet the rest of the way until she was straddling his face with her pretty pink and brown pussy exposed to his hot, heavy gaze.

"Take me in your mouth now, Nick," he demanded.

She couldn't help the stuttered cries for more as she held the thick length of his cock in both her hands. She tentatively rubbed the glistening drop of arousal leaking from the slit on the engorged ruddy head. She couldn't seem to think past the pleasure

his hot tongue sent streaking through her body. Every swipe felt like a wet, hot flame of passion stroking her to a feverish pitch.

As her body bucked atop his hungry face, she eyed the creaming head of Kaelyn's piece of steel hard flesh. She wanted him inside of her.

She stretched her mouth wide and swallowed as much of his length as she could handle. He was so thick and long that she couldn't fit much of him in her mouth. But that didn't seem to matter. His groan echoed across the moist, sensitive flesh between her thighs.

She slowly pulled her head up, swiping her tongue against his length on the up stroke before tonguing the leaking slit.

"Son of a bitch," Kaelyn groaned into her pussy as her tongue rasped against the extremely sensitive head of his swollen cock before he wrapped his lips around the painfully engorged head of her clitoris and sucked hard. His chiseled cheeks hollowed as he sucked at her flesh at the same time that the flat of his tongue brushed against the swollen bud. Nicolett's thighs shook as her body revved up and took sensual flight.

Kaelyn's fingers clenched around her thighs and forced her closer to his thrusting tongue. She could feel the urgency in his touch. He was going to come soon.

And so was she.

She took as much of his hard length into her mouth as she could and swallowed, allowing the back of her throat to relax.

And then Nicolett was there, burning up, bursting into a beautiful flame as Kaelyn held her pussy to his mouth so he could suck, lick, and nip at her tender flesh. She jerked above his mouth before pressing her pussy to his face and weeping out muffled cries of ecstasy as he continued to lick her into a sexual frenzy. Her grip on the root of his cock tightened painfully as he continued to flick his tongue against her swollen clit.

The sounds of her muffled screams lit something deep within Kaelyn. And then he ate at her pussy like the starved man he was. Nicollet was coming apart from his touch. And Kaelyn still wasn't satisfied.

He didn't need to be told that it was getting close to midnight. His sexual hunger was getting stronger, deeper, and more animalistic. He couldn't explain the feeling, but he wanted to be a part of her, and not just in the physical sense. He was in love with her. She was his mate. His gut clenched with the intensity of his emotions. The emotion he had to make her feel, otherwise he would be lost for all eternity.

The moment Kaelyn felt Nicolett's orgasm wash over her, he knew he was gone. The feel of her muffled cries vibrating along his cock as she sucked him was too much for him to handle. He gritted his teeth, realizing that he could no longer stave off the orgasm riding the bottom of his spine, and shot his load into her sweltering mouth.

Chapter Seven

Perfect Fit

11:55pm

Kaelyn slowly pulled Nicollet from between his thighs and cradled her in his arms. Her desire reignited at the feel of his slick, salty skin gliding along hers. She smiled up at him as her fingers tightened and her small, blunt nails dug into the hard, muscular flesh of his biceps when he picked her up and laid her on top of the hardwood dining table.

He brushed his lips lightly against her in a quick, hasty kiss before walking several feet to the left of the table. She opened her mouth to ask him where he was going, but was caught up in the sight of his naked body moving.

Molten heat flooded her veins. A deep-seated sense of need swept over her and she was instantly aroused, leaving behind the satisfaction she had found in his arms moments ago. She wanted him again.

But this time she wanted Kaelyn deep inside of her.

Sweat glistened on every inch of his six-foot-four golden tanned body. She couldn't help the way her gaze followed the taut movements of his perfectly shaped ass. Her teeth dug into the tender flesh of her plump bottom lip as she imagined herself tonguing the dimples on his ass. And then he bent over.

She must have groaned out loud because he turned to her, pants in his hand, with his infamous grin.

The animal inside was fully awake and it could smell Nicolett's desire. It wouldn't be satisfied until it had its fill of her. And that would take a lifetime at the very least.

He palmed the small plastic foil in his hand as he considered the woman before him. Although he always wore a condom, the act was more for the mental comfort of his partners. It was rare that a Lionheart impregnated a human woman, but Nicollet was his destined mate. So he now had to consider protection. Otherwise, he'd be inside Nicollet right now. The hunger for her touch was that strong.

"Hungry, are we?" he said before his smile of satisfaction and excitement deepened.

He watched her brown eyes widen with fascination as he tore the wrapper open, then slowly rolled the transparent condom over his cock. His smile was a flash of satisfaction when Nicollet immediately laid her body across the dining table and spread her legs. "Definitely hungry," he murmured as he looked down at her exposed and moist pussy.

With one hand Kaelyn held his cock and rubbed the taut flesh against the head of her clit, once, twice, before fitting it to the mouth of her cunt. He gritted his teeth as the enticing wet heat of her pussy enveloped the head of his cock.

Holy shit! She felt so good, so hot, so slick, and so wet he wanted to thrust into her to the hilt. But Kaelyn knew better. In his condition, considering how hard his bestial nature was riding him, he would end up hurting Nicollet with his animalistic desires. Every instinct he possessed demanded that he take her hard.

So he took his time enjoying the slow, warm, wet journey into her body. He growled when he was seated to the hilt inside of her. The erotic sound of flesh gliding along moist flesh echoed in his mind as he filled her completely, stretching the tight walls of her pussy.

"I've waited so long for this," he breathed against her parted lips as he slid his hard length into her.

Nicollet felt him touching her, filling her like no man had before. The head of his bulbous cock was stroking the back of her pussy, rubbing against her cervix. He filled every inch of her tight pussy, giving her unparalleled pleasure. And then he began to

move in her with deep, powerful surging strokes that rubbed every sensitive inch of her vaginal walls.

"You're incredible. One of a kind and made for me," he said against her lips. His lips caught hers in a ravishing kiss that plundered her senses as his warm, wet tongue stroked in and out of her mouth to the same rhythm that his cock moved within her. As he placed hot kisses against her eyelids, jaw, and the beating pulse at her throat, his whiskers gently scraped her skin, making her pussy tighten with need.

It was almost too much pleasure.

It was too much pleasure to hold in. Nicollet moaned in bliss as he stroked in and out of her body. The sounds of her moans were punctuated by the wet sound of flesh slapping against flesh as he thrust in and out of her pussy.

"God, you feel good," he groaned before one large hand grasped her left thigh and raised it. They moaned in unison as he sank deeper into her clenching pussy.

He slammed once, twice, into her and rubbed the swollen head of his thick cock against that special spot she had always considered a myth. That was all it took to send her careening over the edge.

"Kaelyn," she screamed in awe when wet flicks of heat caressed her skin as her orgasm shot pleasure through the tight walls of her pussy.

As he stroked in and out of her wet heat, Kaelyn felt his powers being charged and amplified, but it was to be expected. Sex invigorated the Lionheart people. The animal in his soul required it to survive.

Her short, blunt nails dug half moons into the taut flesh of his shoulder as he thrust in and out of her hot, tight pussy and the beast inside his soul roared in satisfaction. The slight pain spurred his animalistic nature. He could feel his cock growing harder and thickening as the animal surfaced.

"Harder," she growled as her nails sunk deeper into his flesh, breaking the skin in her need. His animal side growled with joy and then he was thrusting into her, slamming into her.

Kaelyn blinked hard as he felt his powers charge out of focus for a moment. The amount of energy he was receiving from the act was unparalleled. Never before had he felt what he felt with Nicollet. Whatever doubts he had about her being his mate vanished.

The only things his father had told him about a mating were that the Mark of the Mated would appear on the inside of his wrist and his mate would charge his powers like no other woman.

Kaelyn's head snapped back as the vision slammed through his mind with shocking clarity and intensity. His eyes widened as he saw the woman beneath him heavy and pregnant with child, his child.

He caught Nicolett's lips, muffling the sound of her scream, just as her body went up in a flaming orgasm. She clawed his arms, his shoulders, as her body exploded. Even as her body shuddered around him, Kaelyn kept up the pace of his thrusts, drawing out the orgasm that had Nicollet gasping for air.

Suddenly his thrusts became harsher, rougher, as the feel of her tight pussy clenching around him, milking his cock, sent him over the edge. He thrust once, twice into her, hitting her cervix, and then threw his head back and let forth a harsh bestial growl of satisfaction as his body shuddered his release.

He had found his mate.

Chapter Eight

Shattered Pride

3:17 am

Kaelyn could taste the salt on her skin as their hearts beat to the same pulsing rhythm. It was intoxicating, invigorating, and frightening to be so closely intertwined with another individual. They were separate and yet one.

He growled low in his throat before grasping her thighs and widening her stance. He lifted her legs and placed them on his shoulders so that she was totally open to him and at his mercy.

"Oh my *God*," Nicollet groaned as Kaelyn sunk his hard length deeper into her clenching pussy.

Kaelyn withdrew until only the bulbous head of his cock was cloaked in her hot sheath before thrusting back in. As he lowered his body, he noticed a marking on his wrist. He immediately turned his hand to see the pattern. He had the Mark of the Mated.

The red brown symbol was a combination of ancient words, hieroglyphics, and patterns that could be traced back in history to a period when time itself had begun. He read the long forgotten language of his pride and took the words of his destiny to his heart. Nicollet was his destined mate.

He couldn't help the wide grin that split his face.

She belonged to him. The words echoed through his brain as he thrust in and out of her pussy. He grabbed her arms and lifted them, placing them around his neck. He watched her dark brown eyes glaze over with pleasure; the new position allowed him to caress a different spot, a more sensitive place with his thrusts.

Kaelyn dipped his head, settled his mouth over her breast and captured one blackberry nipple with his lips as he increased the pace and length of his thrusts. The sounds of Nicolett's moans drifted over his head as he suckled the distended tip of her breast.

"Kaelyn, please," she finally managed to whisper with a shaky, breathless voice.

One large callused palm captured the swollen tip of her other breast and pinched. The pleasure/pain sent her over the edge. Nicolett's scream vibrated through the air as her body erupted, and her orgasm washed over her with cleansing intensity.

Kaelyn growled as Nicolett's pussy clenched around his cock and milked his seed from the depth of his balls. His body tightened into taut lines of tension as he followed her over the edge. He jerked once, twice, before releasing his seed into the thin barrier that separated him from the moist recesses of her clenching pussy.

* * *

Hours later, Nicollet woke to find Kaelyn lying atop her and still embedded between her thighs. With the candles burnt out, she felt comfortable enough in the darkness to smile into the cooling night.

Tonight when Kaelyn had looked deep into her eyes and told her of his desire for her, she had seen something more than lust burning in his enigmatic gaze. She had seen something pure. She had felt something, an emotion that made her think that the infamous Revolver wanted something more than a one-night stand with her.

"I'm not done with you yet." The rough sound of Kaelyn's voice echoed through the air. He slid his still slick body from atop her until he was standing between her splayed thighs.

She parted her lips and gasped at the feel of Kaelyn's callused thumb caressing the soft flesh of her plump bottom lip.

"I need you to get on all fours."

Her eyes widened with shock before darting down to see his erection. Kaelyn's face split with a smug smile at Nicollet's look of disbelief. Luckily for him the Lionheart

gene provided him with the kind of stamina that made Viagra seem like a vitamin. And during the Rebirth period, such as now, he could go for days, literally.

He had just begun.

The moment Nicollet realized Kaelyn wasn't kidding she shook her head no. There was no way she was turning over and baring her wide ass to his gaze.

"Turn over, Nick."

She gasped when Kaelyn's fingers skimmed down the length of her moist slit.

"I said turn over," he rumbled before stepping back and away from the space between her thighs.

Nicollet shimmied her hips farther back and then turned over on her belly. Her face burned with embarrassment and dismay at the thought of Kaelyn looking at her ass.

"Come on. Don't tease me, sweetheart."

Nicollet cradled her face in the palms of her hands before kneeling and pushing her hips back. Her head snapped up at the sharp sound of Kaelyn's harsh groan. "Damn that's pretty."

His voice was thick and sweet like honey. It did miraculous things for Nicolett's self-esteem. She could feel his lust for her rolling over her sensitized skin.

The sight of Nicolett's round ass upturned in the air was enough to take his breath away. He had dreamed of this moment, but nothing compared to the reality. The level of desire and hunger coursing through his veins elevated.

He wanted her again.

He needed her again.

Her gasp floated through the air when Kaelyn's long fingers caressed the spread lips of her pussy. She jerked beneath his touch before groaning low in her throat. She instinctively widened her stance, allowing his hands more space.

He loved the fact that she was greedy for his touch. He breathed deep, taking in the musky, sweet scent of aroused female.

His aroused female.

His aroused mate.

A purely masculine growl of satisfaction purred through his throat as he fitted the head of his cock between the swollen lips of Nicolett's sex. He gritted his teeth as he thrust into her warm sheath.

He was home.

The words exploded through his mind like a firecracker. She was his home, his safe haven, and the only one he wanted to come home to. His long fingers grasped the slick skin of her hips and pulled her to him at the same time that he thrust forward. She instinctively pulled back as he pulled out. Together they set a natural rhythm as old as time.

Within seconds the harsh sound of their heavy, rasped breathing rebounded through the air. He grunted with every thrust as he stroked into her clinging body. Her moans echoed his as he slid into her clenching pussy.

Kaelyn gritted his teeth and gripped her hips, biting into the flesh, as her pussy rhythmically clenched around the sensitive length of his cock. He thrust once, twice, thrice, before giving up the battle and shuddering in release as he spurted his seed inside of the only woman he wanted to be with.

He gave one final groan before sliding out of her warm sheath, clutching her to his body, and collapsing on top of the table. He barely had the strength to smile, but he couldn't hide the satisfaction radiating off of his skin.

Moments later his breathing slowed down and returned to normal. He was finally able to take a deep, satisfying breath into his lungs. His eyelids, heavy with exhaustion and satisfaction lowered, but then they sprung open with shock, anger, and fear.

Nicollet groaned when she felt Kaelyn's large frame twitch and jerk against her. It took a moment for her sexually satisfied mind to focus. Then she watched bewildered as he sat up and pounded one large fist against his chest.

"What's wrong? Are you OK?" she asked when she saw the color drain out of his face.

She waited for one second, hoping and silently praying that he would answer her and tell her that he was all right. When his body started to twitch so badly that he started sliding off the table, Nicollet knew the words she was waiting for would not be coming.

She jumped from the table, grabbed his wide shoulders, and pushed with all her might until he was prone atop the table. "We need to get air into your lungs," she said before pressing her lips against his and attempting to force the air into his starved system herself.

After several attempts at the breathing exercise, Nicollet lifted her head, glanced at his face and saw that his color was deepening. He was getting worse and she had no idea what she was doing.

She reached for her purse. After seemingly endless moments she found her cell phone. "Please work. Please have reception," she chanted to herself before flipping the sliver of silver open. She paused, staring at Kaelyn with uncomprehending eyes, unwilling to admit what she was seeing was really happening.

Because to admit it was true meant acknowledging that Kaelyn Lionheart was transforming right before her very eyes. He was becoming the very lion he had been named after. The cellular phone fell to the floor, forgotten, as she backed away from the man/beast sprawled on top of the fine mahogany dining table.

He was frighteningly beautiful with his strong compact body. She watched as he stretched one powerful foreleg, then the other, before jumping down off of the dining table. He skidded for a moment before finding his footing on the slick, waxed linoleum floor.

He shook out his long, shaggy, yellow-gold mane of hair before opening his powerful jaws and giving a wide yawn. Nicollet trembled at the sight and took one step away from the beast. The moment she moved, his beautiful mane of hair moved, and she found herself looking straight into his bright blue gaze.

She was horrified.

She was more frightened by the fact that she recognized the eyes that stared back at her from the head of the magnificent beast than the large carnivorous beast itself. She gave a soft whimper that told of the mental anguish that churned through her.

Nicollet, don't be afraid.

She stared bewildered as the words floated through her mind in Kaelyn's voice. She turned and ran.

The beast's long stride ate up the space in between them in seconds, and Nicollet found herself being confronted by the largest, most ferocious beast she had ever seen. It occurred to her that she would not be so lucky with this second meeting. The lioness she had met had nothing on the lion. The lioness was a cub compared to his imposing presence.

She backed up until she hit the cold white wall. Still the animal progressed until Nicollet pressed every inch of her trembling body against the wall.

I won't hurt you. I would never hurt you.

She shook her head at the words.

I'm not like other men, Nicollet. I'm a shape-shifter.

"No," she moaned with a ragged cry.

You're my destiny, my mate. I would never hurt you.

The lion padded toward her, taking slow, calculated steps. Nicollet screamed when she realized just how close the large beast had come. He was simply a lunge away.

Nicollet...

"Stop it," she screamed. "Stop it. Stop talking to me," she moaned before covering her face with her hands as the tears streamed down her face.

Nicollet heard the soft clicking steps as the lion slowly backed away from her. He took one indelicate sniff before padding over to the entrance to the kitchen and bedding department.

* * *

Kaelyn waited patiently until the security guard unlocked the chains imprisoning them. The moment the door was open his brother, Kaden, strode through. Kaden took one look at the lion's blue eyes and knew something had gone horribly wrong, because in his brother's eyes he saw a lion's shattered pride.

Chapter Nine

Breaking Apart

8:13 am

Nicollet threw one dimpled arm over her head and punched the snooze button on the alarm. Nothing happened. She hit the heinous machine again and groaned when it crashed to the floor. Still nothing happened. The ring simply continued undeterred.

She cracked one sleepy brown eye open and glanced at the clock on the wall across from her bed. It was a little after eight in the morning, New Year's Day. And someone was ringing her doorbell.

Nicollet struggled to make it out of her very comfortable bed, the very comfortable bed she would rather not leave.

Oh hell, she thought as she pushed herself from the cocoon of her blankets.

Nicollet stared down at her naked body confused. And then she remembered. She had drunk a little too much liquor the night before in order to forget the pain that seemed to be a part of her very soul. She padded across the room and grabbed her robe from the closet.

"I'm coming," she yelled when the ringing wouldn't stop, and then immediately winced. She felt like her brain was trying to escape her skull. Her voice seemed to vibrate along the swollen edges of her alcohol-soaked brain.

She threw the heavy wooden door open with an angry jerk. The ringing increased the pounding in her skull in painful increments, so it took her a moment to notice who was standing before her. When she did, her mouth opened on a breathless gasp.

Nicollet instinctively grasped the lapels of her thick terry robe and pulled them closer to her naked body. "Mr. Lionheart," she said slowly, tasting the words on her tongue.

"The original one, at least... the latest original," Lancaster said before gifting her with a grin filled with amusement. He could see it in her deep brown eyes. Nicollet was still trying to figure out if he was really there standing before her or if her hangover was playing tricks on her.

She looked like hell. Some women were capable of looking like they hadn't spent the last twenty-four hours in bed after a late night. Nicollet wasn't one of them. Maybe he should take it easy on her.

And then Lancaster thought about his son, Kaelyn. All bets were off.

Lancaster's open face had changed in seconds. The hard lines of his mouth were set in a frown. He was angry with her. And for some reason she could feel the disappointment rolling off his body. It was the second emotion that made her the most uncomfortable. Lancaster had always been her friend and confidant. Despite the fact that he was the man who had started the world famous firm, he had always treated her more like an individual than an employee.

And he was angry with her.

She groaned before covering her hands with her face. "He told you. I can't believe he fucking told you," she muttered before turning on her heel. She was going to need coffee for this conversation, lots of coffee. *Fuck. I'm going to need a goddamn IV for this.*

Nicollet could hear the soft tread of Lancaster's feet hitting her carpeted floor as he followed her into the kitchen. She eyed the designer coffee and considered dumping the whole package into the machine. It might not be an IV, but it could get the trick done.

"Don't do it," Lancaster said with a chuckle. "One doesn't have to be a mind reader to know what you're thinking and the last thing I want to do is call 911 because you've overdosed on caffeine."

"Is that even possible?" Nicollet threw over her shoulder as she filled the machine with what she hoped was a respectable amount of ground beans for a really, really strong cup of coffee. She had passed suicidal yesterday, after talking to her new therapist. Now she was just plain old "fucking depressed." A caffeine overdose was no longer necessary. Prozac on the other hand was definitely required.

"He didn't tell me what happened."

Only her quick reflexes kept the coffee grinds from spilling all over the countertop. "So I guess I'm the one who let the cat out of the bag," she said with a sigh before turning to him.

Lancaster shrugged one large shoulder. "I have to admit that I suspected *something* had happened."

Long seconds ticked by when the only sound in the room was the soft murmur of the espresso machine percolating.

"Oh yeah, something definitely happened." She led the way out of the kitchen, coffee mug in hand.

"You know I purposely asked you two to work the job at the department store."

"He's your son, a Lionheart. I'm an associate. Was there more to it than that?"

Lancaster slowly shook his head yes.

"On purpose? Why?" she said softly.

"I had a dream, a premonition actually. See, I'm psychic. It's my gift."

"Uh huh," she said with glazed eyes.

The last couple of weeks were quickly becoming too much to take in. She needed a shot -- or a bottle -- of tequila. Now. It was starting to look like she would be spending much of her vacation with her therapist.

"So you know who we are, what we are."

Nicollet had just placed the brimming cup of coffee to her lips when Lancaster spoke. Her body's reactionary jerk sent the steaming liquid down her chin. "Son of a bitch."

"He's started doing that too."

"Excuse me?"

"He's started cursing and he jumps at every little mention of your name or what we are."

"And *what* are you?" she said slowly as she stared down into her cup.

"You know what we are, Nicollet."

She shook her head slowly before mumbling, "I don't know what I know," and digging her small fist into her eyes. "I didn't see anything."

He gave her a wry grin. "I know what you saw. You know what you saw. You saw Kaelyn change form."

"According to my new therapist, I was hallucinating. I was overstressed. I've been working fourteen-hour days for way too long."

Lancaster gave a small chuckle before shaking his head and running his fingers through his blinding white hair. He had just gone through a similar conversation with his son. Kaelyn didn't want to admit that he needed or even wanted Nicollet.

They were both stubborn as hell. Their children would be strong and proud, Lionhearts through and through. "You saw him change into a lion, Nicollet."

"You expect me to believe that?"

"Yes."

"No. You can not sit across from me and tell me these things. You can not rip my world apart and expect me to handle this well."

"Nicollet --"

"No, don't," she yelled, slamming her coffee cup onto the glass top center table. "Don't you dare pretend that you understand how I feel, because you don't. I'm going through a psychotic breakdown so don't talk to me as if what I think I saw was perfectly logical. I saw the man of my dreams, the man I've been trying not to love, defy logic, science, and reality by changing into a lion."

"Lionheart is more than a last name. It's a description." After long moments he continued. "I wanted you two to get together so badly. I told the security guards to 'forget' you were still in the store and lock you both in. I knew what the confinement

would do to Kaelyn at this time of the year. I used our nature against him. We're shape-shifters. It's our legacy. It's our heritage."

"No, you're an attorney, a brilliant, world famous attorney. All of your children, your sons, are attorneys. You are not a shape-shifter. You're a man, nothing more and nothing less."

"No, Nicollet. I'm not." He sighed before continuing, "You really did see Kaelyn change, and you know it."

"I don't see anything," she screamed. "I don't know what I saw. I don't know who Kaelyn is. I don't even know who I am any more. How am I supposed to believe you when my mind is screaming no?"

"Trust in your instincts. Trust in your heart. What is your heart telling you?"

"I don't know. I can't seem to hear it over my mind. All I know is that I'm scared and confused. Tell me, what am I supposed to do?" she cried as tears streamed down her face. "What am I supposed to do when I'm in love with a man and I don't even know if he is an actual *man*?"

Chapter 10

A Christmas Wish, A Christmas Gift

10:45 pm

Kaelyn felt the memories hit him like a sledgehammer the moment he walked through the entrance. It was disconcerting to know that even a year later his heart hadn't healed. The pain was as fresh as that fateful day last Christmas.

He unconsciously ground his teeth when he noticed the beautiful gilded pile of red and green brightly wrapped presents that sat atop the center table to his right. The sight of all the red and green Christmas decorations made him feel nauseous. The holiday itself had been a lot to handle, but the store... Kaelyn just wanted to get in, purchase his Christmas gifts, and get out.

"I know you're not particularly fond of the holidays, especially with what happened last year, but I can't believe you actually considered giving your brothers gift cards," Lancaster said before shaking his head in disgust. "Christmas has always been the most important holiday to the Lionhearts."

"I wasn't going to give them gift cards," Kaelyn growled out as he glanced around the endless store.

"Well, what were you going to give them, cash? It's Christmas Eve and you haven't bought a single present."

Kaelyn had the decency to turn red over his father's words. He had planned on giving his brothers cash. It was the easiest answer to the question of gifts. One still had to enter a store to purchase gift cards.

"You have got to be kidding me. Tell me you were at least planning on buying your little cousins actual presents. I mean, they're children, for God's sake."

"What the hell is wrong with cash anyway? At least they won't be disappointed because I bought the wrong gift."

"Cash is always the wrong gift. No kid wakes up at the crack of dawn to open up a goddamn envelope."

"Let's get in and out as quickly as possible. I'm not big on shopping." He glanced around the store. There didn't seem to be anybody around. The emptiness of the store brought home the fact that he had waited too long to purchase the gifts, so long in fact that the last minute shoppers weren't around.

"Not anymore at least. Have you been in a store since..."

"No," Kaelyn growled. His tone spoke more than the single word did. He detested anything that reminded him of the churning pain that burned in his gut.

"Don't you think it's about time you spoke to her?"

"Let's just get this over with," Kaelyn said before striding to the endless aisle of cosmetic counters. He had to get his mother a gift.

"I can understand your eagerness to leave."

He jerked at the sound of the throaty melodic voice before whipping around. "What the hell are you doing here?" he growled at the woman in front of him before turning to his father. "What the hell is she doing here?" But the old man was already making his escape.

Nicollet placed one small hand on his taut shoulder. "Kaelyn, we need to talk."

"Like hell we do."

"Kaelyn?"

"I already know what you're going to say," he said before turning away from the face that had haunted him for a year of endless nights.

He made it halfway down the aisle when her soft voice called out to him. The pain racked through him like a blade to the heart. "Kaelyn, please don't leave. Please don't turn away from me."

He whipped around, blond strands flying around his face, as the anger in his veins boiled and bubbled. "Like you turned away from me?" he spat out before taking one menacing step toward her.

"I just needed time to think. I needed time to believe what I saw actually happened."

"No, you needed time to forget what you saw."

"That's not what I wanted or needed. Not that you were willing to give me either."

"What the hell does that mean?" he growled.

"You left. You left me, you coward. You just up and left before I ever made up my mind, because you made up my mind for me."

The cold heat in his blue eyes suddenly burned hot. "What the hell are you wearing?" he yelled.

The slow, heated smile she gave him had his teeth snapping shut. Kaelyn watched mesmerized as the soft planes of her face lit up.

"I don't understand why you didn't give it to me that night. It's beautiful, Kaelyn. I absolutely love it, but then again that might be because it reminds me of you," she said as her small hands drifted across the gold lace nightgown she wore.

Kaelyn instinctively took a step back.

Nicollet followed him, and it suddenly occurred to him that he was now the one being hunted. "Son of a bitch," he growled when she pressed one hand down her chest until it settled on her abdomen. He could hear the lace fabric scraping against Nicolett's soft skin. As if to testify, her dark blackberry nipples peaked from beneath the soft gold negligee.

His mouth instantly watered, needing to taste those sweet fruits, drag the rough texture of his tongue against the hardened nubbin before suckling her deep into the hot recess of his mouth.

Kaelyn felt his cock twitch and come to life. Just the simple sight of Nicollet and he was aroused. Son of a bitch!

"I've been trying to contact you for a long time now, but every time I figure out where you are, you leave before I can relay a message."

"I already know what you're going to tell me and I'd rather not receive the call."

She took two steps to him. "So you stayed at the firm in London for three weeks, Dublin for four months, Sweden for less than two weeks, Greece for three months and four days, before spending less than three months in Sydney, because you knew I needed you. You knew I missed you. You knew that I was distraught when I found out that you had resigned from your father's firm."

He stared at her uncomprehending.

"I cried for weeks. It took me forever to get used to the sight of your office door without your name on it. It took me that long too before I could walk past your door without bursting into a fit of hysterical tears. And the pain, you can't even begin to imagine the pain I felt knowing you had left your legacy, your inheritance because of me."

"Nicollet," Kaelyn whispered softly when he saw the silver drops of pain streaming down her face. It broke his heart to see his mate hurting. He caressed the soft skin of her satin cheek, wiping away the moisture. "It's Christmas, remember, love? It's the time of the year for joy."

"And wishes. Do you have any wishes?"

"I have plenty of wishes. And one of them has been answered."

She gave him a slow smile. "I have a present for you," she said before taking a step back and turning away.

Kaelyn gritted his teeth as he caught sight of Nicolett's lush backside switching beneath the sheer lace negligee she wore. Memories assailed him and Kaelyn instantly felt his cock stir in the confines of his cotton slacks.

The arousal coursing through his veins reminded Kaelyn that he had less than one hour to make Nicollet accept him as his mate, otherwise he would become a eunuch for her lifetime. Only upon her death could he regain his sexuality.

Not exactly an outcome he was looking forward to. He had better make this a quick conversation. He watched mesmerized as she made her way back to him. He was so engrossed it took him a moment to figure out she was holding something in her palm.

His eyes widened with shock as he registered the small burgundy box in her hand. "You bought me jewelry?"

She shook her head before speaking. "No. I bought myself jewelry."

His lips spread into a wry grin as he took her face in. She wasn't even remotely remorseful. As a matter of fact, if he had to guess, he'd say she was damned pleased with herself.

"Open it."

The rough calluses on his palm slid against her skin as he grasped the little red box.

Kaelyn snapped the box open with a quick flick of his wrist and was instantly shocked and confused by the sight that was before him. "I don't understand."

"It's an engagement ring, my engagement ring."

"I don't understand," he murmured again.

"Kaelyn, sweetheart, put it on my finger," Nicollet said before holding out one trembling hand.

"You don't understand," he said. The rough baritone of his voice vibrated through the air before Kaelyn started shaking his head.

Tears glazed her eyes as she stared at him. "I think I do understand, Kaelyn."

"No, you don't."

"I understand that you won't cheat on me. I understand that you will never cheat on me, because you can't."

His pale blond head jerked up the moment her words registered.

"I know that I need to accept you and mate with you... tonight," she whispered as her deep brown eyes bored into his hot blue gaze.

"If you do that..."

“I know. We’ll share the same heartbeat, breathe the same breath. If I die, you die. If you die, I die.” After what felt like an eternity to his rapidly beating heart she spoke. “Put the ring on my finger, Kaelyn, and make me your wife and mate. Make me yours.”

Chapter Eleven

Mark of the Mate, Mate of the Heart

11:07pm

Nicollet gave Kaelyn a trembling smile as he slid the platinum solitaire onto her shaking finger. Kaelyn looked up at her from where he knelt on one knee. The sight of her watery eyes forced a lump in his throat. Then she laughed and Kaelyn knew the love and joy he felt was shared.

“I love you,” she whispered as she bent and knelt on the floor next to him.

“You belong to me,” he breathed against her lips before pressing a soft kiss against her mouth.

“Come with me,” she said before standing, grasping one thick wrist, and leading the way.

“Where are we going?”

“We have to mate.”

Kaelyn immediately stopped in his tracks. “You can’t mean to do that here? In the store?” he questioned before darting a look around the empty store.

The look Nicollet threw him over her shoulder was so sultry Kaelyn felt his heart jump and twitch in reaction. “You act as if we haven’t done it before,” she said with a throaty laugh.

He stared at her as he tried to process a way to control his arousal, because right now in front of him was the sexy temptress he had dreamed of as he traveled the world seeking solace from his pain.

“And I have no desire to marry a eunuch,” she said before turning and walking the long length of the aisle.

At her words, Kaelyn immediately glanced at his watch and saw that Nicollet was right. He had only an hour, only one hour until the Year of the Mate was over. After that he could not claim Nicollet as a mate.

Kaelyn quickened his pace, grasped Nicollet, and lifted her into his arms. She laughed at his actions.

"Excited, are you?" she asked as a giggle bubbled out of her throat.

"I've waited my whole life for this moment. Damn right I'm excited."

Kaelyn dropped Nicollet on the bed and watched as her voluptuous body bounced and shifted atop the intricately made commercial mattress. Like the starved man he was, he descended upon her with relentless hunger, grasping the skirt of her gown at the same moment that his lips descended upon her mouth.

She moaned into his mouth as her tongue brushed against his. He immediately felt his abdomen muscles clench in anticipation.

"I haven't... not since you... not since us," she whispered against his lips before capturing them in an open mouthed, thundering kiss.

His heart exploded at her words. Nicollet hadn't touched a single man since the night she had spent with him. He was not alone in his need. He had never been alone in his need. The knowledge surrounded him, warming his heart. Nicolett's mind, body, and soul were hungry for the feel of the man she loved. And he was that man.

Her small fingers grasped at his poplin shirt and struggled with the small buttons. Kaelyn caressed one tender breast, plucked the engorged nipple. She grabbed the neck of his dress shirt and pulled hard. Nicollet groaned in satisfaction against the moist skin of Kaelyn's neck when the sound of popping buttons ricocheted through the air.

He groaned at the feel of his skin stretched taut over the planes of his muscles. She scraped her nails down his chest before plucking one swollen nipple.

The feel of Nicolett's nails scraping against his skin ignited Kaelyn like a match to kindling. He growled against her lips before parting her legs and settling his hips between her plump thighs.

Kaelyn's lips brushed against Nicolett's and he thrust his tongue between her parted lips.

It had been so long.

His fingers parted the thick lips of her pussy and stroked the moist flesh. He smiled against the beating pulse at her neck when he felt her shiver in reaction. Then his long, blunt fingers stroked the swollen nubbin at the apex of her vagina until his fingers were coated in her cream.

"Now... you have to... now," Nicollet moaned against his lips.

Her voice was harsh, throaty, and strained. He knew what she wanted. He knew what she needed.

She needed him to be inside her, stroking her, fucking her, like only he knew how to do. She needed him to make love to her. But he wasn't going to give in to either of their needs until she spoke the words he wanted to hear.

"Say it," he breathed against her lips before one fingernail scraped along her clit.

"Please," she groaned in a breathless plea.

"Say it, Nick, and I'll give it to you. Every last inch."

"Please..."

"Yes?"

"Please fuck me. Fuck me," she said against his lips in a harsh whisper. "Yes, fuck me now."

His smile was a flash in the candlelit room. He immediately grabbed her waist, lifted her and positioned himself so that he was beneath her.

Nicollet threw her head back. With hungry hands she grasped the cool metal belt buckle and loosened it. Within seconds she threw the belt across the room. Then the only sounds in the enclosure were of their labored breathing as the teeth of his zipper opened under her touch.

Kaelyn lifted his hips as Nicollet tugged both his slacks and underwear down his limber body. He was bare of all but the torn shirt that simply hung on his large frame.

She grabbed his left wrist and turned it over until the highly detailed Mark of the Mate was visible. "It's beautiful," she whispered as she took in the symbol of his pride.

"Are you sure about this? Are you sure you want to mate with me?"

Nicollet stared down into his open, questioning face and felt her heart bloom with emotion. "Say it."

"Say what?" he asked, confused.

"Only one kind of man would ask a woman if she was sure about this, knowing that if she said no, he would be impotent until she died," she said softly.

"I've loved you from the moment I shook hands with you on your first day at the firm."

"You owe me a year," she breathed against his lips before pressing her mouth to his. His tongue slid past her parted lips to duel with hers.

"I'll gladly make up for the time lost," he growled.

His hands grasped the skirt of her gown, lifting it until the heaven between her parted thighs was visible. Nicollet broke off the heated kiss and looked down at the man beneath her. He smiled at the emotion in her eyes. One small hand grasped his marked wrist and lifted his arm.

"You have to place it against your heart --"

"And speak the words of the Marked Mate," she said, finishing his statement.

"Yes."

As she lifted his arm, he stopped her. "You're sure you're sure?" It broke Kaelyn's heart to have to ask again if Nicollet was sure she understood what she was getting into. But she had to be sure she wanted to spend a preternatural lifetime with him. Unlike humans, a lion could never divorce his mate. It was literally until death do us part.

Kaelyn wanted, needed, Nicollet to be sure.

"I love you. I want to be your wife and mate. I want to bear your children. I want to be with you forever," Nicollet said softly before placing the inside of his wrist, the side of the Mark, against her beating heart.

His eyes widened the moment Nicollet started to chant the ancient words for the Spell of Joining in the tongue of his long ago ancestors. He had been poised to tell her the words required for the Joining, but as he watched her utter the words softly with tear glazed eyes, he realized that she must have gone to see his father to find out about the ceremony.

He started to feel the tingling sensation on the skin of his wrist the moment she finished speaking the first verse of the Spell of Joining. By the second verse he could feel the change in his heart rate. It sped up before slowing back down. Kaelyn could see it in her eyes. Nicollet was feeling the changes too. Their heartbeats were slowing down to allow the passage of time to drift by them. The Lionhearts' slower heartbeat was one of the reasons they lived two to three centuries.

The moment she finished the third verse, Nicollet threw her head back, curving her body as the energy of the ancient spell flew over her and through her veins, altering the composition of her body, changing her into the Mate of the Marked, a Lionheart's bride.

She took fat gulps of ragged air into her lungs. Then she placed the hard length of his cock against the mouth of her cunt. It was the last and final step. The Joining would not be complete until she accepted him physically as her mate.

Nicollet slowly shifted her hips before lowering herself onto his cock.

Kaelyn gritted his teeth against the desire to thrust into her, but he had to wait until she fully accepted him in her body. To do anything other than that would revoke the mating. The female had to accept the male for the mating to occur.

When he was seated to the hilt, she ground her pelvis against his and he reveled in the feeling of being fully surrounded with her moist heat. With a gasp Nicollet broke off their heated kiss.

"Oh my God," she groaned before threading her fingers in her midnight hair and lifting her hips.

Kaelyn watched mesmerized. The woman atop him was a sultry, erotic being of incredible beauty. The combination of the candlelight caressing Nicolett's mocha skin, the golden negligee, her partial nudity, and her enraptured face made the night feel more like an erotic dream than reality.

But the truth was it was a dream that had become his reality.

I love you and promise to try and make you as happy as you've made me, he said telepathically and laughed when her eyes widened in shock.

Kaelyn thrust his hips into the air to meet her down thrust and groaned as her slick heat caressed him. One hand immediately snaked out, grabbed Nicolett's neck, and pulled her to him for a bruising kiss.

His other hand drifted across her belly to settle in the curls at the apex of her thighs. Long, strong fingers parted the swollen lips of her labia to caress her clit. Her groan of satisfaction was muffled by his harsh kiss.

Together they moved to a rhythm that communicated the emotions and needs coursing through them. She met his every thrust, ground her hips against his, and gave a throaty moan when his fingers stroked her skin, her flesh, before returning to the swollen nubbin at the apex of her pussy.

"Come with me," she moaned before the white hot bolt of lust surging through her body shattered into a masterful explosion of fireworks in every molecule of her body.

"Nicollet," he said, his breathing coming hard and fast as he shuddered in surrender. With one final thrust, Kaelyn emptied his seed into the wet heat of Nicolett's body.

"Oh my goodness," she whispered against his mouth before placing a soft kiss against his lips.

His white hot smile was a flash of lightning in the candlelit room. The satisfaction radiating from Kaelyn was so deep and strong he couldn't find the words to express how he felt.

This morning he had woken angry with Christmas and the joy he saw etched along everyone's face because of the winter holiday. Still, he had made a wish that somebody up there would do something to correct the pain in his chest when his mate had turned from him. Somebody had granted his wish.

He was with Nicollet, the woman he loved, and she loved him. On her heart, she wore the Mark of the Mate.

Nicollet was his for eternity.

Epilogue

Matchmaking Machinations

Lancaster raised a crystal glass of champagne in honor of the recently wedded couple. He watched with emotion filled eyes as one of the many groomsmen made a speech that admonished the groom and prayed for the bride. The room erupted in laughter at Kalil's words.

Then the best man, Kaden, stood and clasped his brother on the shoulder at the end of his speech.

"To Nicollet," he said with a cheer and lifted glass. "For taming the Rogue, the beast that is my brother Kaelyn. And for loving the man that he is."

Lancaster lifted his glass at his son's words. One down, so many more to go. Lancaster Lionheart had been gifted with eight children, all of them male.

Eight different children to carry his name and continue the legacy. Unfortunately none of them wanted to be mated.

That was where he came in.

He had lived long. He had lived for over three centuries, and now he was reaching the end of his time. But he couldn't leave the earth in peace. Not when his sons were unmated.

Fortunately for him he had the gift of sight. He was already planning how to force the next Lionheart and his mate together.

There was nothing like a matchmaking father who was at the end of his life, he thought before striding over to the blushing bride. Belatedly, he wondered when Nicollet was going to receive the call from her physician. He couldn't wait to share in his new daughter's joy when she found out she was pregnant.

And wait until she and Kaelyn found out she was carrying twins.

Tuesday Morrigan

Tuesday Morrigan began her love affair with romance at an early age. As a child she was always infatuated with the romance novels she snuck from her mother. Later, in high school, the public library became her sanctuary with an endless array of romance novels. Tuesday is still an avid reader of books. Thanks to shows like *Buffy*, *Angel*, and her latest infatuation *Supernatural*, Tuesday prefers her stories to have a little more grit. Her favorite genres have always been fantasy, mystery, romance and erotica, so as a writer, she tries to blend the genres to create her own personal niche.

You can learn more about Tuesday, including what's her latest project, at www.mochancreme.com and you can reach her at Tuesday@mochancreme.com