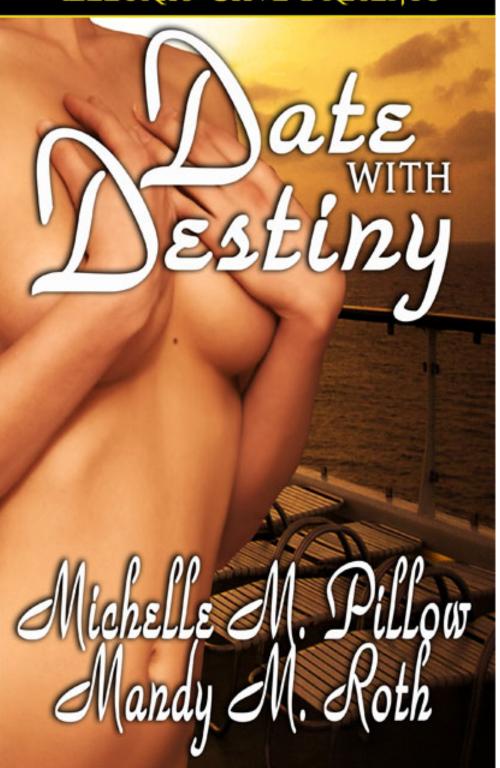
ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS



An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



Date With Destiny

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DATE WITH DESTINY

Michelle M. Pillow & Mandy M. Roth

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The *Pleasure Cruise* series takes place in an alternate reality much like our own but where supernaturals are known to exist. Also, in real life, please practice safe sex.

Prologue

"Welcome back to your favorite game show, Date with Destiny," the loud voice boomed over the studio audience and the last remaining contestant. "Got a problem with pesky supernatural creatures harassing you after work? Check out our sponsor—Supernatural Pepper Spray 3000, guaranteed to blind something with up to a hundred eyeballs or your money back! Side effects may include involuntary urination in were-creatures due to their need to mark territory. And now for your favorite host," the announcer's voice dipped as he rumbled, "Jock Stevens!"

The studio audience was filled with women varying from early twenties to middle age, and very few men. They went wild as Jock sauntered onstage with the standard game-show-host jog. His smile was plastered onto his overly tanned face as he waved like a beauty pageant contestant, blowing kisses at the crowd and winking. His teeth were as blindingly white as his hair.

Anna swallowed hard to keep from being ill as she got a mental image of the game show host in a beauty pageant winning first place. How on earth did she get roped into doing this stupid show? A harsh light passed over her eyes and she blinked hard.

"Thank you, thank you." Jock gripped his handheld microphone as though a mugger would approach at any moment and strip him of it. He gave a low fake laugh the women in the audience seemed to love before glancing in Anna's direction. His short white hair was plastered perfectly into place and his face was obviously caked with makeup. "Welcome back to the final round. With us today is one of our highest-scoring participants ever, Polly Anna Fontaine, with the second-highest score in *Date with Destiny* history."

"My name is Anna," she said flatly, for at least the fifth time.

"Right you are!" Jock answered, his voice sounding like an infomercial. He barely paid her any attention as he moved to interact with the crowd.

Anna tried to smile, hating how he insisted on using her full name. Only her grandmother called her Polly Anna. It sounded so...*cute*. She hated it.

The game show had only been on the air for two years, so being the second-highest scoring contestant wasn't a remarkable feat. In fact, she could've answered their questions in the seventh grade. Almost everyone knew at least the first five digits of pi, didn't they? And did they honestly think stating Kepler's first law was a superstumper? Anyone who'd ever taken even a mild interest in astronomy knew Kepler had discovered the true shape of the planets' orbits was elliptical.

Uncomfortable with the camera in her face, Anna swallowed uneasily. Did the cameraman need to focus in on her nose, close enough to see up her nostril—or was that just a perk of being forced onto national television by your tree-hugging roommate? Winter, her best friend since their first year in college—for reasons even a genius like Anna couldn't understand—had set up the game show spot for her birthday. Anna should have been suspicious when Winter asked her to take the "fun fact" test two weeks ago. The only reason she'd agreed to be a contestant was because Winter told her she could win a brand-new SUV if she did. And since she'd sort of wrapped her last one around a tree, which Winter did in fact hug afterward, Anna was in need of a new vehicle.

"All right, Polly Anna, question one," Jock said, showing his unnaturally white smile.

She wondered if his face felt as plastic as it looked. Patting her dark red hair back into her perfect bun, Anna adjusted her glasses and took a deep breath. Only three questions to go before she won herself a new SUV, complete with a sunroof and a six-disc CD player for her classical music.

"What is an embrasure?" Jock asked.

Anna didn't have to put any thought into it. "It's the open space on the battlements of a castle between a pair of merlons."

Jock blinked and she could see a moment's confusion pass over his face as he turned to the people in the back. They signaled and he grinned. "Right you are!"

The audience cheered and Anna once again grew nauseated. The cameraman shoved the lens close to her face as Jock made an inane comment about how she should be nervous because there were only two questions left.

"Polly Anna," Jock said, dipping his voice and looking so serious she nearly laughed. "What is..."

He paused, looking dramatically at the audience. A few of the women gasped. Another wave of sickness washed over Anna. He really needed to get on with it. She'd had about as much of national television as she could stand.

"Substantive law?"

"It is the portion of law that creates and defines the legal rights of the people. It is distinct from the law that defin—"

"Right you are!" Jock announced, rudely cutting her off. Anna blinked in annoyance. He'd been doing that to her a lot. "And now for your final question. Polly Anna, are you ready?"

Anna nodded. Jock's face fell in mild irritation when she didn't cheerfully answer back. His microphone lowered some and then came once more to his face.

"For the win and your pick of one of our extraordinary, fabulous, magnificent prizes." He again paused for effect. He seemed to enjoy doing that quite a bit. "Polly Anna, what written masterpiece besides the Bible has been a bestseller and has now sold more copies than any other book in the English language?"

"The Canterbury Tales by Geoffrey Chaucer," Anna answered, not bothering to elaborate as he'd just cut her off again. Jock's mouth fell open and he nodded.

Applause buzzed around her. Jock said something but she couldn't make out the words. She was numb. Her ears rang. Now that it was over, Anna felt dizzy. There were no more questions, nothing left to concentrate on. The cameraman shoved the camera in her face and the light reflecting off the lens caught her eye. It was all she could do to stand up straight, let alone smile at the crowd who chanted her name. She'd never been comfortable in front of crowds unless she had a planned speech or was debating, thus keeping her mind occupied. To be standing now, on national television and with nothing else to think of, was too much.

Curtains opened, lights flashed, confetti fell from the ceiling, showering around her. A balloon bumped her on the head. Behind a curtain, a nice shiny black SUV turned on the showroom floor next to a blue Jet Ski. Several other prizes spun on large circular turntables.

SUV, her mind chanted. Her lips didn't move though she tried to force the words past them. *I want the SUV*...

"Which will it be?" Jock asked, his voice was muffled in her head, slow and drawnout.

Suddenly Anna felt as if she were underwater. Her mind raced in terror, thinking about all the homes that had televisions, calculating how many people per family watched television—were watching her at this very moment.

"Which one, Po-lly An-na?"

Anna swallowed, unable to speak, and remained frozen.

Chapter One

"Don't you read the news, Winter? Do you know what kind of diseases are on cruise ships? They're like floating viruses, breeding grounds for any sickness you could imagine. My goodness, if they don't kill you with communicable diseases transmitted from person to person, the food will get you. I shudder to think how many forms of hepatitis could be contracted on this thing. Don't even get me started on restaurants at each port. You never know..."

Winter rolled her eyes behind Anna's designer-suit-clad back and mimicked her talking. Her friend hadn't shut up about the cruise since she'd won it on the game show. Looking at the giant ship at port, along the Texas coastline, she didn't see Anna's floating virus. She saw a portal to fun. The blue ocean and warm, salty air beckoned them out to sea. Though they would sail around the Caribbean, the ship schedule didn't show them docking at any island ports—or so Anna said as Winter didn't live her life by adhering to schedules. Instead they would be trapped, adrift in paradise with nothing but the waves and, if her tea-leaf reading held true, scores of single, hot men. Could anything be more romantic?

Hearing Anna's loud, grumpy sigh, Winter said, "Everything happens for a reason. Why not have a little faith in the master plan? Maybe this cruise is your destiny."

"No," Anna said, matter-of-factly. "My date with destiny was a brand-new black SUV with brown leather interior and all the add-on features. Oh, and the complementary Jet Ski to pull behind it. Not some floating deathtrap and a week of debauchery."

"You're planning on debau—on getting laid?" Winter arched a brow, hopeful her friend was finally ready to take a walk on the wild side of life. "By something that's not

mechanical or requires batteries? Maybe you're right," she reached for Anna's forehead, "maybe you already contracted something."

Anna merely glared, not saying a word. Winter was unfazed. She hoped Anna got laid, and good. Maybe it would lighten her up. Maybe if some guy did her so hard she could barely walk, her mind would shut off and for once she'd not think, just act.

"SUVs are so boring, so...corporate. Do you really want to be like 'the man'?"

"Who is this mysterious 'man' who you're always blaming for ruining the world?" Anna asked sarcastically.

"Mr. Peterson, down the street." Winter chuckled, getting way too much enjoyment out of razzing her longtime friend.

"Please, he's like eighty years old and is as harmless as they come." Anna rolled her eyes.

"Yeah, harmless, sure he is. I swear that harmless old man pinched my ass at the Christmas party last year. I'm not sure because he forgot his teeth and his pronunciation was off but I think he propositioned me. Either that or he once had pigs that wanted to wallow in the muck." Winter prompted her friend to walk with her as she took a step toward the loading plank. If Anna had her way, they'd stand on the dock until the ship was out of sight only to turn right back around and go home.

"I'm not listening to this again. Besides, last Christmas didn't you change your name to Moonchild? So, if what you say is true, Mr. Peterson pinched Moonchild's ass, not yours."

Winter widened her eyes in jest. "No, it was Rainbow. Moonchild was the name I selected the year before. Come on, Anna, is it really that hard to keep track of these things? I remember your list of neuroses, the very least you could do is keep track of my name changes."

"I do my best, Dances with Field Mice."

"Oh, come on, that was a joke! A spoof... Never mind. Why do I even bother? Fine, call me what you will, Ms. Uptight, but tell me one thing. Do you ever get tired of knowing everything?"

Anna scoffed. "No one knows everything, Winter. It's a proven fact that—" She stopped walking, no doubt realizing that she was indeed proving Winter's case, again.

Winter caught sight of a petite girl with long sleek black hair and the most beautiful caramel-colored skin she'd ever seen stepping aboard the ship. "Oh Anna, look over there, isn't that Michi Sue Lin, the winner on *Date with Destiny* two weeks prior to you?"

Anna glanced over and shrugged. "How am I supposed to know? I'd never even heard of the show prior to you signing me up for it, let alone watched it. But if it is, then she must have gotten ripped off in the prize selection category as well."

"I hardly call a paid vacation and a lifetime supply of Supernatural Pepper Spray 3000 a rip-off. You need to lighten up." Winter reached into her handbag and palmed her own can of the spray. She couldn't see herself ever actually using it but Anna had been insistent she take a bottle for protection.

"I'd be more than 'lightened up' in my very own SUV." Anna frowned, only to grumble in self-depreciation, "If only I hadn't frozen on stage."

"Forget about missing out on that gas guzzler. Oh, do you know what? You should buy an old van. Oh! We could get one together, fix it up and paint the sides. Then we could go cross-country with nothing but our van and our friendship to guide us." Winter grinned, her bright blue eyes shining with excitement. The change of subject was more than in order. Life was an adventure, not a chore like Anna tried to make it out to be.

"With love beads and tassels?" Anna asked dryly.

Flipping her free-flowing brown curls over her shoulder, Winter squealed. "Oh perfect! What colors do you want? I already have a few sets in orange, pink and yellow. I might be able to find purple and blue ones too. We need a bed in the back just in case we should happen to luck out and find some action. I always love fucking men in the

backs of vans. It's one of my favorite pastimes. And I could dye some sheets to match the beads and all would be just perfect." She jumped up and down, a little giddy schoolgirl, clapping her hands. "So, does this mean you want to do it?"

The look on Anna's face told her the answer was no. Winter couldn't have contrasted Anna more if she tried. Anna was all pearls and antique lace. Having grown up an only child to some very rich parents, she'd spent her childhood in private schools, learning French and how to play the violin. Now an independent adult doing her best to make it on her own, Anna still hadn't lost her rich-girl ways.

She didn't own one article of clothing that had a hole in it and Winter couldn't remember the last time she'd seen Anna's hair out of a prim-and-proper, no-nonsense bun or twist. Anna could've been a real hottie, with the help of a Winter's "I wanna sex you up" makeover. She really did have the ass to pull off a thong, even though she denied it emphatically.

Winter was all love beads, clogs and living for the moment. Her carefree nature was due in part to her fun-loving hippie parents. They'd raised her with love and political awareness. Briefly, she wondered where they might be now. The last she'd heard they were in southern California blowing glass water pipes with some of their friends but she wasn't entirely sure. She wasn't as hardcore about hippie life as they were but she was a bit "different" from most other people.

Winter's long blue skirt was tied around her waist, perfect for the beach. It blew in the warm sea air, hitting her legs. She loved the smell of the ocean. It reminded her of home. Spending most of her childhood in various communes along the Pacific coastline, she'd grown accustomed to the ocean. Living in the city, she'd always felt something was missing inside her and the minute she drew in a breath of salty air, she knew what it was.

A gentle breeze blew past her, causing her nipples to go erect. It was a good thing she'd remembered to wear her bikini top this time because the shirt was see-through and she didn't need Anna yelling at her about it—again.

"Really, Anna, can we get a van and travel? I've got a friend in Portsburg who'd get us a fabulous deal and he might even knock more off the price if I blow him again. He melts the very second I suck him off. It's been a few months since I've seen him and I'm guessing he's hard as hell. Don't look at me like that. Sex is meant to be enjoyed, not scoffed at. And, before you launch into another lecture, I'm up-to-date on all my shots so there is no threat of sexually transmitted diseases or pregnancy. The days of free love are back, sweetie, hop on the love train! Speaking of trains—"

"Please don't bring up the men you're sleeping with. The day is only so long, you know," Anna said, her tone flat as she lifted one of her oversized designer suitcases.

Winter frowned, momentarily disheartened by her best friend's mood. Then, forgetting the van like she did with so many ideas in her life, she said, "I don't know why you're complaining. You're the one who froze and didn't answer. Jock asked you to select your prize. What were you doing anyway, standing there all green and wavy? I almost screamed out for someone to toss you a bucket. That would have been something, you throwing up on national television."

"I told you, I had a small panic attack." Anna's face colored slightly and Winter knew she was silently yelling at herself. Her parents had demanded perfection from her and now she demanded it from herself. It was really quite sad. "The camera was on me and I was calculating how many people were watching national TV at that moment, subtracting a reasonable number for those at work and watching other channels. I estimated it had to be at least a million viewers."

"Um, no, it was sweeps week so I think it was like five times that and a lot of people have those digital recorders where they can record live TV to watch their shows after work. Not to mention, *Date with Destiny* is dubbed into at least twelve different languages and played worldwide. Granted, it's not a live broadcast like here in the States and it does lag several weeks behind but still..."

Anna paled dramatically, looking strikingly similar to the way she had on air. Wringing her hands, she wiped them on her skirt.

Winter reached over to rub small circles between her friend's tense shoulder blades. "Hey, don't think about it, sweetie. It's over. It's not like they air reruns in the States...much."

"I know I messed up and didn't answer but they didn't have to give me the cruise! I can't believe they let some heckler from the crowd pick my prize."

"Yeah," Winter said, absently following Anna's gaze toward the pile of her designer luggage. It sat next to one shoddy duffel bag and a brown paper bag stuffed with Winter's clothes. "Sorry about that. I just got excited thinking about us taking a vacation together. You never do anything outside of work and I thought this would the perfect chance for you to finally get out of the house. Don't you have around two years' worth of vacation time saved up?"

Anna didn't answer. She looked around the docks. "Aren't they going to send someone down to get us? Who's going to carry our luggage?"

"Ah, I think we are." Winter laughed, slinging the duffel bag over her shoulder and then cradling the paper bag in her arms. "Come on, champ, let's get moving."

* * * * *

Christian Badau listened to his twin brother's loud singing coming from the shower. It was easy to imagine, by the constant thumps from the stall, that Andre was dancing as well. It sounded like this morning was shaping up to be another one of Andre's one-man rock 'n' roll tribute to the Eighties hair bands. Lucky for him, the impromptu concert in the shower didn't include spandex, eyeliner and hairspray—though that was one outfit he wouldn't put past his brother. Yesterday it had been alternative music. To Christian's listening horror, Andre had "danced" to what must have been Nirvana's entire first album before he launched into a dissertation on how the band single-handedly launched the grunge movement out of Seattle in the Nineties. How any band could have been so angry was beyond Christian's understanding and still Andre managed to find enough of a beat to move to it.

Christian sighed, leaning forward as he peered into the suite's oval bathroom mirror. Combing his long brown hair back from his face, he pulled it into a neat ponytail at the nape of his neck. Not a hair was out of place when he finished. He had personal grooming down to a science.

He wore nothing but a towel wrapped neatly around his firm waist. His bare feet absently tapped on the floor as Andre started on his next Eighties tune. His twin really wasn't a bad singer, if he'd just stop butchering the lyrics.

Suddenly the shower turned off and Andre hopped out, glistening wet as he strummed an air guitar and flicked his tongue in and out. Christian's brow rose as he tried not to watch Andre's one-man show. Though the event was oddly like a car crash—as much as one didn't want to look at it, the compulsion to do so trumped all restraints.

Andre didn't even seem to notice he had an audience, that or he just didn't care. Still humming softly, he grabbed a towel off the wall and haphazardly dried his hair then his body, not caring that he missed a few spots.

"Hey, let me get in here," Andre said, dropping his damp towel on the floor and reaching toward the neatly organized sink. He knocked down a bottle of cologne while grabbing the mousse. Squirting some hair product on his hand, he continued humming as he dropped the can in the sink. As Andre moussed his hair, combing the messy length only with his fingers, Christian picked up the fallen bottles. "Oh yeah, thanks, I need that."

"You have a bathroom in your own cabin."

"Oh, I know. But I sort of forgot to bring my toiletry bag. I don't have anything but my toothbrush next door. Well, that and my clothes of course."

"I gave you a list of what to pack."

"Yeah, and when I was out the other night, I ran into this foxy gal and needed something to give her my number with." Andre smiled. "It worked great, thanks."

Christian didn't dignify the comment with a response. He sighed as Andre grabbed his cologne and put it on, not bothering to recap it when he was done. Picking up after Andre as his brother strode from the bathroom naked, he mumbled, "Just like home."

Andre ignored his grumbling brother and headed to his cabin in order to dress. Christian spent too much time being perfect. Andre was just the opposite. He liked music, movies, making an artistic mess and a well-written novel, especially the ones that had loads of steamy sex poured on each page. Who wanted to have an intellectual conversation when you could lie on your back and just let your mind drift aimlessly? Or watch the latest hottie ride you as her tits bounced in your face.

Ah, this is the life...or at least it was, for soon I'll be a married man.

The suite was going to be his and his new bride's. Christian and his future wife would share the suite next door to theirs. There was an adjoining door but it locked from both sides to ensure privacy. Already Andre had tried to suggest wife-swapping and his brother had nearly choked the life out of him prior to even boarding. As much as Christian disliked the idea of having a human as a mate, he apparently liked the thought of Andre sharing her even less. Christian had even lectured him on how once he met his true mate and felt the pull of his beast he'd abandon all thoughts of other women.

Not likely!

He imagined that Christian was a little edgier than usual due to the reason they were on the cruise. It wasn't every day the Powers That Be decreed you had to get married or face the wrath of a thousand gods...or whatever it was they'd threatened. Andre shrugged. He really hadn't been paying attention.

At the time, he'd taken it in stride with his "whatever will be, will be" attitude. Christian had been more worried, going on and on about the antiquated concept of arranged marriages and how the Elders had no right to make them get married if they didn't want to—and most certainly not to humans. For some reason Christian had always had a low opinion of humans.

Pleasure Cruise was just one of the many "businesses" the Elders used to match up lifemates. The Badau brothers had managed to weasel out of participating since the repopulation of the supernatural movement started. The Elders were worried because the supernatural kind weren't mating like they used to. The threat of the bloodlines dying out had caused them to take drastic measures. Both Christian and Andre seriously hoped it was just a fad. Sure, fucking human girls was fun every now and then but being tied to one for all eternity would really suck ass.

It wasn't like they could blame the Elders for the drastic measures they were now taking. As supernaturals, they technically lived forever and it was hard to mate with someone you remembered from the tenth century as being the bitch who nearly got you burned at the stake because you'd slept with her sister after you'd spent the morning screwing her. Oh, or the time he'd almost lost his nuts to a vampiress because she had a pain fetish and decided she wanted to pierce him while he was sleeping. Problem being, she'd used an iron fire poker as her weapon of choice. Andre shuddered at the thought of the horrifically close call.

Nope, supernaturals had too much history among their own kind. And with their numbers dwindling over the centuries because of accidents, murders and the all-out witch hunts that had wiped out a good deal of the female supernatural population, it wasn't like there were a lot of options left to them.

The news that humans were now being considered as mates didn't just bother Andre and his brother. It had sent a ripple of mixed emotions through the supernatural community. In the past, humans could be used for sex and feedings but they were never considered mating material. Their lives were just too short compared to eternity he and his brother would live, barring any unnatural demise. Already they were well over three hundred years old. It was hard falling in love, only to know it was going to be ripped away in a few short years by mortality. Not to mention your mate would look more like your grandmother after about thirty or forty years of marriage. Some people got into doing that sort of thing, he wasn't one of them.

The Elders had solved that problem too. They were going to grant human mates immortality and the changing, so they might become like their supernatural mates. The mortals were screened by the gods to make sure they could carry supernatural children successfully and survive the change before they were recruited as unknowing mates. Only under special circumstances like divine intervention could a human be a true mate and carry a supernatural child. To mate them to a woman who never would be able to would defeat the Powers That Be's purpose in mating them for the sake of boosting the population. He wondered how the women would feel being treated like broodmares. Hopefully they knew the plan before coming onboard. It wasn't like he wanted to be the one to break the news.

A soft smile came over his face as he stared absently at the open dresser drawer. He'd never given much thought to children over the years, mainly because he'd never met anyone he'd want to have children with. Pulling out a pair of faded blue jeans and a T-shirt, he slipped on his clothes. He was excited. How could he not be? Today was going to be a great day. At least he hoped.

Chapter Two

"Here, I got you a little something," Winter said, handing over a crumpled large brown paper bag.

Anna smiled slightly. Winter didn't believe in wrapping paper and never used tape because brown bags were easier to recycle and reuse if need be. By the wrinkled look of the bag, she'd used it plenty. "What's this for?"

"Here." Winter took the gift back and opened it for Anna with a grin.

It was a large book of some sort. Anna could only hope it wasn't another guide to sexual positions. The last one Winter had given her inspired her to attempt a new position with the boyfriend she'd had at the time. Unfortunately he wasn't as limber as the book called for and Anna ended up spending the night in the emergency room with him. He ended up needing to have his slipped disk operated on and Anna found herself being dumped.

"This is a travel journal," Winter said, talking fast in her excitement. "See how the cover is made from dried herbs? Smells good, huh? You can write your thoughts and feelings down about the trip as we go and then do a self-awareness ritual later when we get home. It's really very spiritual. Oh, and this is a crystal. It'll help center your thoughts and help you to focus on having fun and this..."

Anna couldn't help but laugh as Winter piled the items in her hands. Then, as she pulled out the last gift and held it up, Anna paled. It was a leather thong and corset. Instantly, she folded them, trying to hide them under the journal.

"Is so you can finally get laid. You know, clean out the ol' cobwebs. I know that I normally frown upon leather but this was for the greater good. You getting laid is of the utmost importance." The words were said so earnestly that Anna didn't know how to respond. Sure, it had been a while, but cobwebs?

Remembering they weren't alone, Anna glanced nervously up at the large bellhop with a deep monotone voice they'd met on the top deck. He'd taken their luggage rather forcefully. Neither woman had said a word, knowing it was better than having to cart their bags up the stairs on their own.

Anna was a little peeved that he'd watched her struggle up the plank with all her bags before offering to help. She really hoped he didn't set the tone for the service onboard. Walking beside Winter, she did her best to ignore the man completely.

As they made their way down the long red hall toward their suites, she noted that several other bellhops who looked almost identical to the one in front of them were assisting others to their rooms. Their own bellhop didn't seem to be paying much attention to them and that was fine by her. Focusing her attention on the ornate details of the cruise ship, Anna ignored the eerie men.

The gold and black decorations were classic, a little on the Las Vegas side but acceptable nonetheless. Even Anna had to admit that so far the ship didn't look too bad. It might even rival some of the fancy hotels she liked to stay at. None of the decorations were fake and that helped in her acceptance. There was nothing worse than finding out the statue you'd been admiring was really just a plaster reproduction.

Anna's heel caught on something and she staggered a bit, dropping the leather thong and corset as she grabbed Winter to get her footing. "Damn heels. This is what I get for buying a pair on sale for just three hundred dollars."

"You could have fed so many starving children instead of buying another pair of designer shoes, Anna."

Rolling her eyes at Winter, Anna bent down to retrieve her "present". The bellhop turned and gave her a large grin as she brought the leather garments close to her chest. His pale green eyes shimmered as they raked over the front of her. She glared, daring him to make a comment. It didn't matter that he was almost two feet taller than her. She had Winter, who was downright lethal when need be. What army did he have? He took the hint and said nothing as he continued down the hall. Anna grabbed the brown bag

from Winter and shoved the embarrassing outfit into it before hastily cramming the entire bag into one of her designer suitcases.

"I can't believe you sometimes!" Anna hissed.

Winter looked confused and then a little hurt. "What? You didn't like the journal? I thought you loved lavender."

Suddenly the bellhop stopped by room 6C, then turned and knocked once on the door. Giving Anna another lecherous smile, he droned, "Your room, miss. Have a nice day."

My day will improve drastically once you're away from me.

Winter grinned and moved to follow him, walking backward and wiggling her fingers in a little wave. Anna watched until they stopped next door so she could see where Winter was staying. Winter gave her another small wave and didn't wait for the bellhop to finish his sentence as she pushed open the door and stepped inside.

"Wow."

Anna blinked, confused by the sound of the low male voice as she turned toward her room. The door was open and in the frame towered a large man with more notable sex appeal than a Hollywood superstar. For a moment, she was too flabbergasted to speak. His hair spilled over his shoulders in soft, drying waves. He wore an old T-shirt with a faded school emblem on the front. His arm lifted to rest against the open door and she watched the hem of his shirt lift up to reveal his tight stomach. His faded jeans hung low on his hips but she didn't see any boxers peeking out the top. In fact, by the way his hipbones and the narrow trail of hair beneath his navel showed, it was quite possible he wore no underwear at all. Bare feet stood squarely on the floor and she couldn't help but think the man even had sexy feet.

A wave of desire hit her in the stomach, spreading like some sex virus over her hardening nipples and settling between her suddenly hot thighs. It took all her strength not to wiggle against her wet panties. Her gaze lifted from his sexy feet to land on his cock. It pressed unmistakably large and erect against his low-slung jeans. Shaken back

to reality, Anna cleared her throat. When she looked up, dark eyes pierced into hers, hot as molten lava. She shivered. Never had a man been so bold with just a look. He reeked of confidence and prowess. Biting her lips, she said weakly, "My bags."

A brow on his handsome face rose in question.

"Bring them in," she ordered, pushing past him into the room. Obviously tall, pale and creepy bellhop knew the man was in the room because he had knocked on the door. Her mind raced and she momentarily panicked. Mr. Sexy had to be the ship greeter, or a cabin boy, or a maid or whatever they called them if he was in her room. Though the idea of a ship of this caliber allowing their employees to traipse around in street clothes did surprise her. Unless...

Anna stiffened. The cabin suite was large, with dark blue walls and a round bed in the middle of the floor on a platform. She stared at it critically, wondering at the odd placement. Was this man some sort of sex toy? Winter had hinted profusely about her getting laid. Did he come with the room?

Anna gave a small laugh at herself and her wishful thinking. Who was she kidding? *Date with Destiny* would *not* pay for a sex cruise, no matter how hard Winter begged the network executives.

"The bed rotates, *princesse*," the man said behind her, his French accent thick as he carted in her bags. "If you'd like to play with it, the remote is on the dresser."

Did he just call her a princess?

"No, thank you." Anna swallowed back the lump in her throat. The man's suggestion about the bed made her pussy quake and instantaneous, burning desire wasn't something she was prone to experiencing. "I don't play with furniture."

"All right," the man answered slowly. "Suit yourself. But you're really missing out on some fun."

Anna took a deep breath. His tone sent chills over her spine. Seeing the open bathroom door, she decided to go freshen up and get away from him. Throwing herself at a stranger wasn't something she ever dreamed she'd do. Staring at the man in her

room made her entertain the thought a bit more seriously. Unable to look at the handsome man again and still maintain her composure, she grabbed one of her smaller bags and said, "I'll put a tip on the room's tab for you. Please bring in my suitcases and lock the door when you leave. I don't require any services beyond that."

Anna locked the bathroom door before he could answer, glad to see it had a sturdy deadbolt. Listening at the door, she heard the sound of her suitcases being moved into the room. Good, he was going to listen to her orders. Just as soon as she showered, she would request another crew member to wait on her—maybe one who wasn't so distractingly handsome and flirtatious.

* * * * *

Andre watched the woman walk away with a wide grin on his face, even though he was a little confused by the whole thing. A tip? Was she making a joke? The woman hardly seemed the type to joke. Maybe she was nervous, that could explain the way she ordered him about and refused to look at him directly. She nearly jumped when he suggested she play with the bed. He'd only been teasing but if she'd have hopped on, he'd have been right there behind her, no questions asked. Already his cock was hard just from the sight of her. They were going to be married, after all, and he saw no reason to wait for the fun part.

When she'd first looked at him, he knew her body had responded as forcefully as his. But why wouldn't it have? It was meant to do just that, or so the Elders said. It was easy to smell the hot desire moistening the area between her thighs, teasing his body like a perfume. She wore a designer dress suit that covered her silk shirt but he'd just bet her nipples were hard underneath. He briefly wondered if she'd dressed up just for this first meeting, to make a good impression on her future husband. Andre grinned. Women were sometimes like that. He'd not even thought about what he was putting on when he got dressed. All he could think about was what sex would be like with his new mate and had picked his clothes for ease of disrobing.

Doing a quick sniff test of his T-shirt, he nodded in approval. At least it was cleanish. "It's only behind a few washings. It'll do." Besides, women liked the natural scent of a shifter.

It took every effort not to come on to her full force. Andre grinned, knowing that instantly pawing her and tossing her on the bed so he could rip the clothing from her delicious body wasn't the best first impression he could make. Oh, it would've been a good one, but not the best.

She was a beautiful woman, poised and graceful. Andre couldn't have been more pleased. Her small wire-rimmed glasses framed very pretty gray-green eyes and her dark red-brown hair screamed catlike vixen. He longed to pull it from its bun and tangle his hands through its silken texture. Every fantasy he'd ever had of the sexy corporate boss seducing the hired hand came back to mind. He hoped she liked to roleplay. Well, if the Elders picked her out for him, she probably did. They would know best, wouldn't they?

He heard the shower turn on and groaned softly to himself as he imagined her stripping off her clothes. If he hadn't detected the sound of the bathroom lock being securely latched, he would've taken her need for cleanliness as an invitation to join her. Though she hardly looked travel-worn, he could attribute her slightly bad mood to being tired.

He pushed the empty luggage rack outside and shut the door. Then, sighing at the amount of luggage his future bride brought with her, he decided to help her unpack. Okay, he decided to snoop to see what she brought. But "unpacking" sounded better.

Selecting the smallest bag first, he unzipped it. Seeing a large brown bag shoved inside, he grabbed it and peeked in. "Jackpot."

* * * * *

"Have a ni—"

Winter pushed past the bellhop into her room, grabbing her bags from him on the way, not bothering to let him finish his statement. "Uh, yeah thanks!"

Slamming the door, she glanced around the room. It was hideous, even by her standards. Anna liked to call Winter's taste in decorating shockingly psychedelic. It wasn't like she painted everything with fluorescent paint before flipping on a black light. No, aerosol paint was bad for the environment, so she just went for large acrylic-painted daisies on the kitchen walls.

The cabin she'd be staying in lacked color. The walls were all such a dark gray that they appeared black and the bedframe, lamps and side tables were all made from a wood so dark that they too appeared black. Without the oversized white comforter on the bed, it would surely have been camouflaged.

"Great, a week minus color. I guess I'll live." Winter tossed her bag onto the floor. Bending down, she opened the front compartment which held all of her sheer wraps. Winter selected two red ones and draped them over the tops of the two lamps. "Ah, much better."

She caught a flicker out of the corner of her eye and jumped as the door to the bathroom opened fast. It slammed shut before she'd turned all the way around.

"Mon sucré...I was not expecting you so soon," a deep voice laced with a light French accent said.

Winter turned slowly and swallowed hard when she saw the Adonis in the bathroom doorway, only mildly concerned that someone was in her room. After years of living communally growing up, seeing someone suddenly appear wasn't as shocking as the idea sounded. He was dressed in only a towel and his muscles rippled over his body as he took a step toward her. She forced her gaze upward and nearly passed out from extreme hormone overload when she found herself staring into the darkest set of chocolate-colored eyes she'd ever seen.

The stranger had his hair pulled back tightly from his chiseled face, leaving him with a hard edge about him. She glanced at the closed cabin door and back to the man. "Funny, I wasn't expecting you at all. Are you some sort of consolation gift?"

He shook his head and winked.

Okay, not much in the way of talking.

"You have a name?" The corner of his mouth twitched and if Winter didn't know better, she'd have thought he was trying not to laugh at her. "Cat got your tongue?"

"If I'm lucky she will," he said so softly she almost missed it.

"I'm Winter."

"You're named after a season?" The man tipped his head to the side, appearing to be surveying her.

"Mmm-hmm, my sisters are named Summer, Autumn, Spring and Breeze."

"Breeze?" He cocked an eyebrow.

She smiled sheepishly at him before turning to grab one of her bags. "My father is part Native American and, combined with my mother who is peace, love and harmony through and through, they make for a rather eccentric couple."

The stud before her glanced at the red-silk-covered lamps and then down at her pink duffel bag. "Ah, and you in no way take after them? How is it that they decided to name one of their offspring Breeze?"

"They ran out of seasons and weren't expecting to have any more." Winter shrugged.

"I see."

She waited a fraction of a second and when he showed no sign of talking more, she sighed.

"So, are you going to tell me who you are?"

"I'm Christian Badau."

"Nice to meet you, Mr. Badau."

"Christian is fine."

"Wonderful, now if you'll excuse me, I'd like to wash the stench off and then hit the main deck. I came on this trip with Anna to get some amazing sex for a week, not to chat the day away in my cabin, even if it is with a gorgeous man. Unless—" Winter stopped just short of propositioning the hunk. "Wait, did the network executives get my message and turn this into a sex cruise?"

He shook his head slightly.

"Pity." Winter waited to see if he'd leave. When he didn't, she shrugged and yanked her shirt over her head. Tossing it behind her haphazardly, she mumbled to herself, "Now where did I pack that T-shirt I tie-dyed for the trip?"

"Tell me, do you always take your clothes off in front of men you just meet?" There was something in his voice that sounded threatening. Under normal circumstances, she would have felt a bit uneasy to be locked in a room with a man as powerful as this one seemed to be. But since she was on vacation, she was willing to accept his oddities—for the moment. Plus, she was armed with Supernatural Pepper Spray 3000.

"Of course." Winter smiled. "I love everything about me. Human bodies are works of art, so natural, so pure and it's a shame to keep them covered all the time." She twisted slightly and used the bed to steady herself as she removed her long skirt. She reached up to untie her bikini but stopped when she felt two warm hands pushing her hair out of the way.

"I would appreciate it if you did not undress in front of other men on the boat." He worked the tie to her bikini loose and let his hands slide over her shoulders.

Winter's legs nearly gave out from the tingling feeling that spread throughout her body with just his touch. Never had a man made her cunt damp by barely touching her. Christian moved in closer to her, his tall frame dwarfing hers as he wrapped his arms around her.

"You fit against me perfectly. It is as they said it would be."

"As who said what would be? And how long have you been here? You do realize that contractions are perfectly acceptable in modern-day speech patterns? Not that I'm not digging the whole 'French hottie' thing you've got going but you sound a bit like Count Dracula."

He huffed. "I am not a vampire. I am a full-blooded—umm—full-blooded Frenchman and proud of it."

"All right then," Winter said as she bit back her laugh. Christian sure was testy, in a sexy "want to lick every inch of him" kind of way. Snuggling back against him, she felt his erection through the towel and had to grab hold of his arm to steady herself. If what was pressed against her butt was indeed his cock, then she might have finally met her match.

"I can smell your desire for me. Do you often find men you've only just met attractive?"

"Do you always talk this much or do you actually fuck women who are ready and willing? The trip here was long, my shots are up-to-date, I'm horny as hell and want a big cock stuffed in me as soon as possible."

"I..." He hesitated. "Are you not concerned with why I am here?"

"No." She reached her hand back and let it slide down his hard abs, coming to a rest on the top of his towel. Winter leaned forward as she freed him from his terrycloth confines. He gasped and a sultry laugh escaped her lips. "I'm only concerned with one thing right now and that's how long it's going to take you to ram that cock in me. Unless you don't want me?"

Christian's voice sounded strained as he whispered in her ear, "You do not wish to get to know me first?"

"Hey, with what I suggested, we'll get to know each other a hell of a lot faster than sitting around trading childhood stories. Are you in or out?"

"In or out?"

Winter sighed—a perfectly fuckable cock was hard and free behind her, yet this guy wanted them to get to know each other. "Yes, are you going to fuck me or shall I head on down to the main level and see what hunk will fill in for you? Cocks are interchangeable. They come in all shapes and sizes. I just pick the closest one, double-check the packaging and hop on for a ride. It's really not that hard to understand. With all the advances in modern society, sex is safer than driving a car. It's also way more fun and easier on the environment."

Growling, he spun her around. Immediately her eyes went to his ruddy cock. She gasped at the size of it. It was every bit as big as she'd assumed, maybe even bigger. The pulsing veins running along it made her want to touch it, hold it, suck it. When her gaze trailed up his body, she found his dark brown eyes staring at her with fiery intensity.

"You are not to look at another man from hereon out, let alone fuck one."

"Pfft," Winter huffed. "You don't own me, bucko. Since you seem to want to bark orders at me instead of handling my needs, cover that monster of a cock and get the hell out of *my* room. I need to freshen up and have sex. At this point I don't care if the other party is male or not. Sex is sex."

Winter turned and tried to head toward the bathroom door. Christian seized hold of her arm, stopping her in mid-motion. "Hey!"

"You are *mine*." The look on his face dared her to contradict him. Before Winter could even think to do so, his lips crashed down onto hers. The energy that poured from his mouth to hers was unlike anything she'd ever experienced. His warm tongue skated around hers, ducking and weaving at all the right moments—taking her to new heights, making her pussy quake and her breasts swell.

A shock of pleasure racked her system and the minute his hands intertwined in her hair, she knew she lost herself to him. His possessive words echoed in her head, staking claim in a way she'd never known until even she wanted to scream that she was his and

his alone. Men had touched her body plenty of times but none had touched her soul, not like this, not like Christian.

She closed her eyes and felt him all around her. At that moment, Winter would have barked like a dog if he told her to. But she rather hoped he'd tell her to drop to her knees and suck him off. If his dick tasted half as good as his delicious mouth did, she might very well spend a week swallowing his cum.

Christian's hands traveled downward and he cupped his mate's ample breasts, keeping her upright body close to his. How he'd been so lucky as to receive the goldenskinned beauty before him, he couldn't fathom. Surely the Powers That Be smiled upon him. Though Winter was a free-spirited female, her natural sexuality and inner goodness made his chest tighten. The minute he'd sensed her entering the cabin, he'd used all his supernatural senses to read her. The panther traits he carried within recognized her as his mate instantly and when he searched her soul and found only lightness, he knew the cruise had been the right decision. If only she wasn't a human. Could he ever really spend eternity next to something he'd thought less of for centuries?

Pinching Winter's erect nipples between his fingers, he realized they reminded him of rock-hard pebbles. He needed to taste them, sample her flesh. Dropping his head down, Christian took one in his mouth and moaned, "Mm, mon sucré. So sweet."

Winter made a weak noise of pleasure and heaved her chest upward. Christian's eyes rolled from the divine taste of his destined mate's flesh. The smell of her arousal assailed him and his cock demanded attention.

Christian did his best to focus on exploring every inch of the woman before him. Despite the fact that the Powers That Be and the panther that resided within him deemed this woman his true and only match, he would not complete the necessary binding rituals until he was sure. To tie oneself to a human unnecessarily was beyond foolish. After the deed was done, if he tired of her, it wasn't as though he could leave

her and fuck someone else. One rather substantial drawback to being a were-panther was that once mated, he could no longer have sex with anyone other than his mate. Literally, the sexual organs failed to respond to anyone else and not being able to sink his cock into another woman could prove to be an issue.

The likelihood of the crazy woman before him, who was currently making pre-cum seep from his shaft, wanting to be converted into a supernatural was slim to none. There would be no way for him to love her unconditionally if she remained human. Or was there?

As Winter rubbed her body against his more insistently, Christian began to think less about her being human and more about throwing her down and trapping her beneath him while he had his way with her. Leaning over, he kissed her, loving the taste of her mouth as he delved his tongue inside. Could he make this woman who didn't discriminate between the cocks she rode cry out his name and beg only him to fuck her, or would he pale in comparison to what she was used to?

How dare she make me doubt myself? My sexual prowess is world-renowned! Entire countries have gone to war over me fucking this queen and that!

The second Winter took hold of his shaft, rubbing her hand up and down over its hot length, Christian lost his train of thought. She slid her thumb over the tip, rubbing in small, delicious circles. Groaning, he couldn't concentrate beyond her circling fingers. He'd been upset about something, but what?

Whenever stimulated, his cock continually flowed with pre-cum, making the shaft slick and ready to enter whatever female he was with. Since he was larger than most men, the extra moisture came in handy. Winter worked the pre-cum over his cock with her skillful hands. His abdomen tightened as the feel of impending orgasm approached. Never before had he lacked the control to stop himself from coming so quickly. But now the very idea of bathing Winter in his hot cum turned him on. He wanted to see her on her knees, sucking him and then he wanted—no, needed—to shoot semen all over her perfect breasts.

Then I shall move to her cunt.

Thankfully Winter broke away from their kiss or he'd have missed out on both fantasies and merely come in her hand. She looked up at him, her deep blue eyes penetrating his resistance. Perhaps she was part Fae. That would explain her allure. The minute she dropped to her knees, Christian's legs began to shake. Could he do this? Could he, a man who had fucked dozens of women at a time, stay vertical long enough for this human to circle his aching cock with her beautiful, full mouth?

His answer came the minute Winter parted her pink lips and took the head of his cock between them, sucking him into her warm, wet mouth. Christian's knees buckled from the pleasure that jolted through his loins. Heaven, that was Winter's mouth and he'd had only a sample of what she could offer. Winter broke free of him a second before he collapsed next to her on the floor. Miraculously, Christian managed not to come but already the embarrassment of succumbing so quickly to the temptress before him had begun to set in.

Winter chuckled and moved to stand over him. Feeling like a foolish virgin, Christian narrowed his eyes sharply and got to his feet. Chancing a glance down, he noted the confused look on her beautiful face.

Take her in your arms and tell her she has done nothing wrong.

Fighting his own conscience, Christian stalked away, heading straight for the bathroom. This wasn't the way a Badau behaved. Caving and falling to his knees was something human males did, not him.

"Uh, Christian?"

"Excusez-moi, je dois partir maintenant," he said sternly as he closed the bathroom door. Wondering whether Winter had understood that he'd just said "I have to go now" and not something completely rude, Christian entertained the idea of going back out to explain so her feelings wouldn't be hurt. Deciding his ill temper would only serve to drive a wedge between them, he held back. Staring into the oval mirror, he couldn't help but wonder how he let things go so wrong so soon.

Chapter Three

Winter sat on the floor for a moment and then shrugged. Normal people might have been insulted by Christian's abrupt behavior but Winter was anything but normal. It wasn't as though she was proud of that fact but she had come to terms with it long ago. At first glance it might appear as if Christian was being rude, but she had a deep feeling that he was just scared. There had been a look in his eyes that she'd seen on many occasions. It was the look of a man who was not only well-sated but in the process of falling head over heels for the woman he was with. Over the years, many men had done just that—fallen for her—and she had little doubt that her free spirit and open take on sex had much to do with it. The idea of such a big confident man being frightened only made her want Christian more. However she had a hunch he wouldn't like admitting to such a "weak" feeling, even if fear was as natural as any other emotion.

Snatching her bikini top, she tied the strings at the base of her neck and doublechecked that the tiny circular scraps of material covered her nipples. Once she was satisfied with how she looked, she snatched a light green wrap from the front of her bag and tied it around her waist.

"It was...umm...interesting to meet you, Christian," she yelled toward the bathroom door so he could hear her. "I'm heading out now. Be sure to lock up when you leave. Unless I'm in the wrong room, then do whatever you want."

Winter hesitated for a moment on her way out the front door. Glancing back toward the bathroom, she wondered briefly why Christian had been in her room at all. Or did the bellhop truly lead her to the wrong place? Growing up the way she had, in various communal-type living quarters with her free-spirited family and their values, she was used to other people being around. Shrugging, she knew the situation would

work itself out. No reason to worry over what she couldn't do anything about. The sound of robust male laughter caught her attention. Pulling her thoughts from Christian, she headed out.

Walking down the corridor, she spotted a group of buff men near the entrance to one of the ship's many lounges. The only reason she even knew that was because Anna was a freak and had memorized every detail on the ship's blueprint. Why the cruise line had included that in the brochure was a mystery. Listening to Anna ramble on and on about emergency exits had driven her mad.

A tall blond looked in her direction. Out of flirtatious habit, Winter boldly stared at the eye candy before her. His gaze raked over her and a lecherous smile splayed over his handsome face. Winter hoped he'd carry out all that the look promised. She wasn't kidding when she'd told Christian she needed to have sex. Whatever it was they'd done in the cabin had made the urge even greater. Every inch of her skin was on fire. And Winter could think of nothing better to put out the flames than a few hot fuck-o-licious studs.

Sashaying up to them, she reached out and touched the blond's upper arms. "My, my, stranger, what big muscles you have."

He smiled. "All the better to hold you with, darling."

Feeling incredibly bold and, oddly enough, hurt by Christian's unexplained rejection, Winter moved up and pressed the front of her body to his. The man's smile widened, revealing a mouth full of very white, very sharp teeth. "My, my, what big teeth you have."

"All the better to eat you with, sugar."

Chills ran over her spine and they weren't entirely sexual. There was something in the stranger's voice that sounded threatening. When he wrapped his arms around her, she froze. "Are you up for some games?" he asked. The other men with him circled around her, all staring down at her with the same scary but sexual looks. "We can give you the time of your life, little girl."

Winter arched an eyebrow. "Really? That's an awfully big promise. You sure you're," she glanced down at his navy shorts, "up for it?"

"Sugar, I'll have my dick up your cunt so far that you'll swear you can taste it."

Winter swallowed hard, feeling more and more uneasy. "What will your buddies do? Will they watch us?"

"If that's what gets you off. But I'm guessing they'll want to fuck you too. Have you ever been fucked by multiple men?"

"I've done two men and two chicks at the same time."

The man looked a bit surprised. "You like pussy too?"

Winter chuckled nervously. "Who doesn't?"

The blond looked over her head at all of his buddies. "We might want to keep this human a while. She sounds like she'll be fun as hell to fuck. What do you say? I'm calling dibs on that cunt." He took a deep breath. "Smell that, like honey and cream. I might even eat this one out. Look at those full lips. I bet she can suck a man into a coma."

"Not quite," Winter said, suddenly nervous. She never got nervous talking about sex. "Though recently I learned I could make them fall to their knees."

The man looked puzzled. "So, who wants to screw her tight little ass first?"

"That would be me. And as far as you having dibs on her cunt, my guess is you'll want to think twice about that."

The sound of Christian's booming voice chased some of the fear from Winter. The menacing look that passed over the blond's face worried her. "I think I should be going now. Thanks though, guys."

The blond caught hold of her arm and held it tight. Winter winched as pain shot through it. The harder she tried to wriggle out of his grip, the tighter the man's grip got. "Ouch! Stop that."

Christian wanted to shift into panther form and tear the man's head off. Not wanting to scare Winter, he settled for attacking in human form. In an instant, he had himself wedged between Winter and the man. He snatched the man's wrist from her upper arm and snapped it easily. It popped and cracked a few times, leaving Christian partially satisfied. Though killing the filthy bunch of were-platypuses would have been his first choice.

The blond's eyes shifted to yellow and Christian laughed, letting his own swirl to violet. Obviously shocked, the man backed away. He was smarter than he looked. Pity. Christian would've enjoyed teaching him a lesson.

Christian sensed another one of the were-platypus's crew moving up fast behind him. Spinning around, he saw the other man grab for Winter's arm. He moved to strike only to find his assistance was not required. Shocked, he stood as Winter brought her other hand around in a low circle, slamming into the hand the man held her with. She seized hold of the man's hand and twisted it fast. When he bent forward, he let go of her wrist and she used the now free arm to slam down into the back of his elbow. He dropped to the ground with Winter's tiny body riding him down. Her knees pressed into the back of his arm as he lay flat on the deck.

Christian tensed as she looked impishly up at him, her blue eyes serious and bright. "Don't you just hate it when that happens? I really should have brought that Pepper Spray 3000 Anna gave me but I'm not sure how bad it is for the environment."

An overwhelming amount of pride swelled in him and before he knew it, he was smiling back at her. Then the reality of the situation came crashing in and he wiped his face of all emotion. "What did you think you were doing? Did approaching a group of strange men not seem dangerous to you? If you had any idea of what these men are capable of, you'd not have left your cabin! Are all human women as stubborn as you?"

"Human? Okay, Mars-boy, do you think you could stop rambling long enough to handle this jackass for me? My legs are getting tired."

Christian cursed himself. He'd been so caught up in his mate being in harm's way that he'd left her pinning the man to the floor. Quickly, he moved and ripped the man off the floor by his hair. Staring into his pale gray eyes, Christian smiled menacingly. "Be sure to stay away from my mate."

The second the word mate passed through his lips, the man's eyes widened.

"We...we...er...didn't know she was your mate. I swear!"

The man reeked of fear and urine. Not wanting either on him, Christian dropped the were-platypus and grabbed hold of Winter. "Come."

"I'm not a dog," Winter protested.

"I realize that. Dogs are more obedient to their masters. Now move!"

She stood her ground refusing to budge and Christian refused to hurt her. Having had enough of her shenanigans, he bent down and flipped her over his shoulder. The tiny yelp she let out made his already raging cock twitch. He marched toward the cabin, carrying her easily. Winter screeched and flailed madly as she tried to push up. Christian's upper body strength was such that he didn't even flinch. When he reached the door, he set her down. She huffed and hurried to slam the door in his face. Her scent was in his head as he moved to follow her. He knew he couldn't leave things as they were between them. He should never have pulled away from her but he'd been too embarrassed and needed to regain control of his body so he could show her a proper good time.

Christian had been unable to move when he watched her approach the group of men. The smell of her arousal permeated the air and any supernatural onboard would have picked up on it. He had almost thrown in the towel and walked away from Winter when she touched the blond. If he hadn't sensed her hesitation, her concern not for herself but for someone else, he'd have denied she was his true mate and petitioned the Powers That Be to reevaluate his situation.

The moment he smelled her fear, Christian had decided to take back what was his. Maybe his mate just needed a demonstration of his seriousness. Listening to the men planning all the ways they'd fuck Winter didn't just sicken him, it damn near blinded him with rage. They talked of claiming her ass, her cunt, her... No! His would be the only cock that ever entered Winter.

What? You don't want to be tied to a human. You should have let her go with them.

Mentally scolding himself for almost giving in to an eternity with a human, Christian felt another ripple of anger move through him. He focused and found her standing on the bed near the headboard as she leaned over to see out the high porthole. "What in the hell were you thinking, woman?"

"My name is Winter – oh, look at the way the sun reflects off the ocean." She shifted again to look out the porthole. Her green skirt was caught on the headboard of the bed as she stood on the mattress, showing him the full extent of her toned legs. He got a hard-on just staring at her bikini-clad ass beneath the skirt. It took all his willpower not to slam her up against the wall and fuck the hell out of her. He wanted to be in her sample her pussy, her ass, all she had to offer. The need was so intense it left him clenching his fists, fighting a full-on shift into panther form. There were many reasons to avoid shifting during sex. The most important when it came to Winter would be the very real possibility of harming her. She wasn't made to withstand that. Clearly, having fallen to his knees from nothing more than her lips on his cock, he no longer needed a shift during sex. He only needed Winter.

Stop thinking like that. You are a Badau!

"You didn't answer my question. What were you thinking doing that?" he asked, clearing his throat quickly as thoughts of begging her to never put herself in harm's way tried to come out as well. He would never beg a woman – human or not.

She let loose a long cry. At first, he thought she was so angry she couldn't talk. He couldn't have been more wrong. Winter began jumping up and down on the bed, her breasts jiggling with each jarred bounce to draw his attention. The act left his cock raging hard, demanding to be set free of the confines of his pants. It wanted to claim her ass as much as Christian did. At the rate his mind and his cock were going, Winter would be his wife within the hour. He needed distance.

Yes, that's it. I'll go for a walk. Clear my head of her.

"Come here! Look, look! There's a group of dolphins swimming next to us! Ohmygod, I haven't seen dolphins in years! Look, Christian. They're beautiful."

Thoughts of leaving diminished the moment his name fell from her lush lips. Her excitement was genuine as was her desire to share the moment with him. Being a supernatural had many perks, but always sensing someone's true feelings wasn't one of them. He couldn't deny her and at the moment, he loathed that part of himself. "Are you mad, woman? I'm yelling at you for damn near getting yourself killed and you are babbling on about dolphins."

"Uh-huh." She sighed dreamily as she gazed out the porthole. "I'm a huge animal lover."

Realizing his mate obviously was touched in the head, he played along. Besides, it gave him an excuse to go near her. Slowly he stalked across the room, watching the curve of her ass beneath her skirt. "Really, and what types of animals do you like?"

"Well, dolphins, monkeys, horses and llamas. But my favorites are panthers. I've always been fascinated by them. There was this one black panther at the zoo near my house that I'd visit several times a week. He was old but he was so beautiful, so striking. I'd lose myself for hours watching him lie in the shade."

That her favorite animal was a panther wasn't lost on him. He filed it away for later use. If he did happen to decide she was worthy of him, he might need to use that little fact to help break the news of what he was. Of course, the chances of him finding any human worthy of his love were slim. Winter was certainly different than any human female he'd encountered before but that didn't instantly make her worthy of being his mate.

Yet she is.

He sighed, damning his thoughts.

"I wasn't in danger." Winter's mood changed quickly, growing somber. "I'm capable of taking care of myself."

Christian actually felt guilt wash over him. "I was concerned for you."

There, I said it.

Her mood didn't change.

"Winter?" he insisted.

"Do you think we'll get to see more dolphins on the trip, Christian?" she asked, suddenly sounding so much younger than her age.

He stilled. "Wait, you're not angry with me for shouting at you?"

"What? Oh sure. I guess I am a little but I kind of just wanted to see the dolphins. Don't you ever just want to run free, feel the wind on your face, the sunshine warming your skin? I'm envious of every animal that exists. They've learned to fully embrace nature."

A slight smile played across his face. Winter was certainly unlike any human he'd encountered before. Just when he thought his selected mate was tough as nails, she showed him a softer side. She slipped a bit against the headboard and he seized hold of her, his hand accidentally slapping her ass in the process. At the sound of flesh hitting flesh, Christian cringed. Hurting her wasn't an option. He rubbed the area he'd smacked gently.

"Winter, I'm..."

She wiggled and the smell of her cream filled his head. It was intoxicating. She let loose a long, soft sigh. Her body turned to him as she stood on the mattress, not trying to escape. He continued to rub her ass cheek.

"Mm, that's it, Christian," she purred. "I was a bad girl, wasn't I?"

She wanted to be spanked?

His cock throbbed painfully, digging into the pants he'd tossed on before so he could go after her. Unable to help himself, Christian spanked Winter once more, testing her resolve while he made sure to strike the fleshy part of her ass. She yelped and then moaned, grinding against him. The smell of her cunt again surged over him. "Yes, you were very bad. Do not disobey me again, mate."

Mate?

Winter wiggled more and a sultry laugh escaped her, chasing away his concern for saying aloud that she was his mate. She slinked down on the bed until she was on her hands and knees. Slowly, she turned, facing her ass toward him. "I'm all yours. Punish me as you wish, *mate*."

Hearing her echo what he had called her left Christian's beast threatening to break free. It wanted the reality of the word. It wanted Winter as its mate. A bit of his resolve slipped away.

Sliding his hand up under her green wrap, Christian rubbed the hot spot on her ass cheek. As his fingers skated over her smooth flesh, he found it impossible to stop. He went one step further, easing his fingers under her bikini bottoms. Already she was wet, slick and the sweet lure of her cream-soaked cleft called to him on a primal level.

"Please, More,"

As she shoved her ass toward him, attempting to ram his fingers into her, Christian chuckled. "Patience, little human."

"Patience?" She tried to break free of his grip but he tightened his hold, forcing her to settle right where she was. "I will fuck your sweet cunt and tight ass soon. For now you will take your punishment and in the end, you will know to never go against my wishes again."

She let out a soft laugh. "I could always go try to find those guys again."

Her tone was light, yet her words could have sent his beast side into a frenzy. To his surprise, rage never entered the equation. Thoughts of tying her to the bed while he

nipped playfully at every square inch of her body did. He slapped her ass once more, carefully massaging away the sting.

Winter moaned and drew in a sharp breath. "If I beg, will you fuck me?"

"Perhaps, but first we meet with my brother and his mate for dinner. We have reservations in a half hour."

"What? No. Please. You can't leave me like this. I need—"

"Consider it part of your punishment."

More like my punishment but I cannot reward her for disobeying me.

"I need you in me, Christian. I need you ramming your cock so deep in me that I lose track of everything but us." She sighed, wiggling her body in temptation. "You need it too. I sensed it in you earlier when you stormed off to the bathroom. You need me, like I need you."

As much as he hated to admit it, Winter was right. Christian ran his finger along the cleft of her ass and smiled as he found it slick with moisture. Oh, she was certainly wet for him. He teased the rim of her anus before moving down and pressing through her slit. Winter ground against his hand, driving his finger into her tight cunt. She gasped as did he.

She would be so tight wrapped around his cock that he knew if he entered her, he'd come quicker than he wanted to. Something about Winter left Christian feeling like a randy schoolboy.

He finger-fucked her as he stood beside the bed. Winter arched back, lifting her arms over her head, his finger still buried in her. She wiggled back and forth before eagerly turning around to face him. His finger slipped from her pussy. She ran her hands through his hair, undoing his tie and setting it free. Christian let out a low roar from the back of his throat and found himself lifting her to stand before him and positioning her so her cunt was before his face.

The smell of her cream surrounded him and he shoved his fingers back inside her cunt. She massaged his head, running her hands through his hair as she ground herself not only on his finger but against his face. Christian's teeth lengthened as he lost control and began to shift. Drawing in a deep breath, he managed to prevent a full-out shift, leaving only his teeth long and sharp. He took hold of her bikini bottoms with his now-sharpened teeth and bit through the material, leaving a tiny thatch of dark, trimmed hair exposed to him. He thrust his tongue out, running it over her mound and into her slit. The second his long tongue swept over her clit, Winter cried out, riding his face and hand harder.

Christian grabbed her and swung her off the bed, easily holding her by her hips as he kept her pussy near his face, deeply breathing in her scent. Her hands dug into his shoulders as he walked with her until he found a wall. Pressing her to it, he dropped to his knees and instantly thrust his face into her pussy, continuing his sweet assault. He ate at her, letting her cream coat his tongue and savoring the taste of her. Never before had a woman tasted so incredible to him. He could lick her forever and never tire.

"So good. So pure," he murmured. "Like honey and cream."

He lifted one of her legs and tossed it over his shoulder and then did the same with the other, encouraging her to wrap her legs around his head. Winter obliged, leaving her pussy spread for him. When he looked up, he saw she'd grabbed hold of the porthole over her head to help support their position. He thrust his tongue into her hot cunt and fought the urge to come when the walls of her core contracted around his tongue. He rubbed his face against her, letting his nose hit her clit as he tongue-fucked her.

Letting go of the porthole, she trusted him enough to hold her weight as she fisted his hair. She pulled him tight to her pussy as she ground against his face. "Yes, oh yes, Christian. Yes. There. I'm going to come."

He chuckled into her pussy, doing his best to ignore the fact his cock was on the verge of digging a hole straight through his pants. Winter's pussy gripped his tongue

and began drawing it deeper into her as her inner thighs quivered and her body tightened. She came with a jolt and he lapped up her sweet cream, drinking her down and fighting the urge to bite her inner thigh and claim her as his own.

Mine. Always mine.

Christian waited until her orgasm passed before easing her legs down to the floor. She continued to lower her body so she was kneeling with him, their bodies close. The minute she was eye to eye with him, Winter did something no other woman had done with him—she began licking her own cum from his face.

"Mm, I do taste good," she said with a twinkle in her blue eyes. She kissed the tip of his nose. While the act itself was a small one, it suggested intimacy, something he wasn't used to.

"Yes, you do."

She slid her arms around his neck, causing him to sit back as her legs wound around his waist. Christian held her, unsure of a time in his life when he'd had the urge to cuddle a woman. He came up blank. Winter was his first.

As she moved her hand between them, sliding it down and over the bulge in his pants, he hissed. She smiled. "How about we take care of that?"

"We have reservations with my brother." Christian wanted to fuck her but he knew if he did, the odds of him withdrawing before he came inside her were slim to none. Not to mention the fact he'd most likely bite her and stake his claim for all time.

"How could you have made reservations when you didn't even know me? Better yet, why were you in my room to begin with?"

Christian racked his brain for an answer that would satisfy her. He wanted to tell her an elaborate lie. That wasn't what popped out. "I knew the Powers That Be arranged for my mate to stay with me in this cabin, so I planned accordingly."

What? Why did I confess that?

She licked her lower lip before kissing his cheeks lightly. "Mmm-hmm, Powers That Be. Aren't they the guys supernaturals answer to? Are you a supernatural?"

"I'm a were-panther," he said before rational thought kicked in. "I mean, I'm a—"

Winter's sexy laugh enveloped him. "A were-panther? What a coincidence, panthers just happen to be my favorite animal. But you already knew that. Cute. I should probably tell you that I'm a were-panther too then."

If only you were.

Christian turned his head when his teeth attempted to lengthen once more as the beast within tried to force him to claim Winter. He wouldn't take her until he knew for sure he could spend his life with a human mate, even if she did become immortal by the will of the gods.

As she cupped his clothed cock, he moved his hand to cover hers. It skimmed her belly and flashes of what it would be like to see her swollen with his children struck him with a force that made him sway.

Winter had him unbuttoned before he could protest and her cool hand wrapped around his hot cock. She stroked him, nicking away at his resistance. "Just a quickie," she whispered, tracing the edges of his mouth with her tongue. "Just to get you some release as well."

"Winter, I can't."

"I've had all my shots, baby, so it's safe."

Baby? Had she really just addressed him with a pet name?

She cupped his sac gently, massaging his balls and bringing him dangerously close to coming. "Come on, Christian. Use me to get off. I want you in me."

As he went to protest, Winter slid down over his cock, taking him deep within her cunt as she sat on his thighs. His jaw clenched as her pussy gripped him. He lost his train of thought, focusing instead on how perfectly they fit together.

Winter clawed at his upper back. "Ah, too big."

Christian reached between their bodies and found her clit. Rubbing it, he refrained from inserting his shaft all the way until he felt her cunt relaxing a bit for him. "Mmm."

She still clung to him, digging her nails into his upper back as she bit down on his shoulder. He began to pump in and out of her, increasing his thrusts until he'd struck a rhythm that suited them both.

She was so tight.

So perfect.

So his.

Mine.

The beast within surged to the surface. His teeth lengthened again and he found himself leaping to his feet, taking her with him as he sniffed her neck. He buried his face in her hair as he fucked her hard against the wall. He knew an orgasm was building within her and his wasn't far off either. As his balls drew up, Christian bit down, breaking her skin. Something pinched on his shoulder. His cum shot into her, filling her clenching pussy as the coppery sweet taste of her blood filled his mouth.

Mine.

He continued to pump, using her cunt to wring his cock dry. His mind fuzzed as he lost himself in the moment. Before he knew it he was licking her neck, magically healing the bite mark and drawing his sated cock from her wet cunt.

"Ohmygod, I bit you," Winter said, her voice barely above a whisper. "I bit you and made you bleed. Christian, I'm so sorry. I've never lost control like—"

Drew blood?

Slowly, his mind cleared. As the realization of what he'd done began to sink in, his stomach clenched. Not only did he spill his seed inside her as he'd bitten her, she'd also bitten him. The act effectively claimed her as his mate, his wife. It was an unbreakable bond. Winter was now his for all eternity. The knowledge soothed something that had been aching in his chest.

My heart.

"I bit you. Ohmygod." She tried to push free of his hold. Her fear, her uncertainty radiated off her.

Christian refused to let her down. "Shhh, ma chérie. It was natural. Neither of us had any control."

A lone tear danced down her cheek. He kissed it away before capturing her lips with his own. He would worry about what he'd done later. Now the overwhelming need to make sure Winter held no regret took priority.

Shaking her head, she still managed to kiss him while protesting what had taken place. Christian chuckled, lacing his tongue around hers and sucking gently. His cock twitched, hardening once more. Apparently, it wanted more of Winter as well. Who was he to argue?

He broke their kiss. Winter moaned and tried to hug him as he turned her to face the wall. Planting tiny kisses on her golden shoulders, Christian nudged the cleft of her ass with his cock. "Mmm, can you feel that?"

A tiny whimper escaped her. "I bit you."

"You loved me, ma chérie."

Loved me?

She pressed her ass against him and tipped her head back. A tiny smile greeted him. "Yes," she said, blinking slowly. "I loved you."

His heart beat madly at her confession. Needing to force his mind from it, Christian rubbed his cock in her wet cleft and cupped the back of her neck, directing her attention to the wall. He would fuck her out of his system enough to allow him to think clearly. He parted her ass cheeks with his cock and found he was a hair too tall to take her from behind while standing. Not wanting to admit defeat, Christian snaked one arm around Winter's waist, lifting her with ease.

He positioned her just right, leaving the head of his cock pressed to her anus. Their combined juices soaked her there. Christian leaned forward, holding back on entering as he inhaled his mate's scent. "Let me love you," he whispered, shocking himself again.

Winter moaned, grinding her ass against his cock, causing him to enter her. Two quick pops later and he could scarcely breathe for fear of coming. Her ass held him tight. So tight that the idea of moving even an inch left him positive he would lose control and come.

Winter let out a sultry laugh. "Is this how you love me? You don't even move once you fill me with your huge cock?"

He knew she was goading him, trying to get him to fuck her like a crazed man. In time, he would. Not now. Not the first time he sampled her ass. He kissed her shoulder and began to move slowly, in and out. "Non, ma chérie, this," he reached down, finding her clit and rubbing it as he continued to fuck her ass, "this is how."

She rode his hand as he held her, pressed to the wall, pinned in place by his cock. "Christian!"

His balls drew up, signifying how close to the edge of culmination he was. He rubbed her clit faster, working it with a steady rhythm as he found paradise in his mate's body. She cried out, going rigid and he knew she was coming. Thrusting hard and fast, he didn't fight as his orgasm struck, jetting seed into her warm, tight ass. Sated for the moment but not wanting to let his mate go just yet, Christian put his lips to her shoulder and kissed gently. "Je t'aime."

He meant it. He did love her as the Powers that Be knew he would.

"We should shower, mate," he said, his voice low as he withdrew his cock from her soaked ass.

Winter twisted in his arms and he instantly embraced her. "Christian, why do you keep calling me that?"

Drawing in a deep breath, he prepared himself as best he could for her rejection. "Because that is what you are to me. I spoke the truth when I told you the Powers That Be had their hand in the two of us finding one another. When I entered you," he kissed the tip of her nose and cupped her face, "then spilled my seed inside your body as I bit you, I claimed you as my mate—my wife."

He closed his eyes, waiting for her objections. When she pressed her lips to his, he peeked out of one eye to find her smiling. His brow furrowed. "You're not upset with me?"

She shook her head, still smiling. "I bit you too, remember?"

"Winter?"

Rolling her eyes, she nipped playfully at his lips. "Christian, I'm trying to point out that I claimed you too. I can't be mad at you for being my destiny."

"You do not mind being tied to me for all eternity, forsaking all others for me?"

She swallowed hard and he instantly picked up on her regret. It hit him like a ton of bricks. Christian tried to pull away but Winter held his cheeks. "Don't go."

"I should have explained it all to you. I shouldn't have just claimed you."

Her mouth fell open in shock.

"I tried to tell you sooner, *mon sucré*, but you kept distracting me with this delicious body of yours. The Powers That Be—"

"Ah yeah, yeah, Powers That Be, mating, got it," Winter rushed, quieting him. "Are you telling me you're really a were-panther?"

He nodded.

She kissed him passionately before drawing back slightly. "I'm not upset about being with only you, Christian. I love the knowledge that it will be you I wake up with each morning. I'm upset because I, unlike you, don't have eternity. This pairing isn't fair to you. I'll grow old and die. You will—"

"Die with you if that happens," he said, finishing her sentence.

She tried to object but he pressed his finger to her lips. "Don't. It is true. If it were not possible to ensure you immortality as well, I would find a way to give mine up. I would age with you." A slow smile moved over his face as he saw the resignation in her face and the tears of joy in her eyes. "I am happy this pleases you but I have something to ask of you. I wish to make you immortal as well." He drew in a deep breath and continued on. "The Powers tell us that the process of ensuring our human mates are immortal begins the moment we fill them with our seed and claim them as our own. While I trust in them, I wish to have additional assurance. I wish to—"

"Make me a were-panther too?" she asked, arching a brow and grinning. Her tone light and teasing, she said, "Hmm, I'll have to think about it since I'm not really buying you are one. I'm thinking you're a werewolf. Aren't they rumored to be insatiable?"

"You think me to be a wolf?" he asked.

She giggled. "Or a were-goat. Hmm, yes, that might be it."

Lifting her into his arms, Christian headed for the bathroom as Winter continued to suggest all the things he could be. Unable to help himself, he laughed when she said were-penguin.

Chapter Four

Anna sighed as she put her shower cap back into her small travel bag. Though she used soap, she hadn't washed her hair. She wasn't really in the mood to restyle it anyway, instead choosing to just stand as the water hit against her back like a massage. The long, hot shower had done wonders for her temperament, as did the fresh change of clothes. She put on another suit, much like the first one she'd worn—even though the outfit hadn't been that dirty. Her mother had been a stickler for cleanliness and Anna didn't find it necessary to break the instilled habit. Taking her lip gloss out of her small travel bag, she stood to face the mirror.

Anna frowned when she saw a black-and-white-striped toothbrush on the little shelf by the sink. That most certainly wasn't hers. She'd never be caught dead with something like that. Anna ordered her satin-white electric toothbrush from the same French company her mother used.

"Who in the world would put—"

A frightening thought came to her mind. Dropping the unused lip gloss in her bag, she darted across the bathroom and pressed her ear against the door. No sound came from the other side. Was it just left over from another guest? If so, Anna would be having words with the cleaning crew. There was no excuse for such an unsanitary lapse.

Opening the door to ensure the man had left her alone, she gasped. The man still hadn't left and she was horrified to see he held the atrocious leather corset and panties Winter had given her, twirling the underwear on his finger as he lay on the bed. It was almost as if he'd been waiting for her to come out and catch him with it.

"I've never been with a dominatrix before but I'm willing to try anything once, maybe twice." The man winked playfully at her, not getting up from the bed.

She knew he was teasing but she couldn't help but be mortified. Thinking better than to scream and threaten the job of a man clearly her superior in physical strength, she endeavored to get him out of her room. Later she could have him fired for daring to go through her things, let alone make rude comments about them. "I'm sorry, sir, but I don't need you unpacking my bags."

"No need to thank me. It's already done." He rolled up to sitting, the movement somewhat seductive despite that fact she didn't want him in her room.

Deciding to take a firmer stance, she said, "I'm sure several of your ship's clients enjoy whatever it is you could possibly do here but I'm not one of them. Now get out of my room at once."

"You're funny," he mused. Then, seeing how her face didn't change, he said, "All right, I shouldn't have snooped in your bags. I'm sorry, okay. I didn't realize you were such a private person. But if it makes you feel better, I brought some special things for you too."

"You don't work for the cruise line, do you? Or are you trying to lose your job?" Anna demanded, hurrying forward to grab the corset from him. She shoved it back in her bag.

He shook his head and grinned. "No, I don't work for the cruise line."

Another thought struck her and she grimaced. "Oh God, you're like the ship's gigolo! Well, I'm not rich, so you just go find yourself another sugar-mama. Okay?"

"Not that I care about how much money you have, but your eight-hundred-dollar shoes tend to dispute that fact," he said.

"They were three hundred," she asserted weakly, disturbed by his hot look. Why wasn't he leaving?

"As for your sugar." He groaned. "Ça me prend la tête!"

"My 'sugar' is not what is making you crazy." Anna scowled at him, hoping he'd be intimidated. Nothing she did seemed to have an effect on his easygoing, playful manner.

"You speak my language." He nodded in approval. Somehow his look said he wasn't talking about the national language of France but something else, something much more primitive.

"That's your toothbrush in the bathroom, isn't it?" she asked.

"Yes, we're sharing this room." He looked puzzled. "You weren't made aware that you had a roommate for the trip? Is that what this charming little tantrum is about?"

"I don't have tantrums!" Anna paled even more. She could have sworn the ship's blueprints had their cabins marked as the luxury suites. It wasn't like her to make a mistake like that. She took a deep breath, endeavoring to keep her temper and remain rational and calm. All right, she needed to review the facts. *Date with Destiny*, obviously a low-end, shoddy game show to begin with, thought a sex cruise was a classy gift—either that or Winter had managed to switch their tickets. Okay, she could buy that. Once she stopped to think about it, she'd have been mortified to have won such a clearly lascivious prize.

She hoped *Date with Destiny* hadn't announced what this cruise line specialized in on television. Her parents would die if they realized it wasn't what it appeared to be. She'd never really heard what was said, she'd just stared numbly at the camera, trying not to pass out.

"What are you thinking just now?"

Anna blinked, completely unaware that she'd gone still as she contemplated what to do. Slowly, she reasoned, "One of us needs to contact the captain and get this mess straightened out. You will not spending the entire cruise with—"

"Actually, yeah, the rooms are all booked. These cruises always are." The man grinned and nodded.

"Fine, then you switch with my friend Winter, and she'll stay here with me. Problem solved. So long as you don't go all barbaric and trash the place, I think it a simple enough solution to our problem."

"Only no, because then we have another problem," he said, his tone still light. It was the same easygoing quality that made her want to scream at Winter in frustration most of the time.

"There's another one of you – whatever you are – in my friend's room, isn't there?"

The man chuckled, nodding again, his grin widening. Oh, he really needed to stop looking at her like that! She was normally a conservative person but this man had her thinking thoughts that would make a stripper blush.

"I see," she said calmly. "Well, sir—"

"Andre."

"Well, Andre, I'm sorry to break this news to you but you're going to be spending this cruise bunking with the stranger. Either that or you'll be spending it in the hall. So what I need to know is would it be easier for me to leave or you? We are not sharing a suite."

"Would your friend really want to switch rooms?" He didn't look eager to go anywhere.

Anna thought of Winter. Not knowing what prompted her to answer honestly, she said, "No."

"And knowing my brother as I do, Christian won't want to leave her room to bunk with me. You're stuck with me, *princesse*."

Okay, that didn't sound as bad as it should. She looked the tall, handsome man over before prying her eyes away from him. "Winter's with your brother?"

"Yes."

"Fine, we'll all just get together to discuss this arrangement like civilized folk. Until then, I hope you're at least gentleman enough to know the word 'no' when you hear it and if by some insane stretch of the imagination you do end up in here with me, I expect you to sleep on the floor." Anna refused to let him see her rattled. In the days of shots and Winter's celebrated "new free-love era", situations like this weren't all that unheard of. Or maybe it was because she'd been roommates with Winter for so long that this seemed almost normal. "Just know I'm going to do everything in my power to make sure that doesn't happen. There has to be at least one room free on this ship if Winter refuses to switch."

Andre lay on his back. "Mm, the bed is comfortable."

Anna closed her eyes, not wanting to look at the sexy man sprawled out before her. "Don't get too comfortable." Pausing, she saw her suitcases were still full. "I thought you said you unpacked them."

"What? Oh," he said with a grin, "only the important stuff."

Anna sighed. Apparently, the only thing he thought was important was the leather corset. She grabbed a bag and endeavored to ignore him as she started to unpack. A thought crept into the back of her mind—the possibility of actually sharing the room with him. She wanted to balk at the idea, but as she snuck a glance to where he lounged on the bed, she shivered. Frustratingly, she didn't get a bad vibe off him. Sure, she got the frustrating-as-hell, want-to-smack-over-the-head vibe from him, but that was nothing new. She did live with Winter, after all. And, being the type of decisive person she was, Anna wasn't one to go against her own innate instincts.

Opening a drawer, she grimaced to see his clothing had just been dumped inside the drawer. She pushed it shut and went to the next one. Gasping as she saw an array of handcuffs, lotions and vibrators, she dropped her folded skirt and quickly slammed the drawer shut.

"I told you I brought things for you as well. I wasn't sure what you were into, so I just got a bunch of -"

"I am not *into* anything!" Anna cried, spinning around to face him. So much for her super innate judge of character.

He still lay on the bed, not looking at her but at the remote control he was holding. Andre pushed a button and a big-screen TV appeared from behind the wall. He turned it on and began flipping channels.

"You really think you are going to stay here, don't you?"

"I have nowhere else to be," he answered with an audacious grin. Slowly, he licked his lips as if unconscious of how seductive the action looked as he continued flipping channels. Anna took a deep breath, shivering slightly as she tried to regain her composure. What was happening to her? It was like some non-human force was trying to take over her brain, telling her this was normal, that she should let him stay.

Actually, now that the mandatory feminine protest at his presence was over, the idea of sharing a room with such a man did have some merit. She was already on the cruise, so she might as well enjoy. Who would know? Besides Winter who would fully support the decision to have a fling while they were floating around the Caribbean Sea. With up-to-date immunizations, the only physical risk would be sore muscles if the look of him was any indication. Her mind instantly went to the drawer filled with sex toys and she stiffened. Maybe he'd expect too much out of her. Maybe, if she decided to look for a fling, she could seek out another man.

Anna turned to continue unpacking. Suddenly loud music blared from the TV, causing her to jolt in surprise. He instantly turned it down when she arched an unamused brow at him.

That's a good boy. Glad to see you can take silent orders.

"Relax," he chuckled. "We've got a while before our dinner reservations. I did tell you my brother made dinner reservations for tonight, didn't I?"

Anna shook her head in denial.

"No? Well, now you know. So why don't you leave the unpacking until later and come watch a movie with me?" He patted the bed next to him. "I promise to bite."

"You're a funny guy," she drawled wryly. There was something about his relaxed, easy manner that shook her to the core and she tried to fight the urge to give in. "Let me guess, you plan on planting yourself there the whole trip?"

"Does that mean you've caved in and I'm allowed to sleep on the bed now?"

"No. It means you need to get your lazy ass up and march next door to make new lodging arrangements."

Instantly, Andre was on his feet. The remote dropped on the bed as he moved. With stalking grace, he came at her. Anna panted weakly, too stunned by the quickness of his actions to do much else. His chin lowered and his eyes narrowed, losing some of their playfulness as he stopped a few inches from her. Without touching her, he whispered, "My ass is hardly lazy. If you disagree, I welcome you to reach around and feel for yourself. As for the rest of this conversation, though I appreciate to some extent the persistence of your ladylike refusal to believe me when I tell you that we're going to share this room, I grow weary of you telling me to leave. You're an adult, I'm an adult and we're sharing this room."

Anna made a weak noise, trying her best to answer. He smelled really good and the way his tone lowered, becoming all dominant and sure, made her tremble. She always liked a man who could take command. His eyes glanced down to her lips and she was sure he'd kiss her. In anticipation, her pussy throbbed ever so slightly.

His breathing deepened. "You have no reason to fear me and there is no reason why this situation can't work."

Anna found herself nodding, wondering how it was he could get her agree. No matter that she wanted to agree, the fact that he could force the acceptance out of her was puzzling. It was almost as if he had supernatural powers. The idea left her as soon as it came. The heat of his breath fanned her lips. He had to kiss her. Every nerve in her mouth reached out to him, tingling with anticipation and need.

"Good." His sudden dominative expression was instantly replaced with the easy smile of before. "Glad that's settled."

Andre turned, leaving her stunned and breathless as he crawled back onto the bed and flipped onto his back. Once again, the remote was lifted in his hand as he searched for something to watch. Her eyes roamed over him, taking in the length of his form, the tight muscles hidden beneath the T-shirt. She licked her lips, feeling freer than she had in a long time. Something had happened inside her when he'd stood close. His seductive scent, his piercing eyes—they did something to her and Anna decided that for once in her life, she was just going to go with it and see what happened.

Anna slowly crossed over to the round bed to look at the TV screen. Andre scooted over to make room. He glanced in her direction, purposefully winding his hands behind his head as if to prove to her he wouldn't touch her.

"You said you made reservations for us?" she asked, sitting on the edge, not really paying attention to her own words as she prompted him to speak. She wanted to hear his voice, to bring his dominating stare once more to hers.

"Christian did so the four of us could all officially meet." Andre crossed his ankles and her eyes again went down his legs only to glance briefly over the bulge at the apex of his thighs. "He's a stickler for details. I'm a more 'go with the flow' kind of guy."

"You have this scenario all planned out, don't you?" Anna hated to admit it but she was interested in him in more ways than just fascinating conversation, though she got the impression he'd more likely stare at her with his chocolate-brown eyes in order to win an argument than actually debate with her. When he didn't move, she kicked off her shoes and took off her jacket, dropping it on the floor. Lying next to him, she looked at the TV, not really seeing the screen. "And where does the flow usually take you?"

Anna was just starting to relax when suddenly Andre rolled onto his side. He cupped her face, whispering, "Right here," before pressing his mouth to hers. She gasped, allowing him access between her lips. He took it, delving his tongue deep inside her mouth. She'd wanted his kiss but didn't expect him to act so soon, especially when he'd walked away moments before.

It had been so long since she'd been kissed with such confidence that she couldn't think. Her hands wound up in his long, messy hair, pulling his mouth closer. Desire erupted inside her pussy, wetting her with eager passion. Her nipples strained to be free of her bra and silk shirt. Since she had first laid eyes on him her body had been begging for his touch, no matter how hard she tried to deny it. Now to feel it was like living in a dream.

Andre moaned, pulling back slightly. Anna didn't want this to stop. It felt too right, almost ordained by fate. Her thigh brushed against his hard cock pressing against his jeans and she pushed his shoulder to knock him onto his back. Without thought, she pulled at her A-line skirt, jerking it up over her thighs so she could straddle him.

Her hands went to his waistband, unzipping his fly to free his long, hard shaft. Grabbing his cock, she moaned, feeling the ready length of flesh in her palm. It had been so long since she had been fucked by flesh. People usually took one look at her and thought she was uptight. She wasn't—just cautious, and it seemed her body had made the decision to fuck Andre.

"Anna." He started to speak but she put her hand over his lips.

"Shh, don't talk, you'll only ruin it." Her body was wet, aching to be filled and stretched to the brink by his giant cock.

"But," he said against her hand. Andre's eyes swirled with purple and she—she should've known. By the way he threw off sexual charm from the first moment, she should have known he was supernatural. Anna groaned, wiggling so her clit rubbed against his hard thigh. She worked her hands over his cock as it poked out of his jeans. Supernaturals really turned her on, though she rarely acted on the impulse. There was something about their show of power. It made her go weak in the knees each time she saw it.

His body was hot, so she knew he wasn't a vampire. He looked too primitive for that kind. Weak and aching to ride him, she said, "Please tell me you're a shifter."

He looked surprised by the words.

"Oh please, let me see it, Andre. Let me see what you can do." Anna grabbed her breasts and rubbed the nipples through her silk shirt. The light from the TV flashed and blinked over them. "Please, Andre, tell me."

"Were-panther," he answered, the word breathless and stunned.

"Ah yes!" Anna nearly came just hearing it. Eagerly, she pushed her panties aside and lifted up over him. "Mm, shift for me. I want to see it."

Andre didn't speak but he also didn't shift. Anna drew his cock toward her sex. Her wet pussy was ready for him and she didn't hesitate as she sat down on his lap. Their clothes were still mostly on, adding to the hurried charm of their tryst.

"Shift for me, let me see your fangs," she cried, riding him hard. Anna grabbed his shirt, pulling at it. Claws came at her from the tips of his fingers and he slashed through her shirt, tearing it to shreds. She rocked harder, taking her pleasure on his sexy, perfect body. She scratched his chest, knowing he'd heal if she hurt him. "Fuck me like an animal!" she screamed.

Suddenly, Andre growled, a loud roar that echoed around them. Fangs flashed in his mouth. Their bodies still joined, he rolled her onto her back to take over the pace. He pounded into her hard, grunting as he lifted up on his arms for leverage. Anna had never felt so crammed full. She liked his power, his control over her, his dangerous purple-swirled eyes.

Her orgasm built and she arched, letting him do all the work as she was helpless against him. Andre roared again, this time leaning forward. Sharp teeth pierced her neck as his mouth latched onto her flesh. The white heat of it surprised her but she couldn't protest as her orgasm hit her like a hurricane against the beach.

Blissful, mindless pleasure washed over her as she let him drink from her, his hips still pumping hard into her. She didn't mind it, didn't mind the pain mixed with so much passion and pleasure. She needed this release, needed to forget everything—the game show, the public humiliation, the need to be perfect. Finally, he groaned, jerking his release inside her. His cock stayed buried deep.

Feeling so much better, she sighed happily and dropped her arms to her side. Now all she needed was a nap and she'd be refreshed. Anna closed her eyes.

Andre pulled away from her. When he didn't speak, she forced herself to look at him. He sat at the end of the bed, staring at her. Blood lined his lips and she jerked in mild surprise as she reached for her neck. It felt healed but a little sticky with blood.

"You like playing with the beast."

She wasn't sure if it was a statement or question, so she didn't answer. Uncomfortable with his strange stare, she finally moved, tugging down her skirt and crossing her arms over her tattered shirt and bra. "I don't know why you're being so moody."

"Well...I..."

"Well I?" Anna prompted. Frowning, she said, "You're not going to act the innocent victim, are you? The 'I was just lying here minding my own business and she fell on my cock' defense? Besides, you should be grateful."

Anna stood, walking to her suitcases. She opened the biggest one and pulled out a change of clothes.

"Grateful? You tempt the beast inside me, beg it to come out and play and you say I should be grateful to you for doing it?" Andre snorted in disbelief.

Anna started to laugh. "Do you actually blame me for bringing out your beast? You, who I wager has had his fair share of women in the past? I'm sure this isn't the first time that side of you has come out during sex."

"Well, yeah—yeah, I have." The look on his face couldn't have been more proud of the fact.

Why did the knowledge of him and other women make her jealous? She felt like she'd been in a five-year relationship with him, strange considering she'd just met him.

Andre took a deep breath. Did he actually say she was at fault for bringing out the beast in him? Was he complaining about being fucked by a gorgeous woman? That wasn't like him at all. In fact, normally he'd be thinking of clever ways to get her back onto his cock, like saying, *Hey, come get back on my cock*.

Damn, but her cunt had been so tight and sweet. Just thinking of it made him hard again. He'd thought he'd have a much more difficult time convincing her to sleep with him, especially since she came off as so uptight. He couldn't have been more wrong. It just proved that there were many facets to a person and the first impression wasn't always the most accurate. Though there was something very naughty librarian about the way she acted. Almost like a sexual switch flipping on, turning her from prude to wild woman in an instant.

He'd never had a human woman so acceptingly eager to ride his panther side either. That was a shock. She'd begged for him to shift, not that he would ever fully shift into the form of the cat during sex. He'd known instinctively that was not what she meant. She wanted his eyes to change. She wanted his fangs and his claws. She wanted to play with danger.

When she'd begged to be fucked by him, he couldn't deny her. He'd not thought, only acted on pure instinct, thrusting and claiming, fucking and taking all her sweet body had to give. It was only after that he'd realized he'd bitten her and made her his mate.

So soon?

Andre suppressed a moan. That was what was bothering him, not the fact that she'd fucked him. Sex was something he definitely wanted to do again. He'd just been shocked to have claimed a mate without as much as a thought of the consequences. But now that it was done, there was no undoing it. Things would have to work between him and Anna or he'd be forever alone. He wondered how she'd take the news.

"Oh, I understand now," Anna said, her beautiful lips pulling into a pouty smile. Her red hair hadn't fallen completely down from the bun though soft waves had come loose around her face. She looked at his crotch, to where his cock poked out from his unzipped fly. It was hard again, ready for more. "You're grumpy because you're not

done and you think I'm going to leave you hanging." Anna dropped her change of clothes and pulled her tattered shirt and bra off her shoulders, exposing her breasts. "What time is the reservation?"

"I forget," he answered honestly, staring at her chest. He knew his brother would come get them when it was time to go.

"Mm, then you better start undressing because he could be here any minute." Anna moved to the door and locked it. Andre suppressed a smile. She might talk bold but there was still some shyness in her.

"You're not one of those chicks with a shifter fetish, are you?" The idea marred his pleasure. Those women liked him because of what he could do, not because of who he was.

"First, I am not a 'chick'. I'm a highly intelligent woman. Second, maybe just a little fetish but I'd decided I was going to fuck you before I found out you were a shifter—if that helps set your delicate sensibilities at ease."

"Do you always talk down to people?" He couldn't stop the question.

"Ah..." She blinked in shock.

Andre wanted to take it back. Here she was standing with her shirt off, talking of fucking him and giving every indication she was going to do it again and he was trying to start a heated conversation with her. What in the hell was wrong with him?

"Forget it," he said, trying to backpedal. "I didn't mean it to come out so bad."

"No, no, you're right. I do talk down to people. It's just been a long time since anyone called me out on it. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to treat you as if you were stupid. It's just I've been looked at as a bit of a genius my whole life—I sometimes don't think how that comes across. It's tough being smart."

"Christian wouldn't let me watch that game show you were on because the gods ordered him to torture me or some such nonsense but he did tell me you couldn't even

get the simple questions right." Andre grinned. Why exactly was he provoking her? Maybe because it was too damned much fun.

"Ah, that question wasn't fair!" Anna protested. "Who cares what 1971 movie featured a character named Charlie Bucket?"

"Willy Wonka & The Chocolate Factory," Andre answered.

"Or who sang 'Pour Some Sugar on Me'?"

"Def Leppard."

"Who had an album called Dirk Wears White Sox?"

"Adam Ant."

"How can you know all that useless stuff?"

"How can you not?"

Anna sighed. "Man, did you get the wrong room. You should've hooked up with Winter. She knows all that pop culture rubbish. At least you'd have had something in common with her." Then, pausing, she frowned. "Wait, did you say the *gods* wouldn't let you watch me on the game show? What do you mean by that?"

"To answer your first comment, we are not switching rooms." Andre stood up from the bed. He instantly pulled off his shirt. "And, for the second, who but the Powers That Be could make sure you got into my room on this trip? You are mine, Anna. There is no way I'm sharing you with my brother."

"Um, thanks?" she said dryly. She eyed him, seeming aware that he skirted around her question about the gods. How exactly did one tell one's mate that they were preordained to be together, at least in a way that didn't send her running from the room instead of sleeping with him again?

Andre pushed the pants from his hips, easily stripping down to nothing. Her breath caught audibly and she stared at his cock like a woman starved.

"Come here," he ordered.

There was no hesitation as she obeyed. Anna stood directly before him.

"That's a good little human. Now take off the skirt." Andre made a show of licking his lips. Anna again obeyed, pushing her skirt and panties off her hips at the same time. "Damn, you smell so sweet, *princesse*."

Anna was surprised to see Andre's body was already on the way to recovery. He touched her hips, pulling her with him toward the bed. The lids fell lazily over his dark eyes. He stopped and slowly walked around her, lightly running his hands over her flesh. She began to turn but he stopped her.

"Don't move. I want to look at you." Andre's breath fluttered along her neck. His fingers danced down her spine, massaging her. She moaned as he paid particular attention to her ass. Moisture gathered in her slit and he worked his way down her legs. After some time of exploration, he said, "Lie down on the bed."

Anna rested on her back, watching the predatory grace with which Andre crawled next to her. He picked up the universal remote that seemed to control many things in the room and hit several buttons. The TV shut off, replaced by music. The overhead lights dimmed to a seductive glow and strange, disco-like lights floated around the room like tiny fairies. Then the bed started to move, slowly rotating in a circle underneath her. It was a strange feeling as if they were trapped on a private island no one else could get to.

He came over her, working his legs between hers. With rapt attention he explored her breasts, licking and biting them as he covered every inch with his mouth. She spread her thighs eagerly, pulling his hips down as he settled his hard cock against her. Andre bit her nipple before soothing it with his tongue. Her cunt was wet and achy. Soft, animalistic sounds escaped them as they kissed. Rubbing her pussy along his shaft, she tried to get him to thrust inside her as she wet him with her cream.

The teasing pressure felt so good, she moaned for more. "I want you inside me. I want it now."

He grinned, a completely dominant look of pleasure. "Do you know what's happening between us, Anna?"

Anna nodded. Of course she knew. How could she not? His hard cock was pressed against her clit and she rocked her hips in frantic search of release. "Yes, now fuck me."

Andre looked like he wanted to tease her some more but couldn't. His muscles flexed as he angled his hips to hers, pushing up on his strong arms. Everything about him was so damn graceful and sexy. Slowly, he thrust his cock inside her, prying her apart with his heavy length. Anna gasped as he filled her up. She rocked her hips, working him in shallow strokes.

"Mm, you're so fucking tight. I love how your pussy squeezes me." Andre pulled out only to push back in deep and fast. His thumb pressed along her clit, rolling it in slow circles. He pumped his hips hard and sure, pausing in between each push to pleasure her.

Anna squirmed against him, anchoring her feet on the bed as she met his thrusts. He worked her body like an expert, bringing her to the brink of climax, letting her fall only to build her up again. It was astonishing torture.

Anna pushed at his chest, forcing her body up as he sat back on his knees. She took over the pacing, moving to sit on him. He growled low in his throat, parting his lips to show her his fangs. She wanted him to bite her again, to drink her blood until she was lightheaded and weak. The idea of it brought her to a swift climax. Tremors racked her, jarring her body with pleasure. She waited for him to come but to her surprise, he held back.

When her body was spent, she was about to pull off when he commanded, "Get on your hands and knees. I'll show you how animals really fuck."

Her body still trembling from her release, she obeyed. Andre took her by her hips and without warning confidently thrust his hard cock inside her. Anna's cream had begun to dry and it was a rougher ride, creating sweet friction in her cunt. His cock pulsed, secreting lubricant. It didn't take long before she was wet again and his dick glided easily. He groaned, breathing heavily as he brought her desires back to the point of boiling.

"That's it, *princesse*. Give me another one," he urged, his French accent becoming thick in his passion. Sharp claws scratched her sides, not breaking the surface.

She came again, panting his name as she met release. Her whole body went rigid, tensing until she couldn't move. Andre kept going, riding her with a supernatural stamina. Suddenly, he jerked to a halt, keeping his cock buried deep. His hands gripped her sides. A soft moan left her lips and she mumbled incoherently, not even sure what it was she was trying to say to him. All she knew was that it felt good—really good.

"You like that, don't you?" he said, his hot breath fanning her back. She mumbled weakly. "Mm, good, you're too sated to move."

He pulled out and got off the moving bed. Anna tried to watch him as the lights danced along his body. As the bed spun her past, she caught a glimpse of his naked ass and heard him opening a dresser drawer. Anna tried to remember all he'd had in there but could only recall the lotion and handcuffs. Her stomach tensed. What did he have in mind? What toy would he bring back? At the idea, her body heated anew, cream building inside her to welcome him.

How is this possible? Anna had never been this insatiable. It was like she couldn't get enough. Each release made her want to fuck him again. Lips met her neck and shoulder and she hadn't realized he'd gotten back on the bed. The stealth of his movement was probably due to his cat-shifting abilities. He lay along her back, his legs straddling her thighs as his erection pushed into the tender cheeks of her ass.

His cock was moist and warm as if he'd rubbed it with heating lotion. It glided against her, wetting her cleft. He pulled back and she glanced over her shoulder to see what he was doing. She watched as he tied a strap-on harness around his hips, pulling the leather belt tight between his thighs. It squeezed his balls and he moaned as he did it. Then, inserting a dildo into the harness, he secured it in place. A light buzzing sounded as he came toward her. The size of the vibrator rivaled the size of the cock it was bobbing directly on top of. Two cocks came at her, one of flesh for her pussy and another of vibrating rubber for her ass.

Anna tensed. She'd never been double-stuffed before. Andre pulled her hips, urging her back onto her hands and knees. The wet vibrating tip touched the cleft of her ass first, the rounded, smooth tip probing her as Andre moved it up and down until arrowing in on her anus. Anna moaned as he pushed forward, spreading her. When the dildo was in position, he brought his cock to her pussy. Tiny vibrations worked up her spine from the toy.

"I'm going to ride you," he said. "Oh yeah, just like this."

He thrust forward, filling both holes at once. Anna gasped, clawing the mattress as the room spun around them. She felt so full, so complete. Andre rocked back and forth, fucking her slowly. It was too much. Her pussy and ass clenched in unison, tightening. She gripped the bedding, holding on tight as she climaxed. His cock jerked, answering her body's cry of pleasure as it spurted hot seed into her.

That was it. She was completely spent. Anna fell on the bed, her eyes closed, knowing it was quite possible she'd never move again.

Chapter Five

The soothing sounds of violins played over the dimly lit Sea Breeze Restaurant. Winter and Andre looked bored and Anna knew it was most likely not their scene. She and Christian however were right at home in the classy place. Still, as she looked across the linen tablecloth, Andre was the twin who drew her attention.

Identical twins.

At first, seeing a second Andre had been a shock but the two brothers' similarities ended with their looks. Then why was it the carefree, bedroom-eyed Andre and not the proper Christian that kept drawing her eyes? Remembering their intimate moments in the bedroom, she tried to hide a blush.

The soft light shone from a large dome in the ceiling. Thick, transparent columns hugged the sides of a long stairway leading out of the restaurant to the deck above. Tiny dots of light gave the impression of stars along the walls and, except for the low hum of conversation from other tables, Anna felt as if they were all alone. Christian, the perfect gentleman, ordered for the table. Andre, laughing, changed that order from escargots to steaks, baked potatoes and garlic bread. Anna was glad. After her performance in the bedroom, she was starving and suddenly craving meat. Winter had quickly changed her order to steamed vegetables and pasta, apologizing to Christian for being a vegetarian.

Anna watched Christian carefully, waiting to see if he showed any sign of being annoyed with her best friend. When he lifted Winter's hand and planted a kiss on the back of it, nodding as he took the time to sprinkle kisses over each finger, Anna covered her smile.

Winter looked at her and grinned from ear to ear. She'd been doing that ever since they discovered they were "shacked up", as Winter so delicately put it, with twins. Setting her glass of water down, Anna frowned. "Okay, that's it. What is going on? Why do you keep looking at me and laughing?"

Anna reached for her hair, knowing she'd checked it before they left and not a strand was out of place. The same could be said for her immaculate A-line skirt and white blouse. Andre on the other hand hadn't given his reflection a second glance—as was evident by his wrinkled T-shirt beneath a cleanly pressed sports jacket Christian had automatically thrust at him when he came to their door with Winter. Even Andre's hair was tousled from their time romping in the bed. Winter was in a tight white tank top and lightweight tie-dyed skirt, an odd comparison to the pressed slacks and linen button-down shirt Christian wore.

"You're married," Winter said, pointing directly at Anna.

Anna suddenly burst into a fit of loud laughter, not caring who heard her.

Winter pointed at Andre. "To him. They call it being *mated*. Guess the term 'married' is too human for them."

Anna blinked, her rounded eyes turning to Andre. He met her gaze steadily, probing her eyes in an uncharacteristically serious way.

"What?" she gasped, wondering why the idea of being married to the handsome were-panther wasn't at all disagreeable to her.

"You're married," Winter repeated, slapping her hand on the table a few times. "Before we left our room, Christian let it slip that we'd be joining his brother and his brother's mate for dinner. And we met you two!"

"What?" Anna asked again, clutching her wineglass. She looked over at Andre at her side. A hand slid over her upper thigh and he gave her a small smile.

Winter laughed harder, falling into Christian.

"That's a delicate way to break the news to her, *mon sucré*," Christian said to Winter. "You should have let Andre tell her in his own time and way."

"You don't understand," Winter said. "Anna would never impulse-marry. It's too funny. I love it. She's into flowcharts. I highly doubt this was on there. And the best thing is, she doesn't believe in divorce."

Anna stared wide-eyed at Andre, waiting to see what he'd say. Would he deny it? Her heart squeezed, hoping he wouldn't. It was insane but she wanted to be married to him. Suddenly, no other plan for her life seemed right. Andre was what she wanted. She felt it deep inside herself. Sure, there would be days she wanted to metaphorically kill him—just as she did Winter—but those little differences didn't make her want to run from him. It made her want to hold on tight and never let him go.

"Andre?" she whispered.

"Mated," he said. "We're mated, *princesse*. The Powers That Be fated that we should meet and come together on this trip. You're my wife."

Anna hesitantly put her hand over Andre's. "You mated yourself to me?" He nodded.

"Winter is right," Anna said, hope in her heart. "I don't believe in divorce."

Andre leaned forward, smiling as the playful light again entered his eyes. Whispering, he said right before capturing her lips, "Good thing, 'cause I don't plan on ever letting you slip through my fingers. Not to mention, I couldn't get my dick hard for another woman even if I wanted to." He put his hands up quickly. "Not that I do!"

His gentle kiss curled its way through her body, heating her and making her feel safe at the same time. When she was with Andre, it was like nothing else mattered. Nothing could hurt her. Nothing.

"I love you, Anna," he said, pulling back just enough to speak. "The Powers knew that I would and I do."

"Oh wow," Anna gasped, amazed that she'd ever say the words so fast in a relationship. "I love you too, Andre."

A low growl sounded in the back of his throat and she wrapped her arms around him, holding him tight. Their mouths entwined and she knew she'd need to get him back to the room fast or risk doing something very improper in public.

Winter laughed harder, so happy for her friend she wanted to cry. She'd long thought Anna needed someone special in her life, and one look at her best friend sitting next to the handsome Andre and she knew he was the man for her. It was all she could do to contain her giddy happiness for her friend.

"I don't see what is so funny," Christian said sternly at her side. He was brooding again.

"Funny? I'm not laughing because it's funny. I'm laughing because I'm happy for her." Winter shook her head. Wasn't that obvious? Okay, so maybe she was laughing because it was a little funny. Anna was so organized and planned. Who'd have thought she'd jump into a mating situation without a month's worth of list-making and logical debates?

Winter watched as Andre whispered in her friend's ear. She didn't need to hear what they said. The look of love in Anna's eyes was enough to put Winter at ease. Her friend had found true love at last.

"Ah, Winter," Andre said. Winter saw Christian visibly tense at the tone in his brother's voice. "Christian has something he needs to tell you too."

"Yeah," Anna giggled. "I'm not the only one who has gotten herself entangled with a were-panther."

It took Winter a moment to comprehend what they were saying. Her mouth fell open in shock.

"I tried to tell you, *mon sucré*, but you kept distracting me with this delicious body of yours as you began inventing varying were-species. You're my mate as well. The Powers That Be—"

"Ah yeah, yeah, I got all that," Winter rushed, quieting him. "Powers That Be, mating... Are you telling me you're really a were-panther?"

"Ah," Christian blinked, adorably flustered. "But we—"

"Just kidding. I believed you." Winter smiled, giggling at his stunned look. "Though, now that I think of it, I can't believe you didn't shift for me. I told you how panthers are my favorite animal."

"Andre shifted for me," Anna admitted with a laugh.

"What?" Winter demanded, shocked even more by Anna's admission. "That is so not fair! Christian, I want to see you shift too. How come I'm the only one left out here?"

"Mon sucré? Did you not know what was going on? You're my wife and just like Anna, I don't believe in divorce. Our talk was not a joke. It was very real. We are very married."

"Yeah, yeah," Winter dismissed his words. So she was married. The connection she felt with him was a real and powerful thing. "The fates must have thought I was ready, Christian. And who am I to complain or question it? Especially," she paused, grabbing his shirt front and wrinkling it as she pulled him roughly toward her, "when it gives me such a delicious," she kissed him briefly on one cheek before moving toward the other, "handsome," she kissed him again, moving to hover over his mouth, "husband like you."

Christian closed the distance between them and she knew this was where she wanted to be—in his arms for all eternity.

"Mm, oh, speaking of eternity," Christian said, pulling back. Winter stared at him, somehow not surprised he'd read her mind. She felt him in her and felt herself in him. "You and I shall complete what we discussed—you becoming immortal not only through the Powers' wishes but my way as well, just after you give birth to our son."

He touched her stomach.

"Pregnant?" Anna asked from across the table, her eyes wide. "Winter, you're pregnant?"

For once Winter was a little shocked as she looked down at her stomach. "Wow, I... Um, wow."

"I don't believe it," Anna said in surprise.

"Oh, did I forget to mention that part of it? Once you have my son, you too will become immortal," Andre said. Anna was about to speak when he silenced her with his mouth.

Winter smiled. The man really did know how to handle her friend perfectly. Then, turning back to her own new husband, she asked, "A baby? Really?"

Christian nodded. "Are you upset?"

"I'm surprised," she admitted, letting the idea sink in a little. "But I guess parenthood could be a groovy adventure. So—I have the perfect name for a boy. What do you think of Tree? Or Stone? Or Tuesday? I've always loved the days of the week. Do we have to stop at one child? What about a tribe? We could name them Monday, Tuesday, Bob, Wednes—"

Christian moaned, pulling her to his mouth once more to stop her babbling. Against her lips, he said, "We'll discuss it later, *mon sucré*. Much, much later."

About Michelle M. Pillow

Michelle M Pillow has always had an active imagination. Ever since she can remember, she's had a strange fascination with anything supernatural—ghosts, magical powers, and oh...vampires. What could be more alluring than being immortal, all-powerful, and eternally beautiful? After discovering historical romance novels in high school, it was only natural that the supernatural and romance elements should someday meet in her wonderland of a brain. She's glad they did, for their children have been pouring onto the computer screen ever since.

She is married (madly in love) and has a wonderful family.

Michelle would love to hear from you and tries to answer her emails in a timely fashion. That is if the current hero will let her go long enough to check the computer.

About Mandy M. Roth

I grew up fascinated by creatures that go bump in the night. From the very beginning I was odd and creative—a combo every mother hopes for. After studying art all the way through school, I majored in it at college. One rather unexpected child later, I changed my major and finished with a great balance of art and business. I'm working on my MBA with a concentration in marketing but it's taken a back seat while I plug away at the keyboard.

I live in Ohio with my husband and three boys. They definitely keep me busy. Between convincing one he really doesn't need to have his eyebrow pierced, listening to the middle one's philosophy on life and pulling the youngest off the countertop, I do manage to eek in a very small amount of writing time during the day. More often than not, my writing is done from 8pm until 3 am.

If the following years are half as good as my first one in writing, I'll be a happy gal! I'm doing something I love, meeting tons of new people, have the greatest readers in the world and the support of my family. The only thing I still don't have is that hot lycan on a motorcycle. I'm working on it, though.

Mandy and Michelle welcome comments from readers. You can find their website and email addresses on their author bio pages at www.ellorascave.com.

Also by Michelle M. Pillow

Call of the Sea
Call of the Untamed
Maiden and the Monster
Scorched Destiny
Taming Him

Also by Mandy M. Roth

Pisces Phenomenon Solo Tu

By Michelle M. Pillow & Mandy M. Roth

Pleasure Cruise Red Light Specialists Stop Dragon My Heart Around *anthology*

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