

Leopard Tails: Alchemist

Isabella Jordan

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Chapter 1

"Are you hungry?"

Katrina Wilson's heart leapt into her throat at the deep voice that came from behind her. She knew better than to stand gawking outside restaurants with her stomach growling. Yeah, okay, she was starving. She'd maxed out all three of her credit cards and would have to give up her hotel room at the end of the week. After that, she didn't know what she'd do. Would she end up hooking? That was probably what the guy behind her thought she was doing anyway.

A story quickly came to her.

"I'm waiting for my husband." Katrina was deliberately curt. She didn't owe anyone an explanation anyway, but that didn't stop her from turning around to face him.

The man was so tall she had to look up and the face she saw almost made her heart stop in her chest.

It was *him*. Joey.

"Well, your husband must be one heartless bastard, Katrina." His voice was soft and a smile played about his sexy lips. "His wife is out on the streets wearing a black wig, starving, and staring into the windows of restaurants."

"I'm n-not working the streets if that's what you think."

"I know."

"Why do you think I'm starving?"

He stood in the shadows, his dark eyes moving over her. "It's in your eyes, Katrina."

Well, there was no point in playing, was there? She was starving and there wasn't a bastard husband. The serious set of his expression told her that he knew that already.

"Why are you here?"

"I've been looking for you for weeks," he said simply.

Katrina's heart was slamming in her chest. Memories of the only night she'd spent time with this guy had adrenaline surging through her. Back when she'd had a job, she and her co-worker, Patsy, had been heading to a convention in Portland. It had seemed silly to be wary of stopping for gas in a town called Hell and she'd joked with Patsy about that.

They *had* stopped there and that night, to her great horror, she'd watched a pack of werewolves tear her friend apart. *Werewolves*. Until she'd seen it with her own eyes, she would have laughed at anyone who tried to tell her that werewolves were real outside of a movie theatre. Well, they were and she'd seen them kill. It had been gruesome.

It probably would have been better if they'd killed her that night too, but instead they'd held her hostage. She'd had one small bit of luck. One of the older werewolves among them had watched out for her, keeping them from pimping her out the way they had the other women they'd kidnapped. The werewolves were evil but clever. They ran the small town using their raunchy little nightclub and the women they held captive to make money for them. Worse, they often killed the johns that came to their club looking for quick, dirty sex. They'd let the women tire them out, then they'd break in, kill the guy and take his money and his vehicle.

That's what they'd planned for Joey that Halloween night. Old Ben, the one who'd helped her, had been sick that night and Mark, their leader, decided it was time for her to put out. Joey had paid to have sex with her and Mark had told her when she was done, that the werewolves were coming for him. It had seemed like a living nightmare.

Yet nothing had turned out quite the way she had expected. Katrina had steeled herself for a totally humiliating and degrading experience because the maniacal leader of the wolf pack was forcing her to sleep with a man for money. Only Joey hadn't been what she'd expected. He'd been clean, mostly sober. And honestly, he was the most beautiful man she'd ever laid eyes on. None of that hurt.

To her shame she'd enjoyed every moment of her time in his arms. She'd experienced heights of pleasure with him that night that she'd only read about in romance novels. She hadn't expected to actually feel all of the naughty and wonderful things he'd made her feel. Even now when she went to bed she'd think about her time with him when she masturbated. It helped her forget the hunger and sleep.

Now here he was again.

"Why have you been looking for me?" Katrina asked him.

"Because I haven't been able to get you out of my head since that night."

A thrill of excitement raced through her at his frank words. So he remembered that night too. The beginnings of desire, even out here on this cold April night, had her insides fluttering.

Oh, yeah. The craving and desire was still there. She wanted him and she couldn't deny that. As she stared up into his handsome face, the longing that welled up within her was overwhelming.

He was gorgeous...

But he was a beast inside. She couldn't forget that.

After they'd made love that night, the werewolves had stormed into the room just as they'd promised. She'd tried to warn Joey so he would get out of there. Her warning had come too late and she'd known the greatest terror in that moment. She'd been sure she'd watch the werewolves tear Joey apart just as they had Patsy.

Instead, she'd watched him change into an enormous black cat -- into a monster just like them. He'd fought them off easily before changing back into the man she'd slept with and getting them out of Hell on his motorcycle.

He'd found them another hotel where they could stop and rest. Once he'd fallen into deep sleep late the next morning, she'd slipped away without a clue as to what she would do or where she would go.

And she was still struggling to make it each day. The werewolves knew her identity. Taking her purse with her ID and her checkbook had been one of the first things they'd done. She'd had her three credit cards in the pocket of her jeans from dinner with Patsy that fateful evening and she'd managed to keep those hidden from the werewolves. Now she'd reached the limits of them.

She couldn't go home and take the chance of endangering her parents and friends who probably believed she was dead. That meant that she now had no job or place to stay. She was out of money. The future was bleak.

Cupping her elbow, Joey steered her toward the door of the small Italian restaurant.

"Let's have something to eat. We'll talk."

Katrina wanted to tell him they weren't going to have anything together but she was so damned hungry. The crackers and croutons she'd taken from the salad bar downtown hadn't been much to live on for the last two days.

Following him into the restaurant, she welcomed the warmth of the cheery little dining room. A hostess seated them at a small, wooden table in the corner with a slightly frayed red tablecloth and sturdy, wooden chairs. She shrugged out of her coat and hung it on the back of her chair before taking a seat across from Joey.

The waitress arrived and Katrina found herself too choked up to speak. Scared as she was, she so damned grateful for his kindness and the prospect of food that she felt like crying in relief. It was the first moment of comfort, as nervous as she was to see him again, that she'd had since before she'd been kidnapped by the werewolves.

Joey's dark eyes moved over her and the concern she read in his face made tears sting the backs of her eyes. He ordered for them both while she sat there fighting the urge to cry.

"Katrina."

She jumped when his warm hand closed over hers. She didn't pull away from him. It summed up her feelings at the moment, really. He scared her and reminded her of that horrible time that had ended her life as she'd known it. At the same time, her body craved him and his kindness was a balm to her battered soul.

"I'm glad I found you." His warm eyes were the color of dark chocolate, gazing into hers. "I missed you that morning."

She didn't miss the slight sarcasm in his tone. He meant when she'd left him in the hotel room they'd found after they left Hell. Swallowing back her tears and anxieties to the best of her ability, Katrina nodded.

"Were you really that surprised I ran away, Joey?" Smiling up at the waitress who brought them water in tall plastic glasses, she waited for the woman to leave straws and walk away before she continued. "Think about it. Look at the circumstances when we met."

He squeezed her hand lightly. "I knew you weren't a prostitute, Katrina. I told you that."

"That's more than I knew about *you*."

Joey flinched, but didn't withdraw his hand as she half expected him to. To her surprise, she felt a pang of guilt. He *was* trying to help her and he had no reason to.

Or did he want something?

"Why are you here?" Katrina asked him again.

Joey's expression darkened. "I'm here for *you*, Katrina. I don't know how else I can communicate that."

Taking a long drink of her water, Katrina thought over her response carefully. While he was being nice to her, helping her, she had no idea what his true agenda was. Ted Bundy was very charming too, from what she'd read. Once he'd gained the trust of the women who became his victims, he'd butchered them.

Yet Ted Bundy had only been a man with a sick mind. This guy could change into a big frickin' cat. He'd taken out three werewolves last Halloween. He was more deadly than a hundred serial killers. "Yes, but what do you want with me?"

Again, she caught a flash of pain in his expression. This time it faded quickly and his expression became a mask of pure calm. He folded his hands on the table before him. Outwardly he looked like someone engaged in nothing more than a casual conversation.

Katrina sensed the outer calm was deceptive. She felt something else, something intense and determined that coiled tightly inside him. Her heart's pace picked up while she waited to see what he'd say.

She knew that she could potentially be in a lot of danger. Granted, she was in a public place with him. Yet if the shit hit the fan, she was in big trouble and she knew it. The police were looking for her now too. They wouldn't help her.

"Katrina, what's going on in that pretty head? I wish you could see how nervous you look."

"Nervous as a long tailed cat in a room full of rockers?"

"Cute." A corner of his mouth curved up into a smile. "What's going on, Katrina? What are you so afraid of? I hope it's not me that you're running from. If that's the case, I'll go and you won't have to worry about me again."

Now what did she do? She could tell him it was him she was hiding from and end this right now. If he was telling the truth. Maybe he meant to harm her regardless. In that case, she was screwed anyway because she had no chance against him, whatever he was. She knew that.

She could tell him the truth. Trust him. She'd done it once and he'd helped her out of Hell that dark, Halloween night when he didn't have to. He could have just escaped alone.

"You first," Katrina told him. "You tell me exactly what you want from me and I'll tell you my side of things since the last time we saw one another."

Joey nodded, his gaze dropping to the table before him briefly before returning to search her face.

"I've told you already. I can't get that night with you out of my mind. I still have the taste of you in my mouth."

The gnawing hunger in the pit of her stomach gave way for the first time in weeks to a different kind of hunger. One that had the walls of her cunt clenching, ensnaring her in a web of growing desire.

"I've decided that I want you for my m... girlfriend."

Okay, that shocked her just enough to make her pause. "What? You've *decided*? I don't get a vote?"

"I'd like to have you for my lover. One day maybe more." Joey changed his words but the intent behind them was clearly the same. The determined set of his features, the way his sexy lips were pressed together. He meant business. "I want a relationship with you."

"Joey, people don't just decide they're going to have a relationship with someone they met under the circumstances we met under, then buy them dinner and try to cultivate a relationship," Katrina pointed out. "After what happened to us, it's not just a simple decision, Joey."

That threw him off a little. He didn't have a snappy comeback for that.

"You started to say something else," Katrina pointed out. "Something that starts with an M."

Joey's demeanor was unapologetic. "I was going to say mate. Among my kind they mean the same thing, mate, lover."

Mate? It was a term used to describe the animal world.

Yet he was an animal, wasn't he? At least part of him.

"What are you anyway?"

Bitterness crept into his eyes at that and he released her hand. "Someone's science project. Half man, half leopard. But it's something we've found a way to control."

"We?"

"I'm not the only one, Katrina. There are more like me, both manmade and those born out in the world."

Science projects? Manmade monsters? Jesus, what was he saying?

"What do you mean control?"

"We can stop the transformation from man to... we're working on finding a way to make that permanent and just live as men."

When she didn't say anything -- she didn't know what to say -- he went on. "Remember the werewolves in Hell? They may have been evil fuckers but they had the right idea, Katrina. They stayed together and they worked together. And that's what we've done. We've found a place of our own. We'll look after each other and we'll face our challenges together."

"What's your town called?" she had to ask.

"Purgatory." Joey chuckled at what must have been a look of disbelief on her face. "I'm joking. The town is called Madden. It was there long before us but the population is low and the people who live there are mostly older folks. It's a great place."

The waitress delivered their food and Katrina could barely wait for her to leave the table before pouncing on the steaming plate of spaghetti like someone completely lacking in manners. Joey just sat watching her eat and she was too damned hungry to care.

"It would be a great place to start a new life, Katrina. I get the feeling that's what you need right now."

Once she'd swallowed the food that had filled her mouth when he said that, she stopped to meet his gaze. "And be your mate, right?"

"Why not? Where else do you have to go, Katrina? The werewolves are looking for you, right?"

Katrina nodded. It was worse than that.

A couple of the werewolves had caught up with her in Kansas City. She'd barely escaped them that night, darting into a cab and having the driver take her to the police station. She'd been too scared at the time to do anything but tell them the truth and when she had, they had immediately sent her for psychiatric evaluation.

In the hospital that night, she'd finally felt safe. Her safety had been an illusion. The werewolves had followed her to the hospital, killed the kind nurse who'd taken care of her and cleaned her wounds. Katrina didn't see what happened, she only heard the woman's screams in the hallway as she made her way out the window of the hospital room. The woman's gentle face still lingered on the edges of her dreams during the few stolen moments when she actually slept. How many times had she berated herself for not going back and trying to save the nurse?

Katrina had hidden on the hospital grounds for days after that, terrified. Remarkably the wolves had left her alone. When she ventured closer to the hospital in those terrible days, she'd been curious to see what the forensics experts made of the werewolf DNA she was certain they would find at the scene.

She'd lingered outside the hospital administrator's office, but heard no mention of strange DNA. Instead, she'd been horrified to learn that the authorities were looking for *her*. They believed she'd killed the nurse and she was considered unstable, dangerous.

Her. Prior to this, the wildest thing she'd ever done was get a tattoo of a butterfly on her ankle.

Where else did she have to go, indeed?

Joey allowed her to finish the huge plate of pasta, watching her. He motioned the waitress back and asked for another basket of bread since she'd finished off the first one single-handedly.

"We've been on the run, Katrina. Just like you. We understand." He took a sip from the glass of water before him, his movements graceful and easy. "You'd fit in well."

"Except that I'm not like you," she pointed out.

"There are other humans among us," he explained.

"Mates?"

Joey nodded. "And friends, family members."

"I still don't understand exactly what you are."

"I'll tell you everything you want to know, as much of it as I know, anyway. The rest we can learn together."

He had an answer for everything.

"We can protect you," he said meaningfully.

Katrina dabbed at the corners of her mouth with a napkin. "What happens when you get tired of me?"

Joey leaned toward her. The wild smell of him, and the easy way her body remembered his scent, captured her senses. Pulses of heat raced through her blood and she began to tremble from the myriad of emotions and anxieties that were having a go at her. Lust wasn't the least of them.

"Growing tired of you, Katrina, hardly seems possible. I only spent a few moments with you, inside you, and that memory is as embedded in my blood as the leopard is."

The juices began to build within the heating flesh at the top of her thighs. Her nipples beaded hard and now that her hunger for food was sated, her hunger for him, both physical and psychological, demanded satisfaction.

"Want to sleep on it?" Joey asked.

The invitation in his eyes was clear and she doubted it was sleep he really had in mind. For that matter, neither did she.

"Sure," she told him.

Chapter 2

Katrina was a little embarrassed when she took Joey back to the small, seedy hotel room where she'd been living for the last several days. She'd come to realize that there were transients living there, and a few hookers used the hotel too. Her room had dirty wallpaper that was pulling away from the wall in several places and a single full bed with dingy sheets and a comforter with a big rip down the middle of it. The television was broken, the air conditioner worked so well she'd wake up with icicles coming from her nose, and one of the windows wouldn't lock -- which worried her.

"It's okay," Joey told her, closing the door behind them and locking it. He peeled off the dark jacket he wore and draped it across the one chair in the room. "You can be out of here tomorrow if you want."

Oh, she wanted to be out of here. Part of her just wanted to go with him regardless. And he'd been right about one very crucial fact. She had no other options. "I don't have anything to --"

Joey was on her before she could finish the sentence, halting her words when his mouth came down over hers. His tongue stroked hers and the taste of him evoked the incredible feelings she remembered from the night with him in Hell. The scent of him made her mouth water, consuming her senses. Her mind spun with the onslaught of sensations when his lips slid over hers. Joey held her tightly, rocking his arousal against her.

It was all she could do to break that kiss and pull back just enough to look him in the eye. "I can see where this is going," she managed between gasps. "But with all your talk about setting up a town like the werewolves, how do I know you aren't planning to pimp me out like they were?"

His eyes were gleaming as they gazed down into hers. "I'm going to prove to you tonight that I never want another man's hands on you," he vowed. "I'm going to be the only lover in your life."

Her throat tightened. He sounded so sincere. How could he mean that when they probably hadn't spent a total of five hours together?

He snatched the wig from her head so fast it startled her. He pulled the nylon cap that held her real hair in place off too. Sinking his fingers into her hair, he gently massaged her scalp as the long strands fell around her shoulders. God, how did he instinctively know how she liked to be touched?

"I love your hair, Katrina." He lifted a pale lock to his nose, inhaling deeply. "Since Halloween night, you've been all that I've thought of. Your big blue eyes, your delicate little face, your hair."

His fingers plucked at the buttons of her coat, pulling it off to reveal the sweater and pants she wore beneath. Letting the coat drop to the floor, he easily pulled her sweater over her head.

His breath was a rough hiss as his hands ran up the flesh of her sides. "Damn, you're skin and bones. How long has it been since you'd eaten?"

Now she felt very self-conscious. She'd always been on the skinny side anyway. At the moment, she probably looked like a starving dog.

His hands slid up her back to unhook her bra, pulling it away from her skin like a mask. Brushing a kiss to one of her nipples, he bent to unfasten her pants and gently push them down her legs.

When she stood nude before him, she wrapped her arms around her middle. He didn't speak. His hand cupped her between her legs, two fingers sliding into her dampening slit.

"Ah," Joey growled, low in his throat. "Your body doesn't lie, Katrina. You want me, just like I want you. Do you see how good we'll be together?"

Katrina arched her back, her greedy body melting at his touch.

Joey's fingers were gentle and arousing, spreading the juices that he found there and making her pussy contract in need. He parted the folds of her cunt so he could easily slide into her entrance. They filled and stretched her, and her greedy passage closed around them.

"Have you thought about my touch since that night, Katrina?"

He expected her to talk? Everything on earth had come to a grinding halt for her except for the exquisite pressure of his teasing fingers and he wanted conversation? "Yes."

Katrina cried out when his fingers pulled free and trailed upward from her pussy to her tummy, then circled the hard beads of her nipples with the moisture from her pussy. The scent of her own arousal drifted up to her like heavy perfume. Her face warmed while he watched her reaction and her clit began to throb, clamoring for his attention.

His mouth claimed hers for a kiss, his tongue sweeping into her mouth. When he tilted his head, the kiss became one of desperation. His tongue licked at hers, slid over her lips. Katrina wrapped her arms around him, clinging to him. Joey growled low in his throat at that, pulling her tighter against him.

As if he couldn't deny himself any longer, he bent his head, his lips going to her breast. His tongue stroked over one hard nipple enticingly. With his hand, he framed the mound of her breast while he laved her.

"That feels good," she whispered. Arching, she pushed herself at him with the need for him to take her deeper into his mouth. Katrina wanted him to suckle her with abandon.

Joey rewarded her by doing just that. Drawing the tiny, hard tip into his mouth he began to give her what she craved. Katrina moaned. It felt that good. Pulses of pure pleasure spread down toward her stomach and cunt. Her pussy walls clenched hard with each soft, wet lash of his teasing tongue. Her thighs squeezed together, the heated flesh between them slick with her juices.

He pulled back to grin up at her, the handsome devil's dark eyes shining. "Have I convinced you to come with me yet?"

Would he stop if she said yes?

Katrina grinned at him. "No."

His mouth dove for her other breast, lavishing it with the same attention he'd given the first. Katrina shivered and bucked against him, the relentless sensations smashing her sanity. She barely noticed he was moving them closer to the bed until he nudged her back onto it.

Joey pressed her onto her back with her knees hanging over the foot of the bed. He pushed her thighs open and she let him, knowing what he intended to do and wanting it with a desperation that overwhelmed her. He sank down to his knees on the floor and slid his hands beneath her to cup her bottom and lift her up to his mouth.

He only licked her at first, swiping his tongue through her swollen folds. She lost her breath and her hips shot off the bed. Warm juices coated her pussy and matted the tight curls covering it. Joey took his time, lapping at her pussy and sucking at her swollen clit by turns. His tongue burned a devastating path down through her slit, then he plunged his tongue into her opening.

Screaming, Katrina convulsed in pleasure. Her frantic pleas filled the room around them while her pussy pulsed and contracted. Before her orgasm could really blossom, his tongue pulled out of her, drifting up to lick at her clit while her hands clutched at the comforter beneath her and she begged him not to stop. Hell, who knew what she was saying. Tiny explosions of ecstasy ripped through her, making her writhe on the bed. Yet the small sampling of pleasure was not enough. She wanted more.

She wanted a big, wonderful, sanity-smashing orgasm and she wanted it right now. His tongue was a silken flame in her cunt, lapping at her juices and teasing her with quick, little dives into her aching passage. How was she going to survive this?

"Please," she whispered.

Joey rose above her at her whispered plea, pulling off his own sweater and yanking at the front of his jeans. "Please what? Take you with me?"

When he'd rid himself of his pants, he pushed her legs wide apart and poised the heated length of his cock at her weeping entrance.

"You know what I want." Katrina clutched his arms with her hands, trying to pull him down to her.

Joey chuckled and began to push into her with a slow glide that drove her crazy. She bucked against him, grabbing at his arms and shoulders. He wouldn't be hurried. His cock stretched her unbelievably until his entire length was buried inside her. Katrina's head tossed on the bed but he waited, not moving. Her desire for release was so strong now she was afraid she wouldn't make it.

When he began to thrust inside her, she nearly came right away. Her muscles tightened around the hot, broad cock that plunged inside her. She struggled to breathe, struggled to lift her hips to meet his every thrust. Joey fucked her with smooth strokes of his cock, holding her in place with the firm grip of his fingers digging into her flesh. The pressure built at an alarming rate. She was so close to coming now. Tremors began to pass through her, one after the other, preparing for the release that was coming to blow her apart.

Katrina trembled while he watched her. Perspiration gathered between her breasts, beading her forehead. Her pussy began to throb and convulse. "Let go, Katrina." His voice was a harsh whisper. His face was flushed and his expression was one of steely determination. "Scream for me."

And scream she did as the orgasm finally tore through her. Pleasure raced along her, from her pussy and clit, racing through her blood like molten lava. His thrusts gained in strength and speed as the ecstasy rocked her body hard. She convulsed around his cock as he began to shake and moan with his own release.

Hot jets of sperm filled her over and over. His grip on her hips turned almost painful. Shudder after shudder seemed to run through his body and into hers. They strained together, their bodies locked in passion until every ounce of their energy was spent.

Joey climbed slowly onto the bed, pulling her with him up to the ruined headboard. It felt so wonderful to be held in his arms, against his heart. Katrina snuggled against his chest, content and sated.

"So?"

Did he want to talk again? Katrina grinned but closed her eyes. Sleep was claiming her fast, shutting her mind and body down.

"So?" She threw the question back at him.

"Will you go with me?"

The question pulled her mind out of its sleepy lull. He was asking her to trust him, to go with him to who-knew-where and let him take care of her. Of course, if she could enjoy *this* every night, the shelter of his arms and the incredible pleasure he seemed to draw from her with great ease, well, that was a pretty powerful enticement.

Yet there were so many other things to consider. "Will I be able to work in this town you talk about?"

He yawned above her. "I suppose. You certainly don't have to."

"I want to." She didn't want to be completely dependent on someone she hardly knew.

"Then you can. Anything else?"

"Well, we didn't use anything just now." And wasn't now one hell of a time to think about birth control? "If I were to... you know... would the child be like you or...?"

"From what I understand, Katrina, our kind must be full blooded to achieve transformation. So any children we have will lead mostly normal lives."

"Mostly?" Katrina had to wonder what that meant.

"There will be time to talk, Katrina. Once we get to Madden. You're exhausted. Rest now."

That she could definitely do.

"After you answer me."

Katrina sighed. "You asked if I wanted to sleep on it," she reminded him.

“After having you again, I need to know now.”

“Then I’ll go.” She had no other prospects. She wanted the protection she knew he could offer her if the werewolves found them. The sex was really good.

And it wasn’t like she was agreeing to marry the guy. It was an opportunity to live better than she was now until she decided what to do with her life, right? She’d be safe from the werewolves. Once she was there, she didn’t have to stay.

Joey pulled her closer to his chest at her answer and Katrina fell immediately to sleep.

Chapter 3

She'd packed up the three outfits she'd lived in since she escaped Hell and they left the next morning. Katrina slept most of the way to the small town in Maine. He'd wakened her only once to eat dinner in Pennsylvania. He'd slept for a couple of hours at a rest area that night and then he'd continued their drive. All she knew was that they arrived in the small, seaside town late the next morning and for all her sleep, she was still exhausted.

She'd never been to Maine before and it was beautiful despite the fact that it was freezing cold there. The view of the ocean that ran along the edge of the little town was breathtaking. The sleepy homes nestled into the wintry landscape were as perfect as a painting. The town of Madden amounted to one short strip where there were about three restaurants, a clothing shop, a gift shop, a butcher shop, and a hardware store. There were some bed and breakfasts there too which only made sense.

"We aren't far from Bar Harbor. We'll stop here before we go home," Joey told her, pulling into the driveway of an attractive older home just outside the small town. It was painted in white with black shutters and appeared very well kept for a house its age. "I have to pick up my cat."

If Katrina was still lingering on the edges of drowsiness, that pulled her right out of it. "Your cat?"

Joey glanced at her out of the corner of his eye. He parked the car and shut the engine off. "Yes."

"Don't you think that's... I don't know. Weird?"

Joey laughed. "No, why?"

"Just curious." Okay, now she felt awkward. "So, is it afraid of you at all?"

He shook his head, taking off his safety belt. "No, that's why I have a cat. To her, I'm a curiosity. Another pet, a bird or dog, would be impossible though."

"They know what you are?"

"Yes."

"What's the cat's name?"

Joey threw her that little lopsided grin of his. "Tiger."

He released her seat belt and motioned to her with his hand, opening the car door. "Come with me. Meet my friends."

Katrina slowly climbed out of her side of the car, stretching as she did and trying to rake her fingers through the wild tangle of her hair. "Are they..."

"Ilia is," Joey explained, understanding that she was asking if his friends were like him or human. "His wife, her grandmother, and their son are not."

"Their son isn't..."

"Ilia adopted him."

"Ah."

She followed him onto the porch where he softly knocked at the door. A striking man with dark hair and dark eyes answered the door, smiling at Joey. Warmly clasping Joey's hand, he invited them in. "Who is your lovely guest?"

Katrina didn't miss the man's thick accent. Her gaze met his. Russian?

"This is Katrina," Joey said in the way of introduction. "Katrina, Ilia Kerensky."

She accepted the hand the other man offered her and shook it. Okay, he wasn't so scary. Like Joey, he was very attractive but he didn't make her feel threatened.

"Hey, Joey," a woman's voice called.

Katrina stepped inside just in time to see a gorgeous woman walk into the living room. Her dark hair just touched her shoulders and gleamed like silk, the perfect complement to the smooth ebony of her skin. She wore a tangerine colored sweater with jeans and exuded a confidence that Katrina really admired.

And she was human, Katrina reminded herself. That was good to know.

"Who do we have here? Is this that lady friend you've been pining for all this time?"

Did Joey actually blush at the woman's words? Katrina grinned up at him as the woman walked right up to her, holding out her hand. "Hi, I'm Molly, Ilia's wife."

"Katrina. Nice to meet you."

"Well, I'm glad to finally meet you." Molly shot Joey a teasing grin. "Come in. Sit down."

She led them toward a cozy corner with a large couch and two matching upholstered chairs where the four of them sat down.

"How's Tiger?" Joey asked.

"Renard ain't going to give up that damned cat, Joey." Molly chuckled good-naturedly. "I told Ilia last night that it was going to be ugly when you came to get her."

"Renard is Molly and Ilia's son," Joey explained to Katrina. "You'll just have to get a kitten for him after this, Molly."

"No." Glancing at her husband with mischief in her eyes, Molly shook her head. "Too many damned cats around here without adding to them."

Contrary to what Katrina would have expected from the comment, both men smiled.

"So will you be joining us up here, Katrina?" Molly asked her now.

Katrina nodded, but she wanted to be clear that it was her choice. "For now."

Molly studied her for a moment. "I think you'll like it up here. I've always lived in the city, so it was quite a change moving to a small town like this one. But they've got good schools here for my baby and I started my own beauty salon. Business is surprisingly good."

"It looks like a wonderful town," Katrina told her.

"I don't want to give Tiger back!" The high wail of a child's voice drew their attention to the dining room. Only it wasn't a child that stood there but a very old black woman. According to Joey, that would be Molly's grandmother.

"He don't wanna give back that ole cat," the woman announced. Using her cane, she slowly entered the room. Her thinning hair was solid white and her weathered, dark skin was lightly lined. Her eyes were bright and alert as they scanned the occupants in the room, eventually falling on Katrina and remaining on her.

"Katrina, this is my Gramma Ruby," Molly told her. In a lower voice she said, "She's harmless, don't worry."

Katrina didn't know what to make of that until the old woman stopped right behind the chair she was sitting in. She jerked when she felt the woman touching her head.

"Look at that hair," Gramma Ruby mumbled. "White as mine only you a young woman. You *are* a woman, aren't you?"

It took Katrina a moment to realize the woman was asking if she was like Joey and his friend Ilia. "Yes."

"Let go of her head," Molly griped as she rose from the couch. "She'll think you're checking her for head lice or something."

"That your real color, girl?" Gramma Ruby wasn't going to be deterred.

Since Katrina had no idea what the woman was doing and she didn't want to insult anyone, she nodded and waited for the woman to be finished.

And within seconds the old woman was. She swatted Joey on the shoulder to get his attention. "This your woman?"

Joey grinned up Gramma Ruby with genuine affection. "I hope so."

"You don't *know*?" Ruby asked.

"Gramma Ruby, this is Katrina." Molly walked around the chair and attempted to steer her grandmother in the direction of the couch. "Leave her alone now."

The old woman went along but she stared hard at Katrina the entire time as they walked around the chair. "You scared of all this here?"

Crap, now what did she say? Although the woman appeared to be old and eccentric, Katrina didn't miss the fact that she was being incredibly frank in asking her what she thought of their odd little world.

Katrina decided the truth was best. "A little."

"You know what they are?" Ruby went on, her eyes darting from Ilia to Joey and back again.

Katrina nodded. She did know that.

"Well, you here anyway. Need to get over being scared though. I know just what would do the trick."

"Oh, no you don't." Molly's tone held a hint of motherly warning. "She just got here. Sorry, Katrina."

Katrina nodded again. No harm. The old woman freaked her out a little, but apparently it was just her way.

"Renard, go get Tiger's carrier and bring him in here to Joey. She's got to go home now. I'm going to get you back to your room, Gramma Ruby. Tell our guests bye."

Gramma Ruby nodded to Joey, her gaze friendly. When she glanced at Katrina, again, she was staring at her hair. She approached Katrina and to her surprise, stooped to give her a hug. Ruby pulled back and a tiny burst of pain erupted from Katrina's scalp.

The woman grinned at the several strands of Katrina's long blonde hair that were clutched in her hair.

"Ruby, come on!" Molly was clearly losing patience. "You okay?"

Katrina rubbed the small patch of scalp. Why was the woman so obsessed with her hair?

Joey rose from his chair, patting her shoulder. "I know you're tired. We'll get Tiger and get back home, okay?"

Home. Under the circumstances, she would have thought his use of that word would sound like a mockery of what it really represented. Yet her entire being relaxed at those words, as if she really were going home. At the moment it was all she had and it certainly wasn't without appeal. In a Twilight Zone sort of way.

Chapter 4

"This is going to shock you," Joey warned her.

Katrina took a drink of the tea he'd made for her, enjoying its subtle mint flavor. She sat curled in one of the plush chairs in his living room. Joey's house was only a couple of blocks from Ilia and Molly's and just as nice as theirs. Katrina loved the wraparound porch and the tall windows. The interior could use a little more decoration, she thought, but all in all it was a very nice place.

"Considering what I've been through the last few months, I don't think there is much you can tell me that would shock me, Joey."

Joey leaned forward on the couch to rest his elbows on his knees. His dark eyes searched her face, his expression guarded. "Up until last year, Katrina, I lived in a laboratory." His deep sigh filled the room. "It was the only place I'd ever known. I was created there."

Katrina's mind spun with questions at his admission, but she didn't want to push too much. She didn't have to know everything right at this moment. The look in his eyes let her know that he was watching her reaction closely, looking for acceptance or rejection. Her acceptance, she sensed, was important to him and she made the decision to try and listen with an open mind.

"You were created?" she asked, trying not to use a negative tone.

Joey nodded.

"Like a test tube baby?"

"Exactly. Only there was no mother who carried me inside her. I grew in incubators and machines until I was ready to enter the world like any other infant would."

"So you were a human as a baby, right?"

Joey smiled a little at that. "Right."

"Were there others like you?"

"Yes. One of them is here. Alex. You'll meet him. We escaped together. Rather, he was already planning to escape and he let me tag along with him."

Katrina set her glass aside, thinking through what he'd told her so far. He'd been created in a lab? If she hadn't seen the things she had already, she might not have believed him.

As it was, she had no reason not to believe him. And he was watching her with such hopeful eyes. That alone had her heart squeezing in her chest. "Who created you, Joey?"

"We're not sure," he explained. "The only thing we do know for certain is that they will kill us if they find us. They've already tried a couple of times."

"Sure, you're proof of their misconduct." Katrina nodded. "I just can't help but wonder why they would create you that way, half man, half leopard. What did they hope to accomplish?"

"I don't think they originally created us, Katrina. I think they created a copy of something they found out in nature."

"So that's what you meant about some of you being born into the world?"

"Yes. Alex, Nicole, and I were all created in that lab in New York. Somehow they got DNA from another of our kind, someone who was naturally born this way."

"Who is Nicole?"

"She was in Alex's litter. She's married to Vitali, Ilia's brother."

Litter? Wow.

"Where are they from?" Katrina went on.

"The Kerenskys are from Serbia. They have a sister named Nadia who moved here. She's married to another Serbian, Mikhail. They have a son together and they have a nanny from their country, but I don't know for sure if she's one of us. I suspect she is."

Katrina was asking a lot of questions when she hadn't intended to but she just couldn't help herself. They were popping into her mind faster than she could think.

"So that son will be like you guys?"

"Right."

"The Kerenskys are naturally what the men at the lab made you to be," Katrina reasoned.

"That's right. They'd never had any dealings with the scientists though. They have this whole legend of how they came to be. Vitali even has some spooky painting in his home. He told Alex the whole thing one night and Alex told me. It's all about barbarians and dark magic. Creepy stuff."

It was fascinating to Katrina to learn that there were creatures like them existing in the world and the world was completely unaware of them. They knew the moment some politician made a joke that could be misinterpreted or got a blow job under his desk, but they didn't have a clue that these leopard people or werewolves existed. *Incredible.*

"So you can just change into a leopard whenever you feel like it?"

"When we feel threatened, yes, we can change. Sometimes anger will bring it on. The biggest problem is sex."

"Sex?"

"We can only mate with our own kind, Katrina. Mating with a human will bring on the change as well. You have to realize that there aren't very many of us. For some of us, having humans for lovers is our only option. Not that it's a sacrifice." Joey winked at her on that last bit.

"Wait." Now she was confused. "I'm human and you've made love to me."

"I know. I'm able to avoid changing when I make love to you with drugs. The scientists in the lab developed pills that prevented us from changing as an experiment. Somehow, Alex was able to smuggle a bunch of these out when we escaped but that supply won't last forever. We need to find some way to replicate the pills. If we can find a way to do that, we can live free of this half-life shit and just be like normal people."

What an awful situation for them to be in. It had to be a bleak existence.

"You were able to change to fight the werewolves."

"Well, we can fight through the pills' effect if we are endangered. We figured that out fast."

"And then you just change back?"

"Not just." His expression darkened on that note. "In order to return to our human form, we have to kill."

Kill? *Shit.*

"Kill what?"

Joey shrugged, appearing uneasy now. "Killing a human is guaranteed to work. According to Vitali and Ilia, killing a large animal works just as well. That would work in a pinch and there are a few farms up here. I can't imagine the farmers would be very happy."

Katrina now understood the seriousness of their plight. Unless they were lucky enough to find someone of their own kind to be with, they had to secure the drugs the scientists developed or be alone. Otherwise they'd be forced to kill and that would put them at risk. With today's forensics they could be discovered easily if they were suspected of killing livestock, wild animals, or worse, humans. If the world found out about them, disaster was certain. She couldn't imagine what would happen to them.

"How many of you did they make?"

"There were three primary litters. Not many of us survived. Once we were old enough, they injected us with hormones, threw us into the breeding room, and let us have at it. Then they didn't have to create others. They just let us fuck each other silly and each year the females produced young. Every January it started to coincide with the mating cycle of leopards in the wild. Even now, without them shooting me full of that shit, it's a hard three months to get through. It's like being unbelievably horny and nothing you do brings you release or relief."

"What did they do with the babies?"

Joey's expression held a hint of sadness. "I don't know. They kept the males separate from the females. I never saw them."

"You could have children that..."

Joey nodded slowly.

How scary. Was it the government doing that to them? Independent researchers playing God? Well, she was glad that Joey was out of there. They would be on the lookout for the men who'd made them just as she would be on the lookout for the werewolves. In that, she completely sympathized.

"I wonder what they intended to do with you," Katrina said, thinking out loud.

"I think about that all the time, Katrina. I don't know. I really don't know."

Okay, now they were getting really gloomy. Katrina had enough of gloom and desperation over the last few months to last a lifetime. She had a roof over her head, food to eat, and she was starting to feel safe.

"Are you all black cats?" Katrina grinned at him.

Joey nodded, his expression brightening a little.

"With your blonde hair somebody might expect you to be, you know, one of those gold leopards with dark spots. Like you see on Wild Kingdom."

Joey chuckled at that. "I actually like that show. We're all black, though I don't know why exactly."

"Well, you're all here and safe now. You're working together to have more of those drugs made. Do that and you guys can be like normal people, just like you said."

Relief slowly crept into his face as she spoke. "*We* are all safe here now."

Joey rose from the couch and approached her. She wanted him to, so she stood and waited.

His mouth slanted down over hers, claiming her with a kiss that wiped her mind clean of all else. It was different from the patient, nurturing kisses he'd treated her to before. This kiss was demanding, masterful. It revealed the darker, dangerous side of the man who was now her lover.

That kiss and the heat that had built in her body while they'd been talking combined, sending pulses of pure heat racing through her blood. With an urgency that surprised her, she wanted him. She needed him now.

Katrina began to kiss him back with a demand that equaled his and he crushed her to him. Joey went wild, primitive, tearing at her blouse and jeans. He growled low in his throat with the same desperation that she felt while he rapidly shed his own clothing.

Roughly Joey turned her away from him so that she was facing the filmy, white curtains covering a large picture window. She caught a glimpse of the fading sun while she stood there in the grip of the most powerful lust she'd ever experienced, aware that anyone walking along the street right now would get quite a show. Joey's rough hands pulled her back against him, the feel of his naked flesh pressed tightly to hers a powerful sensation that made her pussy walls quiver.

Katrina's skin quickly heated and Joey's -- pressed against her back -- was like flames. Joey bent her forward and thrust his cock fully into her until his balls slapped against her.

Oh, yes. He stretched her, filled her in a way that made her desperate for more. When he began to move within her, she gasped in pure pleasure. The angle at which his cock filled her pussy was amazing and devastating, hitting sensual triggers inside her that she never knew existed.

Her hands clutched at the arms of the chair she'd been sitting in as pleasure and pain collided. His mouth and hands were everywhere and his cock was so deep inside her, she didn't know if she'd ever be free of him. It took her a moment to realize the high wails all around them were coming from her.

"Will you stay with me, Katrina?" Joey's voice was harsh behind her.

"Yes!"

"Even knowing what I am?"

"Yes! Don't stop!"

Drops of perspiration beaded on her forehead and ran down her sides. The sound of their bodies slapping competed with their moans and cries as they filled the living room.

"Come for me, Katrina!" he yelled.

Her pussy closed around him like a fist as he began to pound into her furiously. Katrina screamed as her body trembled and pulsed. The orgasm ripped through her with an intensity unlike anything she'd ever felt before. It shook her to her core.

Joey wasn't finished with her. Dropping to his knees behind her, he buried his mouth into her overly sensitive cunt. With great patience, he licked and sucked her. When she didn't think she could take more, he tongue fucked her until she came again. Nearly mindless with ecstasy, Katrina felt her shaking legs give way until she dropped to the floor before him.

Not giving her a moment to rest, he stretched out on the floor, pulling her body on top of his. Her mind was still spinning when he seated her on the hot, rigid length of his cock. Joey slid into her until she could feel him at her womb.

"Ride me!"

Eagerly, she did just that, though she didn't have much strength left. Joey's fingers dug into her hips, moving her on him and lending her his strength. He groaned when her hands clutched at his chest, his hips bucking beneath her in a way that created the most delicious friction against her clit.

Joey threw his head back and shouted his release. Katrina came again only a second after that, the orgasm tearing through her while his seed shot up into her. They thrashed and cried out until they slumped against each other in a warm, damp pile on the floor. The sound of their ragged breaths floated on the air.

"You know," Katrina pointed out when she was able to breathe again. "That's the third time we haven't used anything --"

A sharp, thumping sound outside the front door had Joey's head jerking up and Katrina's heart lurching in her chest. It was too odd a sound to be someone knocking. It was only a single noise before the sound of soft footsteps fading.

Apparently without a care that he was completely naked, Joey bounded off the floor, viciously yanking the front door open. Katrina watched him look around for several seconds before something caught his eyes just outside the door. He raked a

hand through the rumpled locks of his tawny hair. The look on his face became very grim.

“What?” Katrina asked. “What is it?”

“Nothing,” Joey barked, slamming the door.

Katrina wouldn’t accept that. Whatever it was, he couldn’t keep her from seeing it. Grabbing his long sleeved T-shirt off the floor, she pulled it on and made her way to the door. Joey watched her, putting up his hands to block her.

“Katrina, no.”

Being small had some advantages. She managed to dodge around him and make it to the door, throwing it open before he could stop her.

Her heart slammed in fear when she saw the bloody patch of black fur pinned to the doorframe just outside the door with a hunting knife. Katrina had no idea what it was supposed to mean exactly, but one thing was crystal clear.

It was a threat.

Chapter 5

Vitali Kerensky nodded to Joey the next morning when he entered the hardware shop, quietly asking a younger man working at the cash register to watch things for him. Joey followed him through the small, tidy store filled with tiny, metal parts to a door at the back.

The room beyond was generous in size. A desk was off to one side and there was a simple counter with a coffee pot, toaster oven, and a small microwave. A wooden table sat at the room's center. The men Joey wanted to talk to were sitting there.

Ilia Kerensky, who owned the hardware store with his brother, sat with his arms folded across his chest. Joey had always like Ilia. He'd always found him fair and easy to get along with.

Alex sat next to him, holding out a hand that Joey warmly clasped. Alex was a good friend and they'd been through a lot together. They'd even once shared Casey, the reporter they'd kidnapped not long after they'd escaped the lab. Casey was now Alex's mate.

Alex had always been fascinated with mechanical things, even when they had still been at the lab. With the help of his mate, Casey, he'd learned to drive and was all consumed by computers. Joey knew Alex was taking classes online and hoped eventually to be able to work from their home using the computer somehow.

Over the last several months, the computer had become Joey's world. He'd used disks that Casey and Alex had given him to learn to read, to learn math, just like he was a small child. He'd discovered that he was a fast study and the more he learned, the more he wanted to know. He had so many disks on so many subjects now. Foreign languages fascinated him and he had more than a passing interest in anything electronic.

He hadn't thought anything could make him happier than being literate until Casey taught him and Alex to drive a car. Now he enjoyed any excuse to drive.

Mikhail Turgenev sat across the table from the other two, his hands folded in his lap. As he often did, he looked bored, even pissed that he had to be there. Joey didn't know Mikhail very well himself. He only knew the Kerensky brothers, Ilia in particular, had no use for him. Alex often acted as a buffer between the brothers and Mikhail, always pointing out that they all needed to work together.

Aside from that, Mikhail was married to Vitali and Ilia's sister, Nadia. It wasn't like they could get rid of him anyway. Mikhail and Nadia ran the butcher shop next door.

Pulling out a chair next to Mikhail, Joey sat down.

"What's up, Joe?" Alex started out while Vitali closed the door behind them.

Joey pulled the clear, plastic bag containing the knife, dried blood and fur out of his jacket and held it up.

"Someone left something at my front door yesterday evening," Joey announced.

Alex stared at that bag. Vitali walked around the table to get a better view, leaning against the wall nearby.

"That's a hunting knife," Alex spoke first.

"Katrina is convinced this is wolf fur they stuck to the door, but I'm not so sure," Joey explained.

"I haven't had much time to talk to you since you've been back. Has she encountered the werewolves since you left the town where you found her?"

Nodding to Alex, Joey sighed and laid the bag on the table before him. He'd met with everyone in the room about Katrina before he'd ever left Madden to find her. He'd wanted their approval to bring her into their fold. And there'd been no objections, especially not when she'd been exposed to the werewolves, proof that they weren't the only monsters that walked the earth.

"Yes, she did and they have her ID, so they know who she is and where she used to live anyway. She's been on the run."

"Sounds familiar," Ilia snorted, pulling the bag toward him, pressing at the fur through the plastic. Glancing over his shoulder at his brother, he muttered something in Serbian. Vitali immediately moved closer, bending to inspect the bag himself.

Alex looked at him helplessly. Neither of them spoke Serbian.

"What?" Joey wanted to know what was going on.

"This fur comes from our kind," Vitali explained in his thick accent, his green eyes intent on Joey's face. "It is leopard fur."

Alex shook his head. "Shit."

"Guess that rules the werewolves out." Joey had suspected as much but he wanted their opinions. "So the question now is who and why?"

"Well it's not anyone here," Alex threw out.

"Do not be so certain." Ilia glared at Mikhail.

Mikhail leaned forward, grinning at Ilia. It made him look positively evil. "I am wounded, Ilia. You think I have nothing more important to do than to threaten our lab rat friend and his skinny human woman?"

Joey glared at the other man.

"How do you know what she looks like?" Ilia demanded.

Mikhail shrugged again like the entire conversation wasn't worthy of his attention. "I saw her at your house yesterday. I live across the street."

"If it is not anyone here, who would it be?" Vitali cut in.

"You *know* who," Alex told him. "Maybe the folks from the lab have found us."

"Bullshit!"

Dark as the situation was, that made Joey smile. He loved the way the Serbians said that word. It sounded like bull-chit.

"It is bullshit," Mikhail went on. "If the men from your laboratory had found us, they would not stick a knife in your house with black fur. *Nyet!* They would break down the fucking door and stick a knife in your ass. That is what they would do."

"Misha," Vitali's tone held warning.

"I will leave." Mikhail rose from the table and walked to the door. "I have no time for this. Next you will want me to look at suspicious squirrel droppings."

Ilia muttered under his breath, watching Mikhail leave. The last thing they saw was his hand on the doorknob. There was a slender white bandage wrapped around that hand.

Joey exchanged a glance with Alex who'd seen it too.

"Enough!" Vitali growled at his brother who still sat in his chair, bitching in Serbian. "He was correct about one thing. If the men from the lab had found us, we would know it."

Joey had to agree with that.

"It is not the werewolves. It is not the men." Vitali glanced at the bag again. "The fur is leopard fur. That would suggest someone here is responsible. Nothing like this has happened until now, until you brought your woman here, Joey. That leads one to think that the message, whatever it is, was meant for her or for you because of her."

Vitali had pretty well summed up the situation.

"Now what do we do?" Alex asked.

"We wait and we watch," Vitali told them. "How is your friend after this?"

Katrina had been pretty damned upset, convinced the wolves had found her. Even though she knew they could protect her, he understood her fear. They really had been gruesome creatures and who knew what horrors she'd witnessed in the two weeks they'd held her captive.

"She's not handling it well," Joey answered. "I need to get back to her."

Vitali nodded. "For now we will be on guard."

Ilia and Alex rose. Ilia nodded to Joey before walking around his brother and out into the store. Alex clapped him on the shoulder before he went the same way.

Vitali stopped Joey before he left.

"If something else should happen, call me. Yes?"

"I will," Joey told him. "Did you see Mikhail's hand?"

"Yes, but do not be quick to jump to conclusions."

Vitali's defense of Mikhail caught Joey off guard. He'd always assumed they weren't on good terms.

"Sorry, I didn't mean --"

Holding up a hand to halt his words, Vitali shook his head. "Anyone would have reason to be suspicious of Misha. In many ways, the animal in him is stronger than the man. Random violence and mischief, however, are not in his character. The only time Misha will cause trouble for you is if you cause trouble for him. Do not forget that."

Vitali left him at the door to ponder that and walked back out into the store. He wasn't any closer to figuring out who had been responsible for scaring Katrina, but at least he had some back up now and other people watching.

He just hoped that whatever menace might be out there waiting for them wasn't so bad that he would need them.

Chapter 6

"What did they say?" Katrina caught Joey the moment he walked in the door.

She knew he'd gone to meet the others, but couldn't understand why she couldn't have gone. Yeah, she was just a human but wasn't it dangerous leaving her here by herself? If the werewolves came after her and found her alone, she stood no chance.

Joey wrapped his arms around her, the cool spring air clinging to him. "Everyone is going to help us keep an eye out for whoever did this," he told her calmly.

"That's it?"

"Katrina, what else can we do?" Guiding her to the chair where she'd sat the night before, he eased her into it, kneeling before her. "It's not like we can go to the police. We have to handle this ourselves."

"Did they agree with me that it was wolf fur?" Katrina had to know that. "They did, didn't they?"

Joey sighed. She could read the reluctance in his dark eyes. "No, none of us think that, Katrina. It appears to be leopard fur."

"What? Leopard fur? That would mean..."

"I know." Joey pulled her against him, holding her. "It would appear to be one of us. I don't know how that could be. I've known Alex since we were little, so I'm sure about him. He wouldn't have done this. The others? I don't know them well, but they seem like good guys."

"That doesn't make me feel better, Joey."

"I'm sure it doesn't." He pulled back to look into her eyes. "Believe in me, Katrina. I'll keep you safe. I promise."

Well, he had been right there with her when someone stuck the fur to the house with a knife. He could have been in on it though, arranged it...

Stop thinking like that. Joey had saved her in Hell. He'd found her when she was out of money and hope in the streets. She could trust him, right?

She let Joey scoop her up in his strong arms and her heart raced with excitement. He carried her down the hall and through the door of his bedroom, slamming it shut with his foot. Joey placed her on her feet by the bed with great care, asking for her trust with his devotion.

Then all at once the rush was on to remove their clothing. Katrina's hands were shaking, grabbing the hem of her blouse and pulling it over her head. She heard a ripping sound and looked up to see Joey tearing at his clothes with abandon. Now her thoughts were focused on him, all fear and anxiety slipping away.

When she went to unhook her bra, Joey's gaze darted after the movement. "Let me do that," he said.

With unbearably slow hands, he undressed her, touching her so lightly that she barely felt it. He took her breath away, kissing each new area of skin he revealed. Soft caresses played over her skin and she relaxed into his slow seduction. The desire in his eyes was easy to read. There was so much need there, it made the passion within her ignite in a way that it never had before.

With her breasts revealed, Joey dropped to his knees before her, pressing his sexy mouth to her nipple. Gathering her to him, he buried his face between her breasts. Katrina heard his sharp intake of his breath as he inhaled her scent. She let her fingers spear into the silky locks of his blond hair and he moaned at her touch.

Joey had large, rough hands. They felt so good covering her breasts, squeezing and plumping them. He guided one pouting nipple to his mouth. Katrina's fingers clutched his hair when he caressed her with his tongue and teeth. White-hot sparks of ecstasy coursed through her when he widened his mouth, taking as much of her in as he could. Her pussy clenched in need and her juices flowed while he suckled against her with an endless hunger.

When Joey pulled his head back, she had to wonder if she'd pulled his hair too hard. His dark eyes met hers and just the sight of his tongue teasing the sensitive tip of her breast made the craving between her thighs gnaw and grow.

"That's it. Relax. You're safe." Decadently, he suckled her nipple again with abandon, then returned his gaze to hers. "Does that feel good?"

What? He expected her to speak? She couldn't even breathe.

Nodding, Katrina wantonly pushed herself back toward his mouth.

Joey evaded the breast she offered him, diving for the other one instead, giving it the same devastating treatment as he had the first. Her knees were giving way and Joey sensed it, pulling her down to straddle his lap. The incredible heat of his body seeped through the thick denim of her jeans and she couldn't resist the urge to rub herself against him.

"Let's get these off."

Joey's hands were unsteady unfastening her jeans. She rose from his lap on shaking legs so he could push them and her panties down over her hips and thighs. Bracing herself on his broad shoulders, she kicked off her slippers and stepped out of the rest of her clothing.

Leaning forward, Joey pressed a kiss to the soft swell of her tummy making her shiver in delight. He lifted one of her legs up over his shoulder and then she was trembling. Intense pulses of desire raced through her when she gazed down into his handsome face.

"I love how you taste, Katrina." His voice was deep, making the most wicked shudder pass through her.

Katrina's moan filled the room when he parted her with his fingers, but she didn't say anything. She was way beyond that point.

He pressed his mouth into her light patch of curls and licked her. His tongue roamed from her opening up to her clit where he lingered, flicking against that sensitive nub. Over and over he licked at her, halting now and again to suckle her labia or clit. He gave her clit special attention too, with hot kisses and licks, his lips and tongue

smashing her sanity. It was a good thing he was holding her up because Katrina was writhing and her knees were losing tension with every second that passed. Joey held her against his busy mouth and the soft, wet sounds filling the room pushed her desire higher.

The walls of her cunt clenched and he must have felt it. He thrust his tongue into her opening like a cock and she gasped. God, she loved how long his tongue was, the way it was just slightly rough. In and out his tongue worked, fucking her while his fingers began to toy with her swollen, sensitive clit. Katrina's fingers dug into his shoulders hard, the blood racing through her as she struggled to stay upright, struggled to breathe. She was closer to coming by the second.

"Joey, please!"

The orgasm ripped through her like a tornado, making her scream. Her skin flushed from her face to her cunt. Her blood felt like it was on fire. Her legs finally gave way and she would have hit the floor if not for his strong arms there to catch her. The tremors shook her for what seemed like forever, her cries filling the room that darkened for a few moments around her.

With very little effort, Joey lifted her in his arms and placed her on his bed. All the tenderness and control were gone now and Joey's hands and mouth were all over her. She liked that idea and let her hands do the same, roaming over the smooth muscles of his long body. She felt powerful, more confident than she had in a long time. The way he moaned and gasped if she touched him a certain way had empowered her. Over and over she explored him, teasing him. Trying to figure out what he liked, what drove him wild.

When Joey rose above her and spread her thighs wide with his own, Katrina glanced down to see his cock, poised and ready. She loved the size of him, loved the tight fit of him in her greedy pussy.

The swollen head of his cock pushed against her wet flesh and she moaned as it began to sink into her. The hot column of his flesh stretched her, burning her, slowly

sliding into her channel as far as he could go. He filled her completely. The walls of her pussy clenched around him in need, urging him to move.

But he wouldn't.

Holding himself just above her, he gazed down into her face.

"You know I'd give up my life for you." A bead of perspiration fell from his forehead to splash on her skin. "Just to keep you safe."

Katrina's heart shifted in her chest at that. How could he possibly feel that way? He didn't really know her. How could he be that willing to protect her?

Gently he lowered his mouth to hers, the kiss slow and deep, before he began to move within her.

They moaned together at the indescribable sensation. Rocking back and forth, they both let go and surrendered to the powerful desire that claimed them. Wrapping her legs about his waist, she pulled him back to her each time he withdrew. Joey thrust in and out of her, reaching deeper inside her somehow with each stroke.

The smell of sex surrounded them, her hands and legs sliding on his slick flesh. Their cries and moans filled the room around them while they writhed in the tangle of sheets on the bed. When Joey's thrusts came harder and faster, she just hung onto him for all she was worth, allowing him to push her passion up to unbelievable heights.

Katrina bucked beneath him, screaming while she came hard. Joey held on as spasm after spasm of unimaginable pleasure flooded her before he let go. His body went taut above her and his arms closed around her so tightly she could barely breathe. He threw his head back and yelled when he came while Katrina's body pulsed around him, milking him of his seed.

Joey's weight dropped on her, burying her in the soft mattress. She didn't care. She wrapped her arms around him, her fingers toying with the silky strands of his hair. Her heartbeat pounded in her ears, the sound of their breathing filling the quiet around them.

As blissful as she felt at that moment, Katrina couldn't fight off the worries that crept back into her mind like dark clouds signaling an impending storm.

"You'll stay with me?" she asked him.

Joey rolled off onto his side, pulling her into his arms to cuddle her against him.

"You know I will."

"I mean all the time. You don't have a job?"

Joey chuckled at that. "I do actually. Since Alex and Casey taught me how to drive, I went into Bar Harbor and got a job at a music store there. I really enjoy it."

Katrina pulled back to grin at him. "Music store? Like musical instruments or CDs?"

"CDs. We play music all day. It's not a bad living."

"Music soothes the savage beast."

"You think I'm a savage beast?"

"In bed I do." Reaching down between his thighs, she felt his cock already stirring again. "I wouldn't have it any other way."

Joey laughed, rolling onto his back and pulling her on top of him. His body went tense the next moment because he was staring at something hard. A flash of silver on the bathroom door. "Shit! What the hell?"

Joey scrambled off the bed and dashed for the bathroom door. Katrina sat up, staring in fear. He pulled open the door to reveal a large butcher knife pinning a headless chicken to the wood on the other side.

Joey pulled the knife free of the door, inspecting it. His eyes widened as they moved over its wooden handle. "There!"

The initials MT were crudely carved into the handle. Who was MT? What did it mean?

"Son of a bitch! That son of a bitch!" Joey's face darkened in fury. Bolting off the bed, he snatched the cordless phone off his bedside table. His fingers were shaking so much, from anger she guessed, she wondered if he'd be able to dial the number. Somehow he managed it.

"Get everyone back together," he growled. "Make sure Turgenev is there!"

Chapter 7

Mikhail Turgenev hadn't yet arrived at the back room of the Kerensky brothers' hardware store, but Joey was ready to rip the asshole limb from limb. Now he had proof that Mikhail had been behind the scare tactics that had terrified Katrina and royally pissed him off over the last two days and, by God, he would find out why.

He'd brought Katrina with him this time and now she'd met most of the gang. Alex had brought his lovely blonde mate, Casey, who was as human as Katrina. Nicole, Vitali's wife, had arrived with Molly, and Ilia, her small son, rode on her hip. It was good for Katrina to meet them all. He just wished it had been under different circumstances.

"Where is Renard?" Ilia asked Molly.

"Gramma Ruby is bringing him," she explained. "He was finishing his lunch a little while ago. They should be by any time now."

Ilia nodded, a muscle twitching at his jaw. The moment Joey explained to them what happened, Ilia had exploded. He had no idea what had happened in the past between the Kerensky brothers and Mikhail Turgenev but one thing was certain, it had been ugly. And while Vitali was obviously trying to put it in the past and move on, Ilia seemed determined to hang onto his anger. It was as if he was looking for an excuse or opportunity for payback of some kind.

The door burst open and Mikhail marched into the room, a dark haired woman on his heels. Joey had never met Mikhail's wife before, the sister of the Kerensky brothers, but he would have figured out the relationship without being told. The exotic slant of her eyes, the set of her lovely face, reminded him so much of the Kerenskys. Ilia especially.

"What now?" Mikhail demanded. "I have a business to run. What do you want?"

The man's forceful entrance was just enough to set Joey off. "Been to my house lately, Mikhail?" Joey demanded.

The other man's amber eyes locked with his. "*Nyet.*"

"Are you certain? Because someone left a very interesting gift in my bed and it really looks like you were the one who left it."

"Misha," Vitali broke in. "If you know anything about this you must speak up."

A string of volatile Serbian words followed as Mikhail railed at Vitali then returned his attention to Joey.

Every muscle in Joey's body was tense, ready. He could take the bastard. And he would before he let him harm a hair on Katrina's head.

"What is this about?" Nadia stepped around her husband to frown at each of the others in turn. "What are you accusing my husband of now?"

"Of leaving a dead, bleeding, headless chicken in my fucking bathroom, stuck there with a butcher knife. This is the second threatening thing I've found in my home since I returned with my mate, and I'll be fucking damned if I'll allow it to continue."

Mikhail's fist slammed on the table and Joey felt Katrina jump, her little fingers tightening as they clutched the back of his shirt. "You will not threaten my wife," Mikhail growled.

"Why? You've threatened my mate," Joey shot back.

"If I threatened your mate or anyone, lab rat, you would know it. Rest assured."

Ilia jumped to his feet at that point, appearing ready to tear the other man apart before Joey could ever get to him, and the words he was shouting in Serbian didn't sound pretty. Molly held onto his arm, her pretty brown eyes wide.

"Silence!" Vitali shouted over all of it and surprisingly the other two men relented. "Mikhail, did you do this? Answer now."

Mikhail shook his head vigorously, his expression incredulous. "Why would I want to? What possible reason do I have to care whether or not this lab rat and his human woman even exist, Vitali? Explain this to me."

Joey didn't want explanations. He wanted the man to admit to what he'd done. "You're a butcher, right?" he broke in.

Mikhail rolled his eyes. "Yes. That makes me psychotic too?"

"You sell chickens?"

Mikhail was clearly losing patience. He didn't bother to respond.

Joey pulled the blood encrusted knife from his pocket and held it up. "Is this your knife?"

Mikhail studied it, his brow lowering. With a movement so fast Joey nearly jumped, the other man snatched it away from him to get a closer look. Running his thumb along the blade, he shook his head. "*Nyet*. I would not use such dull cutlery. And it is not my brand. That is a cheap knife. I only use Reo knives. Everything in my shop is Reo."

That didn't mean shit to Joey. "You have a house, don't you? Don't you carve your initials into your knives at home?"

Mikhail scowled at him. "*Nyet*. Initials prove nothing. I --"

"Wait." They all turned to look at Ilia's wife Molly who stared at the knife with a growing look of concern on her face. "Can I see that?"

Mikhail held the knife out to her so she could grasp the handle. Her hands shook slightly as she looked at the handle, the initials carved there.

"Oh, my God. This is *my* knife."

"What?" Joey stared at Molly unbelieving as she looked over the knife.

"Back when I lived in New York, we used to do pot luck dinners and such at the hair salon where I worked. I didn't want to lose my good knives or my crockpot or anything like that so I'd always make sure my initials were on everything."

"MT?" Katrina asked from behind Joey.

Molly nodded. "My maiden name is Turhune."

Even Mikhail seemed surprised at the odd turn of events. Some of the fire faded from his countenance when his wife glared at Joey and Ilia. "You owe my husband an apology," Nadia's voice was heavily accented as she spoke to Joey. Then she turned on

her brother. "And you must get over this anger and hatred you harbor for my husband."

Ilia looked unapologetic, glaring back at his sister.

Joey was in a very odd place. Mikhail really hadn't seemed to know what Joey was accusing him of and now that they had determined the knife wasn't his... "I'll apologize," Joey told them. "First I want to know one thing. What did you do to your hand?"

To Joey's surprise, Mikhail's face darkened. "It happened when I went hunting two nights ago."

Nadia turned on her husband now. "Hunting? Misha, what the hell were you thinking? Why were you hunting?"

"Because I *wanted* to," he growled. "Because I am not like the rest of you. I know what I am. I am not a human. Part of me is a beast and I enjoy being the beast. You can all live your lives pretending to be what you are not and doing whatever you must to meet that end. I don't care. But I will be who I am. I *will* hunt."

The look on his wife's face led Joey to believe that there'd be a fight at the Turgenyev house later that night. "What did you kill to turn back?" Nadia demanded.

"A cow."

"Whose cow?"

Mikhail shrugged nonchalantly.

"And the cow bit your hand?"

Katrina snickered behind him at the sarcasm in the woman's voice and Joey loved the sound. It gave him hope that she might come to accept this crazy situation after all.

"*Nyet*. I was heading out to hunt. There was broken glass on the sidewalk. I ripped my paw on it."

"Ridiculous." Ilia shook his head. "You expect us to believe that?"

"What's all this about here?" They all turned to stare at the old black woman standing in the doorway with Molly's son.

"Gramma Ruby, everything's okay." Molly motioned to Renard, who stood staring at the room full of emotional people with wide eyes. "Can you take Renard home?"

"Guess so." Ruby nodded her head. Walking over to where Katrina stood behind Joey's shoulder, she nudged her playfully. "You his woman *now*, ain't you?"

Joey turned to see the confusion on Katrina's pretty face. "What do you mean?"

"Them spells I worked did the trick. I can see it in your face."

"Aw, shit!" Molly muttered behind them. "What spells?"

"I cast me a couple of love spells." Ruby turned to explain to her granddaughter like it was the most natural thing in the world. "They worked too. Whowee, you should've seen these two in the living room that day."

Realization rushed through Joey like ice water. "Did you stick the fur to our door?"

"Yep." The old woman nodded, elbowing Joey. "Worked real good, didn't it? I got lucky and found that fur on some broken glass out there on the sidewalk."

"And the chicken?"

"That was to seal the deal. Now she ain't ever gonna wanna leave you."

"Joey, I am *so* sorry." Molly's voice was contrite.

Joey didn't know what to think. He did realize that all of this, all of them being and working together in Madden, was his brainchild with Alex. There was already some animosity between the Serbians, and Katrina had been scared to death. While they were all here, he needed to make things right. He needed to make nice here.

Joey clasped his hand warmly over the older woman's shoulder. "Thank you. I think we're all good now."

A wide grin split Ruby's face. "Knew you would be." She stopped before Molly on her way out. "See? Somebody appreciates what I do."

With that Ruby scuffled her way out of the room, taking Renard with her.

Joey looked up and met the gaze of Mikhail Turgenev. *Shit*. What did he say to him?

Truth was best. Joey held out his hand to Mikhail. "I apologize, man."

Mikhail stared at his hand like he was thinking of spitting on it. After a moment Mikhail accepted his hand in an almost punishing grip and shook it. "I accept your apology," he told Joey. He released Joey's hand and pointed to Ilia. "I do not accept yours."

"I did not apologize and I never will," Ilia spat.

"*Nyet!*" Nadia yelled. "No more. Our business is settled. Let us go back to the shop." Steering her husband away like a dangerous bull, Nadia nodded to them before they walked out of the room.

"I'm really sorry," Molly told Katrina.

"It's okay."

Katrina's smile took Joey's breath away. He realized she found the entire scene amusing. He hadn't seen her smile many times since he'd first met her and he definitely liked it. He went hard as a stone.

"It's just a relief that it wasn't something else," Katrina told Molly. "Or *someone* else."

"Everything is okay," Joey assured her. "Now we relax and start our new life together. After all, you can't leave me now because of the chicken."

Katrina laughed at that. After a moment, Molly and Nicole snickered too.

He liked the sound of Katrina's laughter too.

Chapter 8

"Poor Molly." Katrina sat on the edge of the bed and pulled off her shoes, thinking about the gathering earlier in the hardware shop. "I can't imagine how she felt to find out her grandmother was the one behind our big scare."

Relief had left her tired and contented. She hadn't been in danger after all. It had only been Molly's grandmother trying to bring her and Joey together using her idea of love spells.

"So do you think her grandmother has..."

Joey grinned at her and shook his head. "Ilia says she's just a little senile. You know she used to be a voodoo priestess in New Orleans."

"Really?" Katrina pulled off her shirt, enjoying the way she caught Joey's complete attention sitting there in her purple bra. "I've heard of voodoo dolls and zombies, but I really don't know anything about it. I've read some place that some who practice voodoo use chickens but sticking one to your bathroom door? I don't know."

"Me either." Joey pulled his sweater over his head, revealing his powerful upper body. "Ilia says that he thinks she gets confused. Puts her own unique spin on traditional spells."

"Very unique." Katrina moved closer to him as he joined her on the bed, running a hand over the smooth, muscled surface of his back.

"There is a show on cable that I watch every day that covers different topics on religion and mysticism. One day last week it was about alchemy. It's like the investigation of nature really, using philosophy and spiritualism. Now, from the little I know, voodoo is more like religion than straight alchemy, but their aims are similar. Alchemy aims to prolong life, to heal. I think from what Molly and Ilia have told me, that's how Ruby sees and uses voodoo. To heal, to protect those she loves."

She allowed her hand to coast around his waist to trace the line of his cock beneath the tight jeans he wore. "There's nothing wrong with that."

Joey shook his head, his breath hissing when she lightly squeezed him through the denim. His eyes turned nearly black with lust when he stood to peel off his jeans. Anxious to have him, Katrina pulled off her bra along with her own jeans and panties.

"I'll always protect you, Katrina."

She wrapped her hand around the heated shaft of his cock, moving it slowly up and down until he groaned. "Are you an alchemist too, Joey?" Katrina teased him.

He smiled, but none of the intensity faded from his eyes. "No. I'll always protect you because I'm falling in love with you, Katrina."

Joey meant it. The sincerity in his tone made her insides melt.

"Will you give me a chance?" he asked her. "Will you stay for a while?"

Katrina lightly squeezed him, urged him to stand closer to her. "I'll stay, but not just because I need you to keep the werewolves away." The emotion she read in his eyes made her pause. "I'll stay because of the way you make me feel. You make me feel safe and special."

Joey caressed her cheek with his fingers. "You've always been special to me, Katrina. From the moment I saw you."

He bent to brush her lips with the softest kiss. A shudder passed through her, and when he drew back to look into her eyes, she knew she'd give him and this whole crazy community of his a chance.

Katrina dipped her head to the smooth crest of his cock, licking at it with her tongue. His entire body went rigid at the simple touch, so she touched her tongue to the tip again, swirling her tongue around it.

"Katrina!"

Her lips opened over the broad crest, sucking him into her mouth. Joey's hands speared into her hair, grabbing hard. She let his cock slide out of her mouth before drawing it back in as far as she could.

"I can't take that." Joey's voice was harsh. He pulled himself free of her mouth and hauled her up from the bed.

Joey sat on the edge of the bed and pulled her across his lap, positioning her over his straining cock. He slid so easily into her, using the heated wetness that had gathered between her thighs. Katrina let her head fall back, moaning as his cock filled and stretched her cunt until he was sheathed balls deep inside her.

Oh, yeah. She could definitely live with this.

Pressing her mouth to his, she began to ride him slow and easy. Even though she was on top, Joey controlled her movements. His hands guided her to thrust up and down on his erection, just hard enough to make her want more but not enough to hurt her.

The squeaking of the bed beneath them grew louder from the increasing power of their thrusts. Joey growled low in his throat and she knew he'd come soon. Katrina hung onto him, her nails digging into the damp flesh of his shoulders and back. Her pussy walls quivered and tightened around his rigid length, and she smiled at the sharp groan she drew from him. His fingers sank into her flesh and he flexed his hips with more speed and force. The pressure within her continued to build until the powerful spasms of orgasm rocked her. Joey continued plunging into her deeply, swiftly.

He shouted his release only seconds after she came, rocking with her until both of them were completely spent. The sound of their labored breathing filled the room. Joey pulled her head down to his shoulder, cradling her. His skin was warm and slick beneath her cheek.

"Are you hungry?" Joey asked, his breathing harsh.

Katrina pulled back to grin at him. "For more of you."

The smile that earned her was positively sinful. Joey fell back with her on the bed and then rolled them until he was on top of her, pressing her to the mattress. Amazingly, she could feel the hot brand of his erection on the sensitive flesh of her inner thigh. How the hell could he be ready to go again so soon?

Yet he was. Katrina gasped in delight when he slowly pushed the swollen head of his cock back into her waiting channel.

Joey had a way of making her forget everything but him. All thoughts of werewolves and danger swept out of her head like dust in the wind, replaced by Joey's presence. His lovemaking captivated her. His protectiveness endeared him to her.

All that was left was her desire to be with him.

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Isabella Jordan is a lucky lady who spends her days with her family, doing volunteer work and writing. She loves creating new stories of all kinds and chatting with readers and friends.

Isabella would love to hear from readers! Visit her on the web at <http://isbellajordan.com>