



Half-Were House

Darragh Foster, Mima, Celia Kyle

(c) 2009

ISBN 978-1-59578-520-6

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Published 2009

ISBN 978-1-59578-520-6

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Manufactured in the United States of America

Liquid Silver Books
<http://LSbooks.com>

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Blurbs

Tail Over Whiskers

Darragha Foster

Blaze tries to live up to her name after being humiliated, scarred, branded and banished by the werecat society for being different. Really different. She can only shift when she comes, and then, only partially—and it doesn't last. Looking for love in all the wrong places, she ends up inadvertently scent-matched to another half-were shifter. A dog, of all things. Fighting like cats and dogs takes on a whole new meaning for Blaze and Jack as they struggle to accept their spiritual, and physical, bonds. Are they going to set an example for the shifter prides and packs, or will they simply end up chasing each other's tails?

Kinks: Analingus, mixed species coitus, brief m/m, naughty sewer tunnel sex, bondage, toy play, group sex

* * * *

Earning Her Stripes

Mima

Word of the Day: Disobedient

Meg's been thrown out of her home, rejected by her friends and lover, banished by her pride, and thrust into Half-Were House to continue her obedient life. A life that has nothing to do with being a feline shifter and everything to do with fitting in with humans. Tradition demanded she leave and she can't come back simply because she doesn't have little kitty claws. Determined not to take things belly up just because that's the way she likes it in bed, the sweet submissive disobediently returns to The Valley to reclaim her adored teaching position. With the surprising ally of a surprisingly dominant farmer, Meg faces down prejudiced felines who would love nothing more than to turn her into dog food. The pride's leader lays down the terms for Meg's safe return, but will she be able to help Ben submit enough for her to stay?

Kinks: mild BDSM, MFM, toys

* * * *

Piece of Tail

Celia Kyle

Gina's got a problem. Okay, she doesn't think it's a problem, but the pride that kicked her to the curb sure does. She feels perfect in every way. Curves in all the right places and an attitude that just won't quit, she's got it all. And then some. Now her tail... In her mind, it's just an added bonus. But in the mind of the prides, her ability to only grow a tail proves that she's not were enough and too much kitty for humans. Good thing she's found two men who can't get enough of each other, her and her tail.

Piece of Tail contains scenes of tail friskyness, man on man loving and dog jokes.
Kinks: BDSM, Group sex, M/M, toy play, anal

Table of Contents

Prologue

Tail Over Whiskers

Darragha Foster

Earning her Stripes

Mima

Piece of Tail

Celia Kyle

Epilogue

Half-Were House

Prologue

Tasheka's Diary Entry, ten years ago

I wanted this job. Just 'cause I didn't have to fight for it doesn't mean it's not worthy. No one else sees it like I do. All the lost souls coming here to this block of brownstones, unwanted, hidden. So I'm here, a lioness with an ever-shifting pride of non-shifting shamed ones. With my grumpy old human Sam, I'm learning them. Give 'em the sweet and the sour soon fades. I have to remember this, cause the one who came in tonight makes my teeth hurt.

Blaze is a tabby cat. Got pride that won't quit, and fire and sass, like me when I was young. But she's got no people and of course, more important, no shift. She's all full of it, with her mother part of Sekhmet's court and anger burning the air every time she looks at a man. This one isn't going to pass from my haven easy or soon. I'm sorry for it, but I'll help her, as I can.

Tasheka's Diary Entry, nine years ago

I haven't laughed this hard since Sam and I last played. She comes in half-dressed, and that half doesn't last long. That snow leopard tail has a mind of its own, and so does her mouth. Gina is a breath of fresh air, and I just know she'll help Blaze. Those two together are a recipe for trouble stew, but I've got my wooden spoon, and I've got a belly full of laughter in the wake of this woman.

We'll keep her tail hidden, and find her a place, and peace-be-to-kittens, she'll show Blaze the way.

Tasheka's Diary Entry, two weeks ago

I'd never have guessed it, but this one is the key. Sure of it now. Meg, with the bloodline of a tigress and the behavior of a doormat, is the one that's going to knock Blaze and Gina loose from Half-Were House. No matter how I tried and poked and guided, those two just stuck here like burrs with no itch to travel by themselves, like they should, out in the wide world.

But this Meg comes in with a river of hair and pale silence and I'm just thinking, *poor chil'*, and then I catch a glimpse of her eyes. This one has the fire I saw long ago in Blaze's eyes. She has the fire Gina rolls in but doesn't direct. This one has a goal, a life back where they took her from, and she's going to show them the way.

Yes, I told Sam. *Things will be a-changin'.*

Tail Over Whiskers

Darragha Foster

Chapter One

Blaze was desperate for a bit of loving. She figured that a bar frequented by attorneys might be as good a place as any to get herself a decent one-night stand who was clean, employed, intelligent and young.

Last time she'd tried something like this she'd chosen a biker bar. Big mistake. She'd almost bitten off more than she could chew. How long ago was that? Two years. *Bast* ... two years...

She liked a good debate. A good fight. The chance for a decent quid-pro-quo before a roll in the sack. That, lawyers could offer. If she just wanted to be tossed over a bar and nailed from behind, she'd hit the biker bar again. *If it has been rebuilt*. She giggled. She'd left her mark that night, all right. Who knew a broken bottle of brandy would torch up so quickly? At least it got the biker dude off her back. Literally. Mama hadn't named her *Blaze* for nothing.

Blaze had always liked the studious legal-types. That penchant had proven a bit too distracting for her. She'd dropped out of law school just before graduation, and set her sights on learning where she could do more good for her kind. Veterinary Medicine had proved to be her forte. Now, she could both counsel and cure. Since most of her customers weren't quite human, human degrees had little value to them. She had other skills her kind needed.

She sat at the bar and self-medicated for awhile, scoping out the crowd as it ebbed and flowed in a sea of dark suits and briefcases. To go on this kind of hunt, she needed the booze. Courage in a bottle. If she didn't pickle her brain a bit, she'd go home to her vibrator and awaken with arms aching to hold someone less fury than her cat.

However, taking a human lover could prove problematic. A little booze should help her acquisition of the evening, too. At least he could say he wasn't seeing straight due to inebriation. They were so fragile and prone to hysteria after the fact. Or the *act*, as the case may be.

It had taken her over a week to get this far after she'd decided one more session with the Energizer Bunny wasn't going to cut it. It would take her at least three whiskeys to go any further. Human lovers were her extreme sport. Something she loved, but couldn't do very often. She had to psych herself up to the act with some mental calisthenics.

Problem was, aged spirits heightened her human senses, but dulled her less-than-human ones. She could fly a jet blindfolded through heavy enemy fire after a fifth of bourbon but couldn't smell a trap if it bit her on the ass. That's why she didn't drink too often.

Three whiskeys and an hour later she spotted her prey. They exchanged glances and a nod of the head as he entered with his entourage. It almost appeared as though he was flanked by bodyguards the way the older gentlemen kept him within reach. He must have

been their latest project; the firm's protégé extraordinaire. At least his ass in the dark blue suit pants was extraordinaire.

Blaze unabashedly watched him. And to her delight, he watched her right back.

This was the kind of man to write home about. He looked just sexy enough to rock her world, but had a homey aura about him that screamed *family man*. She could detect his fragrance above the crowd. It propelled her to fantasize—an old fantasy yet unfulfilled—about having a husband and family. Something she wanted, but was afraid she'd never obtain. Her birth defect might prevent her from having children after she found a mate and married him in some traditional human manner.

If the opportunity ever availed itself to her, she was going all-out traditional with a white gown, the flowers, the bridesmaids and huge sit-down seafood dinner. Folks show up when there's free food. She nursed her whiskey contemplatively. *I bet even Sekhmet would show up if I got married.*

He slid into a booth, obviously trying to eek out a bit of wiggle room as the stern-looking suits slid in on either side of him. He had eyes only for her. Blaze noticed that even as his drinking buddies spouted judicial wisdom loud enough for the entire room to hear, he kept his cool, and his eyes fixed. He drank his bourbon slowly; his one drink to the others' two or three.

Blaze liked patience in a man. It rounded out her lack of the same. She liked to spring to action—pounce first, ask questions later. Curiosity usually got the better of her. She was lucky it hadn't killed the cat, yet.

She knew she looked good tonight. She'd swept her black hair into a bun. One lock of hair in the front was striped with a golden ring-tail pattern. She'd pinned that around her forehead like a Black Hills Gold crown. She'd applied heavier than normal eye-liner to accentuate her startling cat-green eyes. She'd dressed simply, but seductively. Sometimes it wasn't what you showed, but how you covered it. She wasn't petite—she was close to six feet tall with linebacker shoulders, round hips and an ample bosom that had driven her crazy as a kid, but became an asset as an adult. A few buttons undone on her cream silk blouse showed off a bit of her ultra soft and lacy bra and her supple, golden brown cleavage.

The skirt had a matronly length, but hey ... it was all about the slit on the side. Simple, black and smooth. Off-black hose and in case none of the attorneys in the bar that night were over six feet tall, sensible flats. That was the one drawback about stalking attorneys. Their egos.

Blaze set her temperature to smolder, deciding it was time to draw young Mr. Attorney in for the kill. She wasn't in the mood to wait all night for his drinking buddies to cease congratulating themselves on being masters of the universe before she could have a few moments alone with their younger, more handsome, delicious looking junior partner.

He was probably mid-thirties. He wore an expensive suit and inexpensive loafers. He had a sense of style, however. His mocha-colored skin looked good enough to groom and scratch all night. And his eyes! *Oh, my*. He had the sweetest puppy-dog brown eyes. Not that Blaze liked dogs much.

As she slowly sipped her whiskey and waited, she wasn't sure if it was social or sexual intercourse she craved more. She had her roommates, the customers at her shop, and those relationships she created during the course of every day events, but no one in

her life satisfied—truly satisfied—her needs. She wanted conversation on all levels. By word, thought and deed. She was damned ready to share her soul—her *Ka*—with another. She was pretty sure it would take either years of therapy or a couple more months at the Half-Were House to learn how to let her defenses down long enough for a mate to get a foothold. She could only do that with the support of her half-were sisters. Bast knows she hadn't been able to find one without them.

She chastised herself for even thinking she'd get close to finding a mate in a bar. As *if. Stick to business, Blaze. This is a one-night stand because you are tired of sleeping alone. If there's a mate for you, he's probably living in the enclave of Sekhmet. Short of petitioning the pride for re-admission to find a companion, where the Hell am I to find another half-were shifter?*

Sure, males of her kind existed. Oddball, mutant shape-shifters were few and far between. She didn't know where to find one. There was no personal dating service for misfit feline shifters.

She smirked and caught herself purring softly as, at long last, firm young flesh excused himself from the table. Blaze withheld a come-hither smile. Too flirty. No ... she wanted this guy licking out of her saucer. *Let's not frighten the little lawyer*, she thought as he nonchalantly made his way across the bar to her side.

"Hi," he said.

"Right back at you," Blaze replied.

"Mind if I sit down?"

"What about your friends?" Blaze asked.

"They released me for time spent and good behavior," the young lawyer quipped.

Blaze gestured toward the bar stool next to her. "Please."

He scooted onto the stool as the bartender appeared before him. "Can I buy you a drink?"

Blaze raised the corners of her lips ever so slightly, trying not to smile, but trying all the same to present a happy persona. "Yes. A whiskey. Neat."

"I'll have the same. Leave the bottle," the attorney said.

The bartender did as commanded, pouring two double shots of well-aged amber-colored whiskey. She smiled and left the bottle behind as she went down the bar to help another patron.

"I'm Jack Hawk," the lawyer said.

"I'm Blaze. Nice to meet you, Jack."

Jack smiled and extended his hand to Blaze. She didn't lift a finger in greeting. "I don't shake hands. Don't take it personally. I love physical contact, but I reserve it for my very good friends."

Jack took a sip of his whiskey. "I hope to become one of your very good friends. Blaze—you look so exotic."

"My mother is an American-born Egyptian and my father is Black Irish. And you?"

"Mother is French Canadian. Father is Tanzanian. Maybe a little Rom blood, too—on my maternal grandmother's side," Jack replied.

"Ah, so you're a Gypsy boy, are you?" Blaze teased. "Are you going to steal away in the night with my watch and pocketbook?"

"Gypsies have a mistaken reputation as thieves. I don't believe it myself. But should I spent time with you tonight, rest assured your watch and pocketbook will remain

intact.”

Blaze leaned forward just enough for her blouse to fall open a bit. “What of mine would you steal, Jack?”

“A kiss?” Jack replied hesitantly.

“I’ll give you that.”

Jack pressed inward and their lips met. No tongue. No full-on groping and ripping of clothing. Just a kiss. A really, really nice kiss.

“That was sweet,” he whispered.

“Oh, yeah? Too tame? You a spice-loving man, Mr. Hawk?” Blaze asked, desperately trying to keep from pouncing on this delicious young attorney across from her. His kiss was purrrfect.

“I can take the heat, if that’s what you’re asking.”

Blaze pulled herself out of the stupor of Jack’s kiss. “What? Oh, yes. The heat. So, tell me, are you a pistol in the courtroom, Mr. Hawk?”

Jack smiled. “Alas, I am a corporate attorney and have never been to trial. I spend my days producing boilerplate documents and securing visas for our overseas clientele. My assistant is bored to tears. She said the other day that she was thinking of going back to family law. I guess she likes the drama.”

“I’m not big on drama. Especially not between two people who once loved each other. I could never do it,” Blaze replied. She felt her gut tighten as a fleeting thought of sitting on Sekhmet’s lap as a child became banishment as a teen. Her family drama had burned her big time.

“You’re an attorney, then,” Jack surmised.

“Recovering. I actually am a licensed veterinarian. I never took the bar exam,” Blaze said. She took a sip of her whiskey.

“Law school and veterinary medicine? How long were you in school?”

“Forever. I like the stability of routine. It keeps me from running amuck.”

Jack raised his glass. “Here’s to releasing the hounds every now and then. I think it’s good to cast caution to the wind and howl at the moon. On occasion.”

“I’ll drink to that,” Blaze toasted. “But I’m a cat woman. Instead of releasing the hounds, I like to put the cat out to sit along a fence with the other pussies for a good scratch.”

“I like dogs,” Jack replied. “I don’t have a pet, but if I did, it would be a miniature dachshund. Cuter than Hell.”

“I have a huge marmalade cat named Teague. He thinks I’m his mate.”

“I knew you had a cat. It’s not that you brought the litter tray with you to the bar or anything, but you have a sensual, musky aroma. *It purrs*, if you know what I mean.”

Blaze laughed. “I understand. I truly do.” She slid off the bar stool and turned her round butt encased in cool black fabric to Jack. “I need to get some air. Bring my drink, will you?”

Blaze walked as softly as a proud cat to the exit. She knew her ass looked good in the black skirt. She knew he was watching it, too, as he followed her out.

Night had fallen, and only the slightest pink glow of daylight hung on the horizon. “It’s eventide, Jack.”

He offered Blaze her whiskey. “There’s a new one. What’s eventide?”

“The time between dusk and night,” Blaze replied.

Jack caressed Blaze's arm over her silk blouse. "What do you like to do at eventide?" Jack asked.

Blaze slid her fingertips down the buttons of her shirt. "Make love."

Jack's fingers followed Blaze's down the buttons of her blouse. "I like a woman who speaks her mind. Your place or mine?"

"My mother's pet shop is just around the corner. There's a little flat in the back. It's quite cozy."

Jack chuckled. "Pet shop?"

"Don't worry, Jack. The kittens and snakes won't bother us," Blaze replied.

"Let me slip back inside for a moment..."

Blaze grabbed Jack's tie and drew him in. "Why tell them?" she whispered against his lips. He was only slightly taller than she was. They could stand eye-to-eye. "Didn't you already make a wager with the big boys that if you leave with me, you won't be back? And you don't need to hit the vending machine in the men's restroom. I have everything we need." She took his hand and placed his palm atop her breast. "And then some."

"Astutely said. Lead away, my lady."

*

Angora Companions was the last pet shop of its kind in the city. Flickering neon signs and hand-painted windows offering fluffy companions had gone the way of the eight-track tape. No one took their kids to see the puppies and kittens on the weekend any longer. The shop made its biggest profit from supplying exotic insects and *herpavores* to the local college. Cockroach racing was a big deal at university level.

Still, the kitties were awfully sweet. Blaze rarely stocked puppies. They were too loud, chewed everything to bits and piddled in oceanic quantities. Cats were clean, used a litter tray and whenever she approached, purred like well-oiled machinery. She punched in an alarm code on the side entrance to the shop for entry. No key needed.

Jack chuckled, recognizing the tune. "Nugent's *Cat Scratch Fever*. Cute. Pretty high tech for a pet shop. Deadbolts not good enough for you?" Jack asked.

Blaze shut the door behind them and re-armed the external lock. "Like Gypsies, pet shop owners sometimes fall pray to the mistaken belief systems of others. I do my selfless acts of veterinarian compassion here. I put alley cats on the mend and help find homes for them. I have had activists make threats because they thought I was running a puppy mill for scientific experimentation. I don't like dogs, so a puppy mill is out of the question. And as for scientific experimentation, well ... I have opinions on that, too. I'm all for it as long as the animals can experiment back. You know?"

Blaze paused. "In addition to the activists, and drug addicts hoping to score Katamine, I had their extreme opposites break in looking to steal critters and cash to sell to those abusive sons of bitches, also known as animal experimentation product research companies. They did a number on this place when they found out there was no cash. Thank Bast they didn't find the surgical bay with my pharmaceuticals store. I had the electronic lock added to the doors and windows after the break-in. What's a pet shop owner to do? All I want to do is to give kitties good homes."

"Noble cause. I like cats," Jack replied. "Were the thieves caught?"

"Not by the police," Blaze replied. "I took care of them. Had them by their bollocks and put the fear of Bast into them."

“Ah, the perfumed protector and noble cat goddess. Not a man-eater in mythology as I recall,” Jack said.

Blaze smiled. “That would be her sister, Sekhmet. Bast teaches her adherents other means of persuasion. Come on, the little apartment is down the hall.” Blaze led Jack down a dimly lit back corridor to a second alarmed door. She punched in a code and the door to the flat opened up. Technically, it was a loft. A small table and chair rested by a spiral staircase just inside the door.

*

Jack watched Blaze’s round ass as she sauntered up the staircase. “Nice digs. Jeez ... did you do all the work to this place?” The loft had character. It could have easily been rented out as an artist’s studio. It had a tasteful, Bohemian quality about it that would make a rental listing company see huge dollar signs. “Do you live here?”

“No, I share a townhouse with some roommates. This is where I work, and where I come when I need a bit of privacy. Sometimes you just don’t want roommates around, you know? I’ve decorated it to suit my needs. My mother had carpeted walls. I ripped those out in the first twenty minutes,” Blaze replied.

Jack watched as Blaze unbuttoned her blouse. *Yeah, she has great breasts. Leave the bra on, Blaze. I love the way it pushes your boobs up.* He snapped back to attention as he realized Blaze was talking to him.

“You look uncomfortable, Jack. Take off your shoes and suit coat. Unfasten your belt. Lose the tie. I’m not going to stand on pretenses here. I want to have sex with you. I like the way you look and smell. You are articulate and educated and you don’t appear to have been tainted by the greed and corruption of the judicial system. It’s been a long time since I allowed myself to be held and, well ... I hope you’re up to the challenge.”

Jack kicked off his shoes and threw his blazer over a chair. “I’ll do my best. You know, I don’t want you to think I do this often. I don’t. I honestly don’t have much extra time. Cultivating relationships is difficult at best and sometimes impossible. I saw you and knew that I wanted to get to know you. I guess in this day and age, sometimes it’s easier to make love to a person first. At least we’ll have something to talk about later, huh? I could have been with clients and not my partners and still found a way to meet you, to hold you. There’s something I see in you, Blaze. I just want to stroke you and cuddle you.”

“I’ll take some of that. I could even go for some intelligent conversation over breakfast. However, I’d prefer an orgasm or two first. It’s been a long time since I came by anyone’s hand but my own.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Jack replied. He slid his arms around Blaze’s waist and nuzzled her throat. His dick was pulsing. His heart was racing. She felt so good, smelled so good. “You make me hard.” He chastised himself for saying something so stupid. *Christ ... I could have said anything else. Like, you are beautiful or your perfume is intoxicating.*

* * * *

It was always a game of twenty questions when getting down to sex with a stranger. Blaze liked to make it easy for her lovers—when she had the rare inclination to take one. She laid her cards on the table, leaving as little as possible to chance. Short of screaming, “I like my pussy licked,” she steered the action in a direction agreeable to both parties. Like a cat sauntering back and forth under its person’s hand to have just the right spot

stroked, Blaze wiggled around to make sure all her spots were scratched, too.

Sometimes it was easier to watch. A little man-on-man could get her blood boiling if she was more interested in watching than participating. Like a cat perched on a shelf, watching could be so very enjoyable at times.

As she and Jack kissed, she felt her defenses fall and her heat rise. He had nice lips; soft and smooth as pillows. Jack Hawk's strong arms encircled her in a heated hug of carnality and pulled her hair out of its matronly up-do with one hand.

She liked being nuzzled. He kissed her throat and nibbled at her collarbone and shoulder as they stripped. She stroked his hardness through his Bill Blass suit pants; thick, but not too long. Hungrily, she dropped to her knees, clad only in a lacy yellow-colored bra and panties and deftly removed his erection from his open fly. She cupped his testicles with her left hand and used her right to pump his shaft into her mouth in time to the motions of her jaw. She was out of practice. Her jaw was getting tired.

*

Jack shuddered and placed his hands atop Blaze's head. "Oh, my. Yeah ... that's it," he encouraged as Blaze performed a hard and fast fellatio on him. This woman was about to suck him dry if he didn't say something soon. She was incredible. She gave head like she was starving for it.

"Hey, Blaze. Better save that for the final act. I had a few at the tavern and want to make sure you get yours."

"Afraid if you spend your pocket money you might not be able to give me the change?" Blaze teased. She stroked his penis with her hand. "You're certainly not spent yet, Jackie."

Jack's eyes rolled back in his head as Blaze's hand continued pulling his dick. He shook off the urge to come and lifted her to her feet. He wanted to taste her. Something fragrant called to him, and he was pretty sure the source was between her sweet ass cheeks and labia. "Something like that. I'm better when I haven't had booze. You should try me on a nature walk sometime."

Blaze climbed onto the dark blue damask settee. "I know what you want. You want this." She rolled on her belly and raised her hips. "Ass man."

Her lacy panties didn't hide much. Jack slapped her rear end and ran his fingers lightly along the tufts of dark pubic hair peeking out from the elastic edge. He slipped two fingers inside her panties and pushed the fabric aside, exposing her bare anus, vagina and clitoris. He planted a kiss on her labia. "Sweet," he murmured.

Blaze wiggled her ass, encouraging him to kiss farther and deeper.

Jack inserted a finger into her vagina, drawing out moisture from within to ease his way just like she apparently wanted. Farther and deeper. He inserted two more fingers into her. She was hot and tight. He felt like he could come in the air. This woman turned him on. He'd never been big on screwing strangers, much less putting his mouth in a woman's business unless he'd known her for awhile. But this woman... This Blaze ... she was a honey-pot of fire and he didn't care if his tongue got burned on her heat. He kissed her labia and began a slow oral exploration of her heated sexual areas. He wanted to suck her clit until she screamed and came all over his face. He inserted his index finger into her vagina and his thumb into her ass. He pressed his digits together and kneaded her flesh while flicking her swollen clitoris with his tongue.

Blaze moved away and deftly turned on the settee.

“Hey, Blaze ... where are you going? You taste like summer. Like strawberries. I could lose myself between your sweet thighs,” Jack said. He wiped his face with the back of his hand. “Come on back and let old Jack see how far his tongue can go inside you.”

“Oh, you’re going inside me, all right,” Blaze replied. She leaped from the settee and pulled Jack to the floor, mounting him. She pressed her wet labia against his hardness. “Condoms are under the floor pillow by your head. Can you reach?”

Jack shuddered as Blaze slid her slick opening along his shaft. He slid his right hand under a large gold and pink cushion and pulled out three condoms, while trailing his knuckles over the soft folds of her breasts pushed up by her silky bra.

*

Blaze took a condom from Jack’s hand letting the other two fall to the floor. She opened the packet with her teeth. Without taking her eyes off his, she pulled the condom down over his hardness. Teasing herself, she pushed his penis against her clitoris before maneuvering into position to achieve full penetration.

She moaned as his dick pushed inside her. She was ready for his sex, but tight for his size. She waded her way into the depths. Her plump clitoris hit his pelvic bone as she rocked back and forth. The incredibly fulfilling sensation of a man inside her as she straddled him and rode him for all he was worth was not only a fabulous fuck, but a high she’d forgotten how much she enjoyed. And Jack had a wild aroma that egged her on. Whatever his cologne was, she liked it.

“Jack?” she moaned, slowing the undulating of his hips ever so slightly.

He squeezed her buttocks. “Yes?”

“Something happens to me when I have an orgasm. Don’t be freaked out, all right?”

“That makes two of us. Are you a Black Widow spider?”

“Not exactly, but it’s too late to call a committee to the table and discuss my problem because I am going to...” She couldn’t hold back, didn’t want to hold back a moment longer. A pending orgasm, some eighteen months in the making, burst free from its oppressive confines as Blaze let loose with a guttural cry that could put a Banshee to shame.

She didn’t notice when Jack climaxed.

Orgasms were exceedingly personal for her. It was so much more for her than simply the flush of her cheeks, the all-encompassing rush of pleasure emanating in waves throughout her body, or hardening her nipples ... all eight of them. Of course, six of them stayed in hiding until she underwent the cataclysmic shift of a good fuck.

The surge of orgasm catapulted Blaze into an ambiguous state of being neither human nor animal. A creature trapped between two species. A blended feline/human hybrid. A *Chimera Felis Domesticus*. A chick with a tail. And cat ears. And whiskers. A living, breathing “Josie and the Pussycats” babe.

With each orgasmic surge, a whisker sprouted on her face. Minute moles along her rib cage became small, pink, non-functional nipples—unless of course she had a litter. And she wasn’t going there. Her ears pointed. Her senses sharpened, and then there was the damned tail.

The change was extraordinary, but far from complete. The biophysical changes stopped there. Blaze could never be a full cat. Only a half-cat. A half-were. An outcast in the eyes of the proper, elite were-society.

And she only changed when she came.

Blaze was eighteen when it was discovered by the Queen of Feline Shifters, Sekhmet, or *Suck Me*, as Blaze sometimes referred to her one-time surrogate mother, that Blaze was a misfit were-beast.

Late bloomers were carefully watched by the pride. Since Sekhmet had so dearly loved Blaze as a child, some of Blaze's more human characteristics were overlooked by the deacons of the pride. She had a lot of her father in her. Many human-shifter hybrids were able to make a full shift at maturity. If they could shift, they could stay in the enclave. If they could not shift, they were banished to places like the half-were house. Sometimes, half-weres simply disappeared—as snacks for the Marauders—a canine society living far outside the rules of the rest of the were-dogs. Crazy freaking dog shifters.

Way to kill an afterglow, Blaze thought. First, she shifts. Second, she has a passing thought about the Marauders.

Blaze had a bone to pick with the Marauders. And she hoped, someday, that it was with one of *their own* bones that she'd use to exact her revenge.

As Blaze morphed into half-cat form, she expected to hear a cry of alarm or disbelief from Jack. She looked down, enjoying the glow of Jack's post-orgasmic high. His eyes were closed. His mocha skin looked entirely lickable. The planes of his face were beautiful in his pleasure.

Blaze knew that as soon as his dick ceased pulsing and his climax had concluded, he'd opened his eyes and ... *laugh*.

He laughed as he beheld the woman holding his dick captive inside her body.

Blaze gasped. Seemed he had a secret, too. He shifted. Jack, like her, was a shape-shifter. A half-were. *The dog*.

Laughter was not Blaze's first reaction upon seeing his transformation. Instinctively, her claws came out.

Jack's ears had pointed. His eyes became black pools and his face had developed a snout and canine mouth. With teeth. He bared his canines and scratched at the floor.

He rolled Blaze off with a pronounced, aggressive shove. "Jesus Christ, you're a damned cat! How didn't I sense that? Teaches me to drink too much!" He pulled off the condom and tossed it into the waste bin a few feet away.

Blaze flipped her tail playfully. She'd landed on her feet and was poised for launch if necessary. "And I didn't know you were a shit-eating canine hybrid."

Jack laughed. "It's the alcohol. It dulls our senses and makes it so we don't recognize each other until..."

"We orgasm. *Right*." Blaze rose, desperately wanting to bathe herself. She fought the urge to lick the back of her hand.

"Blaze," Jack said, "Our trigger is the same. To shift, we need to orgasm. I've never met another like me. We're unique, Blaze. We're two of a kind. The same." He laughed again, obviously delighted in the turn of events between them. "I have had one Hell of a time climbing up the dog walk in the canine society. I was finally accepted as an equal a few months back. I had to run a gauntlet of my peers. But I made it, and it's no more puppy papers for old Jack. I can speak in chambers now, and I can take a mate."

"Don't let a good fuck in any way make you believe that I am your bitch, Jack," Blaze replied. "We are not the same. Nor are we two sides of the same coin, or any other metaphoric comparison you'd like to shoot out. This is no ebony and ivory in the fur

world.”

Jack stood.

Blaze likened his appearance to Anubis, the jackal-headed god. The hound’s head, shining, brown skin. If Jack held an Ankh-tipped staff, he’d be a god. She rose, wanting to meet him eye-to-eye. Hoping she was as impressive in her shift as he was in his. “I think you’d better leave, Jack.”

“I’m hardly ready to leave,” Jack replied. “I’ve never met a woman like you! This is awesome! Are you from Sekhmet’s pride? I hear she doesn’t suffer half-weres too well. Kicked you out, right? Us dogs ... we sniff butts and trample down the proverbial grasses with all the canine shifter breeds.”

“I’ve never met a dog who liked cats. I don’t want us to start something...”

Jack interrupted. “I like pussycats. Not the way all the partners do, of course. The firm keeps stray cats in the basement for some of the were-hounds’ amusement—but I...”

Blaze hissed. “You chase cats for fun?”

“They kill cats for fun,” Jack began. “But I—”

“Get out,” Blaze said, not allowing Jack to finish his sentence for a second time.

“Just because you were on top when we made love doesn’t mean I have to take orders from you. I take enough orders every day at work, Blaze,” Jack replied.

“That’s the difference between cats and dogs. Dogs are dependent. Cats are independent.”

“Blaze, we’re the same species! It’s not like I kill cats for fun!”

“But you watch, right?” Blaze asked.

“I have for the sake of my job, yes.”

“Go away, Jack. And don’t come back here. Get out. Now. Or I will make you leave.”

Jack laughed. “What are you going to do to me? What could you do to me? Dogs have long ruled the world. I could catch you and sink my teeth into your throat and that would be the end of poor little pussy,” Jack replied. Immediately, his eyes widened. “Wait ... I’m sorry... That’s the dog-blood barking... I shouldn’t have...”

Blaze lashed out and raked her nails across Jack’s chest leaving bloody scratch marks. She looked at her nail tips, painted with Jack’s bright red blood. It incensed her. It provoked her. She wanted to make the pup yelp. It was a cat thing.

“Damn it, Blaze. That hurt!” Jack exclaimed. “Don’t make me defend myself. We’ve got to talk this through!”

Blaze shook her head. “You need to leave. Leave now or I’m going to go tribal on you, Jack! I can feel the need to protect my territory. I’m losing any sense of logic. I will attack you. I will.”

“I can’t leave after finding another half-were shifter whose trigger is to climax! Blaze ... it’s like we were destined to meet,” Jack replied. He reached for a tissue to staunch the bleeding rakes across his chest. “Jeez, woman. These are deep.”

“I’ve got a gun, Jack. I know how to use it, and I’m not afraid to use it.” She sprinted for her nightstand and pulled open the drawer. Jack sprang up with incredible speed and strength and met her in mid-air. They crashed together and fell to the floor.

Blaze leaped to her feet and grabbed a floor lamp. “Here, Jack. Come on, good boy!” She poised the lamp across her solar plexus-like a fighting man’s staff.

Jack growled. A drop of spittle fell from his mouth to the floor. He approached

Blaze. She could see fire in his eyes and taste his scent in the air.

"That's a good boy. Come to Blaze. She'll give you a treat," Blaze coaxed. *Stupid dog.*

"How long does it last for you? The shift?" Jack asked, circling Blaze.

"Not long," she replied.

"I stay this way until I draw blood, am offered blood, or come again. Wanna do it doggy-style, Blaze?" Jack asked. "Get back to normal? We'll go have a cup of coffee or some egg rolls or something. The gods wouldn't have brought us together if this wasn't important."

"The gods are cruel, Jack. And let me tell you, you son of a bitch ... I am normal. My human side is the freak. Would you please leave?"

"A floor lamp is a poor choice of weapon. You might get one good swing in, but then what? Do you think after you swipe me across the head with a lamp that I'm going to leave quietly?" Jack asked. "I gotta know, Blaze ... you drew my blood—and haven't changed back. What makes you revert?"

"My shifting is none of your business. And as for you leaving quietly, if I bean you with my lamp, well, no. I don't think you'll leave. I know you'll be unconscious. And then I'm going to neuter you," Blaze replied.

"Why are you so angry at dogs?" Jack asked.

"Marauders got hold of my mother. A long time ago. I vowed to avenge her abusers," Blaze replied.

"I don't even know any Marauders, Blaze! I'm a half-were! They don't recruit my kind," Jack said. "Now, come on ... let's talk this through. I really like you." He took a step forward, his arms extended before him.

Blaze swung the lamp with all her might, knocking Jack square in the gut. He sprang upward and caught her upper arm with his teeth before crashing to the floor.

Blaze screeched as the searing pain hit her. Canine teeth ripping tender cat flesh. She bounded backward, her tail whipping about defensively.

Jack emitted a low, guttural growl and licked Blaze's blood off his lips. His ears went farther back. The horrid dog-scent grew more intense. Blaze choked on the stench. She rushed forward and brought the lamp down a second time, striking Jack in the head. "Bad dog!" she cried.

Jack collapsed with a whimper.

She cradled her injured arm as she assessed the damage. To her lamp. Her carpet. A furrow in the flesh of her upper arm was bleeding terribly, and if she had any semblance of intelligence, she would go stitch herself up, now. However, the wound seemed to be the last of her problems.

She felt her shift coming on. She lost strength and agility when in full-human mode. And Jack was going to be a problem. He knew where she kept her litter box.

She looked at the nude body of Jack Hawk sprawled out on her oriental-carpeted floor. His shift was magical. He looked like a 3-D rendering as he shifted into a much more human form. Attractive, virile. Muscular and dark. He was gorgeous. And canine. Holding a handkerchief atop the bite mark on her arm, she mulled over her situation. *He could fit in a large holding cell. I'll get Gina to help me ... help me what? I can't kill this guy. I can't give him a frontal lobotomy. Maybe I could give him a dose of Ketamine and drop him in an alleyway somewhere. He won't remember a damned thing if I give him the*

right dosage. I swear to Bast I'll never drink when I'm horny again. This has got to be the biggest mistake I've ever made. Picking up a damned dog! And I liked him! I really liked him. And he's right ... we are the same. Why did he have to be a dog?

Fighting back tears Blaze reached into her purse to grab her cell phone. Speed dial number one. Gina Mitsotakis, half-were snow leopard. Loud, proud, and her best friend and house-mate.

"Blaze?" Gina answered.

"Yeah. Hey... I need your help. I've got a situation at the shop. A half-were Doberman," Blaze began.

"I don't know if I can leave just now. Tash is watching me like a hawk," Gina replied.

"Get over here!" Blaze pleaded.

"Are you all right?" Gina asked. Gina spoke to someone in the background. Blaze could hear her comforting the newcomer, Meg, in the background. "You need to drink less when you're on the prowl, Blaze."

"I'm fine—and you're right. Look... I knocked him out. Before he wakes up I need to move him into one of the big cages in the basement and give him an injection..."

Gina stopped Blaze. "Spare me the details, Blaze. I'll be right over. I can convince Meg to be my decoy. She'll have a crisis and pull Tash into it. If she can pull this off, she'll earn her stripes."

Chapter Two

"He's bleeding," Gina said. "Did you have to hit him so hard?"

"Ah, hello? *Dog face*. Half-were who eats cats for fun," Blaze replied. She didn't know that. *He didn't say he killed cats. He said "they" killed cats. Did I react too quickly?*

"He's kind of cute. Does he eat pussies, too?" Gina asked. She chuckled.

"Yes. Really well, in fact. I should have known anyone who could use his tongue so well had more than human abilities." Blaze tugged on Jack's briefs. "Help me get him dressed. I don't dare give him an injection while he's out—I won't be able to assess how much to give him until I can see if he's got a concussion. I'm going to have to wait until he's awake, then dose him. After the Ketamine takes affect, he'll get busy studying the bone structure of his hand or counting the cracks in the concrete in some euphoric high and we'll be able to move him to an alley across town. That's why druggies go after the stuff. Its disassociative properties make it the perfect high. He won't know what hit him."

"You hit him," Gina replied.

Blaze nodded. "With my floor lamp."

"In the pet shop loft," Gina said. "Ah, the tabby did it with the floor lamp in the pet shop loft! I do love a good game of *Clue*."

"I'm no murderer. Just a cat protecting her whiskers. How's Meg?" Blaze asked.

"She'll be fine. She's one little half-tigress who is sure as Hell going to earn some stripes tonight if she can keep Tash occupied while I'm gone." Gina swatted at her tail, which always seemed to have a mind of its own. "Let's haul this guy down to your mad scientist lab, all right?" Gina said.

Blaze and Gina managed to drag Jack to a dumbwaiter and sent him down three floors to the basement where Blaze kept a small, tidy clinic for repairing stray cats and the occasional injured half-were.

The basement was dingy, even though Blaze kept it sterile and painted a crisp white. It was the whole atmosphere of the place. At one time, before her mother took over the pet shop and gave it heart, it had been a smuggler's warehouse for exotic pets like ocelots and venomous snakes. Their pain lingered. Blaze tried every day to infuse the basement with love and warmth to dissipate those bad memories.

And now she was about to cage and drug a half-canine shifter with a law degree. That she'd screwed.

"I hate it down here," Gina said.

"Thanks for coming, at any rate," Blaze replied. She closed the kennel door on Jack. "So, he's about two-hundred-twenty pounds and has had alcohol tonight, plus a head injury ... it's going to be a few hours before I can dose him."

"Wanna go home and chill with Meg? We can come back here around two in the morning," Gina offered.

"Yeah. If he wakes up there's no way he can get out and no one will hear him scream way down here."

"Your arm is bleeding, Blaze," Gina said.

"Fuck, yeah. I need to stitch this up. Wanna help? He drew blood and that's why he

shifted back. Apparently he has to orgasm or draw blood to shift. How fucked is that?" Blaze replied. "Hand me that suture tray."

"Kind of like you," Gina said, stroking her tail. "That's interesting."

Blaze shot Gina a glare full of daggers. "I'm not going to talk about it, so don't go there."

Gina snapped a pair of latex gloves and slipped them on. "Uh huh, right."

Chapter Three

Blaze's marmalade tomcat, Teague, leapt into her arms as soon as she and Gina walked in the door of their old painted lady brownstone. Blaze kicked off her flats and nuzzled Teague as the old boy purred as loud as a machine shop in her arms. "I missed you, too," she cooed. "But Mama can't hold you right now. Her arm is awfully sore."

Gina scratched Teague on the head as she passed by. "I wish he'd wait until we're out of the foyer to molest you, Blaze. You and he act like damned alley cats."

Blaze kissed Teague's head. "We are damned alley cats."

Meg peered down from the second floor. "Hey, you're back! I was so worried. You're all right?"

Gina sighed. "Dandy. Where's Tash?"

"In the kitchen," Meg replied.

Gina whispered, "Blaze just about got her tail chewed off tonight. And there's unfinished business back at her shop."

Blaze dropped Teague. "Thanks, Gina. For everything." She planted a kiss on the back of Gina's shoulder.

"Yeah, you can make it up to me later," Gina replied.

Meg sighed. "You two make it look so easy."

"Someday, Meg, you'll be able to join us for a bit of fur-pile action," Blaze replied, referring to the occasional mutual grooming the housemates participated in.

"I can't even half-shift. Sorry, no fur, but I'd love to brush you if you need it," Meg replied.

Blaze stretched and gave a playful tug to Gina's tail. "I'll remember that offer, but right now, I really need to get wet and get this scent off me."

"You are hurt! Look at your arm." She quieted her voice. "You took down a dog tonight? You are one of the toughest women I know."

"Yeah... I had a bad case of the horny-lonelines and picked the wrong guy up at a bar. He scratched my itch, but nearly took my head off a moment later," Blaze replied.

Gina laughed. "And now he's sleeping off the booze and a developing subdural hemotoma before Blaze here shoots him up with Ketamine and sends him packing."

"Nothing like upsetting a vet!" Meg laughed.

"You, too, can have umpteen degrees and a secret practice! Enroll in the college of life!" Blaze giggled. "When the pride banished me, I hit the books. I did a law degree and veterinary science degree in six years," Blaze replied.

"It's good that the pride still paid your way," Meg replied.

Blaze withheld a sigh. If she swallowed enough emotion over her father, someday she might actually forget how disappointed she was in him. "The pride paid for some. My father paid for some. The pride to get rid of me and my father to keep me as far away from his tidy little human world as he could get me."

"Shifter mother and human father. Me, too," Meg said.

Blaze nodded. "You wanna come sit in the hot tub? We can swap horror stories of living in, and being booted from, our pride."

Meg nodded. Gina shrugged and headed off down the hall. "I'll go uncover the

Jacuzzi.”

Meg chuckled, following Gina. “I think it’s so funny that the buffest woman here is a tabby cat.”

“Standard breed house cat, and proud of it,” Blaze replied. “But my cat self doesn’t count to the prides. Just because I can’t fully shift and can’t hold my half-shift, and because I need a trigger to shift, and blah, blah, blah, they banished me here. Screw them and their purity.”

“Why’d you go to a dog bar? You looking for a fight?” Meg asked.

Blaze slipped her arm through Meg’s and escorted her further down the hall. “No. I picked a bar frequented by attorneys because they look good in dark suits and ended up with a literal son of a bitch. I do love me an intelligent, ambitious man in my bed. The problem is the inside of people so rarely lives up to the outside.”

Meg stopped, halting Blaze. “I can see that you might have those tastes, with your history. I can’t believe I’ve actually met someone who came from Sekhmet’s pride. Did you have a bad relationship there, Blaze? You’ve alluded to it, but never really told me the story.”

“I was eighteen. Barely eighteen and, Bast, Mother had kept me so sheltered. She worked as a paw-maiden to the Queen. Even though my father was human, I was raised at court. Mom was a favorite of Sekhmet, and at the time, it was assumed that my elite shifter bloodline would supersede my impure human one. Sekhmet loved me—or so I thought. Anyway, I was tail over whiskers in love for the first time. I had an affair with one of Sekhmet’s elite guards. A full-blooded were-ocelot. First time he made me come, I partially shifted. *Partially shifted*. I knew that I didn’t shift all the way, because... Jeez... I’d masturbated, you know? But I thought that when I finally went into a real heat, that I’d shift.”

Meg nodded. “What happened?”

Blaze continued. “Mom had always told them that I was a late bloomer and that my abilities would show up nearer the end of my maturation. That was true. I went into heat. I took a lover. I orgasmed, I shifted. Full orgasm. Partial shift.”

“What did the ocelot do?” Meg asked.

“He became angry. Enraged, like he’d just done a leper. He wanted to punish me. Needless to say, my second sexual encounter was not nearly as pleasurable as the first. He slapped me around and called me terrible names. It aroused him. It was disgusting. And no ... he didn’t get a chance to rape me—at least not the way he had intended. He got it in me, but I sure as Hell wasn’t going to let him keep it there. He had me by the throat and was going to roll me to take me from behind, but I got him instead.” Blaze flicked her long nails out and made a switchblade sound for emphasis. “I took a good swipe with my nails and just about ripped his balls off him. I swore I’d never relive something that horrid again. So, I work out obsessively to make sure that when my alley cat instincts come out and feed my penchant for walking on the wild side, I can take care of myself.”

“I’m so sorry,” Meg whispered. “I don’t understand why the *fulls* have to be so unkind to us.”

“Suck Me allows it, that’s why,” Gina replied from the hot tub. “Come on in.” She was nude, of course. Her tail whipped about playfully as she climbed into the hot tub.

“Cats don’t usually like water, but in our case, *we do*. Lots of it,” Blaze said. “Your

tail looks lovely all sopping wet, Gina. That drowned-rat look looks good on you.” Blaze smiled sweetly at her friend. She stripped and climbed into the hot tub. The stitches on her arm tingled as the hot water hit them.

Meg relaxed into the bubbles right after Blaze. Her golden tiger-eyes glowed in the low lights of the steamy enclosed deck. Her thick copper hair was the color of a tiger’s coat. The ends floated on the water, brushing her full, buoyant breasts.

“Wow. You’re beautiful,” Blaze remarked, *really* looking at Meg. At Meg’s innocence and pure beauty.

Half were-leopard Gina blew Meg a kiss. “Gorgeous.”

Meg nodded. “I need the good strokes you two give me. I’ve been such a doormat. I see now that we need each other. We’re our own pride.”

Gina laughed. “And Tash is just like a typical pride leader. She barely tolerates our behavior and keep things tidy, but thoroughly snarls at us.”

Blaze laughed. “Your tail irritates her on a daily basis.”

“She doesn’t like it when I flash her, either,” Gina agreed.

Blaze smiled. “You’re my best friends. You’re the ones who really know what it’s like, on the outside. So, here we are, three half-weres kicked out of the prides of Sekhmet, making our own way in life. You were there for me when I needed you. Both of you.”

“I would have come, too, Blaze. To help you with your dog problem. If you need me, I’ll help you. I would. You both welcomed me so completely, when I was just so ... devastated.”

“Thanks, Meg. In this case, your diverting of Tash was the best thing you could do while Gina helped me begin the clean-up of the dog boy process.” Rubbing her eyes with one hand, Blaze considered the situation still waiting to play out at her shop. “What am I going to do?”

Meg shifted in the water. “Be safe. Be careful.”

Gina’s tail peeked up and swished around, brushing Blaze’s leg in the center of the tub. “You’re safe here. Sekhmet leaves us alone. Her guards leave us alone. The Marauders leave us alone.”

“We hope,” Blaze added.

“What clan does dog boy belong to?” Meg asked.

“I don’t know. I’m going to set my whiskers to finding out, however. He’s so typical of his kind. Small canine complex. They all want to go werewolf and are stuck as mutts. Makes them crazy,” Blaze replied. “But, there’s something about him that could easily drive me crazy in heat. I kind of like the danger he presents.” Blaze laughed. “Stop me! Stop me, now!”

Gina splashed water at Blaze. “Stop,” she cooed.

“I just need to remember that he said his firm keeps cats in the basement. That’s enough to make me steer clear,” Blaze added.

“What do they do with the cats?” Meg asked.

Blaze hated to disillusion the naïve, kind young teacher.

“Target practice.”

Gina growled. “That’s wrong. Really wrong.”

“I have the impression now—after the fact—that he has seen the murder of cats, but not participated. He’s going to be so out of it after I dose him. Everything’s going to be

all right. He won't be back. He won't remember tonight, anyway. Ketamine can have that affect," Blaze said.

"What about using Rohypnol on him?" Meg asked.

"Gnarly drug—and not available to vets. I have to use what I can get for the critters. And the quantities are severely regulated. If I use too much too often the DEA will be on me like flies on..."

Meg interrupted. "I get the picture."

"What if he remembers everything?" Gina said softly.

"Well, he doesn't know about this place, or he and his pack would have sniffed us out before. The shop is safe. I've got levels of protection, from a fourteen foot yellow boa that lives behind the cash register to electronic surveillance. If he does remember and shows up at my place, I'll do what I need to do," Blaze replied.

Gina made a "bang" symbol with her finger and thumb. "Dog boy, meet my lovers, Smith and Weston."

Meg shook her head. "You're tough, Blaze. But if it got bad, Tash would help us."

Blaze nodded, feeling the seriousness of it in her cat gut.

Chapter Four

Meg curled up by the gas fireplace instead of going to her room.

Blaze and Gina embraced like the sisters in spirit they were and Gina went off to bed, while Blaze headed to the weight room to work out a little anxiety. She'd changed back into her buxom human form while still in the hot tub. She couldn't control her abilities. So she controlled her human body. Low carb, slow burn, plus cardio and strength training four days a week. She didn't enjoy pumping iron. It just made her feel safe to be so strong. She was a small tabby in a lion's world and she'd be damned if any full shifter tried to do her harm again.

A good hour's sweat later and it was time to move the bitch's boy from the shop to an alley. "Gina?" Blaze called through Gina's bedroom door.

"Yeah. Yes. Is it time?" Gina replied. "I dozed off."

"We need to stay out of Tash's sight, and you know that little gadget of yours ... your little friend? Bring it, okay? I so love me your Stun Gun Master 1000. Neat toy."

Blaze and Gina stole downstairs and into the garage as quietly as they could. Gina opened the garage door manually while Blaze started the truck. "Let's ride," Blaze said, rolling out of the driveway.

The shop with its antique neon signage always gave Blaze a warm fuzzy. She'd been practically raised in the shop at her mother's heels. And when she wasn't in the shop, she was at the court of the feline queen. Such memories of childhood she had. Such love she felt—until her handicap became apparent.

High above the shop, darkening the nineteen thirties bric-a-brac façade there remained bricks blackened by soot and fire. It was a tribute to Blaze's father—the firefighter who rescued Blaze's mother and her exotic pets from certain doom.

Mother wouldn't leave the pets behind, though the entire building had to be evacuated. Smoke poured into the lower levels through the air ducts and vents and Mother had nearly died of suffocation.

Father, with his piercing blue eyes and thick Bostonian accent, lifted her from the floor where she'd collapsed and then went back in again and again to rescue the kitties and rats and mice and ferrets and other various and sundry pets.

Mother had been grateful. *Very* grateful.

Blaze was conceived that night on a bed of coiled fire hose.

Then Mother shifted.

And Father freaked out.

Nine months later when a chubby baby girl was put into his arms at the station, he did the right thing. From a distance.

Eventually, Mother introduced her baby girl to the scratching post hierarchy. Blaze, with her bright green eyes and infectious laugh became a favorite at court. But eventually, Sekhmet, shifter queen, lived up to being named after the vengeful Egyptian goddess of divine retribution. Proud, selfish, and loving only when it pleased her to be so, Sekhmet ruled with a barbed tail and iron claw.

Blaze had refused to feel inferior, even as Sekhmet ordered her branding and banishment. She saw a look of great disappointment in Sekhmet's eyes. The queen

looked at her like she was a broken toy fresh from the box on Christmas morning. A toy she would no longer play with, but didn't want others to ever enjoy, either. The scarification was supposed to take care of that. It was supposed to be a permanent reminder to Blaze that she was inferior.

Blaze walked proudly into the arena, head high and eyes fixed on Sekhmet. Hers was to be a public spectacle. No quick flash of a razor on the small of her back and then out the door to fend for herself. This was meant to be as painful mentally as it would be physically.

Blaze disrobed before an eerily silent crowd of about two hundred feline shifters. Even as she bent her body over the marble altar, she kept her eyes on Sekhmet. Her belly against the marble, refusing to bow her head, she didn't struggle at all as she was strapped down.

She heard her mother, sobbing.

That was the most painful part of the entire episode. The pain it caused her mother. Blaze could deal with the humiliation. She could deal with the slice of a razor against her flesh as an Eye of Ra was carved. She wouldn't gag at the smell of her own flesh being charred and cauterized. It was the cries of her mother that made her ill.

When it was over, her mother was allowed to comfort her. Only it was Blaze who comforted her mother.

Though years had passed, Blaze's spine tingled and her skin crawled when something triggered the memory of that day. The scent of her own burning flesh still permeated her senses. Someday, Sekhmet would know *that* smell. Mama didn't call her *Blaze* for nothing.

She'd dreamed of taking revenge for a long time. *Someday...*

* * * *

Blaze opened Angora Companion's steel-plate delivery bay electronically and closed it behind the truck. "All righty then. Let's go see what dog boy has been up to," she said to Gina.

"No more, Blaze," Gina said.

"No more what?" Blaze replied.

"No more picking up guys in bars. If you need a man that badly, we can find you one. Looking for love in human arenas doesn't pay off," Gina said.

"I need to drink less when I'm out, that's all. If I hadn't been shooting whiskeys, I would have been able to smell old Jack a mile off. And I would have avoided him," Blaze replied.

"No, you wouldn't have. He's cute." Gina laughed. Gina knew her all too well.

Blaze chuckled. "I admit it. I love living on the edge." She hesitated to finish her sentence. "And I could fall in love with him. As wrong as it is, he and I have a lot in common. He shifts when he comes, just like me. It's rare to need a trigger to shift and the odds are astronomical that two shifters would need the same stimulus."

Gina pulled open the door to the lab as Blaze unlocked it. "Quit acting like an alley cat."

Blaze looked at her friend sweetly. "*Meow.*"

Jack looked up groggily from the floor of his cell. He snarled and bared his teeth, though his form was completely human.

Gina patted Blaze on the back. "He's cute. Gina likes mochas." She took a whiff of the air. "Oh, but he smells like a dog."

Blaze unlocked her medicine cupboard and took out a pre-filled syringe of Ketamine.

"What are you going to do to me?" Jack asked. "I like it a little rough, but this is more than I bargained for. And who's the babe?"

Gina coughed. "Babe? Excuse me, but I am a half-snow leopard were-cat and if I shift, even in partial form, I could down you in one swallow."

Jack rose to his knees and cupped his groin, shaking it at Gina. "Come here and give me a swallow, baby."

"Dog," Gina cursed.

"That's *dawg* to you, puss," Jack replied. "What are you doing over there, Blaze?"

"Preparing to neuter you," Blaze replied. "And don't be so rude to my friend. I'm surprised you're acting like such a cur, Jack. Even when you bit me, you seemed to show a bit of remorse. Quit being such a putz."

"I get rude when a lover beats me up and cages me." Jack snarled. "And what the Hell do you mean you're going to neuter me?"

Blaze turned around, the capped syringe poised in her right hand. "Now, be a good dog and take your medicine."

"You're going to drug me?" Jack asked.

"You know where my shop is. You work in a firm of were-canines who chase and kill cats for fun. Thereby, yes. I am going to drug you."

Jack smiled. Suddenly he was the suave, controlled man from the bar. "I'm not really such a bad guy, Blaze. I won't tell the boys about this place. I'll run home with my tail between my legs and next time we go out, I'll treat you to sashimi. Even though you've got me caged in your dungeon, I'd like to see you again."

Blaze felt her face go crimson. She glanced at Gina, who stood staring, mouth agape. "What? I don't dislike him," she said to Gina. She turned back to Jack. "You're way too dangerous a lover, Jack. I shift, you shift, and we end up chasing each other around the room. One of us will get hurt," Blaze replied. "Neither one of us walked away unscathed tonight. I've got eight stitches and you're going to have lovely parallel scars across your chest."

"Although the bite was unintentional, I tasted your blood, Blaze. And you scratched my chest. We've exchanged something that in most packs is considered a betrothal," Jack said. "I can already feel the passion fever working its way around my belly. We've been scent-matched."

Blaze nodded. "Yeah. I feel it, too. But we cannot go there. We're too different. Forget about me, Jack."

"I can't, Blaze. We've been joined. We're going to need each other."

Gina rolled her eyes. "He's a whiner, Blaze. Let me stun him and get him to shut the fuck up."

Ignoring Gina, Blaze approached the cage. "Look, Jack... had I known you were a hound, I would have never..."

"Technically, I'm not a hound. Hounds are scent dogs. Dobies aren't scent dogs. But they are loyal and make great companions—even in a house with cats."

"I've had enough of this," Gina said. She reached into her purse and removed her stun gun. She darted to the cage, pushed Blaze aside, and struck Jack in the arm with a

strong electrical jolt.

With a look of complete astonishment on his face, he collapsed.

"I wasn't ready for him to be unconscious yet!" Blaze complained. "Damn you and your itchy trigger finger."

Gina shrugged. "Get over it, Blaze. You're the one who told me to bring my little friend along. And he was starting to annoy me. Trying to act all innocent and cute. *He's a dog.*"

Blaze stroked Jack's unruly dark curls through the bars. "Under any other circumstances, I might really like this guy." She unlocked the cage door and knelt before Jack, the syringe held between her teeth like the red rose of a tango dancer. She yanked down Jack's trousers and patted his left cheek then swabbed it. "Here's looking at you, kid," she whispered, as she injected a small dose of Ketamine into his posterior. "Let's move him before he wakes up."

"Right. You buying breakfast after this?" Gina asked. It wasn't the first time she'd helped Blaze out of a dog-eat-world situation.

"Absolutely. You got his other shoulder?" Blaze asked.

A handsome lump of dead weight, Blaze and Gina moved Jack to the truck bed. Blaze took his vitals before hopping into the cab. "He's fine. Heart rate is steady. Pupils are barely dilated. Hopefully he won't remember what hit him."

"Or fucked him," Gina added.

Blaze turned the ignition over. "Crude, but well spoken. I'm going to leave him in the alley behind Rockets."

Gina giggled. "You've given this some thought, haven't you?"

"With his belt unfastened and shirt unbuttoned and maybe a little tussling of that black hair of his. Face down, behind a gay bar."

"That's not nice, Blaze."

Blaze chuckled. "I am such a cat sometimes. It was either Rockets or the parochial school stoop with a pair of girl's panties in his mouth."

Gina snorted. "You are such a bitch!"

Blaze, in all seriousness, replied. "No need to be that insulting, Gina. I am a bit of a live wire, but never, ever compare me to a dog. Ever."

Gina cocked head to one side, making a sorrowful face at Blaze. "I'm sorry, dear one. Let's do the Catholic school. This guy looks like he might walk both sides of the fence anyway, so a gay bar won't be a big deal."

"I'd pay to see that," Blaze replied. "Jack Hawk and another buff man doing the nasty. Bare back. Man..."

"Highway to the danger zone, Blaze," Gina cautioned.

"A half-were can dream, can't she?"

Chapter Five

Jack was well into a euphoric stupor as Gina and Blaze dropped him onto the back steps of St. Augustine's Catholic Girls' School.

Blaze checked his pulse again. "He's fine. He'll lay here for awhile and when he wakes up, he'll remember next to nothing. Only a fleeting memory of my embrace and perhaps a leftover twitch from the fabulous blow job I gave him. And as for me, well ... I'll remember his kiss. His probing tongue. The way he filled me. And most of that is because we scent-matched up. I'll get over it."

Gina forced an exasperated sigh. "The way he freakin' bit you? You'll be lucky if you don't show him your tail and beg to have his litter."

Blaze gingerly touched the wound on her arm. "This thing is killing me. I hope it doesn't get infected."

"Dogs are dirty creatures, Blaze. Bast only knows where his mouth was before he..." She paused. "Oh, well. Never mind. We do know where his mouth was before he bit you."

Blaze squeezed into Gina's arms, hugging her friend. "Thanks. Thanks for helping me."

"For the last time," Gina offered. "I am *so* done. If you get horny, go find yourself a nice half-Tom. I haven't seen one in awhile, but I know they're out there. Take out an ad in the personals or something. *Cat-shifter seeking same for howl under the moon*. Otherwise, Meg is your new clean-up girl and amateurs need so much training."

Blaze stood back and raised her arms up, elbow crooked, on either side of her body. A deep twinge of pain shot down her arm from the wound. She turned her palms outward. "By Bast, I swear I shall never go on the prowl again. I'm going to find a mate and settle down. I swear it." She thought of Jack. And the way she still wanted him. Almost desperately. Dangerously.

Gina paused reverently for a moment as Blaze concluded her oath silently. "Amen to that, sister. Bast hears your prayers, you know. And she doesn't take kindly to back sliders—and sometimes she answers prayers in ways we never expect."

Blaze and Gina walked to the truck. "I know," Blaze replied, giving one final wistful glance back at Jack. "I know."

* * * *

Blaze's arm was infected. The puncture wounds caused by Jack's feral attack had grown red and swollen around the edges. Blaze showered and let the hot water steam the wound clean. She needed antibiotics. Good thing she had some at the shop.

She opened up the medicine cabinet and squirted a dollop of Neosporin across the wound and, using her teeth as a third hand, rewrapped it. She'd done a pretty good suturing with Gina's help. She wished she'd have the presence of mind to think about a dose of antibiotics while she was still at the shop.

The house was terribly quiet when she emerged from the shower.

Blaze broke the stillness by humming. She wasn't sure the name of the tune. Why

didn't the house have an old-fashioned clock with its incessant tick-tock-tick? That would have been enough to assure that the place would never, ever be dead quiet. Teague purred around her feet as she climbed the steps to her room. Blaze entered her corner of the big house with her cat at her heels. She scooped Teague into her arms. He nuzzled her face and throat. "I know you love me, Teague. I love you, too. Why can't you be a man?" She rubbed her nose against his. "Or why can't I shift all the way so that we can get all furry on each other?"

Blaze sighed. She realized the name of the tune she'd been humming. It came to her like a slap across the face. She sang the words softly, embarrassed. "I am not such a misfit. I am not such a nitwit." *Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer. Lovely. I'm losing it.* "I am not a misfit, am I, Teague? I'm a half-were. I get the best of both worlds, right?"

The cat purred. Blaze set the big boy down on her bed. He immediately began paddy-pawing her crimson and orange throw.

Blaze stripped off her bathrobe. She was bruised, beaten and black and blue. And sexually satisfied for the first time in ages. She slipped on a simple white cotton nightgown and stretched out on the bed next to Teague. She was too tired to bother crawling inside the sheets. She was too tired to get up and turn off the light. Screw it.

In a few moments, Blaze was sound asleep with a large orange cat sprawled out across her legs.

* * * *

Of what do cats dream?

Blaze often dreamed of being a full feline. Lithe, flexible. Able to walk a wire and pounce on prey from high above. The confines of her human form, bothersome and cumbersome compared to that of a cat, gone. Blaze loved the feel of the night air against her whiskers and the aroma of a thousand insects waiting to be chased.

This dream, however, found her in human form. Pure human with nary a shift in sight. All around her full shifters reveled in the darkness, drinking in the luminous beauty of the stars and moon, making love wildly wherever they wished. She could never join them. She was an outcast. She could look over the fence, but never cross the scent-line. There was no scent-match for her. No mate.

Barefoot and wearing the same white nightgown she'd worn to bed, Blaze stumbled through empty streets, searching. Her eyes reacted to movement down the street. Ah ... so she had her feline senses, but not the body. So be it. Dreams were a harsh mistress. An unsympathetic mistress.

Her arm throbbed. The purple bruise pulled the stitches and oozed pain when she breathed. Any movement was nearly insufferable. Yet, she continued walking.

The movement up the street taunted her.

She wanted to give chase. Catch it and bat it around a bit—whatever it was that was causing the break in the stillness of the night. She left the raucous sounds of full-shifters behind as she moved farther along the street.

A breeze assailed her with a new scent. So precise was its gust against her that it roused her from her pattern of steps against the concrete. It wafted over her like a juggernaut, exploring every crevice of her body with its unstoppable nature. It embraced her. She knew the aroma riding the wind. It was a male in rut. The odor had an undertone of pure sensuality. It carried a note of danger and threat. *Jeopardy.* Blaze knew this

dangerous perfume. She'd become enraptured in it once before. Sekhmet's elite guards were steeped with this scent. She'd been young and unable to stop her animal instincts from surfacing *en force* the night she'd lost her virginity at the hands of that intolerant guard.

She knew this scent from another aspect of her life, too. It was the *flores de la muerte* that lingered on her mother after the Marauder attack. Long after the last bite, long after the last bit of humiliation at the hands of bitch-shifting dogs, the scent of the Marauders had lingered on her mother as she struggled for survival. A bouquet of death.

The one common element of the elite guard big cats and the Marauder dogs was their virile, potent, dangerous scent that marched before them like shields. That was the odor riding the breeze. Dangerous like the Marauders and twice as sensual as a ripe male. It wasn't a big cat. It was fully canine.

Blaze struggled to form two simple words. She knew she was dreaming and within the confines of her dreams, she often could not speak. She lost that ability. But she could purr. And as she put name to scent, she realized that she was purring. She'd partially shifted without coming. The beauty of the dream world. The miracle of her dream world.

Her tail whipped about playfully as she crept toward the man. She spoke words she never thought she'd utter again. "Jack Hawk."

"Blaze." His voice was low and throaty, almost a growl. He was in a shifted state, too. She envisioned his soft, probing tongue going places on her body. His tongue going anywhere it wanted on her body. Dogs had no sense of shame. They licked indiscriminately.

He was close to her now, his presence surrounding her like a chilly mist, teasing her nipples and making her skin crawl.

Blaze opened her mouth to speak, and suddenly found herself knocked to the grass and pinned with that much-coveted tongue against hers. His kiss was hard and aggressive, and delicious and titillating. She could smell his Doberman-self mixed into the heady odor of his cologne. Her tail twitched and stiffened as his probing tongue left her mouth for a southern exploration. Her throat, her shoulders, her nipples through the fabric of her nightgown. The inside crook of her elbows. Her underarms. Her belly.

He brought her tail up between her legs and used it as he should have been using his mouth, damn it. She moaned. The sound came through as a soft mew. He poked the tip of her tail inside her vagina, then set his magic tongue to work on her clitoris.

Snout. Nose. Canine teeth. Human lips. It all seemed a blur to Blaze as Jack brought her closer and closer to the brink of orgasm. Sometimes she saw Jack Hawk, the man. Sometimes she envisioned his half-were self. She ignored the sensation in her gut. The urge to flee. The urge to run away from the bad dog. He had the scent of the Marauders on him. But he had her number, too. Blaze clutched Jack's head and held him fast between her legs as she came. The tight pressure against her clit and the unrelenting flicks of his tongue and the sheer naughtiness of him poking her with her own tail sent her over the edge.

She yowled and screeched and quivered and rode her orgasm for all it was worth. Before the spikes of pleasure had subsided, Jack rolled her and mounted her from behind.

He thrust into her easily, greedily. He didn't position himself to bring her any additional pleasure. Blaze let him. This was wild, feral and forbidden. Inter-species sex. Naughtiness never felt so right. Jack used Blaze's body until he achieved his own

satisfaction. As he came, he leaned into her and whispered as his hips ground into her and his penis pulsed in orgasm, “Ka. Ka.”

* * * *

Blaze snapped awake, knocking Teague onto the floor. A trickle of blood tickled her arm. The stitches were weeping.

She shook off the horrid feeling of dread weighting her down. “Ka,” she whispered. “Soul.” She scooted off the side of the bed, not wanting to get any blood on her comforter and dashed to her bathroom to change the gauze.

She poured herself a cup of water and sat on the closed toilet, not quite having enough energy to swallow the two ibuprofen she’d pushed from their foil packet. Teague wandered in and purred at her feet.

“It’s not transference. It can’t happen between species. Ka, my ass. A dog knows my soul? There’s no flippin’ way I intend to be spiritually joined with a fucking dog!” Blaze realized she was shouting. She closed her eyes and took slow, deep breaths to calm her racing mind. *I am not his bitch! We are not mated or joined or connected in any soulful manner. Ka. The Egyptian soul. Holy Mother, Bast. What the fuck have I done?* Suddenly, Gina’s words reverberated in her mind, “*Bast hears your prayers, you know. And she doesn’t take kindly to back sliders—and sometimes she answers prayers in ways we never expect.*”

She clutched Teague in her arms. “It is transference. I feel it. I’m going to start craving him. I will want to eat, breathe and sleep Jack Hawk. I am in deep shit.” She quickly realized that she’d better not slam a gift from Bast. “Thank you, Bast. I’ll make the best of this situation. Somehow.”

Chapter Six

Jack snuggled against Blaze's shoulder, trying not to look at the framed print of the Egyptian Goddess Bast hanging across from her bed. He thought perhaps he'd buy her an Anubis print to balance things out. Far better than the Crucifix his mother made him keep in his room as a kid. He ran his hand over her rounded belly.

He'd never been happier. A woman to share his life. A woman who shared his secret and his abilities. A woman to love. A woman he loved carrying his child. He could see growing old with Blaze. Jack cast his eyes to the poster of Bast. *Let us die peacefully in our old age, tails entwined after great sex.* He smiled. A dog making a prayer to a cat goddess. Love conquers all. He chuckled softly, not wishing to awaken her. They'd conceived their child in the cage where she'd locked him that first night. What better way to celebrate their union than by making a place of punishment into a place of bliss?

Theirs had been a tumultuous, whirlwind courtship. The hardest part of which was winning over Blaze's roommates. They were the most distrusting shifters he'd ever met. And, unfortunately, rightfully so. It had taken time and patience, but they'd come around once they saw how happy and fulfilled Blaze was. Separately, they had good lives. Joined, their lives were even richer.

And now, in a few months, they'd have a child. A human-canine-feline-shifter. Beautiful.

He dozed off, only to be awakened by a gentle push against his shoulders. "Wake up ... wake up..."

Jack's eyes snapped open. His eyelids felt like lead weights attached to anvils in a wind tunnel. Every muscle in his body ached and he was pretty sure he'd soiled himself. Fighting through a thick fog after opening one eye, he managed to recognize that he was not in the bar. He was not at home. He was not at the firm. And he was not in bed next to Blaze.

It had been a dream. *Damn.*

He was sprawled out on concrete steps next to a large, smelly green dumpster that gave off the foul odor of rotting green vegetables and fermenting tater-tots.

He tried to sit up.

It was then he realized there was something dry clinging to lips. He reached one painful finger to his mouth. Whatever it was, it was cotton. And white. He could just make out that much through the haze.

His chest wall complained loudly as he stretched. The shoulders weren't too happy, either.

He shook off the cloud cover and tried to work up some saliva in his mouth to get rid of the ultra-dry fabric sensation. He held out the gag. "Panties. White cotton panties. What the fuck did I do last night?"

He looked around, hoping to see something familiar.

Nothing. The only thing he remembered was Blaze. But he couldn't remember how he knew her. Or where she was. And he really wanted to find her. It felt as though a part of him was missing—and she was the key to finding that missing piece.

A grating sound alerted him. He lurched forward, falling off a back stoop, landing in

a muddy alleyway. He glanced up, his face covered in grime as a steel door scraped open. A huge penguin emerged. No... it was a nun. A hand-painted sign above her head read, "service entrance St. Augustine's." He was at church.

Church?

"That's him, Officer. Caught him sleeping it off on our stoop with a pair of girls' underwear in his mouth. Can you please help him move along before Father starts Mass for the students? His presence has already caused enough disruption."

Jack looked up at the nun, with her incredibly disapproving continence and icy tone of voice. "Ma'am, if I could explain..." Explain? Explain what? Could she explain to him why he was here?

"Tell it to my partner. He's in the car waiting for you," the police officer said. "Do you need help getting up?"

Jack rose. "I'm Jack Hawk, attorney at law." The words sounded strange, mechanical. "I don't know why I am here, or why I have cotton panties in my possession. I'm not into little girls, nor cotton panties on big girls as I don't go for the school-girl look. I swore off Catholic schools a long time ago. Too many hours spent kneeling on rice as a boy."

The nun replied sharply with a voice like the metal edge of a ruler as it slapped. "I've already polled my girls and none of them seem to have been victimized by you, and all undergarments are accounted for. However, you have clearly spent a night of Hellish debauchery and if I were you, I'd rethink getting down on your knees."

Jack sighed. "Pardon me, Sister—but the only thing I'm going to do on my knees today is romance the porcelain god. I agree with you—I tied one on last night. I think." He turned to face the cop. "Look, I'm going to reach for my wallet. I can tell it's in my back pocket because it pressed against my lower back all night and my hip feels bruised and sore. I'm an attorney." He reached for his wallet. "Here, let me show you." He held out his billfold to the officer.

"That seems to be important to you, doesn't it? Attorneys can drink too much, too, you know." The officer looked at Jack's license. "Well then, Mr. Hawk, *esquire*, sir, I'm not sure I have enough to run you in, but if you'd like to come to the station with me, we'll make a few phone calls and get you back behind your desk in no time at all," the cop replied.

The nun cleared her throat. "You're not going to arrest him?"

"He's trespassing, but he does look a bit haggard. Maybe he was robbed. Were you robbed?" the cop asked.

Jack rubbed his temples. "I have no idea."

"What about the panties?" the Nun asked.

Jack held them out. "You want them? I think they're too small for you, but whatever floats your boat, Sister."

"Don't be flippant, Mr. Hawk. Now, let's move along and let this good lady get on with her day," the cop said.

Jack headed for the patrol car. "Would you drop me at my office? Unless I'm under arrest..."

"No problem, Mr. Hawk. Just keep off church stoops with your panties, all right?"

Cop humor. Jesus. "Yes, sir," Jack replied. "Incidentally, you don't happen to know a woman named Blaze, do you?"

“The only Blaze I know runs a pet shop downtown.”

“Pet shop? No, that couldn’t be her.” Jack crawled into the back seat of the police cruiser, hoping he didn’t vomit as the car started.

Chapter Seven

Jack strolled into his office, glad it was a Saturday and that all the clerical staff were gone. Only security saw him enter in such a disheveled state, and the guards were well-paid to keep quiet about the goings on at the firm.

Jack stripped off his filthy clothes and redressed in a pair of jeans and t-shirt he had stashed in his closet for late night work. Might as well be comfortable when burning the midnight oil, he always figured. Why keep the suit after business hours? He took the elevator to the basement. The senior partners spent a lot of time in the basement on weekends. He was expected to make an appearance in the basement game room every weekend—even if he didn't participate. He didn't want to participate.

The muffled blast of an air gun told him all he needed to know. The partners were enjoying a bit of sport. He punched in the key code and the electronic door opened.

"Jack!" Myles "Canis" Majoris exclaimed. "Never thought you'd show up today. How'd your evening go?"

Jack poured a cup of coffee from the catered breakfast spread. "I wish I could remember."

The basement had once been a sub-level parking garage. The firm had converted it into an obstacle course—and hunting ground. The terrain varied from corner to corner. Desert, water, stone, and the most difficult, the pitch black vault. An array of weaponry was at their disposal, as well as a control operator for lighting, sound and to release the prey. A butler and exquisite nosh, as well as the occasional high-priced sex worker were often on hand, too. Though Jack was always more interested in the smoked salmon than the ladies. The thought of having sloppy seconds after a partner finished repulsed him.

"That good, huh?" Myles replied. "I can see forgetting the evening had it been dismal, but your night looked to be shaping up quite brilliantly."

"You don't understand, sir. I have no memory of last night, at all. I recall leaving work yesterday, then waking up this morning on the back steps of a parochial school with white panties stuffed into my mouth."

"Well, that was some ride she took you on, I dare say," Myles said. He cocked the lever on the air gun.

"Who's *she*?" Jack asked. "Blaze, right?"

"You walked out of the bar last night with a woman, Jack. When you didn't return we assumed you got lucky," Myles replied.

"Very lucky by the looks of her ass in that black skirt." It was another junior partner, Carnivora. Pasqual Carnivora.

Jack laughed. "I don't remember!" But he knew he would. It was a misty thought that he couldn't hold right now. All he knew was, he needed to see her again.

Myles tossed Jack the air gun. "Maybe a good kill will jog your memory."

Jack caught the weapon, but set it aside. "I've never used this thing."

Myles nodded to a control booth across the sealed basement.

A partition opened and two feral cats emerged. They hung back, slinking into the shadows.

"Well? Give chase!" Myles ordered.

Jack sniffed the air. The cats' fear permeated the huge room. He salivated. He'd never been forced to kill before. He'd managed to hang in the back and let the other junior partners take point. This time, all eyes were on him.

Like a skilled acrobatic, Jack's dog senses took over and he bounded across the uneven false terrain toward the prey. He passed the remains of an earlier kill. A calico, disemboweled. He stopped at the carcass, and knelt.

He touched the tip of his index finger into the slimy pile of guts. He could taste the blood through his skin. He could smell it. It excited him. It coaxed him to spill more blood, to test his mettle, to keep his canine abilities honed and sharp.

Jack looked up at the two frightened cats, now hugging the wall as they sought safety. A brilliant flash of green eyes reflected as a rotating track light captured the feline's slow, deliberate, stealthy movements.

A flash of green. A flash fire of green crystalline light reflecting the inner-workings of the mind. A blaze of intelligence and breeding. *Blaze*.

A new taste erupted on his tongue. The sweet salt of a woman's quim. *Blaze*. He looked at his right hand—the hand that had clawed the flesh of her arm and drew blood. And he remembered.

"Jack?" A friendly hand touched his shoulder, drawing him out of the deep well of Blaze's eyes.

"Yes. Yes. I'm sorry. I did have a rough night. I'm a bit slow on the uptake," Jack replied. "I don't want to do this." He glanced at the cat gut. It sickened him.

"You are sweating, Jack. Why are you sweating?" Myles asked.

Jack didn't know how to answer.

Myles squeezed his large hand shut atop Jack's shoulder muscle, the friendly touch becoming aggressive and painful. "Cat got your tongue?"

That was it. *Yes*. "I'm just tired, that's all." Jack tried to pull away from Myles' vice grip, but the man was way more powerful than he. A Rottweiler to his Doberman. Jack was quicker. Myles was stronger. Myles did not fit into the misunderstood Rott scenario. He'd been raised mean and loved it. Jack had tasted Myles' bite before. A painful gauntlet of initiation into the firm.

"Don't lie to me. I smell feline on you. Feline *heat*. Doing a little moonlighting in practice for the big chase?" Myles leaned in, to whisper into Jack's ear. "You know, we kill them, we don't screw them. It debases a dog to mate with a cat. Chase them. Catch them. Chew them up. But never, ever, fuck them."

"Right. Sorry. I got carried away," Jack lied.

"Did you chase the pussy before or after you did that hot number you picked up at the bar?" Myles asked. "Did your dick come out of its sheathe after she passed out? I always find that the safest way to have human relations." He ran his nose along Jack's throat. "I smell her on you."

"I don't recall. I think I may be the one who passed out," Jack replied. He tried to move away from Myles' grip again, this time freeing his shoulder. He rotated it to shake off the pain.

"Ah, well then. You need to refresh yourself with a good kill. The cats await you, Jackie. Sick 'em, boy."

Jack lifted his chin up. A defiant move. Not one Myles accepted from his subordinates on the playing field. "I think I'd rather go home, sir. I don't want to do this."

I can't do this."

Myles sniffed the air and growled. "What?"

"There's more to life than..." Jack began.

"Than what? Participating in the rituals of your kind? The canine society of shifters demands it. Your job demands it." Myles snarled. "Your instincts demand it."

Jack glanced at the dead cat again. He'd drawn Blaze's blood, and she his. She was crawling around under his skin. There would be no stopping the iron-spun threads weaving them together. He'd sealed his fate with her. "I'm sorry, sir. There's been an incident. An incident that the society will require me to honor. A contract has been made. A contract in blood."

"What have you done?" Myles asked.

"The woman I left with last night ... we made love. And then we fought. I drew her blood."

"Go on," Myles encouraged.

"She is a very special woman," Jack continued.

"I'll bet she is to have caught your eye, Jack."

"Yes, sir. She's *very* special. She's like me. A half-were. Only she's feline," Jack replied.

Jack didn't see it coming. The blow. The right hook that belted him across the chin and sent him flying.

He should have expected it, because cats and dogs don't mix. Not socially. Not physically. And to go against this rule, without redeeming himself by bringing the cat's tail as a trophy, was a heinous act in the eyes of the society. Myles, of course, had no choice but to beat him senseless. Proof that it is a dog eat dog world.

As Jack lay next to the decaying cat, his head reeling, his mouth filled with blood and at least one knocked-out tooth, he realized he should attempt to defend himself. Otherwise, they'd have his balls.

They'd have his balls. Literally.

He knew what was coming.

A good ass-kicking by the partners then he'd be tossed into the tunnels underneath the city for the Marauders to deal with. The Marauders kept trophies, too. Not just the tails of a cat, but the heads or hands or cock and balls of those who got in their way. They were well-trained, feral and had a Pavlovian instinct bred into them. When the bell rang, they killed.

Myles sent a boot into Jack's ribcage.

Jack spit blood, and one ... two ... teeth. Thank God they'd grow back. Holding his ribs, he rose to his feet and took a defensive posture. "I didn't know she was a cat shifter! I was drinking. Drinking dulls my senses."

"Too late to make excuses. You've jeopardized our race by bonding with a feline. She'll be sauntering after you, you know. She won't be able to stay away," Myles replied.

"I don't think she has any interest in me. She knocked me out, and Jesus Christ, she drugged me and left me for dead in an alley." That hurt more than any physical pain she had caused. She had abandoned him. She had abandoned him and they were scent-matched.

Myles nodded his head toward the others gathering at the entrance to the hunting ground. "She won't be able to stay away, Jack. You won't be able to stay away from her.

Blood has been drawn. You are scent-matched. And for that, you must be punished. We do not share our life-blood with a woman unless we wish to become her mate. We can take only one mate, Jackie. Fuck all the bitches you want, but transfer life force with only one. And she must be your kind. Transference between species is forbidden. Being scent-matched to a cat is an abomination.”

Jack looked at Myles dead on. “She is my kind. And I declare that she is my mate.”

Chapter Eight

“Girls, I’m in deep,” Blaze said as she turned up the speed on the treadmill.

Meg looked up from the Pilates mat. “What could be worse than sleeping with a stranger who turns into a half-Doberman at orgasm, beating him, drugging him and dumping him?”

Gina laughed. “Well said, Meg. But I can tell Blaze isn’t talking about all that water under the bridge.” She stretched her leg up onto the ballet bar.

“I’ve been fucking connected to him,” Blaze replied. “Scent-matched. The process has already started. I want to have his litter! I can’t think of anything else.”

Gina dropped her leg. “Blood passion?”

Blaze nodded. “Yep.”

Meg sighed. “Oh my God...”

Blaze stopped the treadmill. “I dreamed about him. He said the “k” word to me.”

Gina rolled her eyes to heaven. “Holy Bast. Ka? The dogface and you have a shared soul and you dumped his sorry ass on the stoop of an all-girls’ school? With panties? Ain’t no confession at the Temple of Bast for this one, baby. I told you she listens to us. Maybe she sees you and Jack as a way of improving race relations amongst were-kind.”

“Lovely.” Blaze wiped off with white towel. “I need to find him.”

“For what?” Meg asked. “It’s not like you two are compatible. You can’t have his babies. Can you? I mean...”

Gina spoke up. “Either Blaze finds a way to break the bond between them, or yes, they’ll waggle around in the tall grass until they figure out how to make babies. The urge to procreate is strong. And a blood passion is impossible to ignore. Blaze will have to cut the cord or she’s going to be drawn to him, over and over again. If she was a full shifter, she’d be in even deeper shit than she is now. Being a half-were, we feel the pull, but have enough presence to withstand it, for awhile. Eventually, the urge to mate with dog boy is going to be too much for her, and...”

“I’ll get all fevered for him—and him for me—and we’ll mate,” Blaze replied.

“You’ll have his child? What the hell would it be? Half-were? Full-were?” Meg asked.

Blaze took a sip from her water bottle. “A fourfold Chimera. Human, canine, feline and shifter mix. What shifter abilities it would have are hard to say. Fuck, I should just kill myself now rather than go through the fever of joined Kas.”

“All because he bit your arm during a cat fight?” Meg asked.

Blaze shook her head. “That was the trigger. I scratched his chest, too. Our blood has been exchanged. Our souls are matched.”

“How are you going to find him?” Gina asked.

“He’s an attorney. I’ll start there. Maybe he’ll find me. Damn. I didn’t think for a moment that there’d be transference between us. We’re not even the same species,” Blaze said. “Then again, whatever made each of us a half-were, may be the exact same DNA chain that made him one. Maybe we are the same species. Maybe this is how new weres come into existence.”

Gina shook her head. “Blaze, honey. This crap isn’t that mystical. This crap is why

we don't mix with others, and don't fight. Each half-breed to its own. Cats with cats. Dogs with dogs."

"Goats with goats. Oysters with oysters," Meg continued.

"I'd hate to see the resultant effects of a passion fever between an oyster and a goat," Blaze replied. "Think about the children."

Meg giggled. "Oyats? Goysters?"

Blaze stripped off her sweaty workout clothes. "I'm hitting the shower and then, I *am* so going to find him. I'll Google him."

"You need help?" Gina called.

Blaze shook her head. "Keep your cell phone handy, just in case."

Chapter Nine

He got a few good punches in as he defended himself as best he could against the minions of the Myles Majoris law firm. When he'd run the gauntlet—when he was jumped into the shifter firm—he'd been beaten, bitten and pissed on by the partners, but came out the other side a member in good standing with a nice office, an experienced secretary, a research team at his disposal and keys to the proverbial executive washroom.

He wasn't proving himself to the pack this time. He didn't take to getting his ass kicked easily. He fought back. He fought back until there were too many of them to fight off. Seven. It took seven of them to mete out the discipline of the society's justice.

In a fit of mixed terror and rage, Jack defended himself by deflecting blows and using his Dobie cunning. His old buddies; other junior partners—even one of the clerical staff had been brought in for the “ceremony of societal justice.”

It was when he spied Myles, standing off and away from the throng of fists and teeth, that he knew that it was far better to be beaten and out than whole and in. The fight—the gang-like behavior—excited Myles. He'd shifted and had dropped. His crimson penis was out of its sheath and he salivated with his eyes fixed. Disgusting.

At the end of his tenure at the firm—the end of the jump-out—Jack was dropped down a manhole into the sewers.

He landed hard on his side, his hands tied behind his back. He'd been dropped at least twelve feet. The force of crashing against the concrete floor of the access vestibule was far from the worst sensory attack. The smell, too, wasn't the crux of foulness. The worst of it was that all he could think about was Blaze.

The fever had started. Every breath he took carried her scent. Every time he swallowed his own spit, he found her taste on his tongue. Her soft skin and silken hair teased his senses. Her strength encouraged him. She was his mate. Whether or not she wanted to be. Whether or not evolution intended them to be. Fighting like cats and dogs would take on a whole new meaning once he got Blaze back in the sack.

Where would they live? Where would they raise their children? *Fuck! I can't do this! She's a damned cat! She'd no more like sniffing butts to say hello than I would enjoy scratching in a litter box. This is not going to work. I've got to get out of here and end the connection. Is there a way to end a scent-matching short of death?*

The tunnel was dimly lit by chicken-wire encased bare light bulbs. He could smell rats and oddly, cinnamon. He had to smile. He'd read somewhere that the most prevalent compounds to be found in city sewers near a bakery were cinnamon, vanilla, caffeine and Prozac. That gave him an idea as to what he might be under. He was in the Baker's District where the scent of warm rolls filled the air around four in the morning every day.

He stumbled to his feet and followed the chain of lights down the tunnel, searching for something to cut the plastic tie securing his wrists. An old piece of rebar sticking out from the wall did the trick. He backed up against the cut edge of the rebar and used it to saw through the plastic ties. It took awhile. His shoulders ached from the awkward position and he was dripping sweat by the time the pointy edge of the old steel support had cut through the modern plastic.

Sweat poured off him, trickling from his brow to the floor, mixing with the fetid

waters of the drainage ditch running down the middle of the tunnel floor. His sweat carried a message. His scent. Her scent. It was a warning cry that he was off-limits and had been mated. It was a threat—that a male with a woman had entered the realm.

His hands free, Jack quickened his pace, straddling the sides of the tunnel to avoid having to tread through the muck. He needed to find a way up. A way out. He couldn't go up the way he'd come down, that was for sure. The pack would be waiting.

Surrounded by filth and muck and his body aching and bruised, Jack realized that he never felt stronger, or more hopeful—here, in the Hell of the sewers, where he knew he was not alone. He chuckled. He'd gone to *blazes* and couldn't be happier.

Vacillating again between wanting to break their bond and wanting to pick out curtains with her, Blaze became his Holy Grail, his reason for continuing.

* * * *

Blaze walked the city streets pulling on every animal sense she could muster. She'd *Googled* him and found him. She knew his alma mater, his bar association number, and which building his firm used. Security had said he had left the building in a tone that made Blaze's heart tighten with fear. She could tell Jack was close and that something was wrong. But where was he?

His scent was so strong!

His presence on the breeze made her body tremble and her female parts twitch. The passion fever had started and, sacred Bast, did she ever want a piece of him. Thousands of years of evolution and logic were about to fly out the window. This pussy wanted the hair of the dog that bit her. All the hairs.

She couldn't stop fidgeting. She tapped her fingers restlessly against her thigh as she waited for the light to change. If she didn't watch it, she'd soon be strolling down the street waving her arms and yelling at passersby. She felt that crazy. The cure? Jack. Jack *the dog boy* Hawk.

The presence of Jack Hawk grew stronger and stronger the farther past the garment district and foodie district she grew, all the way into old town. She'd never walk through old town after dark; high crime area and frequented by drug dealers, pimps, prostitutes and the destitute. During the day low-rent shops eked out sales to those living in the area who hadn't spent their government check twenty minutes after receiving it on the first.

Blaze followed her nose and wandered into a noodle house. Jack's essence became stronger with each step farther into the shop. She hated to come in without ordering—by the looks of it the place could use some business. "May I use your restroom, please?"

The weary-eyed woman behind the counter replied using broken English. "For customers."

"I'll buy," Blaze looked at the chalkboard menu. "An order of egg rolls. Chicken."

"Toilet in back," the woman replied. She passed a slip of paper over the counter to the kitchen and gave instructions in her native language.

Blaze opened her purse and left a five dollar bill on the till. "Thank you." She walked down a cramped hall, past an entrance to the kitchen where whole chickens and ducks were hanging and almost lost Jack's scent amongst the pervasive spicy aromas of the establishment. Her stomach growled. *I hope I make it back alive to eat those egg rolls*, she thought, as she followed the trail down to the basement. *Kitty cat smells nasty big dogs down here. Nasty big dogs.*

Chapter Ten

Jack's hands freed, and mind sharpened by a potent cocktail of fear, desire and passion, he gingerly made his way through the reek. Every hair on his body stood from the electricity of caution. He could smell Marauder stink. Their offal. The leavings of their last kill.

The Marauders were full shifters who had gone mad. Their minds could no longer distinguish between canine and human thought. They were the feral, sub-human/canine weres that mothers warned their children about. *Never follow a rabbit into a drainpipe. Culverts are bad places. Stay out of tunnels. Stay away from men who go on all fours like dogs, and dogs who do not remember how to run on all fours.*

Jack knew the stories. He'd managed to stay out of the line of fire, or recruitment, of the Marauders his entire life. He had a friend who liked living the pack mentality lifestyle, and he'd gone Marauder. If he wasn't crazy when he joined, Jack was pretty sure he'd lost his mind later. Living in sewers could do that to a person—or a were-beast.

A low, throaty growl alerted him that he was now, not just alone, lost and injured, but in imminent peril. As he rounded a corner, hoping it led to an upward passage, a red-eyed beastie came out of the shadows. The slight glimmer of light from the flickering bulb made the beast's eyes seem like dancing flames against a starless sky. The light cast the creature's shadow against the rounded stone wall of the tunnel, making it seem huge.

The beast stepped forward, into more direct light. Jack could not help himself but to laugh. "A were-ferret?"

The ferret was about the size of a house cat, but had a presence about it that told Jack immediately, that it was like him. A half-were. Only if this creature was living in the tunnels, it was either very clever to have escaped the Marauders, or was one of them. "Let me pass," Jack continued. "I mean you no harm. I only want to get home."

The ferret shimmered in a pattern almost matching the flickering light and up from the glow came a dwarf. "To your female, yes? She is in estrus. Her scent lingers on you. If you wait here long enough, she'll probably catch up with you. Get separated?"

"Christ, I hope she doesn't come down here," Jack replied.

"She not here with you?" the ferret shifter asked. "That's too bad. You smell like you need her. Your sweat gives it away."

Jack didn't answer. He wiped his brow with his hand. Of course ... his scent carried her scent. He squared his jaw and spoke with a short, direct tone. "How do I get out?"

The dwarf shrugged. "Ask them."

Jack turned, his stomach churning with trepidation. Behind him stood four bulky, filthy canines; one golden retriever, one Husky and two wolf-dog-hybrids with teeth as big as his head. Or so it seemed. A rare breed ... though they weren't werewolves. There were no true werewolves any longer. The breed had died out by inbreeding with canine shifters. All the in-breeding attempted to preserve the race had bred simple minds in their descendents. Jack was pretty sure these wolf-dogs would not speak to him using words of more than one or two syllables.

The largest, the alpha-male, stood on two legs, while the others flanked his rear on all fours.

"How do I get out?" Jack asked. His eyes wandered to the smallest of the pack, a golden retriever shifter with huge liquid blue eyes. The beastie nodded at Jack, just slightly. Nothing overt enough for the lead male to notice. Jack felt an affinity to this hybrid shifter. Something in his eyes made him feel an odd attraction. He figured this young hybrid was the pack's bitch or whipping boy. Better to be dead.

The alpha wolf-dog stepped forward and opened his jaw. He pointed down his throat, then spoke, his voice raspy and heavily accented, "The way out is through here."

"Don't mess with me, Marauder. I'm not in the mood," Jack boldly replied, counting the syllables of the alpha's words. All one. *Let's play to his ego, shall we?* "You seem intelligent enough. I detect an accent—are you Irish?" Jack asked.

"The tales of our IQ, or lack thereof, have been greatly exaggerated. There are many immigrants here. We don't turn anyone away," the alpha replied.

"Not to offend the Marauders, but you're not presenting yourself to me in any way that would make me see that the stories that you hunt outsiders for sport, is untrue," Jack said.

"No longer. Many years ago, yes. As I said, the stories about us are the stuff of legend. And legends, though they may start as truth, are really just stories."

I may be able to reason my way out of here, after all. "You still live in the sewers. Is this by choice or necessity?" Jack asked.

"We live where we must. In this place, few bother us. Though our enemies are growing bolder. We have recently made an accord with one who will help us move from the sewers little by little. Still, we must always be on guard." The alpha took a deep breath. "You are one of his. The scent of the master is on you."

A flurry of movement at the feet of the lead wolf pulled Jack's attention away from the yawning chasm of its mouth. Another were-creature clung to the alpha's legs. It was a cat-like animal with an impish doll-face. "What is that?" he asked, his skin crawling.

"She keeps vermin off us," the alpha male said.

"She's a small..." Jack began.

"A cat. Yes," the wolf replied.

"I didn't know that shifters other than those in the canine clan lived down here," Jack said. "Ferrets, cats ... what else?"

The alpha male laughed. "Do you really want to find out?"

Jack mulled over his reply. "I'd prefer directions to the surface."

The ferret-shifter chimed in. "He has a woman waiting for him!"

The wolf nodded. "Yes, we have her scented. She is your mate?"

Jack nodded.

"She's feline. You're not feline," the alpha said. "Are you seeking refuge from your pack? Or are you hiding from Sekhmet's wrath? Petting a pussy get you into trouble? Like this little one at my feet. She is only one-quarter shifter. Her lineage is so impure that she cannot call herself by any name. She has lived every moment in fear of being used for target practice. Here, she has a purpose."

"To keep lice and ticks off you. Nice. At least she has a job," Jack replied.

"Sekhmet's guards look for her, still. She ran away. No one runs away from Sekhmet. You can be banished, incarcerated or killed—but it must be her choice. Never yours."

"It's hard for me to believe that Sekhmet is more harsh a mistress than any female in

the Marauders,” Jack said.

“There are few female Marauders,” the ferret replied. “That’s why you were found so quickly. We can smell your woman on you. It makes us remember when our women were with us.”

“Where are your women?” Jack asked. “Have none of you scent-matched or taken a mate?”

The alpha shifter didn’t reply to Jack’s question. Instead, he asked one. “What breed of shifter are you?”

Jack replied proudly, “Doberman. Half-were.”

“Shift,” the alpha commanded.

* * * *

Blaze was not too terribly fond of grime. The walls encasing the narrow staircase to the basement were very sooty and saturated with the odor of old, rancid grease. She tried not to touch the walls. If there’d been a handrail, she wouldn’t have touched that, either.

The light switch at the base of the staircase forced her to touch the wall. The gritty sensation of years worth of accumulated filth against her fingertip sickened her. A single bare bulb sputtered above her head before flickering on. The basement had been flooded in the past. A waterline circled the small concrete storeroom and the few shelves still in place had been lifted high off the floor.

One wall had been opened up. The old plumbing looked like a haphazard pipe organ. It was from just beyond those pipes that Jack’s scent called to her.

Slipping through the ancient pipe works, Blaze passed into the darkness of a downward access tunnel.

As the glow of that single bulb faded in the distance, she couldn’t see a damned thing. She needed her cat’s vision. This was, unfortunately, the time and the place for a little self-scritch.

The access tunnel felt more secure to her than the basement, but it was far from an arousing venue. Blaze steadied herself by pushing her left shoulder up against the cinderblock wall. “Jack better be worth this if I can’t break the bond,” she cursed as she slipped her fingers inside her jeans and panties.

If ever there was a time to need a rich fantasy life, it was now. Blaze was afraid to close her eyes. Cockroaches did not appeal to her unless she was dreaming of chasing them. And the stink! This was not the perfume of a boudoir. The only redeeming odor was that of Jack. Jack ... in her thoughts. Filling her senses. He was the lingering flavor against her tongue. The chill against her nipples. The reason the hairs on her arms stood with electric charge.

With half-closed lids, Blaze remembered his kiss. His lips against hers in that first hesitant, sweet kiss at the bar. His mouth could be her playground. She massaged her clitoris in a smooth downward motion, remembering Jack’s tongue circling it, those lips of his, drawing it in and teasing it.

Thank Bast, she thought as the flower of orgasm bloomed. Thank Bast that even in a place like this she could get herself off. She slipped her clitoris in between her index and middle finger and forced her climax forward. She shuddered and came, and felt her feline senses sharpen.

Her green eyes became black and reflective as her pupils dilated to allow for

maximum vision in the dark. What was once hidden to her as a human woman became quite clear after her shift. Her tail tucked safely down her leg, she continued along the path.

The access tunnel led her in a slight downward slope. Not too far in the distance she could sense light and the heat from a bulb. Odd scents, wild scents wafted up from below mixing with Jack's sweet essence.

With agility not known to her legs as a human, Blaze darted through the corridor, into the bowels of the city. She fought the urge to stop and clean herself as detritus flew up and spotted her arms and face. *Disgusting.*

Her shift didn't last long. Just long enough to get her to the end of the makeshift corridor where electric lights hung from chicken wire. As she reached the end of the passage, she reverted. She withheld a strong gag reflex as she pushed her way through an unlocked steel grating far below the noodle house.

She heard voices.

She heard Jack.

Slinking softly in the shadows caused by the flickering bulb, she followed the voices, and hid.

* * * *

"Shift!" the alpha again commanded.

"I cannot. I need a trigger," Jack replied.

"What stimulus causes your transformation?"

Jack did not want to share this information. It was personal and unique. He felt something sharp poke his backside. The ferret had a weapon. "Sexual release," Jack said softly.

Through the loud, long laugh from the alpha male, Jack sensed Blaze more powerfully than he had ever before. Their passion fever was growing stronger. *She is looking for me. He knew this now. And she is close. Very close. Good God, Blaze ... stay away!*

He scanned the vicinity, knowing she was near. Too near.

The alpha turned to the young, soulful-eyed quadruped on his right and said something in a bastardized dog language Jack could barely make out. The retriever shifted with fluid ease into a handsome youth. Dark and brooding, with thick brownish-red hair and those piercing blue eyes, the young man hung back hesitantly. "Go to him," the alpha ordered, pulling the man toward Jack.

"Wait a minute..." Jack began. He'd seen Myles use sex as dominance many times in the pack. He didn't know if he could do this. He growled at the alpha in a defiant move of strength.

"Either you shift, or you die now. Shift, and you may live to die later," the alpha said.

The retriever shifter approached Jack with a sly smile on his face. "We exchanged a greeting. I am not your enemy—you already realize this. It is not uncommon for males to pleasure each other in a pack. Relax, and shift when you are able." He dropped to his knees, the impact making a small splash in the putrid run-off on the tunnel floor. *Shit.* He could fight, and he could run, but he didn't want to die. He wanted Blaze.

The shifter on his knees before him tugged at his fly. Jack felt extremely exposed;

more so than just having his Johnson out. His underbelly was exposed in every sense of the word.

Jack took a deep, nervous breath. He'd been aroused for hours, stimulated from the bonding with Blaze. If nothing else, at least he was stronger when shifted, and he wouldn't be distracted by the intense throbbing in his balls any longer. Wasn't the first time another man had sucked him off. Wasn't the first time he'd had spectators, either. He could do this. Even in a smelly tunnel. Since he *had* to be aroused now, the hard-on he'd been walking around with failed him even as the boy's hands stroked him through his underwear.

He looked around again, feeling Blaze as close as if it were her fingertips drawing his half-hard penis from its safe confines. *Let it be her fingertips upon me. Her lips. Her tongue. Blaze ... my mate.* An archway just beyond the Marauders seemed to breathe with her essence. *She's there*, Jack thought.

He closed his eyes and pictured Blaze, her green eyes flashing and whiskers twitching in post-coital bliss.

And there she was.

It could have been the effects of sewer gas or swelling of the brain from the noxious chemicals. He wasn't sure—all he knew was, he could see her comely face, peeking out from behind the stone arch.

He opened his eyes.

She was still there.

Blaze.

She reached up slowly and smoothed her remaining whiskers and nodded at Jack as if to say, *shift. Shift, Jack. It's all right. Let him ... make you shift.*

Jack nodded his head slightly in reply. *She's into it. She wants me to shift. I understand. I understand.* He couldn't run, now. He'd submit. But he wouldn't watch.

His member became encased in soft, warm lips. He pictured Blaze's mouth. Blaze's tongue. He closed his eyes and allowed the act of fellatio. It was Blaze's delicate fingers kneading his balls. He was not being forced to shift. He was making love with Blaze and they were shifting together at the height of orgasm.

*

Blaze recognized the danger of her situation, but could not help but feel aroused as Jack received forced fellatio to bring out the dog in him. Any other time, any other place, she might have just stretched out with her fingers between her legs and let nature take its course. Jack looked hot trying so damned hard not to enjoy the fast-moving hand and slurps of the shifter at his feet. The minion of the alpha male was moving his mouth back and forth on Jack's penis like a pro.

Mama. Blaze likes this. She shook off the fascination and titillation of this dangerous oral sex encounter. Now was not the time to fantasize!

As Jack's pleasure mounted, the savage lust Blaze felt for him, welled to the surface, too. A single word echoed in her mind. *Ka. Soul. By blood. By fate. Holy Bast! I need to snap out of this! He's going to need me and I need to be ready—not incapacitated by lust!*

The situation could work to their advantage, however. If he shifted, he would have a better chance of getting away. Her female parts reacted to the visual stimulus. How could she not become aroused at the sight of Jack's penis being pleasured orally by another

very handsome man? Maybe someday she'd talk Jack into something like this again—and she'd watch for awhile—then join in.

He stood rigid, hands fisted at his side. His jaw was tight and his eyes closed. She was so proud of him. He was smart, strong, and hers.

*

The retriever shifter had skill. Jack's breathing quickened as he neared orgasm. He could feel his canine self pushing through as he came.

He opened his eyes; forced his eyes to stay open to focus only on Blaze as his orgasm surged. Her green eyes glittered, lips parting with excitement. Blaze ... his unintended scent-match. *Blaze...*

"You're a Doberman," the alpha male replied.

Jack zipped his fly. "I already said that. What of it?" He shoved the boy at his feet away. "Idiot."

"Don't insult my friends, Jackie," a way-too-familiar voice said from the shadows. It was the boss. Myles Majoris. "That was quite the picture, I dare say. Jack Hawk, subjugated and being forced to shift at the hands of a misfit canine shifter."

"I shifted because I wanted to shift. This boy could not have brought me to orgasm if I had not dwelled on one single thought."

Myles scoffed. "Your feline lover? We know who she is. Didn't take long to figure out. All I had to do was contact my informant in Sekhmet's enclave."

The alpha male turned to face Myles. "You have dealings with Sekhmet? You did not divulge that to me when we made our compact."

Myles waived the alpha male away. "It's of no consequence. It doesn't affect our business." He nodded at Jack. "But it does affect *ours*."

Jack snarled at Myles, baring his canines.

"You've been naughty, Jack. You knew better than to scent-match yourself to a feline. You can certainly chase cats. You can bite them. You can even eat them. But never have sex with one, and never fall in love."

"Hey, Myles," Jack said.

"Yes?" Myles replied.

"I quit."

"No, Jack. You're fired. Take him to the gas station!" Myles ordered.

* * * *

Blaze felt her gut tighten as Jack was led farther down the tunnel. *What the heck is the gas station?* She wrinkled her nose as she scooped her fingers into the sludge beneath her feet and smeared it over her arms, throat and face. She needed to mask her scent if she was going to follow the Marauders more closely. Might as well cover her scent with their own.

Cautiously, Blaze followed the contingent deeper into the sewers. They twisted and turned in the tunnels until she barely remembered her way back. At last, they stopped in a large vestibule lined with ladders leading up a tall shaft. A huge tank sat rusting in the center. Very faded lettering on the tank read, E S S O. Strings of old Christmas lights lined the chamber, looking very macabre and out of place. A noisy generator clinked away in a corner, working double-time to provide enough electricity for the myriad of lights to shine.

Blaze gagged at her own odor. The fetid smell of the tunnels had permeated her skin and as far as she could tell, there was no scent difference between her and the environment. She slid around behind abandoned equipment, watching.

She could tell Jack was both frightened and enraged. His tail was straight out and his ears were back. He didn't look her way, though she was pretty sure he knew where she was. She hid in the shadows; hid in the stink—and waited.

*

“What the fuck is this?” Jack asked, looking at a charred steel frame box spring half-buried in the ground.

“It's where we hold marshmallow roasts,” the alpha replied.

Myles motioned to the lesser weres. “Chain him down.”

“No fucking way!” Jack pulled away from the guards securing him and bounded toward the exit with the strength and speed of a Doberman shifter. He looked to his side and caught Blaze's eyes. He screamed, “Run!”

Blaze bolted from her hiding place.

Their eyes met for a moment and more passed between them in that split-second than in the hours they had spent together previously. They were truly bonded.

As they fled, they were stopped by a group of excited Marauders swarming down the tunnel to the gas station chamber.

Panicking Marauders. Escaping lovers. Not a good combination.

Blaze held fast to Jack's arm as they pressed hard into the shadows. “What has them so panicked?”

Her answer came from the shrieks of the mob. “Cats!” one of the Marauders warned. “Cats! It's Sekhmet!”

Blaze's stomach churned and she withheld the urge to gag and vomit as the glowing yellow eyes of Sekhmet's elite guard filled the darkness as haunting as phosphorus-coated Halloween masks. Sekhmet's elite guards pushed their way through the Marauders, their *sais* flashing. As the blades slashed, blood flew in every direction.

“We've got to get out of here,” Jack said.

Blaze nodded in agreement as she pressed herself against the wall to avoid being trampled. “Holy Bast,” she whispered.

“What is it?” Jack asked.

“I know him. That ocelot.” A feral sound emanated from Blaze. “I know him.”

Without waiting for rational thoughts or reasonable actions to overtake her, Blaze darted out, catching the ocelot guard by the throat. She wrapped her arms and legs around him.

“Get off me, female! What are you doing here? We are here under the orders of the Queen,” the ocelot shouted. He pulled Blaze's head back and gasped. “You!”

Blaze spat and hissed. “Yes. Me.” She sunk her teeth into the ocelot's cheek.

Jack darted out of the shadows. He leapt up and slammed into Blaze, knocking her off the ocelot and onto the floor. “No, Blaze. We need to get out of here!”

Blaze snarled, her mouth blood-stained. “Let me. Let me have my revenge.”

“Now is not the time,” Jack replied.

The ocelot fell backward, a sharpened stick through his belly. A sickening laugh rolled over the corpse. Jack knew that laugh. It was Myles. Myles had killed the ocelot.

“What do you think, Jackie boy? Isn't this better than the game room? What better

test to weed out the weakest of the Marauders than by having the elite guard attack?" Myles paused. "Oh, she's lovely, bloodstained lips and all. Is this your pussycat?" He laughed. "I see promise in her, Jack. I think she'd do well in the game room."

"Not a chance, Myles. Leave her alone," Jack said.

"I can handle myself, Jack," Blaze said. She wiped the blood from her face with the back of her hand.

"I'll bet you can," Myles replied. Two of Jack's former co-workers ran up beside Myles. "Take her. And kill him," he ordered.

Myles' bitches stormed Blaze. She lashed back. The three toppled into a pile of muck and blood, fists flying.

Myles snickered.

Trusting Blaze's ferocious nature, he kept his focus on the greater threat. Myles. Jack attacked.

Myles swung out and lost his footing. Jack ducked then leaped up, going straight for Myles' throat. It was a lucky strike. He ripped open the jugular. Myles pushed Jack off as he fell to his knees and bled out.

Jack turned to help Blaze. His shift to humanity had begun. He felt strength and prowess seep from him, but he was not going to let this handicap stop him from helping Blaze escape the clutches of the dogs trying to subdue her.

He dropped into the furious pile of battle between Blaze and her attackers. His fist raised high, about to slam into the face of a lawyer he once laughed with over the water cooler. A trumpet sounded.

The fray went still.

Fully armored and standing a good ten feet tall, a literal Egyptian goddess strolled into the chamber flanked by oiled ebony werecats armed with spears and great scimitars.

Blaze choked. "It's Sekhmet."

Blaze pushed her attackers and Jack aside and rose to her feet. She approached Sekhmet unabashedly. Where others cowered, she held her shoulders back proudly.

One of the ebony guards struck Blaze with the edge of his spear. "Kneel before your queen!"

Blaze felt Jack's hand on her shoulder.

She felt strong without him ... but nearly omnipotent with his support. "I will do no such thing," she replied.

Sekhmet cocked her head to one side. "Blaze Angora? Is that you, child?"

Blaze looked at Sekhmet with piercing eyes. "You know it is."

Sekhmet took a deep breath. "You have scent-matched." She paused. "With him. With a canine shifter."

Blaze glanced back at Jack. "I have scent-matched. Inadvertently. But the deed is done. I cannot change it. I don't want to change it." She patted Jack's hand. "I can only make the best of what is to be in my future."

"And what of our past, Blaze?" Sekhmet asked.

"You marked me. Banished me. Made me leave the only home I ever knew. Took those I loved from me. My mother would have never been attacked if you had not sent me away. She missed me! She wanted to see me and left the safety of your enclave. It's your fault she was attacked. You allowed the guard who abused me to live, but I've taken care of that. So tell me, Sekhmet, what should I think?"

"I cannot take back my past actions, either. I'm proud of you for attacking the ocelot who took indecent liberties with you. Do you feel cheated that you did not take his life? His is not a huge loss to the pride. He couldn't breed. You saw to that. Quite skillfully," Sekhmet said.

"I'm not sorry," Blaze replied.

"Do you wish to destroy me, Blaze? Destroy me as you believe I destroyed you?"

Blaze nodded. "I have considered it, yes."

"But, no longer. Am I correct?" Sekhmet asked.

Blaze pulled Jack to her side. All the pain and anguish, all the horrors of her childhood were drowned in the pool of Jack's eyes. She felt light, and free. "I remember your brutality. Remember how you broke my innocence. But my rage has been taken from me."

Sekhmet's face glowed almost as brilliantly as her armor. "Scent-matching can do that. You are fertile and ready to be loved. It is your time, and we have made allies with the canines for the good of both clans. You will be the first to bear children of a new race. For that advent, I banished you. Kept you away. Made you want to stay away."

Blaze gasped, then quickly regained composure. "You knew? You knew my future?"

"Holy Mother Bast spoke to me in a dream. She said that there would come a day when I would conquer the Marauders, ally with the canines and see the birth of a new age of shifter," Sekhmet said.

"And what of half-weres? Are we still undesirables and of the lowest caste in the pride?" Blaze asked.

"I shall meditate on the matter. Perhaps I was mistaken in sending so many away. Bast will guide me," Sekhmet replied.

Blaze turned to Jack. "Marry me. Right now. Right here. This truce between shifter clans may not last. But we can set an example for both."

Jack laughed. "With a ceremony performed in this filth by the Queen of Feline Shifters?"

Sekhmet replied, "Would you prefer a canine lord to officiate, Jack Hawk? If you love her, and are scent-matched to her, do you not wish to honor her wishes?"

Blaze's piercing green eyes urged Jack to wed. "Please, Jack. Now."

Jack bowed. "Sekhmet, would you do us the honor of marrying us in accordance to the rites of your pride?"

"Raise your hands," Sekhmet said.

All around them, the elite guards, the surviving Marauders and were-beasties who had wandered in during the commotion, gathered around Blaze and Jack, forming a circle.

The carnage around them seemed less impactful as an aura of peacefulness and hope filled the chamber.

Blaze raised her filth-covered arms, elbows crooked and palms facing outward. Jack followed her example. Their eyes met. Their eyes glowed with their shared soul. Their transference was complete. Scent-matched. Soul-matched. This was their destiny. Two lives joined to bring peace to long-feuding clans.

"Jack," Sekhmet began. "Recite these words to Blaze. *Touching noses with you, love, your kiss alone, and my stuttering heart speaks clear. Breathe me more of your breath, let me live! Woman, meant for me! The Goddess Herself gave you as Her Holy gift. My love*

to outlast forever.”

Blaze allowed Jack to take her filthy face into his hands as he spoke the ancient Egyptian poem. She quivered with excitement like a cat watching a snowfall out a window.

She knew the reply. “Let my love, love me best and I shall ordain his hands full of lotus blossoms and flowers. Full of buds and perfumes, strong ale and beer of every brewable kind. Then he’ll give me, his love, a day to remember. Make me drink down this day to its last shadow.”

“You are mated,” Sekhmet said. “Now, go. Leave this place and do not look back upon this night, but only to your future. You are the creators of a new world and should not be witness to the end of the old.”

Blaze grabbed Jack’s hand and pulled him past Sekhmet and her guards; away from the carnage and bloodshed. Away from the shit. He was hers.

Blaze bowed her head as she passed Sekhmet. “Thank you, Holy Mother,” she whispered as Jack pulled her away.

*

Jack whisked Blaze down the tunnel. He’d survived his enemies, claimed her before her Queen and was about to climb from the muck into a new life.

Blaze clutched his hand tightly. She’d seen her tormentors die before her and claimed her mate. Her fingers itched to touch him, take him, discover him.

Darkness surrounded them. The elite guards had shattered most of the light bulbs in their attack on the last of the Marauder hold-outs.

“This would be a lot easier if we shifted, Blaze,” Jack said.

Blaze stopped and backed up against the wall. “Yes. Yes, it would.” She unzipped her jeans. She was teeming with desire for him. She could take him now, take him later and never give him a bit of rest.

Jack approached her, his hands fumbling with his own fly. He lifted her onto his hips. He was ready for her. He’d been ready for her. “When I bit you—it was an accident,” Jack said. He thrust his penis into her.

“It was fate,” Blaze replied, moving her hips in time to Jack’s motions.

The darkness left them.

Despite the violence, fear and filth, their hearts, their minds, their bodies merged into pure conjugal bliss. Jack lifted Blaze with each thrust. Though she was nearly as tall as he, he felt stronger with her in his arms. He could do anything now. Anything. Anywhere. The slick friction of their sex, and the adrenalin of the moment ignited a fierce physical response.

Jack howled and bit Blaze’s shoulder as he poured hot into her. Blaze held on for dear life and dug her nails into his back.

Their shared orgasm ushered forth a new world—for both of them.

*

Panting, breathless, Blaze purred against Jack’s shoulder. Her tail forced its way out of its confines and slapped Jack on the behind. “Let’s go home, pup,” she cooed.

Chapter Eleven

Blaze and Jack darted through the tunnels and to the broken wall Blaze had entered to find him. With each step farther away from the Marauder's tunnels, the air grew fresher.

The aroma of fried rice and steamed dumplings filled the air as they climbed through the broken plumbing into the basement of the noodle house.

Blaze pricked her finger and fed Jack a single droplet of her blood to end his shift. Breathless, they waited as their animal selves went into hiding.

Blaze turned on a faucet in an old basin. The metal sink was rust-covered and dusty, but the water that came from the tap was hot. She quickly washed her face, arms and hands. Jack washed the blood from his hands.

"Are you hungry, husband?" Blaze asked.

"Starving," Jack replied, following Blaze up the staircase. He patted her bottom playfully.

"That's good, because I have an order waiting for me," Blaze said.

"You ordered before you came to find me?" Jack asked.

"Doesn't a good wife always have a plan?"

Jack laughed. "Some plan!"

The counter of the noodle shop was full, but a booth was open near the propped open door. "Your egg rolls!" the woman behind the counter called, giving Blaze the strangest of glances. "Where he come from?" she asked.

Blaze smiled. "My dreams."

The woman scoffed and turned back to her till.

Blaze took the egg rolls and met Jack at the booth.

"Now what?" Jack asked. "I've got no job, and since my apartment was subsidized by the firm, no place to live."

"You're a half-were, right, babe?" Blaze asked.

"You know I am, Mrs. Hawk," Jack replied.

"I live at the Half-were House. It's huge. It's a set of row houses. There are areas not even utilized. I bet I can find room for you. Besides in my bed," Blaze said. "Once you find a new job, we can get our own place."

"Have a fireplace?" Jack asked.

Blaze nodded. She put her egg roll in her mouth and mocked fellatio.

Jack shifted on his seat. "Don't tempt me, Blaze. I could take you right here, right now, and then we'd scare all the lovely customers away. Besides that, I love fireplaces. We can cuddle up in front of it and talk. We have lots to talk about."

Blaze leaned forward, still moving the egg roll in her mouth as if she had Jack's dick there instead. "We can do lots of things before the fireplace, Jack." Blaze giggled as her new husband flicked the end of his egg roll with his tongue. "There's only one problem I can see."

"What's that?" Jack asked.

"My roommates," Blaze replied.

"They'll love me," Jack said.

Blaze giggled. “If they don’t eat you first. Were-tiger. Were-snow leopard.” Her cell phone buzzed. “Gina!” she said. “No, I didn’t have reception where I was. Sorry,” Blaze continued. “I’m fine, Gina. Yes... Jack’s fine. I’m bringing him to the house.”

Gina screeched over the phone.

Blaze took a breath. “I’ll tell you when we get home. Love you. Be home soon.” She snapped her phone shut. “Ready to enter the lion’s den, Jack?”

“With you as my whip and chair, I’m as ready as I’ll ever be,” Jack replied.

They tossed their container, their preconceived notions of relationships between cats and dogs, old prejudices and fear into the trash, and exited into the brilliant light of a new day. A new day for them—for their kind, for half-weres, everywhere.

The End

About the Author:

Darragha Foster writes shape-shifter romances with a twist. Or a fin. Love isn’t always sweet. Sometimes it’s a little bizarre. Darragha is the poster child for erotic romances featuring the strange, the wonderful and the incredibly unique.

She is inspired by everything around her. Her problems, her joys, the way her daughter’s clothing smells after coming home from the stable, the miniature dachshund who adores her (and thinks she’s his bitch) and the willingness of her husband to be her crash-test dummy. Life is good on Planet Darragha. Join the celebration at www.darragha.com.

Earning Her Stripes

Mima

Dedication

To Magnus and Sid, aka Fluff-N-Claws and Little Black

Chapter One

The Valley was a two hour bus ride from Half-were House. Meg spent all seven thousand two hundred seconds shaking. So when she got off at the Valley drugstore and watched the bus drive away, she stiffened her knees, straightened her shoulders and lifted her chin. She was prepared to meet her ex-pride with, well, pride.

She stood militantly on the corner for several moments. Nothing happened. No one came out of the store. No one pulled over in the thin daytime traffic that drifted past on Main. No one came storming down the street, claws out. The sky did not open. Ryan, the pride's enforcer, who was also the official police chief, did not arrive. The pride leader, Ken, was nowhere to be seen. Her thighs trembled once with residual fear.

Disobedient. The word echoed like a gong in her skull. Defiantly, Meg muttered it under her breath.

"Disobedient."

She curled her hand tight around the strap of her backpack. Her heart pounded so hard from hearing that word out loud, here in the Valley, that Meg saw spots across her vision. She'd done it. She'd begun her path to reclaiming herself. The self they tried to take away when they told her to go. The pride, the people who should have belonged to her, had demanded she stop belonging to them. Based on nothing but cruel tradition.

When Meg had seen the defining word "obedient" on her personality test, she'd reached her breaking point. The test, meant to supply guidance to the shifter transitioning between pride and human life, had fulfilled its purpose of showing the subject clearly. It had been a very harsh mirror, and Meg, upon seeing it, had died.

Reborn with a fierce anger and purpose burning in her belly, she'd cut her knee-length hair, informed her new non-perfect-shifter friends that their new word was "disobedient," and began planning to take back her life. Blaze had helped with her new wardrobe, and Gina had helped with the slogans.

Meg had found a loophole. As long as she stayed for only short periods of time, Ken could have nothing to say to her. She was given freedom to roam from Half-were House for twenty-four hours. If she wasn't home in twenty-four hours, Tasheka would call Ken.

Of course, no one ever imagined that the disgusting, filthy, unworthy half-breed would ever dare return to her former pride's territory. But it wasn't forbidden. No one had ever told her, nor was it anywhere written, that she had roaming restrictions.

Meg was under no delusions. It was going to take time to convince Pamela, her Principal, to give Meg her old teaching job back. It wasn't going to happen today. So today's goal was smaller. Find a base. Find a place she could go to make a few calls, change, eat, and rest in safety. She needed an ally, a friend. Meg had made a list. It was rather short. Only three friends had bothered to say good-bye when she'd been escorted out of the pride a few weeks ago.

Hitching her backpack up on her shoulder, Meg walked to the first of her friends' work. She hated to bother Joanie on the job, but she had four hours before the eastbound bus came through, or she'd be stranded for a day. Joanie ran her own comic book and computer game shop. Three blocks later, Meg went into the little glass-fronted business. There was no one in the store because it was two o'clock, and the bulk of Joanie's customers were in school on this Friday afternoon.

Joanie was in her easy chair behind the desk, her ipod playing in a dock, her two monitors showing the bustling town of a multiplayer game. She was reading the latest Buffy comic. Meg had already read that one, and it was good. Meg was glad to know she wasn't interrupting something new.

"Hi, Joanie."

Joanie's black eyes drifted up to Meg in a blank manner that she knew well. Joanie was still lost in the comic. Meg waited.

Joanie focused. "Hi, Meg." She smiled. Then she remembered. Surging to her feet, she stared at Meg, mouth ajar.

"I'm back. I was hoping I could stay at your place." Meg wasn't proud of the way her voice was small and wavery.

"Whaaaa?" Joanie scrubbed her hand over her gaunt face. Then her whole face erupted into a joyous smile. "Meg! Did you *shift*?" Laying the comic down gently and precisely on the desk, because Joanie would never crease a comic, she moved to come out toward Meg.

"No."

Joanie stumbled to a halt, her smile fading. "Meg..."

Meg stared at her best friend. "I'm going to get my job back. My kids back."

Joanie sagged to sit on the desk, knocking a bevy of action figures over. "Oh, Meg..."

"Can I stay with you? I just need the protection of temporary hospitality."

Pushing her hand into her short, purple hair, Joanie tucked a strand behind her delicate ear. Meg had helped pick that shade of purple. Meg had held Joanie through hours of weeping after a violent teen had trashed her store last month. Meg had—

"No. No, Meg."

—believed in her friend. Meg's brown eyes welled, but she blinked quickly. She wanted to ask why. She wanted to call Joanie an obedient shthead. But she didn't. She didn't even nag.

"Good-bye, Joanie."

Meg turned and threaded her curves through the intricately piled tiers of shelves.

Joanie called after her. "Meg, this is wrong. You don't have a full shift. Hell, you don't even have a half-shift! You're not part of the pride anymore. Your shifter blood is too thin. Meg!"

For some reason, an image of Blaze popped into her head, standing tall and proud,

with cold, burning eyes of green. At the door, Meg paused and looked back. Joanie was standing with a decidedly horrified look on her face.

“Oh, and Joanie?”

“Yeah?”

“I’ll need the eight thousand dollars you owe me from last summer’s startup back by next Friday. If I don’t have it, I’m taking you to small claims.”

Meg walked blindly down the sidewalk, her shoulder-length, copper hair swishing as she clutched her backpack to her chest. Blaze would approve, but Meg wasn’t sure if the bittersweet victory was to her liking.

*

The next stop was Savannah’s. Meg regretted the long walk out of town to Savannah’s house only because it gave Joanie time to call her. Sure enough, when Meg stumped down Savannah’s driveway, her friend was sitting on the porch.

“Meg! When Joanie told me you were here, I didn’t believe her! What in Sam Hill do you think you’re doing?”

“Hi, Savannah.”

Meg hated that she stopped at the foot of the stairs that led to Savannah’s wide, gracious porch. She waited there, for her friend to offer Meg some of her famous southern hospitality. Meg would love a mint tea, and a sweet roll. She’d love to sink onto the wicker swing where they’d gossiped and shared many a night. Her friend didn’t invite her up.

Staring up at Savannah’s slim, put-together polish, Meg lost all desire for revenge. It would be easy to hold the secrets Savannah had shared over her head. It would be easy to poke and pick at scabs only Meg, out of all the pride, knew of. But it wouldn’t be easy to sleep with the guilt that would plague her afterwards. Those things had been shared in confidence. Meg had already dipped her toe into ruthlessness and it had been a bit nippy. She preferred her baths at about ninety degrees.

“May I stay with you, Savannah?” she asked, knowing the answer, but needing to hear it anyway.

“Stay? Savannah, if Ken finds out, you could be censured! Land sakes, I heard there was some wild rebel staying on at Half-were, but this is ridiculous. What ideas have they been filling your head with? Love, this was hard enough without stirring the pot all over again!”

Meg tipped her head. She could smell the lovely blend of fragrance Savannah had chosen in her flowerbeds along the front of the house. She mused thoughtfully aloud. “Censure. Do you think censure matters when they’ve taken my life away? Ridiculous... I don’t think anyone’s ever told me I’m ridiculous in all my life.”

“Oh, for mercy mild, don’t be dramatic. Meg, you can’t shift. You can’t shift, so you can’t stay. It is the law.”

“Actually, it isn’t.”

Savannah folded her arms. “Pardon me?”

“It isn’t the law. It’s merely tradition. And it stinks.”

Savannah frowned. “Yes, it does stink. And yes, you are being ridiculous. Little old you, schoolteacher? *You’re* going to challenge the pride?”

Even though she was standing here doing just that, hearing it was still shocking. Meg licked her lips. “Yes.”

Savannah's arms fell to her sides as if they had no strength. She leaned heavily into the porch post at the top of the stairs. "Sekhmet, save us."

Gina's blazing personality burned the ice away from inside. "*Sekhmet's tits, save your own damn self!*" She could hear her new friend rave.

"Good-bye, Savannah." Meg turned and walked away.

"Good-bye, Meg." The sorrow in Savannah's voice didn't touch her. She felt her friend's eyes on her all the way down the road.

*

Next came Rhondi. Rhondi worked as a waitress in one of the Valley's two bars. The Valley didn't have much duplication, being a tiny rural community. Main Street really was the main street, and it had two crossroads that created interesting corners along its length, but other than that, the community was scattered and sparse, mostly small dairy and corn farms, along with a small plastics factory.

At just after four, The Harvester already had several people in it. Farming communities ate dinner early, and started drinking not long after. All of the customers were pride except for one.

The solitary human was old Mr. Carpenter, one of the few humans stubborn enough to stick out living in a community that could be as closed and tight as summer-canned strawberries in February. He didn't seem to notice the wave of silence that descended across the room when Meg stepped across the door's threshold. And unlike everyone else, he wouldn't hear every word she spoke.

Meg gratefully eased onto a stool at the bar, dropping her backpack at her feet. The floor was clean enough at this hour. The long walk to Savannah's and back made her heavy breasts itch with sweat and her shoulders ache. Her thighs buzzed and she had the beginnings of a blister.

The physical discomfort was nothing to the panic that had begun upon leaving Savannah's street. In her heart, she'd hoped the two women she approached first would help her because they both owed her in emotional ways. Friendship shouldn't be a system of checks and balances, but when the chips were down, and the chips were so far down they were pretty much buried, Meg had hoped the women would honor their debt. Rhondi was her next stop. Rhondi didn't have the same balance of debt, but she'd always been there for Meg. She'd welcomed her and supported her from the first months of Meg's fostering.

Ted stared at her from behind the bar. Siamese just weren't very bright.

"Hi, Ted. My usual, please."

He poured the dark German beer without looking away from her face. Meg counted out the money and laid it on the bar with a tip. She let her brain drift to the baseball game on TV. A short while later, Rhondi sat on the stool next to her.

"Oh, Meg..."

"Hi, Rhondi. Can I stay with you?" Meg couldn't even bring herself to look at Rhondi, the woman who knew the most about what it had meant for Meg to be fostered here, away from her mother, welcomed into a community, instead of existing in an emotional wasteland.

"Is it bad, Meg? Aren't they treating you good at Half-Were House?"

"It's like staying in a place out of 'Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous.' The lioness housemother is great, and the kitchen is the nicest I've ever seen. I've met some really

wonderful people, but it's just not home."

Rhondi idly wiped the bar. Her nails were pale pink today. "Meg ... for how long? What for?"

Meg considered her location, and the fact that a dozen pride ears were pinned on this conversation. Mentally, she pulled a Gina, and just let it all flow. "I won't stay long, but I need a place to come and go from. I'm going to try to get my job back. It'll be off and on for awhile. You'll hardly know I'm there. You know I'm neat."

Blaze would be disappointed with the faint pleading that had seeped into Meg's voice. Meg heard Rhondi swallow. With her tiger hearing, she noted the woman's tension through her shallow breathing.

"Meg ... that's really wild. I think it's brave of you, and you know I'd do it, but..."

Meg turned and looked at the brunette. Her ponytail was perfect, as always. When Meg tried to wear one, her hair humped and lumped. Rhondi's was always smooth as glass.

"But?" Meg felt her face flush with the nearness of hope.

"Well, you see, about a week after you left, I ran into Gavin at the Myklos'—" the diner was a fixture in the Valley, "—and we got to talking about you, and then..."

Meg blinked. She focused on Rhondi's wrist as it flexed, still moving her white rag in idle circles. *Rhondi's wrist bore Gavin's collar.* The lovely silver and black leather band was the same one Meg had worn for over two years.

"And then, what? You'd let me stay, but, what?" Meg didn't like it when her masochistic streak emerged in public.

Rhondi sighed, her hand and its rag dropping to her lap. "I've loved him since I was fifteen, Meg. And he's never even noticed me. Now he has, and I'm happy. Meg, you can't stay with me. He's mine."

Meg focused, really hard, on Rhondi's lovely dark skin. As one of the few African-Americans in the Valley, Rhondi stood out. Her parents both worked in the insurance store a few blocks back on Main Street. She'd grown up in the Valley, and when it came time to declare her allegiance or foster at another pride, she'd chosen to stay.

She was one of the few in the pride who understood what it felt like to be different. Like Joanie's geekdom and Savannah's painful past, Meg had been drawn to women who marched to their own drummer. But now she was learning that there was no true marching going on here, only a private little skip-step. Her friends' drummers were the same ones the pride used.

Meg thought about all the hurtful things she could share about how Gavin viewed Rhondi before. Gavin had told Meg that Rhondi was pathetic. He'd rolled his eyes about her nail hobby. He'd told Meg it was bad luck to fuck black cats. Apparently, Rhondi's status as one of the few women he hadn't fucked had tipped his superstitious nature.

"I'm glad he's yours, Rhondi." And surprisingly, Meg was. Now she wouldn't have to worry about brushing a bored, horny Gavin off, like she'd feared. "Just know that if anything happens to lower your status in the pride, he'll leave you instantly, no looking back."

"I know. I saw what he did to you." Rhondi leaned forward, lowered her voice to a whisper that probably only Ted the bartender could hear. "He's powerful, Meg. He's ... amazing."

Meg nodded, and whispered back. "He's not, Rhondi. He's hot in bed but he's weak."

Any man who can't stand against the storm isn't worth your time."

Rhondi sat back abruptly. Meg saw her dark brown eyes flare with understanding, then her pretty face became a closed, sculpted statue. "People grow."

Over the murmur of voices talking about her, over the calls of the baseball crowd on TV, Meg heard a voice pitched at cell phone level coming from the bathroom alcove. It was Jake Simpson, the parent of Cindy, who she'd taught three years ago.

"She's sitting right here! Walked in bold as day! She said she's going to get her job back!"

Meg sighed. He was calling the pride leader, no doubt, or possibly the enforcer. She doubted it was the first call of the day. But soon they'd reach critical mass, as the persnickety members of the pride demanded action. Ken or Ryan would come knocking at any moment and she hoped they didn't knock too hard. Anna, Ken's wife and the secondary leader of the pride, had been the one to burn the eye of Ra into Meg's heel, banishing her. Then she'd calmly handed Meg a bus ticket out of town.

It hurt almost as much to hear Mr. Simpson, a parent who had praised her as a teacher, call her in, as it had to have her friends turn her away. Her last resort had been to go to Gavin. She wouldn't now. She wouldn't have to pretend respect. She didn't want to ask a favor of a man who could turn so easily. *Time to wait for the bus, just a little over an hour.*

Meg hopped off the stool. "Bye, Rhondi."

Stooping to pick up her backpack, she walked out of the bar, eyes on the floor.

Chapter Two

The summer evening air felt good on her face. She'd spent most of the last three weeks cooped up in Half-were House, shell-shocked, and lost. She'd certainly enjoyed her fair share of air today.

Meg considered going to Myklos' for dinner. She just wasn't hungry. She wandered in the direction of the small town park, with the war memorial, the dry fountain, and the swing set. She was still a good distance away when she heard the piercing little voice.

"Mommy! Mommy! There's Miss Frikahee! Miss Frikahee!" Then there was Katie, blonde curls flying, as she pelted across the park.

Meg's heart stopped. Katie threw herself through the air and Meg fell to her knees and caught her tiny body up tight.

"Katie!" Mrs. Shulevitz huffed after her daughter.

Meg reluctantly let Katie go. Katie danced around Meg with her six-year-old energy. "—and Mikey said, 'Yuh-huh! Is so!' But I told them both to stop it, that your rule was 'You can't say you can't play.' And then Ms. Walker said we were using her rules now. Then Chase goes, like, 'Miss Frikahee's rules were better.' And Ms. Walker started to cry! And we all got really quiet, and Ms. Walker left! And when Our Pal Pam came back, she said we had to use respect. And she said you were gone. And she said you didn't want to go. And Mikey started to cry. And then—"

"Katie!" Mrs. Shulevitz finally managed to get within snatching reach and plucked the tiny dervish up. She stared down at Meg with horror.

Meg's heart curled up and died at the woman's expression. She slowly stood. Squaring her shoulders, she lifted her chin. "Good evening, Mrs. Shulevitz. Nice to see you out tonight."

"I can't believe he actually did it..." Mrs. Shulevitz breathed. "I mean, none of us said we'd block him, but I was sure you'd never agree..."

"Mommy! Ms. Frikahee is back! See, she's not sick anymore!"

Mrs. Shulevitz paled to be caught in her lie. "I'm sorry," she said, "I just thought first grade was very young to explain about..."

"I understand, Mrs. Shulevitz. It's your decision." Meg turned to Katie. "I am still sick, Katie. My cat, actually. She will always be sick, and some of the pride worry I shouldn't stay because of it. But no one can catch what I have. I was born with it. You are safe, and your cat is safe, and I would never hurt you."

"So you're coming back?" Katie asked, big blue eyes blinking.

"I'd like that. I hope so. I'm not sure when, though."

"Like my poster said—wash those germs away!"

Meg forced a smile. That her lack of a shift could be cured with a pill was a common daydream she'd had when she was a teen. She'd taught the kids about germs back in October. They'd used microscopes, and made soap. Her class had made germ posters.

"It was a colorful poster, Katie."

"It's still there by the cafeteria door." Katie's voice was very proud.

"Well, I'm afraid we have to go in for supper," Mrs. Shulevitz forced a smile, her eyes avoiding Meg's. "Say good-bye, Katie."

Meg took extra care to be casual and reassuring but vague as she bid the bright, watchful little girl good night. Mother and child turned and strode down the sidewalk in the direction Meg needed to go, but Meg wasn't about to trail behind them, with Katie looking back over her shoulder.

Waving once more, she turned into the park. The bench by the fountain was covered in carved graffiti. To human eyes, the vandals had used a knife with some dexterity. Meg knew they'd done it with claws. Claws she'd never had, and never would.

She sat, defiantly, on an anarchy symbol. Plus the other side of the bench had some spilled soda and a grease stain that smelled like pepperoni. The fountain had been washed since the last time she'd seen it. They were getting ready for the Friday night concerts that started in June.

Absolute exhaustion melted into Meg's bones. Well, Plan A had failed. Three friends, but no allies. She'd been glad for an excuse to avoid Gavin, but had no doubt the outcome would be the same. Meg rolled the taste of her first defeat in her mouth. The war had just begun. There would be more defeat. She'd been brave enough to step off the bus once, she could do it again.

But her shoulders slumped. Her head hung heavily, cascading her coppery hair around her face. She bit her lip with her flat human teeth. *This was so hard...* Lost in her dejection, Meg didn't hear the approaching footsteps until a pair of worn work boots that smelled of earthy manure stood in her vision. She looked up sharply, heart tripping.

"Hello, Meg."

Meg felt herself pull back into the bench even as she mentally ordered herself to sit up. It was Ben Watson, Kyle's dad. Kyle had been in her first class when she'd joined the Valley pride four years ago. Ben's brother Ryan was the pride's enforcer, and the Valley's sole police officer. Meg knew Ben well enough, from the summers she'd tutored Kyle. Had Ryan sent him to escort her quietly away?

Meg nodded stiffly, tipping her head back to take in his face. "Hello, Mr. Watson." She glanced around at the swings to her left, but didn't see Kyle. Her heart tripped again. What was he doing here? Why had he dared approach her?

"You cut your hair." His voice was quiet in the still evening. The day had been warm for late spring, and the birds were calling in the trees. A pickup rumbled past.

Meg stared at him, her mind racing to decide how to reply. She'd forgotten what a huge man he was.

"You should see how big your eyes are, right now. I'm not going to eat you." He went to sit on the other end of the bench, wrinkled his nose at the mess there, and moved to her other side. "Scoot over."

He began to sit at the end, forcing her to move over to the middle to avoid being squished. His thigh settled along hers, a shocking line of heat and steel wrapped in well-worn jeans. He put his arm along the back of the bench to balance himself, as he was only half on the bench. But he didn't force her onto the yucky side, he just perched there. His shoulder seemed to surround her, and she could see his big hand resting along the bench back out of the corner of her eye.

Meg found herself taking shallow breaths. And still his scent swirled her head. She remembered this. Abruptly, she remembered the heart-pounding attraction she'd had on the few occasions she'd been alone with him. She'd shaken it off, professional, already dating Gavin. He smelled so different than Gavin, who'd favored spicy were-cologne.

Ben Watson smelled like the earth. He smelled vibrant and alive.

“My buddy Jake Simpson called me when you were in The Harvester. He overheard your conversation with Rhondi.”

Meg opened her mouth. “Oh?” She mentally slapped herself for the pithy comment. What was going on?

“Yeah. See, he knew I’d be interested.”

She scowled when she heard the quiet amusement in his voice. He was enjoying her confusion.

After a few more cars passed by on the nearby street, he asked, “Would you like to know why I was absolutely thrilled to hear you were back in town, looking to challenge for your job?”

Patronizing black panther. “Sure, Mr. Watson. I’m ... really surprised by this conversation.”

“I’m sure you are.” Now, he sounded decidedly depressed. He sighed. “Meg, you asked Rhondi for a place to stay while you try to get your job back.”

It wasn’t a question, but she cautiously responded. “Yes...”

“Stay with me.” His low, deep words seemed to settle right in her tummy.

“Uhhh...”

“Miss Meg Frikahee, I invite you to be my guest.”

“Oh.” Meg stared at the massive thigh that extended past her own. The fabric on the top was bleached nearly white, and the knee was starting to fray. There was a stain near the middle, about even with her clasped hands. She could see the sculpted muscles flex in his leg as he shifted. A big, rough hand with long, blunt fingers came into view, and firmly turned her chin toward him.

He’d lowered his head, craning his neck to catch her eyes. His were shaded by the ratty old ball cap on his head. Thick brown hair curled haphazardly out from the sides. He needed a haircut. He had stubble on his chin, but it was the stubble of an evening beard, not laziness. His lips were firm. He had a nick on one cheek, a scar on the bridge of his nose.

Meg licked her lips. His thumb gently rubbed over her chin, then his hand fell to her lap. She jumped when he gently clasped her wrist, sliding his thumb under her blue fleece hoodie. His fingers tightened on her wrist, his thumb making a purposeful stroke over her tendons. Surely he’d feel her leaping pulse. The fleeting thought of questioning his personal touch danced through Meg’s head.

“You’re not wearing his collar anymore.”

Shock bloomed out of the heat he’d started in her belly. Meg’s spine snapped straight. Never in a million years would she have guessed Ben Watson, dairy farmer, parent of a prior student, would know about a submissive’s collaring tradition. Let alone speak to her about it.

Those dark eyes caught her wide ones again. They narrowed as his grip tightened, making her belly tighten as well. “Are you, Meg?”

Meg felt her lips peel open. Her lungs burned with the need for more air. She gulped like a fish.

“So? What’s it to be? Did you find a place with a friend, or would you like to take me up on my offer?”

Meg was on her feet and over to the fountain with cat speed, if not quite cat grace.

She spun, her thick, straight hair flaring. “Mr. Watson, what’s going on?”

“I’m offering to be your sponsor in the pride.”

Meg blinked. Whenever prides contracted specialists from other prides, they assigned someone to be the guest’s handler, or sponsor, while they were in the other pride’s territory. She had never considered asking for a sponsor. She’d been hoping for the sanctuary of guest status, with basic rules of hospitality. But having a sponsor was a fabulous idea, one that had a greater history behind it.

“To be sponsored, I’d have to be providing a service to the pride.”

“You’ll be my educational consultant as I challenge the Board of Ed’s staffing.”

Licking her lips, Meg shifted her feet. Saw how his gaze zoomed in on her mouth.

“Do that again.” His words were so low, a breath on the wind.

She did. Licking and folding her suddenly flushed lips into her teeth.

He stood. Up, and up. His shoulders were huge. She tensed, but he didn’t move.

“Please, Mr. Watson, explain what’s going on. Where is this coming from? Your brother Ryan ... little Kyle ... you could face repercussions.”

He nodded slowly, reluctantly looking from her lips to her eyes again. “I wanted you the first time I saw you. If I’d gone to Kyle’s meet-and-greet with him in August, I would have had a chance to date you before Gavin. But I let Sarah go, and then my parents went on back-to-school night when I had that pasteurizer go, and I didn’t get to see you until the November parent-teacher conference.”

“Oh.” Meg remembered not thinking much of him, a father who didn’t bother meeting the person who spent as much time with his son as he did. It had irritated her she’d been so attracted to him during that conference. It had been a long half an hour. She hadn’t given any sign of her interest, and apparently he hadn’t either.

“I honestly believe that if Kyle hadn’t had you that year, he wouldn’t be reading now.”

Meg struggled to follow the shift in conversation. She sat on the edge of the fountain. The stone under her ass was surprisingly cold. “Kyle’s doing all right?”

“He’s great. He’ll never be a top reader, but he’s working hard, doing well. He’s decided to move in with Sarah since Christmas. He can play with his friends, and walk to school. Her asshole moved out, so I finally allowed it. I see him a couple times a week.”

Meg nodded. The mother, Sarah, had been out of the picture until a few years ago, and had brought a non-pride lover back with her. Meg was relieved Kyle’s other parent was stabilizing. “That’s good to hear. I’m glad he’s beating his dyslexia.”

“You showed him how. You found it, you altered his program, you tutored him the next two summers, and you changed his life. He came to me when they made you leave.”

“He did?”

Ben nodded, a proud curl on his lips. “He told me that all his class agreed it was stupid. We had a long talk about it. Then the next time I saw him, he challenged me. He told me this was about personal power, and doing the right thing even when it’s hard, like I teach him. ‘Things change, Dad, and some things have to change,’ he said.”

Ben nodded, once, hard. “He’s right. We talked some more. Nine days after you left, I started the challenge process on LuAnne Walker with the Board of Ed.”

Meg grimaced. LuAnne was a retired pride teacher, who had been shuttled between grades for most of her career in an attempt to minimize the damage she did. She was sweet, and kind, and utterly ineffective as a teacher. Meg had been accepted into the pride

to fill her position. That she'd been brought out of retirement to cover the rest of Meg's school year was ironic.

"I'd planned on contacting you after next Tuesday's Board meeting. That's when they officially post the position, and will choose a timetable for hiring. If I can get them to admit they need a faster timeline, then I think it will start the snowball effect."

Almost casually, Ben moved up to sit his lovely tight ass against the fountain, too. His long legs stretched out in front of him, bracing with crossed ankles. But he flowed too purposefully for it to be truly an easy movement. She was being stalked. She turned to keep him in sight.

"Snowball ... into the search for my replacement?"

He nodded. "Into the realization we had a gem, and they threw you away. Into the understanding that no other qualified, let alone gifted, teacher is going to want to work for peanuts in the middle of nowhere with a quiet pride of hicks."

"Gee, thanks." Meg tried for sarcastic, but she was touched. Others might see this pride as small stakes, but to her it was a haven. Ken was a just leader, the people were friendly and protective, and the human population small enough that living openly as wercats was the norm.

"Meg, come to the Board meeting with me next week. Let's do this. Ryan has a lawyer friend who works for the Council. I already have an official letter declaring the illegality of what they did to you."

Meg sucked in her breath, nails scraping on the stone as she gripped it in shock. Ben put his hand on hers, stilling her from ripping up her nails, and continued on.

"I have a written statement from a Council lawyer, Meg. There is no law that says non-shifting half-weres can't stay in a pride."

Ben's thumb rubbed gently over her knuckles. His eyes, so dark and deep, caught hers. He nodded. "Breathe, Meg."

She breathed, a strangled gasping inhale. "He ... dared?" Ryan, the pride enforcer, had done legal research on her behalf? No, on his brother's behalf, but still...

"A pride enforcer asked a legal question. The lawyer was bound to answer it. And privately, he told Ryan that it wasn't the first time prides had come to him about trying to keep their half-weres, by any means."

"Why..." Meg looked away. She couldn't think with his hand so warm on hers. She couldn't focus with his dark eyes in hers.

"I told you. Kyle made me see it was the right thing to do. Our family owes you. The whole community admires you. The pride took you in, promised to watch over you. It's all bullshit, and they're weakening the pride by following this ancient crap so blindly. Ken and Ryan see it. They just don't know how to get out of it."

Meg swallowed. Turning her wrist, she put her palm to his, and curled her fingers tight, gripping his hand. She blinked to clear her eyes of tears. In a very small voice she choked, "Thank you."

"We'll get you back in school, Meg. You're naturally talented, expertly trained, highly professional, and help form our children at one of the most critical years."

A tremor ran through her. Any second now she was going to fall to the ground in a puddle of disbelieving joy. She had an ally.

"So, are you coming home with me?"

Her joy stilled at the depths in his voice, at his hand tightening on hers.

His voice purred, "Come to the farm, Meg. All we'll do is catch-up, make plans."

Looking at him through her lashes, she said, "That's all?"

"Tonight, that's all."

Oh. Her nipples lifted, her crotch oozed heat.

"I won't lie. I want you. I waited for you to get tired of Gavin. You didn't seem to have any vision in that regard. It seemed you were just marking time. It pissed me off. But tonight, I'll take you home to put my stamp of sponsorship on you. I don't want you to fear moving through the pride when you visit."

Meg nodded. She thought back to the times she'd talked to this man about his son. Remembered his intensity, his desire to help Kyle practice and improve. How he'd read all three of the professional and medical books she'd recommended on dyslexia, despite having precious little time as a single father and a farmer. Kyle's stories of his life with his father had always been positive, even when he was complaining. Meg had seen the solid adult behind the child's pouting.

Divorced because his wife cheated on him when Kyle was two, the exes now had an amicable relationship since Sarah had moved back to the Valley. To Meg's knowledge, Ben hadn't been linked to anyone else. He owned a three-hundred acre dairy farm that had been in his family for five generations.

Meg saw her free hand reaching out before she even recognized her need to tell him. She put it on the middle of his chest, where his Carhart jacket hung open, revealing a plain black t-shirt. His heart kicked hard under her hand. His pec jumped. He was so warm.

"Ben, I *was* marking time with Gavin. I was waiting to shift, with my tigress. And I never did. And I think ... I always knew I wouldn't. Somewhere inside, Gavin was just a fun weekend, while I waited to see what Ken would do."

"You wore his collar for years." Ben's voice rumbled down her arm from where she pressed against his breastbone.

Meg shrugged. "He played me in bed the way I like it. But when he asked for it back... I've had time to think. I was hurt. I was depressed and disappointed. I *wasn't* surprised. I never expected him to champion me or to marry me, to even mourn me. We were together, and it was easy, because we weren't really involved."

Ben stood and faced her squarely. His hand still held hers tightly. His free hand came up and gently scooped behind her hair to cradle the back of her neck. His palm engulfed her nape, his skin rough. He leaned down, tipping his head so the brim of his hat shielded their face from the street. He lowered his lips to just above hers.

"Meg, when you're with me, you're going to be involved."

He hovered there, catching the darting breaths that left her. She couldn't believe he was so close, so big, so hot, so new, and oh, so comfortable.

"Do you understand me, Meg?" His hand tightened on her nape, his thumb teasing through her hair, causing goose bumps to erupt down her spine.

"Yes." Meg's eyes closed, making his smell that much more perfect. "Yes, Ben."

"Ahhh. That sounds so good. So fucking good." The breath from his words moved over her lips, scouring them.

Meg grew dizzy. Her body settled into the grip at her neck. Then, to her despair, he stepped away, his hand sliding slowly enough from her skin that she could lock her knees. He eased his hand from hers.

“Answer me. Are you going to accept my sponsorship?”

Meg looked at Ben Watson. She licked her lips. “Yes.”

He reached up and resettled his cap on his head more firmly. His lips cocked in a grin that zipped from her heart to her toes.

“You’re different. I like this new you. C’mon, my truck is over on Maple.” He turned and began walking in lazy strides.

Meg hurried to get up next to him. “Different how?” Proud pleasure burst in her at his observation.

“You’re not sleepwalking anymore. You’re awake.”

He stopped by the passenger door of his big silver Chevy. Mud splattered the sides. He opened it for her, and stood with his hand out to help her with the enormous step.

She put her hand in his. “Yes, I am different. I’m disobedient now.” She stepped, ducked, and scooted into the cab. Now her face was even with his.

He braced a hand on the cab’s roof and leaned in, that sexy grin stretching into a full-blown smile. *He had a dimple!*

“Are you?”

She nodded solemnly, trying to suppress an answering smile. “I am. And I’m prepared to face the consequences.”

His face wiped of all humor. He straightened. “If consequences are threatened, you come to me, Meg. I’m serious. As your sponsor, any problems should be directed to me first. The only consequences you deal with for disobedience are mine.”

Meg shook her head slightly, her own eyes serious in return. “Ben, I’m ... overwhelmed at the support you’re showing me. At this opportunity. But this is my fight. I’m the captain on this mission, and if it fails, I’m the one that will take the heat. Not you.”

Ben’s face hardened, his eyes shuttering. He stepped in, gripping the seatbelt buckle. In one smooth extension, he drew it across her body, his knuckles skimming her chest. He held her eyes from inches away as he clicked the latch. He held the position, his body leaning into hers, staring her down. She looked away.

He strode around and climbed in, starting the truck in the same movement as closing the door. He faced her, his arm stretched out along the seat as he turned to back up.

“Apparently you didn’t hear me when I said we were going to be involved, Meg. You’re coming home with me tonight to cement the sponsorship and the protection it gives you. But you think hard on returning a second time. Because once you’re in my bed, you’re in my life.”

Ben headed south on Maple, out of town. She knew it was a twenty-minute drive. Twenty surreal minutes of sitting next to Kyle’s father, who wanted to be her lover. Who wanted to help her fight the pride for her job.

Meg lasted five minutes in the churning silence. “One of my new friends at Halfwere House told me something important. Blaze said the prides are supportive, but they’re not just. Ben, I won’t have you suffer the injustice that I face. It’s not something I’d ever accept, to allow your status to be affected by mine.”

“You’re not one of those weird modern women, are you?”

“What?”

“You know, one of those sexual freedom women who want ‘open relationships?’”

“What are you talking about?”

“Meg, when you fuck me, am I going to be your man? Do you want me to understand that we’re exclusive?”

Meg’s head whirled as if the simple country drive were a wild amusement thriller. His words made her breasts ache.

“Ben...”

“Is it going to be ok with you if I go out to The Harvester and bang Rhondi over a barstool?”

“No!” The burst of anger from that image shocked her.

“So you don’t want me catting around?”

“No.” Meg heard the pout in her voice. She knew the trap he was backing her into.

“Same here. I catch a man’s hands on you that I didn’t put there myself and there are going to be hard, angry words. I’ll trust you when you give me yourself, and I’ll hold you to it. Just like you can trust me to be your man. So no more of this bullshit about protecting me.

“If you decide to take me as a lover, you get a partner. We’re side by side as friends, and hell yes, we’re side by side as lovers. If the pride has crap to dish out because a talented half-tigress wants to teach our children, then I’m there to deal with it. I don’t want you facing it by yourself, Meg. Understand that.”

Meg let her hair shield her face as she bowed her head, biting her lip to keep from crying. Ben Watson had just shown more courage and integrity as an anticipated lover than her actual ex-lover had. *You suck, Gavin*, Meg muttered mentally. And then she mentally dismissed him. Tilting her head, she looked at Ben through the curtain of her coppery-orange hair. He was scowling, his hands gripping the wheel tight as he stared at the road.

“I don’t want you facing it by yourself either, Ben. You understand that.” It came out soft, muted in the rumble of the truck, but she knew he could hear her.

He nodded once. “Of course. Hopefully, there won’t be any trouble.” He glanced over at her, looked back at the road. “I’m so glad you came, Meg. Good for you. What, did you take the bus?”

Meg relaxed. “Yeah. It’s stinky.”

“Tell me about Half-were House. I hear they have a human there.”

Something uncurled in her chest. She straightened, took a breath, held it, let it out. Meg was in the Valley, and she had an ally, and a friend.

Chapter Three

They sat on the porch. It overlooked the yard where the trucks were parked, but a massive oak softened the dusty barrenness of it. The night was still, the frogs chirping distantly. The low moans of the cows were a soothing melody.

Ben had fed her, and they cleaned up dinner afterward. She was relieved that dinner had been a low-key, practical event. Her attraction to him hummed in the back of her skull and the back of her knees, but he hadn't touched her. They had spoken of the community, of his efforts to organize a path for her return, of his son. He'd given her a cup of tea and put her on the porch while he went to share his daily phone call with Kyle.

She could hear his low rumble only partially over the night sounds and the dishwasher. Inhaling the country air, Meg felt herself relax. She felt normal here. Half-were House was a place where misfits learned to recreate themselves into something resembling usefulness. Everyone was on edge there. Here, she was safe.

Ben came out through the screen door. The season was early enough that she now wore an extra jacket over her fleece. It rustled as she shifted, surprised to see him pull his t-shirt off over his head.

"Kyle's thrilled to hear you're going to try for your job back. He said he's going to organize a petition." The pride in his voice was clear. He tossed the t-shirt onto the cedar table next to her Adirondack chair and undid his belt buckle and jeans. "Sarah is less thrilled. We spoke about whether or not it was wise for him to stick his nose in this." Ben sat in the chair next to her, the table between them. He bent and undid the laces on his work boots. The muscles in his shoulders flexed and rippled.

"W-what are you doing?" Meg's voice was decidedly breathless.

Ben didn't look away from his boots. "I'm undressing. I hate fighting my way out of clothes when I shift." He kicked off his boots and peeled off his socks.

Meg lost her breath when Ben stood and faced her. His chest was flat and hard and covered in interesting dips and swells. Gavin had worked out for a perfect, chiseled body. Ben was leaner, tighter, from hard labor.

"I wish you could come with me." Ben's voice was gentle.

"I wish I could, too." Meg was stunned. No one had ever so blatantly addressed her handicap to her face, openly, simply. Her friends never shifted around her, never mentioned needing to. It was like that part of being a werecat didn't exist, in deference to her inability to participate.

His hair was disheveled, thick and wavy. His eyes were steady, dark and still. He captured her gaze and held it as he pushed his jeans and underwear down over his hips in one motion, lifting his legs free. She held his eyes, her heart thundering with the will it took not to look down.

"I walk my territory every night. I like twilight best. Do you want to come?"

"I—I—I don't, I think, I'll stay here."

He tipped his head toward the yard, seemed to scent the night. "Go inside. Lock the door. Word will be out you're with me." He must have seen her anxiety and he followed the order with quiet reassurance. "Just to be cautious."

Meg nodded. Licking her lips, she gave in, and let her eyes go down over his furred

chest, following the narrowing path as it funneled down to his groin. He had either been aroused, or was becoming so, his penis thick and slightly lifted. She breathed out roughly, her mouth bursting with saliva. It was arching out of a lovely silky nest of brown fluff that matched his chest.

“Meg.”

She jerked her eyes up to his.

“It hurts like a bitch to shift with a hard-on. I’d appreciate it if you didn’t encourage me.”

She smiled tremulously at the teasing in his quiet, low voice.

“Go in the house. I’ll wait till I hear the door lock.”

She stood stiffly. “I can lock the door, Ben.”

He just stared at her. Huffing, she took her tea inside and locked the damn door. He nodded to her through the window, and went down the porch stairs. His ass flexed, the hollows clenching as he moved. He rolled his head on his neck once, and then the shift flowed over his body, in a wash of black fur and writhing muscle, until he was an enormous black panther, tail thrashing. He stretched in a blatant display, then wandered off toward the barn, quickly lost to the shadows.

Meg laid her fingers lightly on the smooth glass, heart beating furiously. Her eyes welled and she clenched her teeth. Her square, human teeth. Blaze and Gina could both achieve a half-state, morphing features of the cat into their human bodies. It was beautiful and exotic, and a testament to their werecat heritage. They at least knew the feeling of wearing part of their cats, no matter how briefly.

Meg was one of the last female were-tigresses in the world. The closest she ever got to shifting was the cat’s voice that would sometimes come from her throat when a lover brought her off particularly hard. As prized as her cat was, no man would want her for fear the strength of her human blood would taint any of their children. Genetics dictated that if Meg couldn’t manifest the tiger, the children would have less of a chance of shifting no matter what their cat.

Drifting into the living room, Meg turned the TV on and muted it. She dug out her cell and called Gina.

“Kitty-cat Club, where all the best itches get scratched,” Gina’s voice sang out into the phone.

Meg grinned. “It’s Meg. Hi, Gina!”

“The strip show begins promptly at ten, Mr. Mayor.”

Ah. So Tash, the house-mother, was no doubt nearby. “I didn’t do so well with the people I’d hoped to connect with, but you’ll never believe this, Gina—I got picked up by a guy!”

“Mmmmm. Love the sound of that, stud. Our premier act, ‘Gina’s Pussy Prowl,’ is highly recommended.”

Meg heard Tasheka’s voice calling in the background, “Gina, so help me, if that’s a human you’re playing with, you better hang up.”

Meg continued on. “He’s the parent of an ex-student, and he’s been fantastic to me. He’s already started to organize a movement to help me!”

“Well, I agree, in a business like this, looks are important.”

“Oh, he’s incredibly yummy. He’s strong and tall, dark hair and eyes. I don’t know what to do. I mean, I was in Gavin’s bed less than a month ago.”

“Easy come, easy go. And I do mean *come*. I think you’ll be well-pleased with a new selection.”

“I have no doubt I’d be well-pleased.” Meg sighed. “I’ve always been drawn to him, but I never suspected he was attracted to me. Now I’m here for the night, and he wants me to be his *lover*. I’m so turned on I can’t think it through. I’m sure there are reasons why I shouldn’t—“

“Seize the night, handsome. Come by tonight and let the girls show you a good time.”

Meg sighed. “Well, he won’t force me. I’ve got a safe place to stay. I’ll be home tomorrow afternoon.”

“Private lap dances are Gina’s specialty. Come share all your desires,” Gina purred, “for only two hundred an hour.”

“Gina! Who is that?” Tasheka called out, aggravated.

“So glad you called. See you soon!” Gina hung up.

Smiling, Meg put the phone back in her bag. The big couch was comfortable, and smelled faintly of Ben. The easy chair to the side smelled of Ryan. Her tea soothed her, settling her nerves. The old farmhouse was a little shabby inside, missing a woman’s touch for a decade. But the warmth of the building was solid. This was a family home.

Meg remembered the cold, modern apartment she’d grown up in. And her human father’s antiseptic, suburban, cookie-cutter house she’d occasionally visited. And her cramped apartment above the dentist office she’d had for a few years. Gavin’s fussy Victorian had been impressive, so over-decorated that she was afraid to use some of the antique furniture. He’d even had a fainting couch he didn’t want her to sit on.

She’d been to Ben’s house many times. Sat at the big, solid, scarred maple dining table tutoring Ryan. She’d even eaten lunch with Ben and Ryan a few times in the summer, sitting on the porch with them. She’d been comfortable then. She’d been at ease. Now, a feeling of sanctuary called to her as she sat curled up in the dark, with only the lights from the kitchen sink and TV to keep the darkness at bay.

Meg kicked off her shoes and tucked her legs up under her. Closing her eyes, she pulled a lovely old quilt off the back of the couch and cuddled. A short while later, a nearby presence brought her slowly awake.

Ben crouched near her, nude. “Are you sleeping alone tonight?”

She blinked sleepily at him. He smelled of dew-touched grass and fur. She nibbled her lips. “Ben...”

“Stay with me. Just sleep, Meg. I promise.”

Oh. Disappointment stilled her heartbeat while her lungs filled in relief. “All right. Sleeping with you sounds nice.”

He stood and went into the kitchen, his sculpted ass flexing. “Do you have cat vision?”

“I do.”

He turned off the light. The TV was already off. Meg folded the quilt and followed him up the large staircase, then down a wide hall.

“Here’s the bathroom,” he gestured as he passed it.

He turned into a room and very simply tossed back the puffy down comforter. His scent exploded in the room. Meg leaned weakly in the bedroom doorway.

“Do you want a shirt to sleep in?”

Meg looked at him standing there, his body painted in blue shadows from the faint light coming around the edges of the shades. She wanted him. But Meg didn't act on men she wanted. She needed to be the one sought. The one ordered, the one commanded.

He went to a dresser and rummaged, pulled out a large t-shirt. She couldn't tell what color it was in the dim room. "Put this on. It will give both of us peace of mind."

She took it, her heart pounding, and he put on a pair of cut-off sweatpants. Ben had gone to great lengths to reassure her. She knew he was honorable, and that he wouldn't coerce her. *Dammit. Take me*, Meg thought. *Make me*.

"Did you want to take a shower?"

She usually took her showers in the evening. But she didn't want to leave this room now. She shook her head. He went to the bed, laid down and pulled the covers up.

Putting his hands behind his head, his voice came out so low it was a textured rumble in her stomach. He ordered, "Put my shirt on, Meg."

Meg felt her vagina soften, moisten, at the same time her breasts tightened, rose. She stood in the room, holding his shirt, and debated falling to her knees and begging him to take her.

Slowly, she put the shirt on the corner of the bed. She'd already pulled the jacket and fleece off earlier. She shrugged her arms through the sleeves of her shirt from underneath. Reaching behind her back, she undid her bra, and slipped the straps down her arms. She let it drop to the floor. Her shoulders burned with relief, and her breasts rested warm on her body. Being a D cup wasn't as interesting as less-endowed women might think.

Undoing her jeans, she put one foot on the bed and peeled off a sock. Then she did the other foot. Putting a hand on each hip, she glanced at him. His raised and folded arms revealed a delicious line of muscle on the underside of his arms. She wanted to taste it. But she wouldn't. Meg would never get to taste that bit of flesh unless he told her to taste it. The thought made her clench her ass. How would she be able to explain her need to be passively submissive to such a decent, normal man?

She pushed her pants down, and stepped out of them, remembering how he'd bared himself so unashamedly a few hours earlier. He was a prime were-cat, strong and fit, with his cat spirit burning calories like an Olympian.

Meg was a half-were. Her dominant human side made her metabolism human. Her curves had always set her apart. Hips, ass, tummy, thighs ... none of the pride's women had anything close to the padding she had. It might make sense if Meg was sensitive about her body, but she hadn't been. The fear of difference had been for her shifting ability, not her shape. From a young age, the males had never given her any reason to doubt her beauty. Werecats were a sensual race, and the men loved comfort.

Her shirt still hung around her neck, falling to her hips. Drawing the hem up her body, she closed her eyes as it passed over her face. She was hyper-aware of the swish of her hair pulling through the neck and cascading across her shoulders as she pulled it over her head. She lowered her arms and dropped the shirt.

Instantly, the smell of her attraction rolled through the air. She could smell her vaginal cream, her sweat from the day's walking, the slight lingering sting of her fear and sorrow. Her breasts pebbled even further, the nipples throbbing.

"You're so beautiful. Just stand there for a second. Let me take you in, Meg."

Her breath caught. The room was dark, the air just cool enough on her heated flesh to increase her awareness of all the exposed curves.

“Turn around.”

Closing her eyes against the low command’s heat, Meg obeyed.

When she faced away from him, he said, “Stop.”

She stood there, struggling to slow her breathing.

“Widen your stance.”

Meg did. She stood, feet spread shoulder width, feeling the air on her inner thighs. She heard her breath panting in the quiet room but couldn’t control it.

“Meg, you smell so delicious. Not tonight, but soon, I’m going to taste you.”

A tremor flowed over her skin. Cream gathered on her lower lips. All right, maybe she wouldn’t have to explain her needs to the dairy farmer. He seemed to be naturally dominant. He seemed to be incredibly, amazingly hot.

“Yeah, that’s what I’m going to taste. Thick and rich, soft and sweet. It’s going to drive me insane letting it go to waste tonight. But I want to show you that I can control it. When I take you, it’s going to be a decision we both make, not some rush of raw lust.”

Meg’s hands were resting on the front of her thighs. She tightened her fingers until the nails bit into her skin.

“You don’t like falling into passion, do you, Meg? I made it a point to find out, even though I had to listen to painful stories about that shit Gavin. You don’t want to participate. You want someone else to be responsible for your pleasure. It’s something you need to step back from, give over.”

Goosebumps swept down her spine.

“If you give me your body, Meg, I’ll use it so hard. I’ve wanted you for a damn long while. I’m going to enjoy it deep, just the way I want, and it’s going to be like a gift, knowing you don’t even want me to worry about how you feel.”

There was a rustle of sheets behind her.

“But it’s not in me to completely ignore you. I’ll use you, but I’m never going to be unaware that it’s Meg I’m using. Sweet, caring Meg. Meg, with the light laugh that shines like the sun. Meg, with the glowing hair that flows like a soft summer river. Meg with the ass that’s made to be pounded in a hard, driving fuck. An ass so wide and soft a man can go all night.”

A whimper escaped, halting his lashing words.

She heard his deep breath. “Ah, Meg. Somehow we’ll find a way between what you need to give up and what I need to give. I’m going out of my mind imagining how it can be. Touch your nipples, Meg. Touch just the very tip of them, lightly, with just one finger.”

Her arms felt like lead as she slowly drew them up and rested her middle fingers on the tip of her nipples.

“I wonder if you can feel the heat of them. I can smell your heat, you know. Your body is so hot right now it’s warming the room. Lean forward. Bend at the waist. That’s it, keep your back straight. Keep going. There. Stop there.”

Meg was just slightly above a horizontal plane with her torso. Her breasts hung heavy, the nipples throbbing harder as her stomach clenched to hold the position.

“Are your fingers still touching the tips of your nipples, Meg?”

She closed her eyes, felt her breasts tremble with her harsh breathing.

“You didn’t answer me. I don’t want a doll, Meg. Let me make this clear. I want a woman. I’m so fucking turned on right now, my dick is lifting the covers like a party tent.

I'm going to come, but if you're not going to participate, I'll take care of myself with my hand and let you worry about your own relief."

Her breath caught in protest. Her eyes flew open.

His voice hardened with frustration. "Now answer me. Are your soft fingers touching the huge tips of those hanging tits or not, Meg?"

"Yes, Ben." Meg's voice was soft, but she heard the desperation in it. Cream heated her folds, thickening.

"Meg, I can see the line of your spine. Your hair has gone over your shoulders, and your back is so delicate. I love the flair of your waist."

He fell silent. The stillness spun out, only the sound of her panting breaths in the room. She felt his eyes on her like a weight, making the position difficult to hold over the agonizing minutes. Her thighs burned, her stomach ached, her cunt clenched in waves, and her back stung.

"Where do you feel it the most?" he breathed, finally.

Meg had to lick her lips before she could answer. "My breasts."

"That's not right. Open your legs wider."

She did, struggling to hold the difficult stretch of her torso. Feeling her lips peel open, she whimpered as the cream escaped and trailed down one thigh. Biting her lip, she cut the whimper off abruptly.

"It's ok, Meg. You can make sounds if you need to. Pinch your nipples, pinch them as hard as you can."

She did, and sighed as the sensation spiraled through her torso.

"Now put your hands on your knees. Keep your back straight."

The new position was a relief and a torment. Her breasts shifted, aching, and her newly spread legs made her aware that she'd now tipped her exposed cunt directly toward him.

"I wish I could have your mouth on me while I watched you in this position. I wish I could watch you suck me while I watched your pussy from this angle. I'll have to think about how to make that happen somehow."

She heard the first rasp of flesh over flesh. He'd touched himself somehow, and she ached for want of seeing it.

"Put your hands on the floor."

Letting her hands slide down her shins and over her feet, she stretched to put her palms on the floor. The backs of her thighs burned. Her nipples throbbed. A small sob left her.

The click of a switch made her jump. The room was flooded with light. Tucking her head, she looked back through her legs, the upside-down room making her head spin. He'd thrown the covers back, one hand wrapped around his erection that rose well beyond the width of his stroking hand. His other arm drew back from reaching out to the bedside lamp.

"Ahhhhh. There's the pretty pussy I wanted to see. I can see both your holes. Look at all that cream. What a fucking waste."

She watched him stroke himself over the next several minutes. Her head ached from the rush of blood to it. Her legs started to tremble. She never took her eyes off his long length on the bed.

"I'm going to come soon, Meg." His voice was thick, slow. "Take your hand and put

some fingers inside you.”

She blinked, gathered her balance.

“Do it!”

She’d been too slow, and his growl made her jump. She took her hand and raised it up to her spread core. She moaned when she touched her dripping, bare labia. Closing her eyes, she put two fingers into her vagina. She was soft, and slick, and burning hot.

“Add another one. I want to see you stretch. Yeah. Now stroke.”

She began to stroke herself, folding her fingers to try to get as deep as possible. It felt good, so much sensation, after being held exposed for so long. But it wasn’t what she wanted. Her clit pulsed like a second heart. That didn’t matter. Only Ben’s pleasure mattered. The ache to touch her clit faded. Ben needed to come for her. *She* needed to help Ben come.

“Yeah. Fuck, yeah. Faster. Yeah. Faster.”

She heard his breath sawing from powerful lungs. Hers rasped along with him.

“Harder. Damn me for keeping my promise, I want to taste you so bad.”

Meg moaned.

“Faster! Keep it going!”

Her arm ached, and her head throbbed. Sloppy sounds from her frenzied fingers filled the room.

“I’m gonna come, Meg. I can’t believe I have you here in my room, presenting so sweet. Keep it fast. You’re like a dream. Harder.”

Sobbing, tortured moans left her continuously. Her breasts bounced from the force of her thrusting hand.

“Ahhh. Yeah. Here I come. Now your clit, baby. Give it to yourself. Fuck!” His voice wound tighter, higher, louder. “Come with me, Meg!”

She ground her fingers into her clit with desperation. And exploded, falling to the floor in a heap as she moaned, long and guttural. Her hands both scrabbled to get between her legs, one going back into her vagina as the other kept the sweet pain of her clit at a peak.

The rumbling cough of a riled big cat filled the room, made her skin shiver. His voice was like velvet over her collapsed form. Joy burst through her body’s shaking pleasure. Ben had come, for her.

“Did you come, Meg?”

Bracing herself on one hand, her head hanging, Meg listed to one side as she struggled to sit up. Sizzling dashes of electricity skittered down her thighs. “Yes, Ben.” Her voice was a breath, her lungs struggling in the aftermath of the pleasure that still pulsed over her.

“Are you my woman, Meg?”

Meg looked over her shoulder. She felt cream trickle from her vagina. She felt blood trickle from her wounded heart. She whispered, “Yes, Ben.”

With one knee drawn up, the other sprawled out, Ben defined satisfaction. One hand was behind his head, the other made idle swirls in the cream lying on his belly. He stared at her, and she watched him.

Finally, he said, “You’re stripes are beautiful.”

Meg’s elbow gave out, causing an inelegant jostling as she caught herself and turned to face him. Staring at her hands as she sat on her knees, she turned them over several

times, but saw only her pale cream skin. She felt her jaw flap before getting her voice back. “You saw ... stripes?”

He moved off the bed, went into the hall, came back with a towel. Raising her off the floor, he pressed it between her legs, causing one knee to tremble.

“I did.” His fingers swirled in her opening. “You’re surprised.”

Gasping, her hands shot to his forearms, using him for balance. “I am. I’ve never seen stripes. And never had a lover see them.”

He drew the cloth up into her clitoral hood, then brushed it along her thighs before she had a chance to shout. “I’m honored to have seen them.”

Meg tightened her hands on his arms. “Ben, the lighting ... the blinds ... the shadows...”

Frowning, he gently twisted his arms free of her touch, and began to wipe at his stomach and hips. “They flowed out of your spine, aligning with each vertebrae. They narrowed as they curved around your ribcage. They were faint, but I didn’t imagine them.”

After swiping under his balls, Ben tossed the cloth to the floor. “Come to bed, Meg. I’m up at four-thirty. Sleep with me.”

Meg moved to the bed in a daze, settling into the cool sheets. She stared at the ceiling as he crawled in next to her, and switched off the light. He pulled her into his shoulder, wrapping an arm around her and weaving his leg between hers as he took possession of her knee, pulling it up to his hip. He sighed deeply, and his whole body seemed to sink into relaxation.

“Sekhmet’s balls, that was fucking hot. I loved directing you, Meg. That really worked for me.”

“Mmmmm.” Meg wove her fingertips through Ben’s chest hair, petting his nipple.

He purred, and she buried her face in his neck, smiling. “Oh, Ben. The stripes ... do you think? Could it be—“

“Meg. Don’t go there.”

“But, Ben, this is new. Maybe I’m just a late bloomer!”

“No, Meg.”

She stilled. Her body no longer felt formed to his, but awkwardly tangled. A growl rumbled in his throat.

“You can’t keep living in wait, Meg. These last years in your holding pattern did you a disservice. You have to go forward.”

“The disservice of not being with you?” Meg asked tartly.

His fingers wove into her hair. She couldn’t decide if she was soothed or threatened.

“You’re not human, Meg. You don’t belong in some human school. You don’t belong in some big city, where the cat inside you will fester, trapped. You need to face life not as an almost-werecat, or a maybe-werecat, but as a full member of the pride. You’re Meg, and you’re worthy. Don’t put yourself back into their mindset, needing the shift to validate you.”

Meg lay silent, thinking. “What if I change, Ben?”

His fist tightened and he pulled her hair once, sharply. “You’ll still be my woman. You’ll still be a pride teacher. You’ll still be Meg. Now go to sleep.”

It took him longer to relax this time. Meg was able to soften with him, but her brain remained churning. Why now? Was it Ben? Was it her new disobedience? Was it the

result of living under stress? Why just stripes? Many werecats entered a partial shift with teeth and claws. Would she want that? Would she become furred? Would she become enraged, like the teenagers could be? Would—

“Meg, for Sekhmet’s sake, please. Go to sleep.”

She blinked, surprised.

“I can feel you thinking. Breathe with me. Settle.”

Ben’s rumbled order rolled through her body. She closed her eyes. His heartbeat was there. She slowed her breath, held it to match his. His hand soothed along her thigh, and back to her knee. “Thank you, Tigress.”

Ben slept, and so did Meg.

Chapter Four

At lunch the next day, Meg was back at Half-were House. She nibbled on waffle fries as Gina and Blaze argued over whether or not revenge was best served cold, or was only effective in the heat of the moment. Blaze had issues, and Gina had heat, and Meg didn't know what to make of either of them.

Pulling her aside as soon as she'd arrived, the women had already enjoyed a private powwow. They had delighted in Ben. They had cheered for the small, second-hand car he'd bought her so she could travel between Half-were House and the Valley at will. And they had purred over the delicate, unadorned golden bangle she'd woken up with on her wrist. She had no idea how he'd gotten it on her without her waking as it had no clasp.

The morning at the farm had felt so strangely comfortable it was almost surreal to be sitting back in the opulent chrome kitchen of Half-were House. Waking in Ben's bed and having breakfast with him and felt right. He'd made a call to Ken that had made him stiff and angry, but he said that the sponsorship was logged and acknowledged. The pride would hear about it with the frightening speed of small town communication networks, otherwise known as gossip.

Here, it did not smell like hay and cows. Tasheka's large presence loomed in and out like a governess. Meg was scheduled for lessons updating her training in the human brain's developmental cycle. Meanwhile, she took notes on changes in educational models between when she'd graduated and when LuAnne had.

"What does it mean to you to be able to half-shift?"

Meg's question interrupted the two laughing women. Blaze and Gina looked at her in surprise.

"I mean, are you glad you can half-shift? Or does it frustrate you that the full shift is just that little bit out of reach? Can you feel the cat lurking there, or is it just like another natural state?"

Blaze smiled. "It used to make me angry. I like who I am. It's the full-shifters with the problem. And their biggest problem is going to be a half-were named Blaze Angora."

Meg nodded. She thought about being angry, and being awake. Did she like who she was?

Gina nodded. "I dig having the tail." Gina winked at Blaze. "It's wicked helpful in certain situations, but who wants to deal with all the other drama?" Then she asked, "What brought this question on?"

"I have—" *stripes*. The word hovered in the back of Meg's throat.

"Yeah?" Blaze prompted.

Meg looked at Blaze. The word was still stuck. She raised a hand up to her throat, as if she could actually feel the word there.

Gina slid her hand across the kitchen table. "Meg, you're a beautiful half-were."

Meg nodded. "I know. I believe that." Reaching out she clasped Gina's hand, and accepted Blaze's as well.

"You deserve your job, Meg," Blaze said firmly.

Meg nodded again. "I know. I do."

The stripes she wanted to claim faded back down her windpipe and laid still.

Meg drifted through her training that afternoon, and was in her room before dinner when her cell rang.

"Hey." His voice was deep, and tense.

"Hi, Ben." Meg was instantly awake.

"How was your day?"

His voice had the attention of every nerve in her body. "The best part was breakfast with you. Waking up in your bed was nice, but you weren't in it."

The silence spun out on the phone. "Are you teasing me?" He sounded genuinely confused.

Uncertainly, Meg said, "Yes. I was trying to."

"Do you really feel that way? You really wished I was there, with you, in the dawn light?"

The image of the morning light in his room burst into her mind's eye. The cream comforter, the pale green blinds, her clothes strewn on the old beige rug. "Yes."

Again, he seemed to be thinking in the silence. "Tell me what you'd most want, Meg, there in the warm den of our morning."

Meg licked her lips. She could keep this conversation light and say a kiss. She could go back to teasing with a comment about his beautiful body. But, she thought suddenly she'd tell him the truth. "I'd want you to use me."

This time she could hear her heartbeat in the silence.

His voice came, lower, quieter. "That would please you?"

"Yes, Ben." Meg lay back on her bed.

"I've heard about this from others. Tell me. You tell me."

Meg closed her eyes, feeling again the thrill of masturbating for him, with him, last night. "As long as I can see, or hear, that you're excited, I'm excited. Your reactions to me while you control me... I don't have to think, or to worry or plan, I don't have to second-guess or pretend. The only pleasure that matters is yours. It's like flying. I'm so free. I feel so free I almost feel like floating, sometimes. I exist in that moment, for that sensation, and it intensifies everything. Everything I feel, I feel for *you*. It's ... sexy. Safe, and sexy and happy."

"But I can order you in. I can make you kiss me, touch me."

The hesitance in his voice was so sweet. "Yes, Ben."

"My God, that sounds so beautiful. That little hush you get in your voice."

"Thank you."

"I can do this, Meg. I can be that for you."

"Ben, you already did it. You already are that." Meg played with the bangle on her wrist, spinning it.

"Did you unpack?" His voice was low again, sultry.

"Yeah..." Meg stilled.

"Did you find my present?"

Sitting up, Meg frowned at her backpack. "No. Ben, you gave me a car, for heaven's sake."

"The outer side pocket."

She hurried over to the bag. Rummaging, she pulled out a felt pouch, and poured a pair of tiny gold clamps into her palm.

"Oh, Ben ... they're beautiful."

“And fun, too.”

Meg chuckled. “Yes.”

“Put them on.” His voice was hard.

Meg stared at her palm. “Yes, Ben.”

It was hard to hold a cell between her shoulder and ear, but she didn’t want to put it down. Lifting her shirt, she pushed her bra cups out of the way. She grasped her already stiff nipple and set the open clamp around it. Biting her lip, she tightened it. The pinch was sharp, steady. When she let the clamp go, it pulled on the sensitive skin.

“There’s one.” She added the other. Leaving her shirt up around her neck, she admired them both. “I’m done. The sting is already fading. I love them.”

“I’m coming over.”

Meg held the phone more firmly in her hand, shivering as her t-shirt fell down over her spike-hard nipples. “I’m coming to you on Sunday, tomorrow.”

“I want to be with you now. It sucked coming back to an empty house today, eating alone. I already patrolled my territory. Let me come, Meg.”

Meg bit her lip. “No visitors, Ben. Tasheka would report you. But...”

“Meet me.”

Easing the cups of her bra back into place, Meg closed her eyes as the pressure shifted the clamps, and compressed her nipples. “All right.”

“I’ll be there in two hours. I’ll wait for you at the end of the street.”

“No! Sam has video security wired all over the area.”

“Sam? The old human the house lioness is messing with?”

“Yes, him.”

“Tell me where.” He was determined.

“Let me call you back.”

“All right. I’m leaving now.”

“Drive safe, Ben.”

Heart pounding, Meg scampered across the hall to Blaze’s larger room. Blaze came to the door in a slinky black number. She was nearly as tall as Ben, and as wide, but everything about Blaze said “feminine.” Shopping with her last week had been an eye-opening educational experience. Meg loved her new clothes. They settled on Blaze’s bed.

Blaze wound one long strand of hair around her finger. “What’s up, Meg? You look like you’ve been pole-axed.”

“Ben’s coming over.”

Blaze frowned. “Hmmm. Tash...”

“I need to sneak out.” Meg and Ben had both agreed that her disappearing with any regularity would lead to suspicion. It had to be random. “I’m going to meet him.”

Green eyes twinkling, Blaze said, “I think you’re going to do more than meet him!”

“Well, yeah, I hope. I’m going to wear the teddy I bought with you.”

“Definitely the teddy. And that orange velvet peasant skirt too. With that loose purple angora sweater.”

“Purple and orange?”

Blaze drew her brows in. “With your coloring, yes.” Tapping her lips, Blaze mused, staring at the ceiling. Meg wondered again what it would feel like, to know her half-shift like Blaze and Gina did. Surreptitiously, Meg reached up and rubbed the arch of her round human ear, set humanly on the side of her head.

“How about that old convenience store at the bottom of the west ramp?”

Meg wrinkled her nose. “It’s abandoned.”

“Yes. Perfect.”

“Why?”

Blaze sighed deeply. “You’ve never had hot tub hanky-panky, and you’ve never had car sex either?”

Shaking her head, Meg said, “Car sex won’t work. He’s a pick-up, and I’m an escort.”

Blaze froze, staring at her. Meg heard what she’d just said, and both women burst out laughing uproariously.

“Pick-up! Escort!” Blaze chortled.

Gina burst in, barely dressed in a loosely tied robe. “No fun without me!”

Meg explained the joke, and then the dilemma. Gina agreed it could very well come down to car sex.

“This is what they’ve reduced us to. Skulking around like children,” Blaze growled.

Meg and Gina looked at each other, recognizing the preaching that was coming on soon from Blaze.

“What about the old railroad bed?” Gina burst out.

Relief rolled through Meg. “Perfect. Abandoned at night, but not creepy. We can hear anyone coming, and it’s natural.”

The railroad ties had been removed years ago for a hiking trail and much of it was now packed earth with overgrown forest surrounding it. The parking lot was convenient and unlit.

“I think you should get there first,” Gina added. “And get *naked*.”

“Of course you think that, you’re a nudist,” Blaze retorted.

Gina’s tail thrashed, threatening to pull the robe completely off her body.

“Thanks guys. I’m going to go,” Meg interrupted.

“We’ll cover for you. When’s he getting in?” Blaze asked.

“I’ll leave in about an hour and a half, just after dinner.”

“All right.” Gina winked. “One diversion, coming up.”

Meg left her friends to plan, and called Ben.

She gave him directions, and he gave her an order not to remove the clamps. Meg sat through yet another delicious dinner with an enormous smile on her face and throbbing breasts. She didn’t eat much, but managed some chocolate cake.

Dressing in her sexy new clothes felt so exciting. She’d stopped dressing for Gavin ages ago. He never noticed anyway. He’d order her down, and fuck her, and then they’d spend the evening quietly at his house, or sometimes go out to eat. Lately, she’d simply gone to her apartment and done schoolwork. She wondered... When was the last time Gavin’s interest had been as intense as Ben’s last night? Had he ever really told her he liked her as a person? Had he ever appreciated anything besides her big tits, long silky hair, or soft ass?

When she smelled Tash coming up the stairs, Meg abruptly shuttered her thoughts as hard as she could. Tash was a psychic, and even though she had promised not to intrude, Meg knew she was now under suspicion from being away last night. Tasheka knocked on the door. Meg almost came out of her skin. She hated confrontations. Pulling a robe on over her teddy, Meg peeked out.

“Tash?”

“May I come in?”

Disobedient. “No?” Meg cringed at her wimpy response.

“Meg, we need to talk about where you were last night. You were gone ten hours.”

“I know. But I’m allowed. I read the rules of Half-were House very carefully.” Meg continued to project a mental image of a tinfoil hat around her head.

Tash folded her arms. Her beads clacked softly in her braids as she leaned against the door. “All right, young miss. I think you’ve been spending too much time in the hot tub with Blaze and Gina, but I don’t believe you’re nearly as much trouble. Be careful, Meg. Cutting off your hair doesn’t mean you cut off your good sense.”

“Oh, you mean the good sense that keeps Half-weres out of the prides?” Blaze copied Tash’s position, lounging against her open door across the landing. “Or the good sense that keeps us prisoners in human cities? Or the good sense that keeps us apart from all our friends and family while we’re trained to be little automatons?”

Tash, still looking at Meg, rolled her eyes. “Evening, Blaze.” To Meg she said, “Mind yourself, Meg. Don’t start something in secret that will blow up in public.”

Meg nodded solemnly, holding onto her tinfoil helmet. Blaze started to say something but Tash held up her hand. “I’m going! Relax! We’re not going there tonight, Blaze.”

Both women waited until they heard Tash moving away into the house two floors down.

Blaze winked at Meg. “Flash me.”

Grinning, Meg peeled open her robe. Her breasts quivered in the low lace cups, gold winking from flushed nipples. Her hips flared from the high cut thighs, and her bare pussy was cradled in the lace panel that morphed into a satin thong in the rear.

“Hoo-eee! I told you red was your color!”

Chuckling, Meg closed her robe, and her bedroom door. She hummed as she finished dressing. A short while later, Meg waited at the top of the stairs. When she heard Gina’s yowling erupt from the living room, she darted down and out through the garage. She left the long brownstone quietly, keeping to the shadows, and cut away from the street into the opposite yards.

Meg got to the hiking trail on the side of a busy road a few minutes later. She stood facing the tunnel of greenery that led into darkness. It smelled like the dew of summer. *One thin strip of nature stubbornly growing in the middle of sprawling human contamination.* Closing her eyes, she let the smell of earth and growing things settle her nerves. She jumped when lights flared across her.

Ben pulled into the lot’s deepest shadows and cut the engine. He hopped out of the cab and slammed the door.

“Evening, Meg.”

Nothing could stop her huge smile. She’d snuck out of her house for a boy. She’d dressed up for him, and he’d driven two hours to be with her. Swaying her hips as she walked up to him, she felt young.

“Your golden eyes almost glow in the night.” He smiled back at her, his thumbs in his belt loop. He’d showered, and his long curling hair was still damp.

“Meg.” He held out his arms and she stepped into them with relief. He folded her close, as he had when she’d left that morning, and it was just as soft, safe, and peaceful as

she remembered.

“Ben.” She snuggled into his arms, her own going tight around his waist. They stood pressed tightly together, until her heart steadied, and her feet were solid under her.

“I never heard how your day went.” He spoke into her hair.

“It was fine. I missed you. I laughed with my friends. I had some good cake. And yours?”

“Steady and normal. Cows ate, cows gave up milk, cows ate some more. Kyle had a soccer game. He scored. Did they question you?” His hands molded over her back, stroking, heating her.

“Just a bit. More of a warning. Did he win?”

“No, but I like his coach. She makes it clear she expects good play, not wins.”

Meg let herself sink into his strength. Waiting.

“Are you ready, Meg?”

She felt his heart kick hard under her cheek. “Yes, Ben.”

“Are you still wearing the clamps?”

“I am.”

Ben tightened his arms even more, compressing her ribs. “You’re so soft.”

“Yeah.” Meg smiled, waiting to breathe.

He relaxed his grip, and her nipples throbbed from where they pressed into his hard ribs. “I’m gonna fuck you now. Later, I’ll love you.”

Abruptly, Meg felt a wash of cream dampen the lace of the teddy at her crotch. “Yes, Ben,” she breathed.

“Fuck, yes.” Whirling away, his hand on her wrist, he dragged her behind him, to the far side of the massive truck, away from the road.

He ripped open the passenger side door and placed her in the V of the opening.

“Take off your shirt. I want to see your—breasts.”

Meg grinned to hear his self-censorship. “You can call them whatever you want.” Meg lifted her shirt and drew it over her head. Twisting, she laid it on the truck seat behind her.

He licked his lips. “That lacy thing ... is nice.”

Meg stood before him, hearing the traffic buzz steadily on the road a short distance behind her on the other side of the truck. Ben reached out a large hand and gently traced the line of lace along her curves. He drew his hand back and undid his buckle.

“Pull the lace down. Show me the clamps.”

Meg did, torn between wanting to watch his face tighten at the sight of her swollen nipples and wanting to watch him reveal the bulge in his white jockey shorts. She tried to get a glimpse of both, eyes flitting back and forth. The air felt so cool on her chest. Her nipples ached.

He reached out and tugged on one clamp gently. Then he pulled on it a bit more steadily, and twitched it hard. Meg gasped. Reaching behind her, she braced one hand on the cold seat of the truck.

“I’ll mark you, before long.” His voice was so low it was almost lost between his cat’s gravel and the traffic.

“Yes, Ben.” Meg sighed, arching her chest toward him. It was as close as she got to asking for anything.

“God, that’s gorgeous.”

He reached up his other hand and gently worked the tiny screw on the side of the clamp.

“Oh!”

He tightened it, causing her whole breast to throb. Her clit echoed the pulse.

“Look at how beautiful.”

Meg looked down. His large fingers hovered over the swollen, blood red berry. The gold glimmered in the low light.

His hands moved to the other breast, and she braced herself, but this one he loosened without tugging on it once. Her nipple exploded in sensation and heat. She felt like both breasts had swollen to gigantic proportions. He pocketed the clamp and stood, staring, his gaze moving from one breast to the other.

Panting, Meg stood, trying to hold her knees locked. It was the most erotic thing she'd ever done, to simply stand there in the open night, while he watched her. He reached up once, and jerked on the clamp, lifting the weight of her breast, and letting it fall, jiggling it. Then he stood, tucking one hand into his underwear, palming himself, just staring.

“Touch the one that's clamped. Play with yourself.” His order came with an impatient twist of his hips as he shoved his jeans and shorts down, baring himself. His thick erection speared up into the night, slanting from his body as if reaching for her. She wanted to touch him so badly. But it didn't matter. Only what he wanted.

Meg raised one hand up and cradled the breast, lifting it, and sent the fingers of her other hand drifting over the engorged tip. She moaned, shivering, but never took her eyes from his hand stroking himself roughly.

Pulling, twisting, patting, pinching, she worked the nipple until her breath came in short gasps.

“Do you like pain, Meg?”

Meg's eyes lifted to Ben's face. “I like this.”

“That's not what I asked.”

“I don't like the whip. I don't like to be hit. But when I see you want this, I like it, too.”

“I've never hurt a partner before. Not on purpose. But this, I like. I like seeing your nipple abused.” Ben frowned. Lifting his eyes to meet hers, he whispered, “Don't worry, Meg, we'll do mine sometime, too.”

Meg came, light and liquid fire ripping out of her belly down her arms and legs. Only by falling backward onto the doorframe did she keep herself from sprawling in the crushed stone of the parking lot. Her hands tightened on her nipple as she stared at him in shock, her vagina rippling.

He grinned at her, making no move to steady her. “Did submissive little Meg like that idea? Maybe you have a secret aggressive side. Bad Meg, coming without my telling you. Drop your skirt.”

Fumbling, she managed to stand, and let her skirt drop to the ground.

“Hey, that is one amazing piece of lace.” His eyes burned as they stared at her hips. “Pull the cups up on your breasts.”

Swallowing, she did.

“Turn around. Brace yourself on the seat. Watch your knees on the frame.”

Meg couldn't lay her body forward on the seat because the doorframe kept her away.

She put her forearms on the edge, and bent over. When her breasts shifted forward, their weight unrestrained by the delicate lace, both her freed nipple and her tormented nipple exploded with raw sensation. She sobbed.

“Legs wider.”

Meg spread, and then Ben’s huge hand was on her hip.

“Oh, fuck, Meg, I’m gonna come so hard.”

She felt him peel the thong from between her cheeks, setting it to one side. He probed her with his hot cock, his knees brushing hers as he bent them, seeking entrance. The smooth feel of his thick, hot column pushing in her sopping folds made her eyes slam shut. She remembered he wanted to hear her.

“Oh, Ben.”

“There you are.” He tightened his hand on her hip, and his other hand came around her to sink into her tummy. He held her as he shoved his tip in.

“Oh!”

“Fucking sweet.” He shoved again, and this time didn’t stop.

Meg cried out as he kept pressing deep. When his thighs were plastered to her ass, he lay down over her back.

His lips against her ear, he growled, “Here’s your fuck, Meg. I can take you, use you, make you. You think this is what you want.” He swirled his hips, his hands coasting over the lace, up her ribs, gripping around her lower torso. “But I’m going to show you how it can be, how it should be. I’ll top you, little tigress, but soon I’m going to love you.”

His hands suddenly latched onto her sensitized breasts. Dug in deep.

“Ah!” Meg shouted in shock. The clamp pressed into her, covered by his palm. He kneaded her breasts harshly, then his hips swirled, jabbing to get deeper.

“God, I want to crawl inside you, own you. So soft.”

His hands worked her breasts and she gave another cry into the night air, her hands scrabbling on the smooth seat. It wasn’t Ben’s skin, didn’t have his heat.

“Your cunt feels so good around my dick, Meg. You’re hot and wet and I just want to live here.”

He sank human teeth into her neck, lashing the muscle with his tongue. His hands moved to her nipples and pinched them. She writhed under him as pain exploded into a pleasure nova, clamping hard on his thick length from the inside.

He grunted, and then he was pounding her, hands on her hips, his pelvis slapping at her ass. Wet sounds mixed with his coughing grunts, his cat riding his throat. Meg shook in the storm of Ben’s claiming. The pleasure he burned into her core was lightning that sizzled off the bonfire in each breast. Her knees were flickering flames, her toes curling in her sandals. The truck began to rock with his strength, and her hips stung as he curled his grip harder into her, pulling her back to meet his thrusts.

“Deeper. Hard as I want.”

Ben’s grunts were escalating to hard shouts, and Meg’s head spun, buffeted by his pleasure. She softened, arching her back, pushing her ass out, going up on her toes with each deep drive.

“Yes, Ben,” she whispered.

He grabbed her, both arms claspng her hard around the belly. His hips spasmed again and again in tight punches against her. She felt his head drop to the middle of her back, his breath scorching her spine. The heat rolled down to her tailbone and drove

straight into her womb. Her man came in her.

Opening her eyes, Meg stared at her clenched fists on the black leather. The golden bangle on her wrist gleamed. His pleasure was hers. She came, shaking, her vagina rippling around the deep intrusion of Ben's body. So beautiful ... the heat in her body washed through her.

Ben grew still behind her. He sighed, contented, his hands loosening their iron grip. Rising off her back, he stood upright behind her, his softening erection slipping messily from her lips. His big palms smoothed over her ass.

That's when Meg saw the stripes. They cascaded down her arms to just past her elbows, followed by a darkening of her skin to mid-forearm. Her wrists and hands stayed creamy white. The stripes darkened, becoming more distinct.

"Meg ... look..." Ben's voice was hushed.

"I see it!" Meg cursed when her eyes flooded, blurring the image. She blinked furiously. The stripes were fading when she got her sight back.

"No!" Meg straightened, staggering a bit, lifting her arms in front of herself. Just like visualizing the tinfoil hat, she summoned a mental image of the stripes ... and they came back.

"Ben!"

His arms came around her from behind, holding her gently. "You're beautiful, Tigress."

Meg couldn't stop the tears this time. "I am! Ben, I am! I am a tigress!"

He kissed her shoulder, his hands still fascinated with her belly. "I never doubted it a moment."

I did.

Meg stared as the stripes slowly faded away, shocked by her forbidden thought.

"We have to get you to Half-were House." Ben bent and picked up her skirt, pulling it up around her legs and fastening it. He put her shirt over her head, and she added her arms when he prompted her. Doing up his belt, he picked her up by the waist and put her in the truck. Then he lifted her shirt, pulled down the lace over her clamped breast, and undid the screw. As soon as the clamp left her breast, his mouth was on it, tongue working firmly, warm and gentle.

Meg's hands latched onto his head, her head falling back against the seat. He suckled and laved her breast for a long, long while, until embers had lit from the ashes she was sure had no energy left to give. His lips were agile and his teeth teasing, sometimes gnawing, sometimes nipping. He sucked, once pulling a bruise to the underside of her nipple, but mostly gentle mouthings that balanced the sensation in her nipple.

When he pulled away, his lower face gleamed in the night, matching the wetness shining on her breast.

"I don't want to let you go. This is insane. I want to be with you, Meg. I want you at the farm."

Meg nodded.

He drove her to the corner of a parallel street, where she would be able to cut through the yards and slip back into the garage, hopefully unnoticed by Sam's gadgets or Tash's nose. He parked, and got out to stand with her.

"Good night, Meg. See you tomorrow."

He hugged her, and she loved how they smelled of each other, and sex.

“I’ll trail behind you to make sure you get in safe.”

“I can do it.”

“I know. I’ll just make sure.”

Meg pulled out of his hug, smiling up at him. “Because I’m your woman.”

He tapped her on her nose, rubbed her lower lip. “Because I’m your man.”

Meg slipped through the shadows as if she was born to them. She tapped once on Gina’s and Blaze’s door, the signal she was home. She showered, admiring the mouth-sized bruise on her breast, and her bruised nipples. Meg went to sleep with a smile on her face.

Chapter Five

She was sore the next day, and wore her most comfortable bra, which was, of course, her most hideous. She smiled through breakfast.

Once, Gina leaned over and hissed, "You're purring."

Which only made Meg smile more.

She blithely told Tash she was going for a drive and took off in her little black Escort. The day was sunny and warm, so she clipped her hair in a barrette and rolled the windows down, singing at the top of her voice.

When she pulled into the Valley's gas station, she was still humming as she debated what snacks to get. She ignored Robby Watson staring at her. His mother was the sixth grade teacher. She'd heard he'd recently shifted into an orange tabby.

"Say hi to your mom for me, Robby. Have a nice day!" Meg went out the convenience store doors to her car, and stopped dead.

A puma lounged on the roof of her car, licking one paw. The tail gave lie to the calm it portrayed, lashing in wide curls.

Meg squared her shoulders. "Hello, Gavin." Good Lord, was he always such a drama queen? She added wryly, "Fancy meeting you here."

She approached the car, but when she reached for the passenger door to put her bags in, he growled. She was furious with herself for hesitating. She opened the door, but as it began to swing out, one massive paw landed on it and pulled it back in. He left scratches in the paint above the window. As she stared at them, he casually spread his claws and left more gouges in the roof. Of the car Ben had bought for her. *Disobedient*. Meg felt her blood boil.

"Gavin, I'm not going to play games. Get off my car and talk to me."

He looked in the other direction, the supreme version of a cat pout. Meg reached for the door and pulled it open, but he whipped his paw out and clasped the top of the door. His huge, muscled body held it easily against her human strength.

Meg glared into his tawny cat eyes. He'd always been miffed that her eyes were more gold, even in her human form. "Who do you think you are, a Marauder? You have no business interfering with me like this. I have official status. I'm sponsored by Ben."

Gavin growled, huge incisors revealed by his lifted lip.

"Ms. Frikahee? Come into the store. I called Ryan." Robby's voice didn't even quaver. He was growing up.

But she didn't want to wait obediently in the store. She wanted to face Gavin down.

"Thanks, Robby, but I'll be fine." Meg turned back to Gavin, who had now sat up, staring down the road. "Bet you didn't expect this, did you?" Meg felt power roll up from inside her. "You rat bastard. You didn't expect me back in town, reminding all the pride how you turned your back on a lover. Doesn't show you off very well, to have a farmer look stronger than you. Doesn't show you off very well, that I'm not crying over spilt milk. Yeah, that got your attention. Ben's my man now, and not only is he stronger than you, he's a damn better lover, too."

Sirens came from the distance, moving fast. Gavin leaped gracefully to the ground in front of the car, sending it rocking from the force. He stretched his front paws out as if he

were lazily rousing, then began to stroll away. But his ears were still flicked back toward her.

Meg shouted after him, "Oh, this isn't over. You'll be hearing from me, Gavin. I won't have you treating me like this!"

She stared at him with impotent rage as he wandered across the street, tail lashing. As Ryan's police car came into sight, Meg hauled her car door open, and screamed.

There on the seat was a cow's head, the eyes and mouth mutilated and half-eaten. Her bags crashed to the ground, and she staggered back, her hands to her mouth. She stood frozen like that until Ben grabbed her up, whirling her away, hefting her in his arms as he hustled her into the police car.

"Meg! I'm right here, you're safe."

She didn't let go of him, even though she was in the seat and he was crouched down next to her. Her hands clutched at his. "Why would he do that, Ben?"

"Robby said Gavin was here?"

"Yes."

Ryan came to stand behind Ben, pulling his jeans on, barefoot. He must have shifted to investigate. "Meg, are you hurt?"

"He didn't touch me. He scratched my car though. And the inside..."

Ben looked up at his brother, "Is it mine?"

Ryan nodded once. Ben was a large man, fit and rough. But Ryan was deadly. There was no disguising what he was. In a group of hunters, he was the pride's killer. He'd always terrified Meg. Joanie would joke he was a one-man "scared straight" program. She'd been grateful that the pride leader's wife had been the one to brand her heel, not this quiet force.

"Yours? Your cow? Ben, did he kill one of your cows!" Meg realized she was crying, but couldn't let go of Ben to wipe away her tears.

"Ryan was investigating at the farm when Robby called about Gavin on your car. Last night one of my cows was killed in the middle of the barn. The head was missing."

"I'm so sorry!"

"Meg! Don't apologize to me when the bastard put it in your car to terrify you."

Ben stood, gently disengaging one hand, but letting her keep the other. He turned toward Ryan. "I'm her sponsor. I have the right to go hunting with you."

"Ben, it wasn't Gavin."

Meg and Ben stared at Ryan.

"All it took was one whiff wearing my leopard." Ryan crossed massive arms over his thick, bare chest. "It was Sanders."

Meg felt shock roll through her body. She was glad she was sitting down. "Sanders? Margie Sanders?" Margie was a member of the School Board.

"No. It was Kevin Sanders." Gavin came up to them, still buttoning one cuff. "I saw him from my office across the road. He lugged a garbage bag up and put something big and bloody in the car. I called you, Ryan, but it was busy. I didn't have time to leave a message. I ran out of my office and over here, but he'd left. I figured I'd wait to make sure he didn't come back and hurt Meg. He might have done something else to the car."

Meg stared at Gavin in shock. He'd seen Kevin, and rushed to protect her. And she'd said all those horrible things.

Ben held out his hand to Gavin. "You have my thanks."

Gavin shook it. "Sure." Looking at Ryan, he said, "I claim prior protector's rights. I want to go hunting with you."

Meg jumped when Robby's adolescent voice chimed in, made higher with excitement. "I made the call. I'm eighteen. It's my find. I have hunter's rights!"

Ryan pinched the bridge of his nose, looking more aggravated small town sheriff than deadly pack enforcer. "I'm going to call Ken. Then I'm going to the Sanders' house. Then I'll see what we're going to do about a hunt. I'll let you all know."

"Awesome!" Robby bounded away.

Gavin nodded to her and put his hands in his pressed pockets. "Come on over if you want to talk, Meg. I'd rather things be really over. Rhondi said she'd talked to you."

"Yeah." Meg hated how her brain just wasn't very quick under stress. "I'm sorry about what I—"

"No, don't be. Really."

He stared at her, and it was bizarre, to look at a man who had once been such a large part of her life, who had shared her body so often, and feel nothing.

"It's not like what you said wasn't true." He gave a pretentious little half-bow with his admittedly pretty golden body. He sauntered away, just as falsely nonchalant as before.

Meg watched Ryan put his t-shirt back on, feeling more regret for the change of scenery than Gavin's departure.

"I have to talk to Robby, and then I'll take you guys to the farm. Don't wander. That he was able to get to her car so quickly means she's being watched." Ryan moved toward the store.

Ben closed the door on Meg, went around the car, and got in the other side. He pulled her across the wide, flat back seat and into his lap.

He buried his face in her neck. "I can't believe this. Yesterday, when news of my sponsorship of you spread through the Valley, I got a lot of calls. Some said, "Be careful." Most said, "Good for you." People love you, Meg. Every parent who's ever had you wants you back."

His hands on her waist were firm, his grip unbreakable.

"In the afternoon, before I called you, Kristie Wilhelm called me, and told me that Margie Sanders had shown up at her door demanding she sign a petition to protest your consultant status. She wouldn't sign, and Margie spewed a lot of half-were hate.

"I gave her name to Ryan, but I never imagined such violent bigotry here in the Valley. About a third of our pride was born elsewhere. We welcome newcomers. When I got home last night and smelled the death, I was so pissed. But this... I'm scared, Meg. I just got you. I won't stand for this danger to you. I have to think about what's going on in this community before I go forward with my challenge, because I won't endanger you. I thought people might be cruel. I thought they'd be stuck-up. But I never thought—"

Meg laid her fingers over Ben's lips. "I know, Ben. I can't quite believe it, either. Why didn't you call me?"

He shook his head. "I thought it was done. I would have told you today. No use waking you up."

Meg squirmed off his lap. "No, Ben. Partners. I should have known. I would have been more watchful. I have as much right to worry and care for you in distress as you do for me."

She held his eyes, and this time, his deep brown looked away first.

He nodded. "We need to talk, about how this changes our process."

"All right." Meg felt sadness settle into her bones. She knew what was coming. Out of fear for her, he'd keep her from this challenge. He wanted her out of danger. Meg felt her lip lift in an involuntary curl. *Disobedient*. "We'll talk about it later."

She'd started this journey before she knew she'd have his help. She could continue on without it if necessary. Looking at his profile as he stared at Ryan coming out of the store, her heart wrenched. Why were people so threatened by those who were different? By those who wanted justice that would benefit all? Ryan picked up her keys, purse, and bags, then locked her car.

Reaching out, she touched Ben's jaw. He turned toward her, a frown between his brows. Meg leaned up, cupping the back of his head, and kissed him. His lips were soft, his mouth larger than hers. When he opened after a moment, turning onto her body, pressing her back, taking control, she gloried in his taste.

"Right." Ryan's voice was dry as he climbed into the cruiser's driver's seat. "The Love Taxi will now take you home."

Chapter Six

Meg didn't see Ben for much of the rest of the day. He had work to do in the barn, work to do on the farm, work to do back in town cleaning out her car. She felt guilty for letting him deal with the disgusting job. She cleaned the house, and made a stir fry dinner with homemade biscuits.

After Ryan called and told her Kevin Sanders was in custody, she even went out along the fence in the back and picked daisies for the table. But she'd felt endangered the whole time. No hunt had been needed after all. He'd been at home, having ice tea on the porch. Joanie called Meg's cell, but Meg didn't pick up.

Ben came in during the evening, and took a shower. He came down to dinner in a damp t-shirt and the same cut-off sweatpants she'd seen before. He walked right up to her, and hugged her tightly.

"It's hard to get blood out of a car to a cat's satisfaction," he said as they sat at the table.

"Oh." Meg stared at him. "Thank you for doing that for me. Never having gone hunting in human or cat form, I'm not really used to gore."

Ben shrugged. "I am. When Ryan was applying for the enforcer's role, I was a senior in High School. There were territory forays, and kill drops. It got pretty bad. It's a miracle I graduated. My grades were shit, but I wasn't going to college."

Meg swallowed, shredding her biscuit. Kill drops were a common form of expression with cats. They could be used as affection, aggression, or dominance. Basically, cats were hunters, and how they displayed their prey was an art form. "I'd just as soon get meat wrapped in plastic, Ben, if you had any thoughts in that direction."

He grinned at her. "I can bring home the bacon with the best, Tigress. You'll never lack for meat."

Meg smiled at him. "That's good to know." He was talking like she was going to be here for a long time. After the display of hate today, she wasn't so sure. "Ben, I want to continue the challenge. I'm so sorry for what happened to your cow. But I don't want to quit."

Ben sat back in his chair with his water glass. He stared at her. "Meg ... if we continue this, there could be ... challenges."

"I'm not the bravest person in the world, Ben. But I want to prove myself. I believe I'm the best teacher those children will get."

Nodding at her, he resumed eating, but he seemed distracted.

Lord, he was handsome. His hair lightened as it dried in loose curling waves. His mouth was wide and smiled easily. His jaw matched the strength of his shoulders. She liked the scar on his nose. It was cute. He ate with gusto, making charming small talk about Kyle. Meg could imagine this life. Coming home from school and sharing this. She wanted it.

The phone rang as they were cleaning up. Kyle wanted to come over. Ben made excuses. Meg's heart hurt knowing he was protecting his son from the danger she'd stirred up. He eventually passed the phone to Meg. "He wants to talk to you."

Meg took it. "Hi, Kyle."

“Hi, Ms. Frikahee!”

“I hear you’re doing well in soccer.”

“Yeah. Did Dad tell you I have a petition? Guess how many names I have!”

Meg closed her eyes, leaning against the counter. “Kyle, that was very brave of you. Please, be careful.”

“Guess!”

“Ummm, twenty?”

He snorted derisively. “Way more. Guess again.”

Meg didn’t want to guess such a high number he was disappointed he hadn’t achieved it. “Thirty?”

“Try something over a hundred.”

“R-really?” Meg was stunned.

“I think by next Tuesday evening, I can get two hundred, because I’m going to take it to karate and band practice.”

“Oh, my…” Meg didn’t think there were two hundred people in the school district. She didn’t think there were that many people in the pride who’d sign it. “Kyle, I am so touched. I never thought you could ever get so many people to support me.”

“You’re awesome, Ms. Frikahee. Are you dating Dad now?”

Meg blinked. “Uh…” Staring at her hand still clasping the wet dishrag, the gleam of the delicate gold bangle caught her eye. “Yes, we’re seeing each other. But it’s still very new, and we don’t know how the School Board will respond to our challenge. The odds aren’t good, Kyle.”

“I hope you stay, Ms. Frikahee.”

“Thank you, Kyle. Your support touches me deeply.” Meg’s voice was thick. Whenever her students showed admiration for her, she got so emotional. “How’s Tim?”

Distracting Kyle with a question about his inseparable best friend was easy. They had a lighter conversation and she turned him back over to his father.

When the dishes were done, Ben stretched in the middle of the kitchen, muscles straining, fingers brushing the ceiling. Saliva burst in Meg’s mouth in appreciation.

“Thanks for dinner, Meg.” Ben crossed his arms.

She stilled when she saw the twinkle in his warm brown eyes.

He nodded at her caution. “Now go upstairs and get undressed. The clamps are on the nightstand. Put them on, and lay spread eagle on the bed, facedown.”

Meg stared at him. There’d been no sexual tension throughout the evening. But suddenly she ached as if she’d been teased for hours. She licked her lips. Moving out of the kitchen, his quiet voice stopped her.

“Don’t think I didn’t notice how you were the one who kissed me today in the car. I loved it, Meg. It made me feel wanted. I need more of that from you.”

Meg hesitated, looking back at him, still standing with his arms crossed, his pants low on his hips, exposing deliciously sculpted hipbones. “Tonight?”

“Tonight, we love.”

Meg’s heart tried to leap across the room at Ben. She raised one hand and pressed it to her chest.

“Go on,” he motioned with his chin.

“Yes, Ben.”

Meg had to use the banister to support her shaky legs. She undressed and stood

staring at the small black pouch, caressing her heavy, warm breasts. She looked at the big bed, then pulled the comforter down with a shiver of anticipation. Putting the clamps on her still sore breasts made her moan softly.

She had cream on the tops of her thighs by the time she crawled onto the mattress. Bending to lay down on her tummy made her breasts hang, and when she lay down, the cool sheets were torment. Shivering, Meg concentrated on opening her legs to a widespread V, and raising her arms toward the corners of the headboard.

She felt so exposed. She loved giving this to Ben. She softened with a relaxed sigh, nestling her head into the pillow that smelled of him. Sinking into the moment, Meg concentrated on her aching breasts, her open labia. The minutes spun out, and when she started to purr from the heightening tension, she smiled, and closed her eyes.

She didn't know how long it was before Ben came in. He undressed, and crawled up onto the bed between her legs. She felt his hands, warm and calloused, curl around her ankles, his fingers caressing the hollows there.

His palm cupped the heel with the eye of Ra burned into it. It was easy to forget about the scar, but not easy to forget the result. She'd never be of the pride again.

"This doesn't matter, Meg. You're my woman."

His hands massaging her heels made her toes curl. "Yes, Ben."

"I love your body. It's so rich and creamy." His hands coasted up to the backs of her knees, massaging her calves once. "I love your patience with the children. How you see each of them so clearly, and respect them."

His hands went up the backs of her thighs, and out to the curve of her hips. His fingers flexed, toying with her hipbones. "I love your eyes. Every thought you have just flitters right through them. No secrets. No coyness. They're gold on purpose, I think. The gold of royalty. The gold of purity. The gold of inner wealth."

His words were so beautiful they brought tears to her eyes. His hands moved onto the cheeks of her ass, massaging deeply. He purred. She purred. Pushing one leg up so that her knee was folded high, without any warning at all, Ben shoved two fingers deep in her vagina, rotated them, pumped. Meg moaned softly, writhing, her hands in fists. Pleasure exploded through her belly.

"Yes, Meg." His voice was low, dark. He twisted his hand, jabbing deep, and his thumb crushed her clit. "I love you."

Meg came on a wail, unable to keep from raising her bottom for more pressure. The heat and pleasure of letting go for him swirled her breath away. He kept one hand on her thigh, moving the other with hard force in her softness. When she came down, panting, he said, "Roll over."

It took a second for her to order her body to move. She lay spread before him, her legs still on either side of him, his hand still buried deep, toying with the clinging flesh of her insides. *Ben loved her.* She felt so alive, so gifted. His gaze roamed her body like a heated laser, trailing fire over her belly, breasts, neck, arms.

"Take the clamps off."

Meg did, feeling her heart kick at the look on his face when she played with her nipples, soothing them, enjoying the raw sensation the clamps had left her with. He added another finger in her, pulling the thin skin of her core tight.

"Keep going. Touch yourself. I want you to come again. But I'm long overdue for a taste of you."

He pulled his hand from her and held her eyes as he licked his hand clean. Lids lowering in pleasure, he curled his tongue carefully and completely around each finger. Reaching up, he pulled two pillows down from the head of the bed.

“Lift your hips.”

He stuffed the pillows under her, causing a deep arch that left her legs splayed wide and pressure on her shoulders. She squeezed her nipples when he lowered himself onto his stomach and buried his face between her bare lips.

“Ben!”

He lapped at her, his tongue hard and hot. She grabbed her breasts tightly as he cleaned around her clit, avoiding it. She cradled them, pushing them tightly together when he sucked at her vagina. When he sent his tongue into her hole, his hands spasmed hard, bruising her hips.

And it didn’t stop. She never closed her eyes, watching his disheveled curls as they bobbed between her legs. The softness of his hair on her thighs, the slurping sounds he made, the scalding heat of his breath ... it all drew her higher.

When he finally pulled back, gasping as if he’d run miles, he gently placed his fingertips along her labia and pulled her wide. Just staring at her, he licked his lips, cleaning the thick white cream from his face. Raising his gaze to hers, he sent one finger just slightly into her cunt, perhaps an inch. Her breath stopped. Then he lowered his face and pressed a gentle, pursed kiss to her clit.

Without moving a muscle, Meg came, her body frozen, afraid to break the connection he’d forged with their eyes. His soft lips on her pumped sensation in a glorious rolling wave right to the ends of her hair.

“So beautiful, Tigress. So beautiful.” He whispered the words over her clit.

She came again, and this time, she couldn’t keep her eyes from rolling up into her head.

He surged up her body and eased into her as if they were two interlocking pieces designed to be joined. He forged deep, his tangy mouth closing over hers, pushing her lips wide, taking her breath. His chest crushed her breasts, and she threw her hands up onto his shoulders that completely covered her. When he began to pump in deep, long drives, Meg started to shake. She dug her nails into him, wrapped her feet around his thighs.

He kissed her, sometimes breathing for her, sometimes letting her take air, and slid his body into hers, and slid his soul into her heart. Pulling back, he whispered, “Tell me, Meg.”

Ripping her lips from his, Meg kissed his neck fiercely, scoring it with her human teeth. “I love you, Ben. Please, please, please.”

“What do you want?”

“Don’t stop. Don’t stop.”

He kissed along her jaw, and took her mouth again, his tongue hot and demanding. “Never. Never, Meg. Always.” Then he shifted his hips and slammed his pelvis hard into her clit.

“Ahhh!” The pressure was a shock of pleasure in her belly.

He did it again, and again, and again, and again, and she shattered, a coughing, deep tigress’ roar filling the room. The higher pitched panther’s scream came after, and she went wild under him.

Nails and teeth and bucking hips, she drove him back and up, twisting him over so that she was on top. It was his turn to moan and writhe as she dropped herself onto his massive erection, grinding down hard, forcing his tip against soft things deep inside her. She lifted and dropped harder, breasts bouncing. His hands grabbed them, almost encompassing them. She took him deep, twisting and clenching inside. Her hands planted wide over his chest, Meg took control of sex for the first time in her life. She needed it. She needed to see him under her.

Leaning down until her breasts flattened against the coarse hair on his chest, she hissed, "Mine!"

His hands grabbed fistfuls of orange, fiery silk at the back of her neck. He tightened his grip, pulling on her scalp and hissed back, "Mine!"

They kissed in a frenzy of need, and he cried out into her mouth, shaking and bucking under her. Rolling, he wrapped his arms around her and kept his hips tight to hers as he jerked and groaned, his body rigid.

She petted his clenched ass, soothing him as her vagina rippled around his erection, the pleasure softer this time, rolling down her thighs, deeply satisfying.

He eased to the side, keeping her tight in his arms. Her head cradled in his shoulder, Meg ignored the cooling mess between her thighs and felt the peace inside.

When Ben finally spoke, his voice was hoarse. "If we fail here, we'll leave. We'll find another pride who needs a teacher. I can work on any farm. I won't leave Kyle, though. He'll come with us."

Meg closed her eyes, knowing what this land meant to him. Knowing what it meant to leave a pride, and go off into the world alone, with no one. But she couldn't imagine leaving him. And if the Valley's pride closed against her, she would be weak enough to take him with her.

Chapter Seven

From downstairs, the electronic chirp of a cell phone came. Ben stirred. "That's Ken's ring. I have to answer it."

"I'll hop in the shower." Meg knew he'd want privacy for the phone call, which would no doubt be about her status.

She heard him greet the pride's leader respectfully, and then stepped into the warm water. She was almost done when he joined her.

"They're coming over." Ben's face was utterly closed.

"Who?"

"Ken, his wife Anna, and Ryan, with the Sanders."

Meg admired Ben's body, glossy with streaming water. "Should I go?"

"No." He cupped her breasts, lifting them, and nibbled on a nipple. "I want to mark you, but I don't want to scar your perfect skin. How would you feel about getting nipple rings?"

Meg listed against the shower wall as lust she'd thought exhausted came shimmering back. "Oh..."

"Meg, I love you."

Why did he sound so desolate? He looked different with his hair plastered back wet and smooth to his skull. She rethought her idea of asking him to get a haircut.

"I love you, too, Ben."

"Tonight ... was good."

"It was the most beautiful thing I've ever felt."

He nodded. His hand came up and cupped her face, his thumb smoothing along her cheekbone. She rubbed her face into it.

"Sometimes I'll fuck you, use you, for our pleasure. But tonight is what I really want. I want you *with* me. I want us loving each other."

Meg held his eyes, swallowed. "Yes, Ben." She smiled tremulously.

"Good." The tension he'd carried since he came into the bathroom seemed to swell.

"Meg, Ken is coming over to settle our challenge tonight. After what the Sanders' pulled, he doesn't want this to go to the School Board, or through the usual pride council. Ryan's on his way. He's been ordered to test us. Ken wants to know where I stand. With the pride, or with you."

Ben took his hand from her face and stood in the spattering spray of the shower, arms hanging. "Meg..."

Meg knew what was wrong now. Ken had called for their submission. He'd been kind in allowing it to be private. Some prides still demanded loyalty tests at the pride gathering. She lifted her hand and put it over his heart. "We can do this, Ben. You love the pride, and you love your brother. This is a good sign, that Ken values you enough to prove you."

Ben closed his eyes. His hands fisted. Meg let her hand drift through his soft pelt and down, toying with his belly button. He was an inny.

"Ben, you're my man, and I'll always be your woman."

He turned her around. With a hand at her hip and one between her shoulder blades he

bent her in half. He worked his cock in hard, with short, brutal digs. Stunned, Meg braced her hands on the back of the tub. She was swollen, and while there was still some lubrication inside, the water on him made his fit slow and uncomfortable.

“Damn it, Meg. Damn it, you’re *mine*.” He finally made it inside her.

She smelled him through the open bathroom door. “Ben, Ryan’s here.”

“Yeah. He’s coming up.” He toyed with her opening, the head of his cock nipping and pulling at her sensitive lips.

Ryan filled the doorframe, bringing in a wash of cool air. Ben had the shower curtain open. He sent his erection deep into Meg, a forceful, blatant taking. She understood that he’d staged this scene. As submissive as she was, Meg had never fucked two men before, nor been fucked while someone watched. It felt shocking, as the fire of Ben’s shafting lit her up while Ryan stared.

Ryan didn’t pretend any nonchalance. His eyes were on Meg’s, then they dropped to her swaying, round breasts. “Sekhmet’s claws, Meg, you are one beautiful woman.” Ryan growled. “Look at those curves.”

“God. Ryan. God.” Ben’s voice was almost pleading.

Meg knew this wasn’t about pleasure. She’d heard of this before. It had even happened once while she was in the Valley. It was about dominance, the pride’s over an individual. Ryan was going to take her, and Ben needed to let him. But Meg didn’t need to make it ugly. She widened her legs as far as the tub would allow, and arched her back, pushing Ben tighter to her body.

“I don’t see why Ken should doubt me.” Meg tried to reason with Ryan, even though she knew it was already too late. “He told me to leave, and I left. I left my whole life when he told me to go. I let Anna brand me. You can’t get any more obedient than that.” Meg grunted softly as Ben stroked his length into her. She let her head hang down as her neck was suddenly too weak to support her.

“Ben.” Ryan’s order held his cat’s growl.

Ben pulled out, and backed away. Out of the corner of her eye, Ryan was undressing. By the time Meg rose and turned to stand beside Ben, her man was nearly shaking with rage. Ryan’s erection was complete, standing straight and dark, veins stark.

Meg reached out and sent her nails over Ben’s ribs. “Ben, make this better.”

“Meg.” Such anger in one word, but it wasn’t directed at her.

“Share it with me, Ben.”

His eyes closed, his chest flexing as he bent his head back under the spray. Chest rippling with frantic, deep breaths, he ground his teeth together.

“Your pleasure is mine, Ben. Use me.”

Ryan stepped up to the tub, and for a moment, Meg thought it would all be over. She felt Ben lean as if he’d leave the tub, refuse the test. Her thumb swirled in the dimple of his hipbone.

Then he turned, his voice low and hot. “Get on your knees and make me come.”

Meg fell to her knees and bent him down to her mouth. “Ben...”

He stilled, lowering his hands to her head. “Yeah, Tigress?”

She swallowed. “I... I want ... tell me what to do. I don’t like not knowing what to do.” Meg trusted him with her heart. She had to trust him with the truth of her sexuality.

He nodded. Backing up so that he was against the showerhead wall, he drew Meg forward until she was directly under the spray. Reaching behind him, he adjusted the

water hotter. "As long as you let yourself do what you want, too. I'll direct you, Tigress. But don't deny yourself when you have an idea to add. Don't ask me permission. Just do it."

She licked her lips, then licked the head of his cock.

"Good girl. Now hold my balls. Yeah, a little tighter. Now put me in your mouth."

Eagerly, with infinite relief, Meg closed her lips around him.

"Oh, fuck, you should see what your lips look like stretched around me. Take me out and do it again, slower. Yeah, oh God, I want to see it again."

"That's so pretty." Ryan was crouched right next to her. He reached out a hand and cupped one breast, lifting it with casual ownership. Ben stiffened, growling. Ryan pulled his hand back sharply, letting Meg's breast drop heavily. He tapped her nipple in a hard flick of his fingers.

He stood and leaned into Ben. Meg looked up at the two men. She could see the relationship between them in their eyes and jaws, but Ryan was much darker than Ben, with darker skin, and short, black hair and eyes. He was bigger, too, by at least a couple inches and forty pounds of muscle. Which was ironic because Ryan was the smaller leopard to Ben's black panther. Ben leaned against the wall, shoulders square, jaw clenched. Ryan's posture was aggressive: his shoulders back, chest out, chin up, eyes narrow. The two men looked beautiful, like a wild matched pair.

"I'm not here as your brother, Ben. I'm here as the pride's enforcer, at the order of our pride leader. Don't growl at me again. You're both in this test, and don't forget it. Either Meg is subject to the pride, and your relationship to her as well, or there will be trouble."

Ben remained rigid, staring his brother down.

Meg closed her eyes. Her body softened, drifting into the space of acceptance and excitement. She loved serving Ben. She loved pleasing him. It was so fulfilling. The thought of drinking his cum made her moan as she kissed his tip, and let her lips part slowly, pressing down on his width so he could see her mouth stretch.

Ben's thighs shivered. When she opened her eyes again, he was staring down at her, his eyes a little wild. She curled her tongue around his shaft, tightened her hand under his on his base.

Ryan backed off, too. Climbing into the tub to stand between Meg's legs, he said, "The pride will honor your relationship if you honor us, Ben. I know Ken will come through. Don't blow this."

Ben choked on a bitter laugh. "Don't blow it. Got it."

Meg felt Ryan's hand rest lightly on her wet head. "I'm going to fuck you, Meg. We'll keep it simple."

Meg repositioned herself, moving her knees back, arching her ass toward Ryan, widening her stance. The scalding hot water of the shower ran between her cheeks, sizzling her soft folds. Ryan's hand trailed down her nape, a big hard finger following her spine. He knelt behind her. His hand came around to clasp her round belly. "Thank you, Meg," he whispered.

Meg drew back off Ben's cock. He was staring at Ryan behind her. She lapped over his hole. His eyes darted to hers. She kissed his tip and slowly took him into her mouth again.

"Thank you, Meg," Ben echoed hoarsely. To Ryan he said, "Thank God you're my

brother, or I don't know if I could do this."

"You'd do it. For the farm, her safety, and the pride," Ryan said. He laid his hips against Meg's ass, his cock feeling cool as it slid into her valley that Ben had lubricated.

Backing off Ben's length, Meg whispered, "Tell me, Ben. Tell me what to do."

"Take me in deep." He took over the base of himself, surrounding her hand, and shifted her head so that it was tipped back farther on her neck. "Relax your throat." He shifted, pulling back, then nudged in. "Oh, Meg. Shit, Tigress. The thought of coming in your mouth makes me so hard. I want to come so bad. Can you purr for me?"

He pulled out and stroked into her throat again, and Meg summoned a purr.

She held the purr right through Ryan's cock nudging into her opening.

"Where's your tongue, Tigress?"

She pressed it to his underside, and he moaned.

Ryan's tip pressed into her. He was hot and hard and a stranger, and when her hole opened with the press of his weight, a shiver rippled through her despite the hot water pounding on her back.

"Wrap your lips around your teeth, bite down on me." Ben's hand cupped the underside of her jaw. "I want to fuck your mouth, Tigress, open wide."

He began to shift his hips gently in and out of her open mouth. Feeling his veins rub her lips as he pressed his muscle in, then pulled it back out, turned her on.

Ryan had gently maneuvered his body into hers. Meg had never had a man feed himself so slowly, almost stealthily, into her. He held himself still. She liked the strength of Ryan's abs against her ass, his thighs like warm, lightly furred stone against hers. She clamped around him, loving the feeling of being filled at both ends.

"Your tongue, Meg!" Ben's order sounded desperate over the roar of the water.

He fumbled behind him, and turned the water cold. Meg cried out, grabbing his balls.

"Oh, my God, fuck, your mouth is so hot. It's so warm and soft."

Ryan called out, shouting curses at Ben. He jabbed into Meg, his hand tightening on her belly, pulling her into him, making him feel even larger inside her. The cold water made her ultra-sensitive to the heat in her cunt and mouth.

Meg shuddered, feeling her breasts ache as the water turned off. Ben's hands came up to both sides of her face, and his hips came at her faster.

"Let me do it, Tigress. Just open. Keep it open, keep using your tongue."

Meg lifted her wet lashes and stared at Ben. His abs flexed, his face contorted in pained focus. She flicked her tongue at him on every withdrawal. She pulled her hand off his cock and sent it between her legs.

"Yes, yes." Ben's eyes blazed with satisfaction. His gaze moved over her shoulder and he nodded once. Meg flattened her clit, rubbing hard in circles. When Ryan withdrew half a mile, Ben withdrew as well. When he slid into her throat, Ryan slammed deep. The cold water Ben had chilled them with drained from around her legs in the hard tub.

"Suck me," Ben spoke from gritted teeth.

She sucked, pulling hard, and couldn't keep her belly from clamping on the cock inside her. A low, male growl rumbled against her ass.

A dangerous stranger was behind her, and Ben was coordinating his movements with him. Ben stroked her in ever-shortening lunges, and Ryan's strokes sped up, too, a perfect match. Meg moaned again and again from the sizzling sensitivity of her lips, her madly fluttering fingers, and the raw hard length lunging against her ass.

“Swallow me. Now.” Ben let go. His cum was hot and tangy. It was thick and stuck in her throat. She pinched her clit, imagining his cum still trapped inside her body, and she came, clamping down around the thick cock in her mouth, trapping it in her throat as she swallowed desperately. The orgasm spun her brain, froze her spine.

Then Ryan hissed from behind her, and pressed a thumb into her damp ass. She came again at the shock of it, the burn and intrusion, accepting his taking. It was hot. She shoved back at him, and his hand on her belly dove between her lips, tangling with her own fingers, battling for control of her clit. She came again, both of her hands jerking up to brace against Ben’s thighs as the room spun and her body shook.

The next thing she knew, Ben was on his knees in front of her, raising her limp body up, kissing her deeply, lapping his own cum from her mouth. She was a melted puddle, listing backwards, her entire weight held by Ryan’s solid strength. Ryan’s hand was trapped between them, still buried deep in her folds, petting her sizzling clit. He was hard inside her, and his thumb had left her ass.

When Ben pulled away from their kiss, Meg took a moment to find her breath. She asked him her question with her eyes.

He looked over her shoulder. “Are you satisfied?” His voice was hoarse, pissed.

Meg felt Ryan’s cock jump inside her. His fingers swirled in her folds, swirling her lungs, then reluctantly withdrew, easing back around her hip. “Ben...” Ryan’s voice was just as hoarse, but his was tinged with regret. “Yes, the pride is satisfied.” Ryan tipped Meg’s hips and eased his long, long length from her.

She bit her lip to keep from crying out at the pleasure. Her thighs trembled as the smooth sensation of him triggered a memory of orgasm.

Ryan stood and left the tub, bending to pick up his clothes. Ben’s eyes stayed on him, hard and cold, as he left.

“Ben, he did it because he had to, just like we did.”

Ben looked at her, and his eyes softened. “I’m so proud of you, Meg.”

She nibbled her lip and gave him the truth. “It wasn’t a hardship, Ben. It wasn’t special, it was shocking, but it was hot.”

He soothed his hands up her arms, massaging her shoulders. His gaze went distant as he said, “He didn’t come.”

“No.”

Ben wrapped her in his arms. “I’m glad,” he whispered fiercely into her ear. “The only cum in your womb should be mine, Tigress.”

Meg kissed his neck.

“Purr for me, Meg,” he ordered, wrapping her up tight.

She purred, safe in her man’s arms.

He steadied her as she left the tub, and dried her off.

Standing in the warm bathroom, wrapped in a soft towel inside Ben’s arms, Meg remembered what was coming, and dread filled her heart. Ken wasn’t going to let it go to the School Board. The odds said he was going to stop her challenge for her old job now.

“You trust me, Meg.”

“I do.”

“I’m going to do something that surprises you tonight. And you’re going to obey me. Don’t worry, it will be much easier than what we just did.”

Meg shivered, her ass clenching. “All right.”

Ben rubbed his face against her hair. "I'm your man. Remember that. Whatever happens, whatever Ken decides, I'm yours."

"Ben ... I ... I—"

"So help me, you better not back out on what you promised when we made love."

"I'm happy. I'm almost afraid of how happy I am, and I'm about to take your entire life away."

Ben pulled back, kissed her once, sweetly, softly, deeply. Looking at her, he frowned. "Don't borrow trouble, as my Gram used to say. And no matter what, you're worth it."

He kissed her again, and by the time he lifted away, Meg had her tears under control.

"I want you to wear my robe. No underwear." He pulled a long, heavy, navy fleece off the back of the bathroom door. It looked like it didn't get much use.

Meg took it with surprise. To go before Ken and Ryan, in just a robe? Was he going to ask her to go nude? Weres didn't have much modesty, but because Meg had never needed to bare herself for shifting, she wasn't used to it.

Ben kissed her again. "Trust me. I won't shame you."

Meg nodded, putting on the robe. She combed out her hair while Ben got dressed.

Moving downstairs, she stilled to see Ryan sitting at the kitchen table, staring at her jam jar full of daisies. His face looked desolate. Ben came up behind her, his hand resting on her nape. Ryan didn't look at either of them.

Ben moved up to the table, standing next to Ryan.

"Walk with me." He turned and went out and off the porch.

Stiffly, Ryan rose to follow. He paused at the door. "Meg—"

"I'm all right, Ryan. I'm a werecat. I'm a tigress. I'd do much, much worse than enjoy your respectful touch to teach my kids again and live with Ben in this community."

He looked at her sharply.

She returned his look calmly, unchallenging.

He nodded to her and went out.

She brewed a pot of tea, added a half cup of sugar, then poured it over ice. Taking the glass of daisies outside with the tea, she sat on the porch listening to the crickets until Ken and Anna pulled up.

Meg crossed her arms in a defensive gesture. The last time she'd seen Anna, the woman had branded her, marking her an outcast for the rest of her life. That the woman harbored her no ill will made it even more bitter. All in a day's work as the wife of the pack leader.

Ben and Ryan came out of the barn, moving with deceptive, long-legged speed. Meg released her breath to see the ease between them, how they paced as one. Neither seemed bruised or scratched. It might be awkward, but they'd have Ryan over for dinner soon, and this would pass.

Ken was a corn farmer who sold his crop to ethanol. Anna was a slim, strawberry blonde. Both were lions.

Ken shook Ryan's hand.

"It's done. Both accepted the will of the pride," Ryan said.

Ken nodded, gripping Ryan's firmer, and shaking it again. "Good. Good. Thank you."

Ken moved to Ben and shook his hand as well. "You still belong to the Valley. Your

status as Meg's protector is added to that of your sponsorship."

"Yes, sir." To Meg, Ben sounded cold, but Ken didn't call him on it.

They all settled on the porch, accepting a glass of the fresh sweet tea. Anna tried to make light small talk with Ben about Kyle, but it was Meg who picked up the conversation past monosyllables. It was surreal to sit with the tense men surrounding her. She flashed on her memory of the woman holding Meg's ankle between her thighs, the searing pain of the brand spiking deep into her bone, hard. When the Sanders pulled up, Anna and Meg stayed on the porch while Ken, Ryan, and Ben went down.

Violence was common in many prides, but not in either her birth pride or the Valley. It was hard for Meg to watch the posturing, the staring, and finally, Ken's hand shooting out and slamming Kevin Sanders into the dirt.

Ken turned away from the man he'd just knocked down. "Meg. Walk with me. Ben, you're bound by the rules of hospitality to accept the Sanders into your home at my request. You'll all be sitting here politely when we get back."

Ken moved off toward the pastures, and Meg hurried down the stairs, holding the thick lapels of the robe closed as she went.

Ken stopped when he got to the same fence Meg had picked daisies from earlier today. It seemed so long ago. Before Ben had claimed her body and heart.

Heaving a huge sigh, Ken braced his beefy arms on the top of the old split rail. "You're Ben's woman now."

"Yes."

Meg stood a little behind Ken, uncertain whether to move up.

"You want to move back to the Valley, work in the school again?"

"Yes."

"You can't shift. You'll never shift."

"Yes."

"You never caused a moment's trouble while you were here. You supported a lot of families in need, were a kind friend to many."

She didn't know about many, but she confirmed his favorable assessment. "Yes."

Turning, he laid both elbows on the fence, and lazily assessed her from head to toe. "I was shocked to hear Ben was setting up the Board challenge. But I was floored when I heard you'd come back into town." He held her eyes.

She tried to hold them, to prove her strength, but the power rolling off him unnerved her and she looked away.

"You're a submissive."

Meg raised her chin, looked at him quickly, then away. "In bed."

"Hmmm. I think, more than in bed. Just not a doormat. You did well to show that you can control Ben, and allow the pride to subjugate him."

She glanced at him, stiffening.

"Don't think I don't recognize that the only way that dominant cat would let Ryan touch you would be through your mediation. If you'd wanted to demand Ben's complete loyalty, that would have been the moment. I can tell already, he would have broken from this pride in a heartbeat for you."

Meg swallowed. It had been more of a test than she realized. And she'd passed.

"So, you think you should be able to return," Ken drawled.

Disobedient. "I deserve to be teaching werecat children. I'm a highly qualified, very

effective teacher.”

“Hmmm... Let’s head back.”

They heard the arguing as soon as they rounded the back of the house. Ken lengthened his stride. Meg scurried behind.

“—barely a werecat! She’s so human she can’t even call her claws! She doesn’t even have a half-shift form!” Margie’s voice was disgusted.

Her husband took up the abuse. “She has no understanding of what it is to truly be a werecat. She’s a danger to us. Her loyalties will become more and more human as time goes on. Her weak blood weakens the pride.”

“She does have a half-shift form.” Ben’s voice was vibrating with anger. He seemed to be holding onto the arms of the porch chair for dear life. “She brings enormous benefit to the pride, and her loyalty is only in danger because of your racist hate.”

“My loyalty is not in danger!” Meg stopped at the porch stairs.

“Yet you flout our laws so easily by returning here, demanding the rules of generations be changed for your own convenience, defying the will of Sekhmet herself,” Kevin sneered at her.

Ryan’s deep, calm rumble drew all eyes. “It is not against the law for a half-were to live in a pride.”

Ryan and Ken exchanged a long look. Ken moved up onto the porch to stand by Anna, their arms going around each other’s waists with the ease of long companionship.

“Show me your half-shift form, Meg,” Ken commanded.

Meg felt the weight of six pairs of eyes like a blow. She blinked rapidly, feeling like she was at the bottom of a well from her position below everyone on the porch. Ben moved rapidly down the stairs. He took her hand and turned her so that she faced away from all the eyes.

Lifting his big hand to her face, he caressed her lips, slipping his thumb in to test her teeth. She sucked on it in surprise. Ben’s other hand pulled at the belt of the robe. His eyes went to her chest as he parted the lapels. The lines that appeared in the corners of his eyes when he narrowed his gaze on her breasts made her lick his finger. He took his hand from her jaw, pulling his thumb past her teeth, and gripped the back of her nape. He pushed the robe from her shoulders.

It caught on her arms, but sagged down even with her ass. Nudity was common in the pride. Although not openly accepted socially, it wasn’t something that brought shame. Tightening his grip on her neck, he gathered her hair with a sweep of his hand, pulling it over one shoulder. Her shoulders and entire back were now effectively bared to the audience on the porch. Smoothing down the cool silk of her dark orange hair, he ended at her nipple, pinching it. He licked his lower lip once, subtly.

Flicking his eyes up to hers, Ben ordered in a low, vicious tone, “*Tigress, show me your stripes.*”

Her skin prickled and Meg glanced down at Ben’s large fingers twisting her nipple. The points of her stripes cascaded down the edges of her chest. Distantly, she heard Margie exclaim. Then her skin darkened in a wash to a deep, amber tan, and the stripes solidified into black sweeps instead of shadows. Her breastbone and belly remained creamy white, like the underside of a tigress.

Ben stepped into her and kissed her, pressing her lips open, storming her mouth with his tongue. Meg tangled hers with his in return. His hand at her nape skated down her

spine, and then he was drawing the robe up over her shoulders, pulling away, and belting it closed. His brown eyes were dark with satisfaction.

"Meg, you are absolutely gorgeous," Anna called softly.

Ben led Meg up onto the porch. "She's my Tigress."

Meg blushed when she caught the admiration burning in Ryan's eyes, and looked away.

"Here is what I can see," Ken said. "I can see that the Valley is small. Many of our pride have come from other places. We've never been a place to completely drive strong humans out. It's my belief our community can tolerate a non-shifting half-were living amongst us.

"The fact is that I would be honored to have Meg teach my own child. I'd prefer her to LuAnne. Meg has a sponsor, and a protector in Ben. I'm aware that young Kyle has collected proof of her support by our pride's future. His petition is impressive."

Meg's heart swelled with hope.

"True, it is only tradition that demands half-weres be banished from a pride, but it is a tradition the Council has never refuted, and one still held by many as correct.

"In my opinion, Meg will bring more benefit to our pride than damage. However, as such a small pride, I cannot fly in the face of Sekhmet's Council. Meg will not rejoin the Valley pride."

Meg blinked. Biting her lip, she stared at the porch in disbelief. Her hand tightened on Ben's. She could feel him holding himself rigid. *To leave the farm...* where would they go? Blaze's hatred of their ruler came to life in Meg's heart. Why did Sekhmet allow this injustice to continue?

"However, I see no reason she cannot continue to live and teach here under permanent sponsorship by Ben. Especially if she has, perhaps, several other co-sponsors to support her."

"I will," Ryan said instantly.

"I know of at least one School Board member and three other parents who will as well," Ben said gruffly.

Ken turned to Margie, whose jaw was flapping at him rather comically. "I also think it best if you resign at this Tuesday's Board meeting."

Kevin stepped forward, fists clenched. "That's outrageous. She's allowed her own opinions."

"Of course. But she's not allowed to attack a pride member's property for having an alternate opinion than hers. And she's not allowed to assist in stalking a sponsored werecat in our territory. And she's not allowed to be an accomplice in a kill drop designed to intimidate and harm a sponsored werecat, either.

"You are both under official censure. The pride will shun you for one moon and the balance of this one. You will not shift in all that time, and you will not leave your house. Supplies will be delivered by Ryan. You'll pay Ben the cost of his cow, the cost of his cleaning, and the cost of all the milk he'd have gained from that cow, plus an extra grand. To Meg you'll pay the cost of the cleaning, and an extra grand in pain and suffering. You owe Meg and Ben a public apology at the next pride gathering, and you will swear to cease and desist all communication with Ben's family for the duration of Meg's sponsorship."

Meg watched Kevin out of the corner of her eye. He held himself stiffly. He was

middle-aged, but still fit and powerful for a Maine Coon cat.

Ryan moved up to stand in Kevin's space. "I have three men that are dying for me to call a hunt on your ass. Just try and run."

Kevin remained rigid. "So be the will of the pride." He seemed to force the words out through stiff lips. Margie sobbed once, stepping against his back. Her cat was a gray tabby. Both were outclassed among so many big wildcats. Kevin and Margie stumbled to their car, giving Meg a wide berth.

"I'll follow them home." Ryan nodded to Ken and Anna and moved toward the stairs. Ben stepped up and grabbed his arm, pulling him into a hard hug. When he stepped back from it, Meg went to stand at his side, threading her fingers through his. Ryan reached up and touched Meg gently on the cheek, and moved down to his patrol car.

Anna gave Meg one of the delicate social hugs Meg hated. "Welcome back to the Valley, Meg."

Ken shook Ben's hand, and to her surprise, Meg's as well. "Thanks for the tea. It was excellent."

Ken and Anna drove off after Ryan's car. When the dust settled, Ben slipped his arm around Meg's waist. She returned her arm around his.

They stood listening to the crickets, the cows lowing in the distance. "All set?" Ben asked quietly.

"I—I guess I am."

"Tuesday we should see if you'll be called back to finish the year out or not. Only two more weeks of school."

"I'd like that. But just to be able to go in and see the kids one more time would be ... good. Maybe next week we could have Ryan over for dinner."

They stood on the porch a few more minutes. "I want to call Kyle later and share the news. But right now I'm going slip into my cat and walk my territory. Want to come?"

Meg nodded. "I want to get dressed, though."

Ben squeezed her. "You were stunning in stripes."

"I couldn't have done it before you."

"Maybe. You're a tigress, through and through, Meg. You would have found your stripes eventually."

Meg went upstairs and changed. When she came back down, Ben was standing nude under the oak in a half-shift. His hands were paws with lethal, curving claws.

"Show-off," she teased.

"Damn right." His body flowed and rippled into a waist-high black panther. He butted her thigh with his head.

"Let's head out," she said, petting his soft fur. Meg walked with Ben through the evening twilight, picking flowers as he sniffed and explored with a powerful, sexy, rolling gait. It was a long walk, but she was up to it.

The End

About the Author:

Mima is a dreamer in upstate New York. When people query her on what she's

reading, she answers proudly and simply, “A really sexy romance.” She firmly believes women know the difference between fantasy and reality, and need both. No matter how sweet the kids, husband, mother, cats, house(work), and job are. Mima is at runemima@yahoo.com and www.mimawithin.com

Piece of Tail

Celia Kyle

Chapter One

This was totally against the handbook. One hundred percent. Maybe not in so many words, but Patrick was sure fucking his lover in his office probably wasn't the *best* idea in the world. Anyone else and they'd be gone in a heartbeat. *Damn, it was good to be on top.* In more ways than one.

"Patrick." Daniel snapped. "Are you even listening to me?"

Patrick pulled his mind from his fantasies and focused on his lover, and business partner, Daniel. "Of course I am and of course, I disagree." He smiled at Daniel's growl.

"She won't go for it." Daniel swallowed hard and Patrick imagined licking his way up his lover's throat. "Why would she?"

Damn, but his boyfriend could be as insecure as a woman at times. With a sigh, he levered himself from his comfortable position on the couch and strode to Daniel, wrapping him in his embrace. "Because she wants you ... *us*." He squeezed the other man's shoulders. "She watches us, Daniel. You aren't in the office as much, but I swear, she watches our every movement as if she were a starving snow leopard and we are walking, talking steaks."

Daniel looked at him, eyebrows scrunched, nose wrinkled. And Patrick couldn't resist the man any longer. He brushed his lips across Daniel's, inhaling his lover's scent and relishing the musk of his skin. Daniel opened for him with a moan and turned in Patrick's arms, pulling their bodies together chest to chest. In less than a second, Patrick's cock went from interested to rock hard and, not for the first time today, he imagined bending Daniel over his desk and taking his lover from behind.

Patrick released his hold on Daniel's shoulders and shifted his grip to his lover's hips. He dug his fingers into the other man's cloth-covered skin, pulling and pressing their bodies together, gaining the friction he craved. He rocked his hips, grinding his erection against his lover's and smiled against Daniel's mouth when he moaned.

His dick ached and throbbed in time with his heartbeat, pulsing and thrumming a mile a minute while their tongues dueled for dominance. Patrick moaned and pressed harder when Daniel fisted his hair forcing him to relinquish the man's mouth while the tiny sting went straight to his cock.

"Patrick." His lover growled, forcing his name through clenched teeth.

Patrick leaned forward, stealing another nip at those tempting lips. "She does, Daniel. You want her. I want her. As fucked up as it sounds, I think she wants us as well." He couldn't resist, he ground his cock against Daniel's, eyes closed and panting as his body trembled.

Daniel's head fell forward to rest on his shoulder and the other man sighed. Patrick resisted the urge to shout in triumph, knowing he'd won. "I don't..." His normally straightforward lover paused and Patrick hugged the man's shoulders once again.

“It’ll work, D. I swear it. She’s so...” It was his turn to sigh. “Gina is the epitome of everything we’ve ever wanted in a woman. You know it. *I* know it. Why can’t we just see how she feels?”

Daniel raised his head from Patrick’s shoulder and he brushed his thumb over the man’s cheek. “I barely know her, Patrick. She barely knows *me*. How can you think that...”

Patrick cut him off with a quick, bruising kiss. “We’ll just fix that right now, won’t we?”

Daniel sputtered and protested, but Patrick ignored his bluster. The man was hard as a fucking rock, harder than he’d probably been in years and no amount of arguing was going to deter him now. Daniel wanted a relationship with Gina just as much as Patrick did and nothing short of her refusal would keep him from making their duo into a trio.

Victory was within reach and he’d be damned if Daniel’s insecurities would rob them of what could be the ideal life for them. Sure, there’d be two husbands and one wife, but who was counting?

*

Sensing a presence behind her, Gina saved the file she’d been working on and turned to face her visitor. Strike that, visitors.

Damn her to hell and back again... The two finest pieces of non-shifty man-meat were standing at the entry to her cubicle and the only thing she could think was *yum*. *Smart, real smart*. She almost snorted, but bit her lip instead.

Her ears perked up at the low moan coming from the man standing just behind her boss. Daniel, Danny-boy as she sometimes called him in her mind. Maybe he wasn’t feeling well. Taking a closer look, she saw a fine sheen of sweat along his brow and felt bad about ogling him when he obviously wasn’t feeling hot.

“Gina,” Patrick’s deep voice yanked her attention from the boss’ boyfriend and back to the man who hired and fired. She pasted on a smile, waiting to hear what the “big guy” had to say. She hadn’t fucked up in a while... Okay, if she was honest... It’d been like, a whole week, since she’d gotten into trouble. That was truly a record for her.

Patrick glanced back at Danny-boy before he continued, tugging at his collar. Dang, the boss man was nervous. *So not good*.

“Gina, Daniel and I were wondering... Wondering if you’d like to have dinner with us. Maybe tonight?” She opened her mouth to respond, but shock kept the words from leaving her mouth and Patrick kept going. “Maybe tonight is too short of a notice. Friday, maybe? Daniel and I... Wait, you know Daniel, right?”

Her boss turned to his boyfriend and tugged the man forward. Poor guy looked green around the scruff and like the last place he wanted to be was in her cubicle.

Though nervous, sick and sweatiness aside, the man was truly a gorgeous hunk of fucktastic meat.

Both men, side by side, were more than her inner-kitty could stand. The base of her spine tingled, right along with her pussy, as arousal thrummed through her veins. What she wouldn’t give to have them both at the same time.

But dinner? Was this some “help the halvesie” sort of thing?

Daniel stuck his hand out and automatically, she reached for him, forgetting about the ferocious feline within. An electric shock rocketed through her body at their initial touch, tingling and singeing her nerves in a split second. The niggling feeling at the base

of her spine erupted into a full-blown ache. Her tail, normally kept under pantie-wraps during the day, sprung from her body. At the same moment, her grip tightened, reacting to the feelings his touch caused.

Her cat wouldn't be denied any longer and mentally burst from her confines, anxious to claim the men in front of her. Gina fought the cat, but in the end, the feline won the battle. Her tail swung free beneath her skirt, her ears could now pick up conversations all over the office and her strength ... fuck if her strength didn't kick in like all of her other abilities.

Gina's smile fell with each passing millisecond until the now-familiar sound of bone crunching against bone echoed through the office like a shot.

She released Daniel's hand and dashed from the office, tail curled around her waist below her skirt.

Damn, but 'mans were squishy creatures.

Chapter Two

Like gas and matches, Gina and clothes just did not mix. The minute she threw her beat up old 'yota into park and lowered the garage door, she was tugging and pulling at the fabric of her blouse. Shoes were kicked into a corner in the laundry room right off the garage.

She tossed her top into her designated hamper which was quickly followed by her skirt. She sighed. Blessedly naked. At least for a few moments anyway. She snagged a ratty T-shirt from her stack of clean clothes and tossed it on. The well-worn cloth barely covered the essentials, but nothing pink poked out so she was good. Tasheka had a thing about the residents wandering around in the buff. Something about her dear old Sam being led astray by the young little pussies. *Ha! As if.* The crotchety old human was so head-over-heels in love with the *were* that no amount of prancing in the nude would sway him away from her.

Gina stretched, arms clasped above her head as she worked out the kinks from sitting behind a desk all day. *Desk.* Damn. She winced as the tension eased from her shoulders. She needed to hide from Tash for a while. At least until Gina knew whether her boss had bothered calling the house to "discuss" the encounter with Daniel. Oh well, nothing she could do about it now but face the piper.

Accepting her fate, Gina took the stairs to the second floor and padded through the weight room built into her unit and into the center townhouse where all of the TVs and couches had been set up. Since the pride owned an entire row of townhouses, it made sense to connect them all and make common areas for all of the residents to share. Her favorite place was on the couch in front of the TV, but *Suck Me* only knew how she'd ended up in the unit with the common workout area.

"*Gi-na!*"

She cringed. Tash was already at it. "Swear to *Sekhmet*, Tash, I didn't mean to do it. I can't help that 'mans are so freakin' squishy."

The big house's half-were stopped in the doorway, frozen. "I don't *even* want to know what you've done to *another* human. I was yellin' because you, yet again, chose to blaspheme our leader's name in your mind."

Oh. That. Stupid mind-reading were. "Come on, Tash. I gave you a nickname, right? What, you don't think Sekhmet has a sense of humor?" Gina smiled and half-laughed. Tasheka wasn't buying it. Damn. "Okay, I promise not to refer to our great and powerful leader, Sekhmet, as Suck Me any longer. Girl Scout's honor." She made the symbol of the cross over her heart.

Tash snorted. "Ha! All you've done is eat Girl Scout *cookies*, so unless your honor is hidden in your hips..." Gina stuck out her tongue at the older woman. "Thought so. Now, tell me what you've done to a human *now*."

"Nothing." She slumped her shoulders, praying that the *were* would leave it be.

"Uh huh." Tash didn't look convinced, but seemed content to let it drop and Gina left out the breath she'd been holding when the *were* left the doorway and returned to the kitchen in the far unit.

With a sigh, Gina flopped onto the couch next to her ex-unit-mate and sometimes

partner-in-crime, scritchling mate, and most recent resident to fall whiskers-over-tail in love with some *male*, Blaze.

"Close one."

"You're tellin' me. *Suck Me* knows—" Gina laid her head on Blaze's shoulder.

"For the love of—Gina!" Tash bellowed.

Gina straightened away from Blaze. "What? I swear, Tash, I was just telling Blaze to suck my boobs. It's been a while, ya know? I was hoping Jacky boy would let her off the leash and help a sister out." She smiled wide, making sure her dimples were showing and went for the whole "innocent" look, praying Tasheka would believe her. In the end, Gina didn't think the woman believed her for a second, but Tash did turn around and go back to the kitchen after giving her the evil eye.

"Suck your *boobs*. Seriously? That's all you could come up with?" Blaze shoved her. "I get that I'm a weirdo with the whole shifting during the big 'O' thing, but do I look like lesbian to you?" She held up her hand. "Wait. Don't answer that, I'm afraid of what you'll say. Now, tell me what's got you down."

"The thing about it is..." Gina began.

"Seriously? This is a 'thing about it is' story? Shit, I need popcorn for this." Blaze hopped from the couch and disappeared through the entryway to the kitchen. Moments later she heard Tasheka and Sam laying into the tabby half-were about letting men take advantage of her, how Jack the half-Russell Terrier couldn't possibly love her. It didn't seem to matter that the man in question lived in the house, surrounded by cats, just to be with Blaze.

Gina knew her friend wouldn't be returning anytime soon. Just her luck. Right when she needed someone to confide in about this whole half-were mingling in the human world thing, her confidant was taken hostage by the old people. *Ugh!* She needed air. Maybe wandering through the city would help her mind settle. She wasn't much for the whole exercising thing, but she just couldn't be hemmed in by brick walls any longer today. Yeah, her muscles would be kicking her ass in the morning, but desperate times and all that.

Gina rolled to her feet and went back to her townhouse. By the time she reached her floor, she was just a smidge out of breath. If smidge equated to holy-shit-I'm-dying, that is. After the climb, she had every intention of collapsing on her bed for a while, but since it was occupied by Teague, Blaze's cat, it didn't look like that'd be happening any time soon.

She stared at the fluffy orange tabby, turning her head this way and that as she watched him clean himself. He pointed one back leg to the sky, toes spread, while he folded in half and dug deep. *If only...* Sometimes, she really wished she could fully shift, if only for the flexibility. *Possibilities...*

Turning from the clean-conscious cat, Gina exchanged her ratty t-shirt for a jersey dress from her closet. It managed to cover just a smidge more than the shirt, but it also had a built-in bra. The bra didn't keep the girls entirely contained, nothing short of an eighteen hour monstrosity could do that, but at least she wasn't swaying in the breeze any longer. She slipped into a pair of comfy flip-flops and glanced at Teague once more.

Dang, what she wouldn't give... She sighed. Well, if she couldn't "handle" things herself, at least she had some new spank bank material. Seeing Patrick and Daniel side by side had made her want to purr. It didn't matter that moments later she'd broken Daniel's

hand. Up until that point, the picture those two made had been perfect. Ha, so much for that.

Downstairs, Gina exchanged her flip-flops for cute, heeled strappy sandals in the laundry room. Thoughts of purring with Patrick or Daniel, or Patrick *and* Daniel, or even being the filling of a Patrick/Daniel sandwich had her wanting to look a little more cute and a little less frumpy. *Mission accomplished.*

She stepped into the cool air, embracing the chill as it whipped through her thin cotton dress. *This* was what she needed. Even if she was stuck in the middle of a cement jungle, developers couldn't destroy the cut of the wind as it whipped around all the buildings. It reminded her of home, of being free. Not that she wasn't free now, it was just *different*.

The human world with all its own set of beliefs. None of which were true, some of which were entirely illogical. She snorted. Like clothes. But, considering she couldn't manage a full shift like the rest of her pride, she was stuck in the half-were house until she *could* learn to live with the squishy humans.

When she was "invited to leave" her pride, she'd been even worse than she was now. As a teen, it'd been cute to prance around with her tail out, freaking out the 'mans and causing general havoc. It'd all been fun and games until old Mrs. Wilenheim had gone and had a heart attack.

Coincidentally, that was also around the time of her twenty-fifth birthday. Gina wondered if the old bat hadn't died if anyone would have even noticed that she couldn't fully shift. Nah, they would have figured it out eventually. Sure, being the daily entertainment and gossip source for the town had won her years of leniency, but scare one old woman to near-death and all eyes were on her.

Weres were up in arms (and tails) about her behavior and before she knew it, she'd been branded with that ugly eye of Ra ankh thing that Sekhmet loved and was parked on Tasheka's front step at Half-were house. Nah, it didn't matter that there wasn't a law that the non-shifting halvesies had to be banished, but her pride had had enough and off she went, new icky brand and everything.

Then to top things off, Tash seemed to always look for her mistakes and hound her to no end about all of her fuck ups, past and present. She felt pigeonholed as the one half-were who always did wrong. She'd expected that type of treatment when she first moved in, but it'd been years. *Years*. After all this time, she wasn't sure she'd ever adapt enough to move out on her own and have a life with a white picket fence and two point five, possibly furry, children.

Ah, well, best she just accept it. Especially since tweedle-Meg had left her to build her own fur-less life and tweedle-Blaze was busy breaking the bed slats all the freakin' time, she was stuck at Half-were house by her practical lonesome. Bitches.

Gina turned the corner at the end of the block, making her way toward the park. It'd be a long walk, but maybe surrounding herself with the city's version of nature would improve her mood a little. Or at least get her mind off of the tall, lean Patrick and his equally gorgeous built-like-a-brick-wall lover. Hmm... Apparently, her walk hadn't done all that much in distracting her from imagining the two men engage in wild monkey sex with her in the middle. Pity. Or not.

Twenty minutes and aching thighs later, the park was in sight. *Finally*. Not only did her legs twinge and twitch in odd places, but her feet were on fire as well. The park had

not been that fantabulous of an idea after all.

She walked the perimeter, searching for a place with few people and lots of shade. What had started as a cool day quickly turned hot with the amount of time she'd spent in the sun. Even with the olive skin she'd inherited from her Greek papa and Italian mom, her body heated and she could practically feel her skin burning.

She spotted a bench on the other side of the park, shrouded in shadows from the trees, but empty. Perfection. Instead of walking the perimeter further, she decided to cut through the park. Single-minded in her destination, she ignored the families and couples enjoying the day. Annoying little beasts, humans, whatever. They had each other to keep them company and she had ... no one. The thought of living in half-*were* house alone, but not, churned her stomach.

For so long it had been her and Blaze, then her, Blaze and Meg. Now, it was just ... her. Sure, there were other half-*weres* who'd been put out by their prides. The reason? They were unable to shift into their feline counterparts and maintain the furry fun. But Gina had always been in her own little world and hadn't bothered getting to know the other residents. She sighed. It was probably time to become sociable again, dammit.

Halfway across the park, still lost in thought, her heel sunk down into a fresh mound of dog shit. *Well, lovely.* And then, to make matters worse, the mangy mongrel who'd probably deposited the lovely mound of crap started barking and growling not far from her. Strangely, it almost sounded as if the barks were growing closer. She brushed aside the thought as she wiped her heel on the grass, trying to rid her shoe of the dog poop.

"Andy. *Andy.* Andy, *no.*" The barking continued and Gina assumed the man was having a hard time calming his pooch. "Andy! Ma'am, don't run!"

Gina swung her head toward the man, but her view was full of the huge fucking beast barreling toward her, teeth bared, barking and snarling. Not run? Not likely. Damned dog, beast, thing looked like it could bite her ass in half. Fuck that.

Gina ran, hard and fast. The snarling giganto beast was on her ass, nipping at the hem of her skirt. She picked up the pace and thanked Sekhmet she'd inherited some snow leopard traits. Like speed. Speed was a good mother-fucking thing with a big ass dog trying to eat her in a very bad way.

The heel of her shoe snapped off and she cursed, but didn't break her stride. Instead, she allowed the shoes to slip off her feet without interrupting her pace. Being barefoot would help with the climbing she was about to do anyway. She couldn't outrun the beast forever. She eyed her original destination and selected a tree that looked big enough to support her.

A few feet from the tree and she leapt straight into the air, looping her arms around the branch she'd targeted and pulled her feet just out of biting range. She struggled for a few seconds, getting comfortable in her new perch. Then, she blew a raspberry at the fucking beastie while he jumped and barked at her from below.

The dog's erstwhile owner finally jogged up and snared the beast's leash, berating the animal while he tried to pull it under control. This is when it dawned on Gina that perhaps the park hadn't been the best place for a half-*were* cat shifter to come ... with the dogs and all that.

"Andy, wait 'til Daddy hears how bad you were. Bad dog." The man tugged on the leash and smacked the dog's rump. "Bad."

The dog turned its attention to the stranger, still shrouded by the branches protecting

her from the beast below. Somehow, the voice sounded vaguely familiar. An ex? Naw, she never went for dog people. Too much pet/people drama to be had.

"Ma'am?" The dog growled. "Andy, no. She's a friend." The dog quieted, but glared up at her. She stuck her tongue out, causing the dog to growl again. "Dammit, Andy. What am I gonna do with you?"

What am I gonna do with you? The way he said it really did sound familiar. True, she'd heard those words often enough from Tash and Sam back at Half-*were* house, but she was sure she'd heard them with that same drawl... *Oh. Shit.*

"Patrick?" She buried her face against the tree branch supporting her and wished for the ground to open up and swallow her, and the tree, whole.

She heard him step closer, but refused to look up, down, whatever. "Gina?"

Yup, her day just got hellu worse. She waved at him with one hand, but didn't raise her head. "Yeah, it's me. How you doing this evening?" She didn't give him a chance to respond. "Good? Good. Me, I'm just trying not to die of embarrassment or be eaten by Dogzilla here. How am I doing? Oh, wait, still alive. Damn. Better luck next time. If you'll just wander off with the radioactive dog, I'll crawl down from the tree and then keep going once I find a big enough rock to hide under. Thanks, see ya."

She tightened her grip on the branch, arms and legs wrapped around the smooth bark, and waited for Patrick and the devil's spawn to leave. They didn't.

"Gina, get down from there. Andy, so help me, you will not get any steaks ever again if you don't behave."

She peeked through her lashes to see the dog's response. It stared at Patrick for a moment before flopping to the ground with a sigh. Steaks. *Huh.*

"He's not going to go feral on me again?"

Patrick shook his head. "He didn't go feral on you, Gina. He just got... excited. Now, crawl down. Unless you like showing the whole damned park that you're not wearing panties."

He growled the last few words. Well, she thought she felt a nice cool breeze. But he acted as if she was personally affronting him by her lack of undergarments and that she was showing her bare ass.

Adrenaline still coursed through her veins from her chase so it didn't take much to get the inner kitty to play nice and help her out of the tree. A quick shot of her *were* strength and she landed on the ground with nary a sound, four feet from the nasty animal Patrick called a dog.

Patrick ran a hand through his light brown hair, making it a rumpled, but sexy, mess. "I'm really sorry about Andy acting up like that, Gina. He's usually a gentle dog."

She eyed the animal in question. Two hundred pounds. Easy. Dog just didn't seem like a good enough descriptor for the animal. Beast had been more apt. "Uh huh." She held her ground, not wanting to incite the animal's snarly wrath again and used her "I'm talking to a little kid" voice. "Why don't you keep a nice tight hold on him while I hunt down my shoes? M'kay?"

He shifted to block her path. Several feet separated them, but she stood frozen. "You're bleeding, Gi." She glanced down and realized that her venture up the tree hadn't been without collateral damage.

"I'll be okay—"

Patrick cut her off. "Let's just get you to the house and I'll come back out for your

shoes. You broke one anyway so it's not like you're walking home. Daniel or I will take you home once we've got you taken care of. How does that sound?" He phrased it as a question, but she didn't imagine he'd take no for an answer.

Her heart pounded in her chest. Most of what she'd heard was "blah, blah, Daniel, blah, home". *Yum!* Daniel and Patrick and home. She may have actually sighed. Aloud. Complete with dreamy look on her face and everything.

Which Patrick took as agreement on her part. Before she could object (as if she would) he had an arm wrapped around her shoulders and placed his other behind her knees. He scooped her off the ground and walked toward one of the gates out of the park. *Whoa, baby.* Patrick was packing some *serious* muscle beneath his clothes and the fact that he picked her up without a problem just proved his strength. Considering her weight (and she did ... daily), scooping her from the ground as if she was light as a feather just proved to her that he should be in a Mr. Universe competition or something. Okay, maybe Mr. Universe was going too far, but damn, the man had muscles. With her curves upon curves upon curves, she wasn't delusional when it came to her size or weight, but somehow, Mr. Pick-me-up made her feel petite. Small even.

Gina didn't waste time pretending to be shocked or upset by his handling. Instead, she slipped her arms around his neck and snuggled closer. Gay or not, Patrick was a hot hunk of man and her body responded in kind.

She peeked down at the ground and noticed that Andy seemed to have gotten over his objection and utter hate of her rather quickly as he followed sedately behind them. Patrick still had the dog's leash looped around his wrist, but as big as the beast was, it could run off quick as you please without so much as a ta-ta for now. *Steak. Hmm...*

The dog must have felt her stare because it turned its attention to her and bared his teeth. So much for that.

"Just a bit further. Are you in a lot of pain?"

Pain? Wha—"Um, no, I'm fine. I appreciate you being so gallant and all that, Patrick."

He snorted. "Gallant? Naw, just your regular creepy guy looking for an excuse to get his hands on a hot woman."

She whipped her head around to stare at Patrick, but before she could question him or shove her tongue down his throat for saying she was hot, Andy barked.

"Yeah, boy, we're almost home," he assured the dog. Only the barking didn't stop. The whole trudge up the steps and toward the door, he barked and hopped and acted like a general nuisance. Her annoyance grew until she felt the telltale tingle in her lower back. *Well, fuck.*

Before she could cool her temper, she'd sprouted. The damned tail grew from her lower back, just above her ass. Three feet of near white and grey fluffiness sprouted and lengthened from beneath her dress as Patrick climbed the stairs. Thank goodness the dog kept him occupied enough to not notice her new appendage. Not that he'd be too overwhelmed. It wasn't as if he didn't know she was a halvesie. Then again, he probably hadn't been faced with too many half-shifts in his lifetime either. Secrecy of the prides and all that.

The damned dog kept barking and tugging on Patrick's wrist, which in turn, jostled her and then... The fucking beastie had the gall to sniff and then growl at her tail. Her. Tail.

Oh hells, no.

Before she could think better of it, not that she would of anyway, she rapped the dog on the end of his nose. Not hard enough to hurt, but hard enough to teach the dog that regardless of his size, *she* was the big cat. The dog whimpered like a baby and quieted immediately. *Pansy.*

Patrick finally reached the top step and set her on her feet just as the front door swung open to reveal Daniel. She took a moment to look him over while he got over the shock of finding her on his doorstep. After she'd broken his ... hand? Her eyes landed on the hand in question and she didn't find a cast. Well, that just made her day a hundred times better. Like, over the moon better. Now, she didn't have anything to confess to Tash and Sam. *Whew.*

Well, he had to still be a little sore, but at least it wasn't broken. His hand shifted and tightened the towel around his waist. Towel?

Whoa, baby.

She scanned his body quickly. Trim hips, flat stomach, killer pecs and wide shoulders. *Yum.* The man seemed to have muscle upon muscle *upon* muscle. By the time she reached his face he was smiling with one eyebrow arched. Well, she'd never been bashful before, why start now? Besides, he was gay, like all the other hot men in the world, and practically married to the man standing next to her. She could look, just not touch since it'd probably gross him out.

Tail swishing between her legs, she quickly wrapped it around her thigh and prayed no one had seen her little slip up. She liked to call them blips, but when explaining “blips” to Tasheka, the word just seemed to piss the woman off even more. The silken hair tickled her legs and she hoped pleasantries would get underway. She really needed to get somewhere private to take care of her spontaneous fur problem. *Any second now, guys.*

Chapter Three

"That was fast." Daniel winced internally and cursed himself. He didn't imagine Gina appearing on his doorstep wearing next to nothing meant she was here because of what he and Patrick had discussed. Dammit, couldn't Patrick have called and warned him? That was why they had cell phones. Sort of.

Best play it off somehow. Then again, when he looked at Patrick the man just smirked at him, proving that his lover was well aware of his discomfort. He cleared his throat. "Hey Gina, uh, I guess you ran into Patrick in the park." *Stupid.* He turned his attention to Patrick for some help. "Andy not up to much of a walk today?"

Please play along, please. Before I get a fucking hard-on in front of her, for her ... in her. No. Wrong way for my thoughts to turn.

Patrick released the dog's leash and Andy bound into the townhouse. Odd since the dog rarely left his side when he was home. He'd had Andy for years before becoming Patrick's partner and the dog was practically a second mate. Minus the sex, of course.

"Actually, Andy was in mind for a run." He raised his eyebrows, shocked that the big bear of a dog who normally hated walks wanted to run. Patrick continued. "In fact, he ran Gina up a *tree*." Patrick nudged Gina forward and across the threshold. "I now leave her to your tender mercies while I go hunt for her shoes." Patrick leaned in and pressed a quick kiss to his lips, and then jogged down the steps. "Bye, Gi!"

With that, Patrick did exactly as he promised and left him with Gina. He wanted to scream at the man to come back, but the words died in his throat as the woman in question skirted around him and into their home. Her ass brushed his hip and he fought the urge to grasp her and grind his growing erection into her ass. *Fuck.*

Why did Patrick have to leave him with her? After all they'd talked about this afternoon, he had to bring the object of their collective lust home with him? Now?

She moved silently as a cat in their home. One moment she stood in the hallway with him and the next she'd disappeared, little bits of dirt and grass the only evidence that she hadn't been a dream.

Daniel followed her trail through his home. He passed one door and then another. When he strode past the living room, he noticed Andy doing his best to fit his two hundred pound body underneath their leather couch. What the hell was *up* with that dog?

The muffled footsteps above him wrenched his attention away from their pet and back to the woman. His woman. *Their* woman. Okay, in his dreams maybe, but nothing could change the fact that she was there, in their house, and *he* was getting the chance to take care of *her*. The reasons, whys, and wherefores didn't matter any longer. He and Patrick had talked, agreed and sealed the decision with a good old fashioned fuck before Patrick had taken the dog for his daily walk. Only ... he hadn't imagined his lover jumping into things so fast. Or maybe it was just fate fucking with them. Either way, he wasn't about to look a gift horse in the mouth.

Holding his towel, he took the stairs two at a time, ignoring the smudges of dirt on the polished stairs. His inner neat-freak wanted him to stop and wipe the floor clean, but lust rode him hard, right beside nerves and just behind anticipation.

He didn't find her on the second floor, a quick look into the spare bedrooms and

office revealed that she'd been there, but wasn't there now. Again he bounded up the stairs. The third floor only held the master suite. *Oh. Shit.* He stopped at the top of the stairs and begged his dick to soften, willed his heart rate to slow.

Years. Years of listening to tales of Gina's antics, humor and unrelenting loyalty had him feeling emotions that he wasn't sure were justified just yet. At least, he didn't think she'd believe him if he ran in with a raging hard on and words of love and shit. Okay, it probably wasn't love, but it was definitely lust with a big heaping helping of like. Yeah, lots and lots of like. He stared down at his cock, straining against the weight of the towel wrapped around his waist. About eight inches of solid, nail pounding, like.

Daniel closed his eyes and tipped back his head. He took a deep cleansing breath and shook off the lust riding him like a damned bronco and straightened his shoulders. He could do this. He could be the nice amenable guy that takes care of the girl without any sexual overtones. Yeah. This, this he could do. He swallowed past the lump in his throat and stepped into the bedroom. He heard their guest tinkering in the bathroom and assumed she was looking for first aid supplies. He wasn't going to tell her that they had some in the kitchen downstairs. Not when he had her so close to a bed and... *No.* Not going there. Not *yet* anyway.

Attention focused on the bathroom door, he slipped into a pair of loose-fitting shorts. His cock, still half-hard, caught on the elastic and he wondered for a moment if he should slip on a pair of briefs to help keep the *Big Man Below* restrained. A muffled curse reached his ears and he decided against any further clothing. Gina sounded as if she were in pain and here he was, wondering how best to handle his dick. *Asshole.*

He strode toward the open bathroom door and stepped over the threshold only to be pole-axed by the vision before him. Gina, all curves, spit and fire, was sitting on the bathroom counter, legs forming a V that left her completely open to his gaze. One leg dangled and bounced against the cabinets while the other foot was resting on the counter, pressed against her ass on the smooth granite beneath her. And she wasn't wearing panties or knickers or underwear, or whatever the fuck you called the damned material that should have been hiding her most intimate place from his view. Nope, the most perfectly constructed woman in the world was propped open, pink and slick and damned if he didn't want to sink to his knees in front of her. He wanted to make a meal of her pussy, gorge himself on her for as long as she let him.

Gina's attention was focused on her leg and while she seemed oblivious to his presence, he decided to look his fill. Perverted? Absolutely. He'd proudly state his status as the Perverts Club President if it meant he could stare at this woman. Her kinky, curly black hair hung like a curtain, shielding her face from his view. Good thing there was a lot more of her he could look at for now. The dress she wore clung to her curves, outlining the generous swell of her breasts, the curve of her stomach and flare of her hips. When his gaze landed on her lush thighs, his perusal ended. Damn. That tree Andy had chased her up did a number on the skin of her thighs and here he was...

"Enjoying the view?"

Her deep voice had him wrenching his eyes from the V of her thighs to the wall just to his right. He opened the door to the linen closet and extracted a small towel. Eyes averted, he approached her with a few long strides and started to place the towel where she, hell *he*, needed it most. Woman must not know just how tempting her sweet looking pussy was. Eyes closed, he waited until she took the towel from his hand to open them

again. She hadn't done what he thought she'd do. She was busy wiping the tiny beads of sweat from her brow. Without a word, he snatched it from her and shoved it at her groin. Women.

"Ow." She glared at him.

"Sorry, but..." He gestured to her lap, blush heating his cheeks.

Gina tucked the towel between her legs. "Look, if you're getting squeamish, looking at my *vag*, all you had to do was say so. I didn't finger you for a prude since you answered the door in a towel and up until now, sported a nice looking rod in your pants, which got me thinking you guys were bi, but whatever."

If he hadn't been paying such close attention to her, he would have missed it. He would have missed the spark of hurt followed by embarrassment that flashed across her face just before she glared at him and went back to cleaning the scratches on her inner thigh. He opened his mouth to ... what? Explain? Yeah, explain. Maybe not the whole thing since he couldn't grow balls big enough to do that without Patrick at his side, but he could tell her a little. Too bad she had other ideas.

One hand tucked between her legs, holding the towel in place, she glared at him again. "This is all Patrick's fault. He knows I live a few blocks over, but instead of taking me home, what does he do?"

He didn't think she really wanted an answer, so he kept his mouth shut.

"He brings me here where his hubby answers the door in nothing but a towel and a smile."

He almost added, "and a hard-on", but didn't.

"So, he knows I'm adventurous and what the hell was I supposed to think when he leaves us alone? I figured, 'Hey, the gay guys want a swing on the bi-way, but don't know how to ask and they're hot as hell, so why not?' And a few minutes ago you were staring at me as if I'm a downed gazelle and you're a starving lion and then you're covering *me* up. *Men*."

Her attention returned to her scrapes and she widened her legs, probably in an attempt to get to the rest of her scratches. He heard her mumbling under her breath about some guy named Teague and he made a note to ask Patrick about the man later. His lover hadn't mentioned that they might have competition. When she sucked in a quick breath and hissed, he decided it was time to take over. With only one hand available to wipe and tug at her skin, she wasn't having much luck and it seemed like she was hurting more than helping herself.

Daniel snagged a cotton ball, doused it in Bactine and dropped to his knees ... which was probably a mistake. Because now, he could smell her scent. Not that of her skin or clothes, but *her*.

"Here, let me." He brushed her hands aside and he could feel her glare. Deserved or not, he hated it. He hated that he'd managed to fuck everything up within minutes of being left alone with her. He wasn't a words guy and somehow, he thought she'd have enough for the both of them. Too bad they seemed to be the wrong ones.

As carefully as he could, he wiped away the bits of dirt and flakes of bark that'd become embedded in her skin. Droplets of blood stained the cotton ball and each time she tensed, he blew a warm breath across her skin. He hoped it soothed the ache and took the sting away. He urged her to bend her knee further, exposing more of her skin and allowing him to reach the rest of her scratches.

The left leg cleaned, he wrapped his fingers around her ankle and slowly lowered it before he turned his attention to her right leg. With each passing second, the scent of her musk seemed to grow thicker, stronger. It invaded his senses, beckoning him to take the tiniest of tastes, but he resisted.

Attention focused on her right thigh, he never heard Patrick return. Didn't hear the telltale thump of his big feet on the smooth staircase or the normal groaning and shifting of wood when he stepped on that spot just at the end of the bed, feet from the bathroom. No, it wasn't until Patrick spoke, that he realized his long-time lover had come home.

"What do we have here?"

Daniel froze and he felt Gina grow tense beneath his hands. He could only imagine the picture they presented to Patrick with Daniel on his knees, between Gina's plump thighs as she breathed deep. Patrick wouldn't know it was from pain and not pleasure that had her moaning. He wouldn't be able to see the towel pressed firmly between her legs, shielding her from his view. They hadn't ever actually discussed whether they'd "be" with Gina individually, they'd only talked of the possibility of bringing her into their relationship. *Shit.*

Daniel rocked back on his heels and prepared to face Patrick when his lover's hand slapped him on the shoulder. "Damn. You had me there, Danny. I thought maybe I was going to get to watch the two of you together and find that you're only helping her get cleaned up."

He stared at Patrick as if he'd grown two heads.

Patrick looked confused. "What?" Patrick's gaze darted between him and Gina and the man had to notice her "I'd like to kick your ass" look. "Well, not *just* cleaning her up, but ya know... Gina, you get it, right? I thought I'd get to witness a little ac..." Patrick's attention settled on Daniel. "There's obviously something I've missed and I'm digging myself deep, huh?"

Gina answered for him. "Not at all. I had just asked Daniel if he'd like a little Gina for dinner and you interrupted him. So, Daniel, care for some Gina tonight? I hear I'm great with a glass of Merlot." She brought her knee down fast and nearly clipped him in the chin. He shot to his feet and stood next to his lover and she hopped to the floor, wincing when her feet connected with the tile. "You two wouldn't have a nice bottle hidden around her somewhere, would you?" She winked and smiled.

He spoke up. "Tell you what, uh, why don't you finish cleaning up, take a shower if you'd like to get clean, and we'll figure out something for dinner. It's the least we can do since Andy ran you up a tree." *And we want to spend more time with you,* he silently added. Patrick opened his mouth and Daniel slung his arm over his shoulders, squeezing just a smidge too hard. "We'll see you in a few."

Chapter Four

And 'mans thought *she* was a freak. Dayum. Those two were all over the charts and had her tagging along behind them like a damned puppy, which pissed her off even more considering she was of the feline persuasion. She went from appreciative, to excited, to pissed and then settled on frustrated when Patrick finally showed up. Of course, he just pushed her back to being a testy bitch and managed to confuse her even more. *Men*.

But these were men with a gorgeous bathroom whose dog had caused her grievous injury. Okay, not so grievous since the scratches would heal by morning, but she wasn't going to let them in on that little secret. Then again, Patrick already knew. Whether he remembered or not was another story, which had been good for Gina until she developed a Texas-sized crush on her boss ... and his boyfriend. Damn them for getting her all confused with their teasing and quick changes.

Gina finished toweling off and slipped into the shorts and t-shirt Patrick left her before he went downstairs with Daniel. She had to admit, taking a nice hot shower and rinsing away the dirt and tree bits did improve her mood. A little. And the clothes they left were one hundred percent cotton and that pleased her inner cat to no end. The beastie hated synthetics. The smell... She shuddered. *Gross*. Plus, the boxers meant that hopefully her tail wouldn't be making an appearance. All she had to do was sit through a nice "I'm sorry" dinner, wait for her dress to be cleaned and then she was on her way. Hell, she may even have a job tomorrow since that damned dog decided to play chase the big-assed kitty up the tree. After nearly breaking Daniel's hand she'd been a bit worried about her employment situation, but dog-chasing employee up a tree trumped a broken hand any day.

She rubbed the towel through her hair one last time. Glancing in the mirror, she grimaced at her appearance. Damn, without her hair products the mop top was unruly as all get-out. Curl after curl stuck out this way and that, and she knew that if her hair air-dried she'd end up with a Greek-fro. Not much she could do about it now.

She tossed the wet towel into the laundry bin and padded through Patrick and Daniel's bedroom. On the way up she'd taken a moment to appreciate the dark, solid wood furniture, earth tones and simple decorations. A sense of clean and calm seemed to radiate from the room, something Gina's hectic, hurly burly life had never known.

With a sigh, she padded down the wood steps and noticed that someone had cleaned the mess she'd made on her way up. At the time, she felt bad about making such a mess, but all she'd wanted was to get the icky bark and dirt off. *Yuck*. After today's excursion, she decided she'd never again walk more than the distance between her and a car. Ever.

Oh well, at least the aches and pains weren't for nothing. Now she'd get to spend an evening with two gorgeous men who, out of pity or duty, were going to feed and take care of her. That was more than she'd had in longer than she could remember. Sure, Tasheka and Sam at Half-were House took care of all the residents, but tonight, it was all about *her*.

At the bottom of the stairs on the first floor, as she gazed around the perfectly put-together room before her, a soft moan stole her attention away. She paused, and a groan drifted through the house. Not a clink of silverware or scrape of pots on the stove reached

her ears, but the soft whimper of pleasure that hit her next could be heard loud and clear.

Silently, she made her way through the living room and toward what she thought was the kitchen. Gina pressed her body against the wall and listed, just listened ... for now.

"More." *Oh, God, Patrick.* "Mmm ... that's it. Suck it. Suck my cock."

Gina's knees went weak and damn if her pussy didn't start throbbing in time with the sucks and licks she could hear. If only ... No. *No.* She was *not* going to peek around the wall and watch an intimate, private moment between two committed lovers who were hotter than the sun. Nope. Nothing...

Maybe just a little look. They know I'm here, right?

Okay, maybe they didn't know she was *here* here, but Patrick knew she was in the house and just about as sexually adventurous as they came. Shit, Tash threatened more than once to send her out into the world with a warning label tattooed on her ass.

Resolve dissolving, she flipped around, pressing her front to the eggshell white wall. Inch by inch, she scooted closer to the doorway until she could peek around the corner. And what she saw nearly brought her to her knees. This was one thousand times better than the best gay porn you could buy. Maybe even a million times better. And Gina knew. Being a connoisseur of man on man cock sucking, she knew what was happening mere feet from her should have gone into the *Guinness Book of World Records*.

Daniel, big, burly man's man, was on his knees in front of Patrick; not that Patrick wasn't a formidable male, but Daniel oozed testosterone with every snicker, smile and sway of his hips as he walked. Wide shoulders, trim waist, he was sleek and muscular at the same time. She and Patrick had discussed Daniel's *physical* attributes a time or twenty during breaks at work, Patrick tend to describe their sex life in detail over a celebratory glass of wine after hours, and Gina hadn't ever thought of him as a *giver*. Turned out, she was wrong.

The man was on his knees in front of Patrick, body snuggled close to his lover's thighs as if he hated any space between them and his mouth. Holy shit, that mouth worked Patrick's cock like he'd been born to.

With every slide up Patrick's length, he left a glistening wake of saliva and also afforded her the perfect view of her boss's dick. Her mouth watered. From her vantage point she could see that Patrick's cock was long and thick when erect and she ached to drop to her knees next to Daniel and get a few tastes of her own.

"Fuck, yeah, baby. Suck it," Patrick growled.

Daniel sucked so hard on the next upstroke that his cheeks hollowed until he released his lover's cock with a pop. "Do it. You know you want to, Trick. Say her name."

Gina squeezed her thighs together and bit her lip on a whimper. She wiggled back and forth, trying to cool the burning ache between her legs. The skin of her lower back tingled and itched and she knew without touching the skin that her tail wanted to come out and play. Hell, her tail just wanted her to come. The inner kitty was jonesing for some action and she knew from experience that she didn't have much power against the beast.

Patrick, her sweet boss who never had a harsh word for anyone, fisted Daniel's hair and wrenched his lover's head back. Her gasp was swallowed by Daniel's. "You want me to say it? Want me to pretend you're her while I fuck your pretty face?"

Fuck, she wanted him to pretend. She wanted to hear Patrick fantasize about getting a blowjob from a woman. Without a doubt, she heard the word *her* and not *him* from Patrick and that just ratcheted her libido, and prime time fantasies, right up there.

Patrick shoved his dick back into Daniel's mouth and a great moan reverberated through the kitchen. Patrick? Or Daniel? One of the two *really* enjoyed what happened just now. And dang it, she enjoyed it too. Even more, she was going to enjoy it a lot better in two... She slid her right hand down the wall, clit throbbing in anticipation. She dipped her hand beneath the elastic of the boxers she wore. Her fingertips danced along the skin of her abdomen and she dipped them into the top of her slit. A sweet, achy shudder worked through her from head to toe with just that tiny bit of contact. *Oh, yeah.*

Moans and groans mixed with deep, heavy breathing mixed with her own sighs of pleasure as she circled her clit. Her juices already coated her pussy from core to the hood of the tiny nubbin, giving her plenty of lubrication to work with. Shivers and streaks of undeniable pleasure slid over her from head to toe. Finger performing a dance her body knew by heart, she watched, transfixed by the men in the next room.

Patrick's hips shifted and thrust his cock into Daniel's mouth and she couldn't miss the look of pure rapture on his face. She also couldn't miss the raging hard-on her boss's lover was sprouting. It strained beneath his sweatpants.

She circled her clit in time with Patrick's body, for every thrust and retreat, she circled the blood-engorged nub with her fingertip. Not too hard and not too soft, she held herself on the brink of orgasm as the men in the other room worked toward theirs. Her fantasy had been shattered up in the bathroom, earlier in the evening, but she could have this one stolen moment with the two men before she went along with her life. Tomorrow ... tomorrow she'd have to go to work and live through days that ate at her fantasies, but each night she could cherish this seductive, illicit memory.

"Fuck, yeah. Gonna come in that sweet mouth," Patrick whispered, low and husky. Daniel moaned. "Gonna shoot my load down your throat and you're going to drink every drop." *Ewwww. It sounds sexy, but tastes nasty!*

Daniel's eyes drifted close and Gina imagined sucking Patrick's cock with her boss' lover. Daniel could remain locked to the shaft while she sank lower between Patrick's legs, licking and sucking his balls into her mouth as she massaged and stroked his perineum. With the two of them making love to Patrick with their mouths, he wouldn't be able to *not* come like a freight train.

Yeah, she could imagine coming that hard. Body jerking uncontrollably as frissons of pleasure coursed through her veins. From toe to tail to head, a person could happily die from that much pleasure.

Patrick sped up his tempo and so did she. She couldn't come with the men in her or around her, but she sure as shit was going to come with them. When Daniel palmed his cock, her pussy clenched. She could do that for him. She could stroke one and suck another. She had *very* good coordination, donchaknow.

"Yeah, stroke your cock, get it good and hard. Gonna come with me, yeah?"

Daniel moaned in response, as if saying "Fuck, yeah."

Patrick's movements became uneven, jerking. "Gonna come, gonna come down your throat." He took a heaving breath and Gina increased her pace again. Her pussy clenched rhythmically. Again and again it sought something to fill it. So close to coming, as close as the men not feet from her. And then, Patrick spoke again, shattering her world into thousands of tiny pieces.

"Yeah, suck it, Gina. Suck my cock and make me come. Fuck, yeah. S'good, Gina."

Gina. Fuck me. He'd called her name and before she could think better of it or slam

on her body's brakes, the building pleasure overtook her in a near blinding wave. The sudden tsunami of her climax rushed through her veins. Muscles spasmed, contracting and releasing in a rhythm only her body could control and not connected to her brain. Her voice, so quiet for so long, rose and rose in a keening cry. Her toes curled into the plush carpet beneath her feet and her hips jerked against her hand, hipbones colliding with the wall with each wave of sensation.

The shudders slowly died down and she turned around, pressing her back against the wall. She slid down the sturdy surface until her ass collided with the carpeted floor and she let her head slump forward. *Ho-ly shit*. That was a world class orgasm; one for the record books, without a doubt. She slid her hand free of her boxers and just as she was about to wipe her fingers clean on her shirt, a large hand wrapped around her wrist.

"Ah, ah, that's mine." She followed the hand to the man's wrist and up and up and up, and met eyes with Daniel.

"Hey, I get a taste, too." Her attention shot to Patrick.

It'd be good if the ground opened up and swallowed her whole right about now. But since it didn't, she figured she'd work with what Sekhmet gave her. Still a little unsure about what she'd witnessed and how they were going to react to ... well, everything. She decided to play it cool. She swallowed past the lump in her throat. "Oh, hey guys, didn't, uh, hear you come in."

Patrick lowered himself to a crouch next to her and smiled. "Uh, huh. That's because you were too busy coming. As were we." Patrick extended his hand and she thought he was going to reach for hers, but instead, he dipped between her legs and brought up ... *her tail*. "Gina, you got some 'splainin to do."

Chapter Five

"Leave it out."

Three words and Gina's world turned on its axis. Sure, at home within the walls of Half-were House, she never once thought twice of letting her tail sway in the breeze; but *here*, in Patrick and Daniel's townhouse? *Um, no*. She eyed Daniel warily, her attention pinging between the two men. She'd quietly excuse herself to the restroom with the hope that distance would allow her to regain control over the kitty within. Then, Daniel's words froze her.

"Um, excuse me?"

"Leave. It. Out. I like it." Daniel stepped closer. He snaked an arm around her and stroked the fur where her tail emerged from beneath the boxers. "It's so soft, silky. You seem to be more comfortable this way so," he shrugged, "leave it out."

Comfortable? Ha! She was anything but comfortable right now. With a twitch, her tail was free of Daniel's grasp and flicking him in the chest. While most cats could never boast of her level of muscle control, Gina had spent many years learning how to use her tail almost as if it were a third hand. "Leave it out? That's all you've got to say when you find me sprawled on your living room floor with a *tail*?"

He smiled and rocked back on his heels. "Yup."

She rolled to her feet and whirled on Patrick. "I assume your *boyfriend* is taking this so well because you told him about us." He nodded. "Patrick, how could you? We're supposed to be a secret from 'mans. Sekhmet gets pissy and starts killing people for letting humans in on our little secret and now you've gone and told him when there was no reason to. Specifically, you told him about *me*." She narrowed her eyes and poked him in the chest with her left hand when all he did was smile in response.

"I couldn't *not* tell him, Gina. Not when we started talking about kids and he wanted me to be the donor for a surrogate. What would have happened if the kid sprouted a *tail* someday? Gee, honey, I forgot to tell you I've got a bit of kitten in my family tree?" Patrick snorted. "Not likely."

She rubbed her forehead with her right hand and squeezed the bridge of her nose. "I can't believe this. So, Danny-boy, you've known about me for how long? Hell, you probably know about everyone in the office, too, huh?" A hand encircled the end of her tail and she tugged it free, whacking the offending fingers. "Quit it and answer the question, Danny-boy."

He chuckled. "Six months, at least. I was a little skeptical at first, but uh ... Patrick demonstrated for me at the office one day."

That got her attention. "Demonstrated? Patrick's *were* is so diluted that it's nearly non-existent. How the hell did he demonstrate?" Confused, her attention bounced between Patrick and Daniel.

Patrick had the grace to blush. *Good, let him be embarrassed*. "Remember the, uh, office incident a while ago?"

She whipped her tail from Daniel's chest and whacked Patrick on the side of the head. "You did that on *purpose*? You *ass*. I walked in on the two of you making out like teenagers. You mean to tell me that you got me hot and bothered enough to sprout a tail

and you did it as a science experiment to show your little boy toy what happens to a cat when her itch doesn't get scratched." Her tail and left hand worked in tandem to slap Patrick, once on the side of the head and once on the shoulder. "You. Ass."

She spun away from the two men, hurt and embarrassed that her nature had been used against her not once, but twice. They'd probably set up the little blowjob display so that Daniel could get a better look at her more furry attributes. She needed to go, get out, leave. Shoes or no shoes, her jiggly ass was getting away from the two fur freaks as soon as she could.

Gina strode past the den, "Bye Andy." The dog whimpered. Good. She hoped the damn thing pissed the rug too. They deserved to have to clean up after a fur ball.

Hand on the front doorknob, she flipped the deadbolt and opened the door, only to have it slammed shut again by... He was tall, wide, smelled of smooth woodsy spices... *Daniel*. The reason for her embarrassment. Without pausing to think, she whipped her tail behind her and straight up, between Daniel's legs. It may be fluffy, but there was substance to it and she'd worked hard at developing *those* muscles. *Hellooooo family jewels*.

Daniel dropped like a stone with a curse on his lips.

She whirled on him, staring down at the writhing man and a hint of remorse crept into her mind. He really did look to be in a lot of pain. A. Lot. She wrapped her tail around her waist, stroking the soft fur as she waited for Daniel to recover. Patrick dashed into the room and crouched by his lover's side.

"You okay?"

Daniel nodded. *Well, that was good, right?*

Patrick's focus shifted to her and she rethought her decision of waiting to see if Danny-boy was okay. She really should've gotten gone while the getting was good. He growled at her, eyes burning bright with anger and something else, some emotion she couldn't quite place. "Gina, help me get him up and then we're going into the living room to talk."

She didn't move. Sure, Patrick probably only had the tiniest bit of *were* buried deep in his blood, but right now, she saw every ounce of angry lion come to the surface.

"Gina," he growled.

She bent and helped Patrick drag Daniel to his feet. Together, they scuffled to the living room, taking tiny steps so that they didn't hurt Daniel further. Dang, now *she* was starting to feel bad. And she'd been the wronged party!

They settled Daniel on the couch. She slumped down to the cushions with him, hoping to prevent any further pain. She knew her tail could do damage when she wanted to, she just didn't know quite how much strength she had.

She slipped her arm free of Daniel's shoulders and shifted to stand, only to be brought up short by Patrick's barked order. "Stay."

Gina glared at him. "Do I look like a dog to you?"

*

Patrick took a moment to calm himself. No sense in saying anything else to piss the little she-cat off. Already this entire encounter had spun out of control and he wasn't sure how to take command again. Leaving Daniel and Gina alone had been a stroke of genius as far as he was concerned. Too bad it hadn't worked out very well.

Then, he thought they'd snag her interest again by allowing her to be the kinky little

voyeur they knew her to be. And look how great that had turned out. Nope, he and Daniel were batting a thousand, basically missing each pitch and striking out with their little *were* and now looked to be the right time to lay it all on the table. *All* of it.

He didn't spare a glance for Daniel. Now, all of his attention was on the agitated feline before him. Her tail rest in her lap, the tip flicking wildly, showing how truly pissed she was. *Damn*. No sense in delaying the inevitable arguing, though. Now that she'd come to her own *wrong* conclusions, he knew he'd be hard pressed to change her mind. Didn't mean he wasn't going to try though. His and Daniel's future depended on her trusting and believing everything he was about to say.

"Uh..." Yeah, he was an idiot, grade A and if he was in the majors, his ass would be benched.

"Uh. *Uh*. That's all you have to say?" She jumped to her feet and he followed.

"Sit. Down."

Gina stared at him a moment. He didn't know where all of this possessiveness and aggression was coming from, but it seemed to be the only thing she responded to. He made a note of the tone he used when she slowly lowered herself back to the couch.

"As I was saying. This *was not* some ploy to get our jollies off at your expense, Gi." Daniel snorted and Patrick kicked him in the shin. "Okay, I should say it wasn't entirely a ploy to get our jollies off at your expense." Damn, he needed a drink. "We..." He looked to Daniel and silently begged him to finish what he'd started.

His lover obliged. "We wanted to see what your reaction, in private, would be to the two of us. We wanted ... you."

The color drained from Gina's face and Patrick wondered if their kitten was about to pass out. "Me?" She squeaked, more in an impersonation of a mouse instead of the deep seductive voice he was used to.

"You," Daniel confirmed, and Patrick nodded his agreement.

"I've been attracted to you from the moment you started working for me, and Daniel... Daniel's been listening to my stories about you at dinner every night." He swallowed and felt a low burning begin in his neck and travel up his cheeks. Fuck, he was blushing. "And during other times as well."

Her eyes widened and it seemed she'd caught on. "That wasn't the first time..."

"No, it wasn't the first time you've entered our sex lives." His admission hung in the air between the three of them, taking on a life of its own as the truth came out.

"Oh."

Confusion overrode his embarrassment, "Oh? That's all you have to say?"

"What do you want me to say, Patrick? Ooh, goody? You two seem to be leagues ahead of me in this game, so why don't you spell out *exactly* what you want for the slow people, namely me, in the room." Fire burned in her eyes and his cock responded. It didn't matter that he'd just come down Daniel's throat. Nope, his cock wanted to come deep within her *now*.

"Fine. You wanted it spelled out?"

She nodded once. "And without euphemisms please."

"We want you, Gina. In our bed, beneath us, our cocks buried deep within your pussy *and* ass at the same time. We want to fuck you and make love to you until we all pass out from the pleasure."

She smiled and Patrick felt as if twenty fly balls were coming his way at once and he

didn't know which one to catch. He watched her, wary of the sudden change in mood. He'd expected his blunt language to piss her off, as it would most women, but Gina surprised him again.

"Let me get this straight. You both know of the fur and you want me to hop into bed with you to be used like some cheap sex toy?"

Daniel elbowed him. "Idiot."

She spoke up and surprised them both. "Fine. I can be a fuck toy with the best of them. Besides, I've been dying to sink my claws into the two of you since ... forever. You guys really need to work on how you send your signals. I've been confused since Patrick picked me up in the park." She tipped her head back and inhaled, slow. "Is that dinner I smell? I'm starving and ya'll are going to feed me before we get our freak on."

She rose from the couch, tail swinging behind her. Well, almost swinging. Its motion was inhibited by the leg of her boxers and he could tell it irked her by the agitated flick of the tip. Before Patrick could utter a word about her acquiescence or offer her something else to wear, she peeled the boxers down her thighs. "Ah, much better."

Patrick squeezed Daniel's thigh. *Ho-ly shit*. Not feet from him was the most perfectly rounded, heart-shaped ass he'd ever seen. Plump and full, it jiggled with every step and he couldn't wait to slap his hand against her cheeks and watch as they reddened beneath his assault. And there, nestled between the cleft of her ass, was the most beautiful, fluffy, spotted tail he'd ever seen. With the boxers gone, he could see where it emerged from her skin at the base of her spine to sway seductively between her legs, shifting and dancing with each step she took. He wanted that ass, wanted to feel that tail against his skin ... just plain wanted *her*.

Patrick pulled a recovered Daniel from the couch and tugged him along. "Come on, it's time to eat."

Chapter Six

Dinner had been ... strained. Gina shook her head then took a sip of wine and snuggled deeper into the couch cushions. No, strained didn't even begin to cover everything. The two men obviously had never engaged in a frivolous affair. Okay, to her it wasn't frivolous, what with her never ending crush on the guys. But for those two, she knew it had to just be a fling. She was a sex toy, something the gay guys could experiment with while broadening their sexual horizons. She giggled and the next thing she knew, her glass was plucked from her hand.

"Hey!"

Daniel nuzzled her neck from behind and planted a soft kiss just below her ear. "Hey yourself. Don't want you too drunk, we *do* have plans, you know."

"Mmm..." she sighed. "Plans."

She couldn't wait. Really. Couldn't. Wait.

Gina lifted her arms around Daniel's neck and tilted her head to the side. She sifted her fingers through his hair, enjoying the feeling of his silky strands sliding across her skin. *What would it feel like to have that hair touch me ... everywhere?*

"Starting without me?" Patrick asked from the doorway. Now this she could handle. The stilted dinner conversation while the men did their damndest to figure her out had nearly bored her to tears. But sex? Sex, she could do. Besides, it'd been a long time since someone's hands, other than hers, had touched her intimately.

Patrick closed the distance between them and crouched on the ground between her knees. Now, shedding her boxers earlier in the evening had turned out to be a marvelous idea. She just hoped his position inspired him as it was inspiring her right then.

Daniel's lips left her for a moment as he slipped free of her hold. Out of the corner of her eye, she watched as he placed her wineglass on a side table and then he returned. He wrapped his arms around her from behind, hands skimming the exposed skin of her arms and then resting on her stomach, just below her breasts. Slow, they moved slow, with deliberate shifts and touches, so sweet that they didn't want to frighten her. She could sense their hesitancy and she loved them for their care.

Patrick skimmed her thighs with his hands, his attention focused on her lap as he touched her. She reached out with her tail, brushing the tops of his hands as he stroked her. The higher he eased along her thighs, the wider she shifted them. Subtle wasn't in her vocabulary. Ever.

The bottom of her shirt covered where she wanted him most, but that didn't seem like a deterrent to him. He flipped the fabric up and both men groaned.

"What?" Suddenly self-conscious, she tried to bring her knees together. Patrick wasn't having it.

"You are gorgeous, Gina."

"Fucking beautiful," Daniel echoed.

Patrick's fingers stroked her lower lips, the tiniest, barest of touches. "She's bare."

She started to say "No shit, Sherlock," but realized that Patrick wasn't talking to her, he was talking to Daniel. Then, he touched her again with a firmer hand and all thoughts of sarcastic retorts flew from her mind. Now, all of her attention was focused on the man

between her thighs as he petted her pussy. He stroked her slit, slipping from top to bottom and with each successive pass, she grew hotter, wetter. Those fingers that normally handed her work and signed her paycheck were now teasing and caressing her. Her cunt clenched and clit throbbed with his gentle, tender branding on her sensitive flesh. Up and down he stroked, stoking the burning, scorching rush in her blood.

Daniel's arms shifted and dragged along the fabric of her shirt until he slipped his hands beneath the hem. Then, warm hands rubbed along her abdomen, shifting higher until he cupped her breasts, fingers plucking her hardened nipples.

"Yes," she hissed, arching into Daniel's touch and rocking her hips in a silent beg to Patrick. Both men chuckled. *The bastards.*

Soon, soft, tender lips seared her skin. Daniel nipped and licked the side of her neck, nuzzling her just below her ear while he continued to stroke and play with her breasts. He kneaded them, pinching the nipples lightly and occasionally adding a twist to the tormented nubs. The pinches, pulls and strokes shot straight to her overly-teased pussy, causing the ache and needy warmth to grow in intensity.

Patrick's caresses grew in strength. His fingertips separated her labia, sliding easily through her cream. He circled the opening of her pussy, teasing her by sliding a finger into her throbbing cunt and then withdrawing just as quickly. She rocked her hips, aching for deeper penetration and all she got was a deep, male chuckle in return.

Finally, she gave up. Gina let her head loll against the back of the couch and opened her body fully to the two men since they seemed to be content with keeping her on edge. She figured she'd ride that edge, the aching sweetness of being kept on the brink.

Patrick circled her clit with his thumb and she forced herself not to move, to allow him to give her the pleasure she craved instead of chasing it as she usually did. Tremors started at her toes, forcing them to curl and grab onto the carpet. They shivered and shook up her legs to pause at the juncture of her thighs, the concentration of her pleasure.

Daniel murmured in her ear, his words, as much as his hands, driving her arousal higher. "He wants to taste your sweet pussy, wants to lap at that cream like the cat he is. Open your legs for him. Let him drink you up, Gina."

She moaned, another wave of arousal pouring through her veins. She opened her thighs wide, praying that Daniel's words weren't just a tease.

The first touch of Patrick's tongue on her clit rocketed her into heaven. She felt like a kitten that'd gotten into the year's supply of catnip. Her back arched of its own volition, pressing, no shoving her pussy into Patrick's face as he became intimately acquainted with her. His fingers suddenly filled her cunt, stretching her while rubbing that sweet spot deep within. She shouted. "Yes!"

Gina gripped Patrick's head, holding him exactly as she wished as he pleased her and he growled in response, pulling her hands away and placing them on her thighs.

"He likes control; likes figuring out exactly how to make you scream his name. You want to scream for him, don't you? Want to come with his name on your lips." Daniel's wicked words filtered through her mind. His hands stayed occupied with her breasts and she reveled in the attention the two men gave her, rejoiced in it.

Patrick continued to fuck her with his fingers, stroking in and out of her cunt with a steadily increasing speed while Daniel whispered those naughty words into her ear.

"Once we're done playing with you, we'll go upstairs and fuck that pretty little pussy of yours. You want that, don't you, Gina? Want us deep in your cunt, coming on our

cocks. We'll make you come until your body can't anymore."

Her pussy spasmed and clenched around Patrick's fingers, the muscles of her body tightening and releasing with each subsequent wave of ecstasy. Daniel pinched her nipples, hard, and the shot of pain went straight to her clit causing her to cry out.

"Yeah, you want to come, don't you? Come on Patrick's face; let him lap at that sweet cream. He's earned it."

Gina's hands curled into fists, fighting the urge to direct Patrick to where she desired his tongue the most. Then ... then he latched onto her clit, circling the tiny, aroused nubbin with his tongue while he sucked. Round and round he went, flicking and licking her as if she *were* the rarest and tastiest of creams. Harder and faster he worked her pussy until finally ... finally she came, pussy spasming and clenching around his fingers, back arched and muscles convulsing as her body reacted. She absorbed the waves of pleasure pouring through her, carrying her away with each ebb and flow dancing along her nerves.

Patrick slowed his attentions as her spasms died away, pressing soft, chaste kisses to her lower lips while Daniel tenderly petted her breasts, rubbing tiny circles on them. His lips, never far from her neck, continued to kiss and caress the skin below her ear. He murmured softly against her, telling her how wonderful she was, how good she had performed for Patrick, for *them*.

Patrick laid his head on her thigh, hands petting her legs as he caught his breath as well. His eyes, the pure blue of a mid-day sky, met hers and he smiled. Not the smile she normally got from him while at work. No, this was a smile containing emotions she dared not ever hope or wish for from him. She spared a glance for Daniel and saw hints of the same emotion. *Oh hell no!*

They couldn't do this to her. Not now, not after they'd discussed her being their toy. She'd spent too long protecting herself, and her heart, to have it crushed by these two men.

Quick as the cat who shared her body, Gina untangled herself from Patrick and Daniel's grasps and made a beeline for the stairs. Standing on the first step, she threw them a smiling invitation. "Last one in bed has to watch!"

She bolted, jogging up the steps as quickly as her out of shape body, complete with jiggle thighs, would let her. Behind her, she heard the thump of male feet pounding on the wood. She redoubled her efforts. It wouldn't be any fun to let them catch her on the stairs. As sexy as stairway sex sounded, she didn't imagine it'd be much fun in application.

By the time she crested the stairs, she was out of breath. Panting, she shuffled toward the bed, thankful she'd made it before...

A growl followed by Daniel's "Got ya!" was all the warning she received before her world turned upside down. Before she could blink, he had her flipped around and tossed over his shoulder. Even with her extra weight, he didn't break his stride. She raised her head and came face to crotch with Patrick's groin, his thick cock straining the fabric of his shorts.

"Hey, beautiful." Patrick stroked himself over the cloth. "See something you like?"

Before she could respond, Daniel spun her around and pretended to drop her as he flopped onto the bed. Patrick slumped down next to him. The two men were barely breathing any faster than normal. The in-shape studs.

Daniel shifted and wiggled her until she lay on top of him, breast to breast, thigh to

thigh, and gloriously hard cock to cunt. "So, where do you want to watch from, Gina?"

"*What?*"

Patrick rolled toward them and he stroked her ass, paying special attention to the area around her tail. She wiggled her ass in response; her cat purred on the inside, loving the extra attention he laved on that part of her. Most lovers, okay, all lovers, never touched her there. If they knew about her tail, they pretended it didn't exist. Well, except for Blaze those few times in the hot tub, but that didn't really count.

Patrick encircled her tail with his hand and stroked her from root to tip, sending a wave of pleasure through her body that only served to renew her arousal. Already her pussy throbbed and grew heavy with desire. *And all he'd touched was her tail.* "You are the last one in bed. Therefore, you have to watch."

She glared at him. "Am not. You were, I got into bed with Daniel."

"Nope, actually, baby, you haven't even touched the bed yet."

She swung her gaze to Daniel and glared at him next. "Nu uh."

"Ya huh. Who's holding you right now? Has your skin touched the comforter?"

A growl, deep, angry and predatory built in her chest.

"Hey." Patrick swatted her ass. "Bad kitty."

Chapter Seven

Daniel spared a glance for Gina. She didn't look to be a very happy camper at the moment, but he knew that would change before all was said and done. He remembered the scent of her musk and how loud she'd keened just from watching him blow Patrick. Now, *he* was going to blow *her* mind. She was settled in his favorite chair in the corner with an unobstructed view of the bed, her tail swishing and dancing, the tip twitching. Yeah, she'd get the best show of her life and hopefully she'd join them.

He turned his attention to his lover, Patrick. The man was a study of trim lines and precisely sculpted muscle. Patrick had always been tall and lanky, especially compared to his own stockier build. But no matter what they did, the thinner man always gave Daniel a run for his money.

Patrick lay sprawled on the bed, legs hanging off the edge and hands propped behind his head as Daniel approached. Daniel didn't waste a moment. He whipped his shirt over his head and tossed it aside. His pants were next. He shoved them down his hips. Pulling them free of his erection, he let them drop to the ground and he kicked them aside. Gina's presence, though palpable, faded to a buzz behind him. He only had eyes for Patrick now, his lover of years, and the most beautiful man he'd ever seen.

"Shirt," Daniel demanded and he was happy to see Patrick shift to comply.

While his lover worked to divest himself of his shirt, Daniel worked on the man's pants. With a few quick and efficient tugs, he had Patrick nude from the waist down. He let the other man worry about his shirt on his own since Daniel had exactly what he'd been looking for. Patrick's cock, full of blood and completely erect, stood tall above his groin. The plum-hued head was coated in a fine sheen of fluid. Yeah, his lover had really gotten off on pleasuring Gina and now it was Daniel's turn to do the pleasuring. He never could get enough of Patrick's cock. Plus, he knew he'd be getting a lot more before long.

Daniel dropped to his knees and placed Patrick's legs over his shoulders, opening the man to him completely. For the moment, he avoided Patrick's dick and focused a little further ... south. He laved and sucked on his lover's balls, enjoying the thick musky scent that seemed inherently Patrick. The smooth skin and salty taste worked to heighten Daniel's own arousal. His tongue danced along the man's perineum, giving his lover more pleasure if Patrick's moans were any indication. He kissed, caressed, licked and sucked everything *but* Patrick's cock, doing his best to drive him wild. It wasn't often that Patrick relinquished control and allowed him to drive their lovemaking. He had a feeling the show was all for Gina.

"Please." Patrick whimpered.

Daniel sucked one of Patrick's balls into his mouth and laved the taut skin as he stretched it. He released his lover with a soft pop.

"What do you want, Patrick?" Daniel wrapped his fingers around Patrick's thick cock and stroked him from root to tip. Patrick hissed his approval. "Should I make you beg?" He stroked him again. "Should I make you writhe and moan for me or give you what you want?"

Just as quickly as he'd started, Daniel stopped and reached into the bedside table. In seconds, he had what he'd been looking for. With a quick squirt, his fingertips were

covered in cool, slick lube. He swiped the gel across Patrick's puckered asshole and the man pulled his legs farther apart. "Yeah, you're a needy bottom, aren't you? Want my cock in your ass, Patrick?"

"Yes, fuck yes, fuck my hole. I want her to see."

Daniel chuckled. Yeah, his lover, when in the mood, never could get enough.

"Got a good view, Gina? Want to get any closer?" He looked over to the raven-haired beauty and nearly lost his train of thought. She stared, transfixed, at where his fingers toyed with Patrick's asshole, her own fingers pressed against her pussy, stroking the glistening skin. He licked his lips and his cock throbbed. Damn, but he wanted a taste of her, just as Patrick had gotten. Oh well, time enough for that ... later.

He returned his attention to his long-time lover. Slowly, stretching out the sensations and the teasing for as long as he could, he slid two fingers into Patrick's ass. The man's hole eased open around him, as if begging to be fucked. His lover managed to pull his knees wider, opening up that ass as much as he could. And Daniel loved him for it. The wider he spread his legs, the better view both he and Gina got.

"Fuck me, please, Danny." Patrick's eyes were closed up tight, face contorted from being in that place of pleasure so great it was almost painful.

He tugged on Patrick's cock, stroking from bottom to tip and back again as he soothed his lover. "Shhh... One more finger, baby, and then I'll take this ass. You want it, don't you? Want my cock inside you. Tell me. Let Gina hear how much you like having your ass fucked. Let her know that I'll be pretending it's her writhing beneath me while I pound away. You want that, don't you? Want me to yell her name when I come in your ass? Tell me."

"Yeah, want that. Want you in me. Show her how good it'll be."

Daniel looked to Gina, trying to gauge her response to their banter, only to find her attention focused on Patrick. Yeah, his lover was a sight. Aroused and wanting, the man looked to be somewhere between ecstasy and death and if not for the cock straining for Daniel's touch, he would have thought Patrick was in horrendous pain.

Daniel slid his fingers free of his lover's ass and Patrick whimpered in response. "Come here, Gina. I think it's time you did a little more than watch."

Gina rose and approached the bed in slow, measured steps, her eyes more than her body language telling him that she was unsure about what was going on.

"Give Patrick something to love on while I fuck this hole, Gi. I want him to lap at your cream while you put your sweet mouth to use on his cock. Think you can do that, baby?"

She licked her lips and watched as the flame of her arousal seemed to set her entire body afire. Her eyes widened and a small smile curved her lips. "Yeah, I can do that."

In seconds she whipped her t-shirt over her head and crawled onto the bed. He only caught a glimpse of her heavy breasts swinging free before she was crouched over his lover. Gina wrapped her fingers around Patrick's cock and sucked him down as if he were her favorite treat. He stared as she began sliding up and down Patrick's shaft with her mouth, swallowing him in slow, sinuous movements. His lover's asshole winked at him with every trip down the man's cock. As if begging, pleading to be filled.

He wasn't about to disappoint.

Cock throbbing in time with his own heartbeat, he lined the head up with Patrick's hole. Slow, slower than he'd ever entered his lover before, he slid past the first ring of

muscles, easing into the tight heat. The couple before him moaned in unison as if he penetrated them both. He knew Patrick got nothing but pleasure out of being filled, but it seemed their girl *really* loved being a voyeur. He kept pushing; sliding into Patrick felt as if he were coming home. He imagined that entering Gina would feel the same. Already, he felt comfortable and calm around the spitfire and she'd already proved she was a match for them sexually.

Inch by inch he fed Patrick's ass his cock until his groin was pressed against his lover. The soft, silky crest of Gina's head bobbed against his abs. He froze, buried deep within the searing heat of Patrick's body. He loved the first penetration of a lover, the initial tug on his balls from the mind-numbing pleasure of entering someone so intimately. Gina slid up and down Patrick's cock with ease, tiny whimpers and moans escaping. He imagined his lover licking and sucking on Gina's juicy pussy, lapping the musky evidence of her arousal. Part of him wished he could fuck Patrick's ass *and* join his lover as he ate her pussy.

He tangled his fingers in her riotous dark curls, stroking her head as she sucked Patrick. Slowly, she slid up his shaft and released him with a pop. Patrick's ass clenched around him.

"Fuck him. Fuck him while I watch, Danny." Her voice had fallen deeper, huskier, and it went straight to his dick. It pulsed inside Patrick as if saying, "Yes ma'am!"

Daniel slid his cock out of Patrick's hole and then slipped slowly in again. Retreat and advance. Advance and retreat. He kept his pace slow, building his orgasm right along with Patrick's. Gina smiled and his heart filled with an emotion very near to what he already felt for the man writhing before him and he returned her slow, promise-filled grin.

"Harder, Danny." She moaned, eyes rolling into the back of her head and he imagined Patrick rubbing her tiny little clit. "Fuck him harder."

Daniel was never one to deny a lady. He gripped Patrick's thighs to hold him steady and increased his pace. Skin against skin, he thrust his cock in and out of Patrick's ass, fucking his lover while *their* lover watched the action. Again and again he shoved his cock into the tight hole, pounding Patrick like he loved. He bent his knees slightly, looking for that special...

Patrick cried out from under Gina. "Yes."

Yeah, he'd found that spot. The one that would make the man's eyes roll back in pure pleasure. He stayed in that position, pistoning his dick in and out of the hole while Gina watched. She soon returned her attentions to the cock in her hand, slipping and sliding that Cheshire grinning mouth over the hard shaft. Soon, they moved in tandem, her sucking and him fucking Patrick in the same rhythm.

Moans, groans and gasps filled the air as their three bodies worked toward the same goal. Daniel's balls drew up tight against his body, signaling his impending release. The zings of electric-charged bliss danced over his nerves, lighting his entire body and wrapping him in the unadulterated pleasure of imminent climax. His orgasm was close.

"Fuck, gonna come."

Gina nodded, her mouth still wrapped around Patrick's dick. His lover's ass clenched around his cock, telling Daniel without words that he was close as well. *Fuck, yeah. All gonna come together.*

He dropped his head back, body taking over now that his mind had all but been fried

by the unparalleled ecstasy of his lover's ass. Then ... then something downy soft and gentle brushed the area behind his balls and his eyes flew open to collide with Gina's.

"What the..."

Pressure increased and it finally dawned on him. He followed her tail's trail as it twisted around and disappeared between their bodies. Again, the pressure came, rubbing and stroking that sweet spot between his balls and ass. He widened his stance, allowing her full access to do as she pleased.

The combination of fucking and rubbing catapulted his orgasm to new heights. The tingling sensation that began around his balls ventured further into his arms and legs. Frissons of uncontrollable pleasure coursed through his veins with each heartbeat, forcing his pleasure higher and higher until...

"Fuck. *I'm coming.*"

As if his own admission opened the floodgates, Gina and Patrick's groans rose above his own. His hips jerked while he came, pumping in and out of Patrick's spasming hole. Again and again he thrust, until his heart rate returned to normal. Gasping, he eased free of Patrick's ass and shuffled to the bathroom to clean up. Upon returning, he took care of his lovers, making sure they were tidied before he crawled into bed, placing Gina between them.

Yeah, that was fucking amazing.

As he drifted to sleep, he thought of how perfect it had all seemed and that he couldn't wait to wake up and make love to them both again.

Yeah, for like, forever.

Chapter Eight

Gina woke slowly with a smile on her face. How could she not smile? Just before passing out, she'd had one of the most amazing orgasms of her life. It managed to eek out past the first one of the evening by a hair. She figured watching Daniel fuck Patrick as she gave Patrick a blowjob had to be a contributing factor. Yeah, it'd been so hot, she thought she'd catch fire. And she burned hotter and came harder than ever before. *Just imagine what it'll be like when they fuck me.* Yeah, they'd fuck her too, just as soon as she could wake them up for it.

She stretched, a soft groan leaving her lips as she discovered a few new aches and pains. Neither man stirred. Daniel had flopped to his stomach at some point during the night and Patrick lay on his side, facing her, his lips pursed as if asking for a kiss. Slipping free of the sheets and blanket, she scooted to the end of the bed. When she stood, she noticed a movement in the doorway and a second later heard the click of nails on hardwood floors. *Damn, best make nice with the pooch.*

Gina followed Andy's clickety-clack retreat down the stairs until the poor dog had nowhere to run. She cornered him in the kitchen where he sat huddled against the door. *Poor guy.* One, he was the biggest scaredy-cat ever and two, he probably had to pee like nobody's business since they'd all been too caught up in themselves last night to worry about the poor dog. Of course, it was hard to think of him as a poor defenseless puppy when he weighed a smidge less than she did.

She held her hand out to Andy slowly. "Come here, Andy-boy. I'm not going to hurt you, just come here and make nice with the sniffles and then I'll let you outside, okay?"

The dog gave her a look that clearly said "Get fucked." Huh, too bad she already had and the men who were likely to do it again were still asleep. Damn dog needed to get over his snit already. Finally, after being crouched down for what seemed like hours to her achy body, the dog eased forward and sniffed her hand. Then, the fucker had the audacity to growl. At *her*. Before he could open his mouth and bare those fangs his owners called teeth, her tail was out and whacking him upside the head. Just as quickly as his growl started, it ended with a yelp.

"Now, we can place nice, but no teeth or the tail comes out, got it, Fido?" The dog gave her a look that said, "Don't hurt me," and she was satisfied.

Rising, she popped into Daniel and Patrick's laundry room and snagged a dress shirt and pair of boxers from the dryer. It wasn't like she could let the dog out in the nude. When she returned, Andy sat exactly as she'd left him, leaning up against the back door. "Okay, pup, let's do this thing."

She reached over him and tugged on the door. It didn't budge. "Okay, fatty, move your ass so I can open the door." She glowered at the dog. Staring at him and realizing that his head came above her waist, she figured he had to be a mutant of some sort.

"Move your ass."

A deep male chuckle drifted through the kitchen followed by a quick, high-pitched whistle. "Come on Andy, move it and go out."

The dog scrambled to obey and the moment she opened the door, the dog bound into the small backyard. She shut the door and turned to face Patrick. "I don't think your dog

likes me."

"Yeah, calling him fat will do that to a man." Patrick grinned. "What are you all dressed up for?"

"Going to snag the paper. Didn't think your neighbors would want to see me in all my jiggly glory."

He strode forward and wrapped his arms around her waist. "But you'll strip when you come back in, right?"

"Um..."

"I'll cook for you, anything you want, if you'll have breakfast naked. I want to stare at these breasts and that gorgeous pussy while we eat." He nuzzled her neck and she leaned into his hold with a deep sigh. "Come on..."

"Okay. I'll grab the paper and you do the cooking. Then, I'll do the stripping."

He nibbled her neck. "Perfect."

She ducked out of the circle of his arms, wrapped her tail around her waist and strode toward the front door. As she approached, the busy sounds of traffic and male shouts met her ears. "What the hell?"

Gina pulled open the door and what seemed like a thousand flash bulbs went off in her face. Men and women shouted and charged her where she stood on the front step, clicking cameras in her face and shoving tape recorders toward her mouth as they shouted questions.

"Is it true you're part of a rare breed of mutant?"

"Do you only grow a tail?"

"Can we see you shift?"

"How long have you been a mutant? Were you born this way?"

"Can we see your tail?"

She stood there, frozen, as the reporters clamored and shouted for the answers to their question until Patrick saved her. He wrapped an arm around her waist and yanked her back through the doorway, slamming the steel reinforced door in the reporter's faces. In the distance, she heard Andy's deep, bellowing bark as it coincided with Daniel's curses and orders to 'calm the fuck down'. Shock rendered her speechless and Patrick guided her to the living room couch. He left her for a moment and the clattering of blinds being lowered mixed with Andy's barks. Soon, all was quiet in the house and she was surrounded by her lovers.

"Gina, baby, you okay?" Patrick stroked her back in small, light circles.

"Gi?" Daniel sat close, but didn't touch her, just stared at her with concern in his eyes.

She swallowed. "How? Who? Why?" She couldn't even form complete sentences.

Then, the phone rang. And rang. And rang. With a curse, Daniel answered it. His booming voice told the person on the line that there was no comment and then he returned. "Gina, do you know who could have done this? Who outed you? Hell, I didn't even think anyone knew you were here."

She shook her head. "No, no one does. I spoke to Meg before I left for my walk and Blaze was at the house visiting, but no one knows I'm here since technically, I haven't been gone for twenty-four hours just yet, Tash hasn't sent out a search party. Right now, I'm more concerned with how they know about, you know." She waved at them with her fluffy grey and black tail.

Patrick ran a hand through his hair. "So, what do we do?"

Gina closed her eyes and folded over, placing her head between her knees. She took a few deep calming breaths. Of course, Daniel had to ruin it.

"Uh, Gina, I don't think now's the time for some self love, baby."

She didn't have to look to react. Just as quick as she had whacked Andy in the head, she thumped Daniel on his temple with her tail. The idiot.

"First of all, I can't do that. I get the tail, but not the flexibility. Sucks, doesn't it? Second, give me a little freaking credit. Sex toy I may be, but Nymphomaniac I am not." And just for good measure and because it made her feel good she added, "Jackass."

She rose from the couch, no longer wanting to be surrounded by so much testosterone, and paced. Back and forth she padded from one side of the room to the other as ideas, options and general thoughts of hysteria zinged through her mind. Finally, she knew what she had to do. She needed reinforcements.

"Give me the phone." She held her hand out to Daniel and before she could blink, it was resting on her outstretched palm.

From memory, she dialed the digits that could save her life. A groggy, half-aroused voice filtered over the phone lines. "Hello?"

"Get yer ass out of bed bitch, I need the fucking cavalry and call Meg-sie, I may need her brother-in-law's help with the whole 'legal' thing."

"Shit, Gi, what the hell did you do now? You never told me what happened to Danny-boy. Is he pressing charges?" Blaze lowered her voice to a whisper. "Are we *getting rid* of your problem *permanently*?"

"Bitch, please," she scoffed. "Danny and Patrick blew my mind six ways to Sunday. They stay breathing as long as I'm still coming." She took a deep breath. "No, this is another little problem I'm having and I'm sure it won't evade *Sekhmet's* notice for long, so I'd like to get it fixed ASAP. I've got, um, reporters camped out on Patrick's lawn asking to see me go furry."

"Ho-ly..."

"No shit."

"Dayum. Give me the address and we'll be there. I'm bringing dog-boy along just in case this has something to do with the fleabags and I'm sure Meg will be there with the cavalry soon. We got your back, chica, no worries."

Gina rattled off the address, hung up with Blaze and turned to her men. "Look, I'm really sorry about this, but I can't leave until we've come up with a plan to deal with the reporters outside. Just as soon as I can, I'll get out of here."

Patrick stood and wrapped her in his arms, pressing a kiss to the top of her head that almost brought tears to her eyes. "We didn't say you had to leave, baby. We're here for you and we'll do what needs to be done to straighten this out. Promise."

She chuckled. "Well, you're about to be overrun with shifters, including one former Marauder and no less than three cats. And that's assuming our *all-powerful ruler* doesn't catch wind of this before the others get here. I guess I'm about to test that promise to its limit, huh?"

Daniel enfolded them both in his arms and she leaned back into his embrace, enjoying the comfort that the two men provided. "Don't worry about a thing. I'm sure we can figure something out."

Seconds ticked by while they stood there, wrapped and cuddled in each other's arms.

If she strained she could still hear the soft murmur of voices on the other side of the door. The distant conversation consisted of *is she* or *isn't she*. Tears pricked her eyes and she fought them back. She'd spent most of her life being told she was a worthless, half-*were* fuck up and now she'd just proven to the entire *were* population that she was as they'd accused. She sniffled.

Patrick tilted her head up with his finger and brushed a soft kiss across her lips. "None of that. We'll take care of this. Money can pretty much buy a person out of any problem and we've got a lot. We'll get through this, Gi; don't worry. We just need to wait for your friends to get here so that we know *who* we need to buy off." He kissed her again, this time a sensual promise to seal the vow he'd just given.

When Patrick released her lips, Daniel turned her around and treated her to the same. His lips brushed hers, teeth nibbled and his tongue stroked the seam of her lips, begging for entrance. She opened for him and he slid his tongue into her mouth, stroking and skimming her tongue until he sucked it into his own mouth. Their tongues danced and parried, imitating what their bodies had done only hours ago.

The front doorknob rattled and then the door burst open with a bang, slamming against the wall and a voice she knew only too well echoed through the halls in a fake Hispanic accent. "*Gina, I'm home!*"

Chapter Nine

"So bitch, let's do this."

Gina cringed. Each and every time Blaze called her "bitch" Patrick and Daniel seemed to grow in size. It didn't seem to matter to them that she treated Blaze the same way. No, all they saw was an insult thrown at her. Their anger was cute in a psycho boyfriend kind of way. Not that they were anywhere *near* being her boyfriends. No, that wasn't the arrangement.

"I seriously don't think this is going to work, B."

"Bitch, even Meg *and* her pig-smelling brother-in-law—"

"Hey."

Blaze held up her hand to stifle Meg's brother-in-law, Ryan's objection. "Zip it, shield-boy, big girls talking. As I was saying before *Bacon Bits* interrupted," she thrust her thumb in Ryan's direction. "Even he thinks redoing the photos is a good idea and it's really the only shot at fooling the idiots at the paper. So, go hunt up that poor excuse for a dress, get nice and dirty and get yer ass back down here."

Gina narrowed her eyes at her best friend and growled.

"Don't growl at me, ho. I will take your tail wearing ass *out*."

Meg stepped between them. "Gina, let's go upstairs and get you changed."

Tiny little Meg looked over her shoulder at her mate, Ben, and smiled before she pushed Gina toward the stairs. Damn, she wanted that. She wanted the sweet smiles, love and support of a mate. Okay, if she was honest, she wanted two mates; the two men downstairs, specifically. Of course, that'd never happen now that they'd been exposed to their fur-filled lives.

Upstairs, Gina stripped bare and flopped onto the bed, sprawling across the king sized mattress while Meg rubbed dirt and grime into her dress. The little perfectionist had the picture that'd been shot on her way into Patrick and Daniel's townhouse at her side.

"But why? And who? And are you sure this will work? Maybe one of those reporters stuck around..."

"Nope," Blaze cut in. "Dog boy and you know, the real dog, chased them all away. Jack's having fun hanging out in his puppy fur on the front steps." She lowered her voice to a whisper. "I don't care for dog hair in the house, so he doesn't get to do it too often."

"Fine," Gina grumbled. "But that doesn't explain the why or who."

A strangled cough followed by a sputter came from Meg and drew Gina's attention. She narrowed her eyes at her other best friend.

"Meg-sie?" Gina propped herself up on her elbows. "Got something to say to the class?"

"Uh, no?"

"Wrong answer, spill it, girlie."

Blaze hissed from across the room and Gina chucked a pillow at her. "Stuff it, *cum-shifter*. I want to hear what you and Meg have decided isn't for my tender ears. Now."

Meg's eyes darted from her to Blaze and back again and Gina felt the need to add a little threat.

"Don't make me call Ben up here and have him make it an order, subby chick. I'll lie

to him if I have to. It's not like *I'd* get the spanking for lying to the man."

"Gina," Meg huffed. "You're a bitch, you know that?"

Gina flopped back onto the bed and stared at the ceiling. "Amazingly enough, I do. So, get to the goods."

"Fine. Ryan called a few not-so-savory characters and found out that Daniel is *friendly* with a couple Marauders. Ryan thinks... He thinks that *he* may be behind the whole thing." Meg grew quiet at the end, but Gina got the gist of her message.

"No." Gina blinked back the tears that filled her eyes. "No way. I don't... I don't know him that well, but after last—No. Just, no."

Blaze crawled into bed with her and pulled Gina close. Meg sandwiched her on the other side. The three of them cuddled and hugged as Gina's world collapsed around her.

"Is he sure, Meg-sie? Surely sure?"

Meg stroked her hair. "Of course we need to check with him, Gi. But Jack confirmed he smelled dog in the house and it wasn't just Andy. It was the scent of another pup-shifter in the living room."

Gina nodded. Okay, this sucked and she didn't really dream of happily ever after with the two twits, right? Right. It had been a night of sexin' and fun. That's all. No emotions involved, no hopes or dreams of the future with a white picket fence and two point five fur-kids. None of that. She'd spent the night with them to get her rocks off and now, she'd do a stupid fake photo shoot and return to Half-were house and live with people like her.

"So, we really think Daniel set me up? To be captured by mad scientists and picked apart?"

"Yes," they replied in unison, without hesitation and she recognized the truth in their faces and didn't doubt that they spoke the truth, which could only mean...

"It's cause he was jealous, right? 'Cause my body was too bootylicious?" Humor, she could fight anything in the world with humor. Even conniving fuckbuddies.

Blaze snorted.

Meg chuckled.

And Gina let out a laugh. 'Cause if she didn't laugh, she'd cry.

"Alright. Let's get this over with and then ya'll can take me home to Tash. Lord knows she's already heard about everything and is probably sharpening knives for my beheading or some shit. I swear, that woman has been after my ass for years."

Blaze pulled her closer. "It's only 'cause she loves us and wants what's best for us, Gi, that's all."

Meg slipped from the bed and Gina followed her friend. "Yeah, yeah. Let me tell you that making us eat her nasty meatloaf was 'good for us' alright." She snickered.

Gina donned the dirty-again dress and Meg and Blaze followed her back downstairs. Daniel, Patrick, Ryan and Meg's mate, Ben, were sitting in the living room awkwardly not talking. The knowledge of Daniel's guilt was written on all their faces and she couldn't bring herself to look at Daniel. The tears she'd pushed away upstairs were threatening to come back with a vengeance and that wouldn't make for very good photographs, would it? Plastering on a fake smile, she leaned against the wall and arched her back, shooting for a sexy pose. "I'm ready for my closeup, Mr. DeVille." Funny, no one laughed. "Spoilsports."

She pushed away from the wall and strode toward the front door. "Let's do this shit."

She wanted to get the photos taken and then she was going to go home to Half-were house, take a shower and burn this damned dress. It held too many memories best forgotten and a wicked stench of betrayal that she didn't think any Maytag could get rid of.

Using the newspaper photographs as a guide, it didn't take the group long to recreate the photos in the tabloids. Patrick scooped Gina into his arms and carried her up and down the steps more times than she could count in an effort to portray their initial homecoming. Only this time, she made sure the tail was hidden and was *not* whacking the idiot dog in the head. They made sure they took quite a few, just to be safe. After all, Andy was a dog and couldn't be trusted to actually *listen* when he was given an order, though Jack's presence, as a fellow pup, did help.

When all was said and done with the photos, Gina didn't hang around. She trusted Ryan with the film and knew, as a cop, pride enforcer, and best friend to one of his relatives, he'd do all he could to help her. She strode to Meg's little Ford Escort and crawled into the cramped back seat. Soon, the others joined her. Meg took the wheel while Ben slid into the passenger seat and Ryan crowded her in the back. Before she knew it, she'd plastered herself to Ryan's chest, bawling her eyes out like some newly abandoned kitten that missed her momma.

Wave after wave of sobs shook her body. Nobody spoke. No one said a word. Big, dangerous Ryan cradled her in his arms and tucked her close while Meg put the car into gear and eased into traffic. She felt Daniel and Patrick's gaze on her within the car, but she never turned around. It just hurt too much. Before long, Meg pulled the car alongside the curb in front of Half-were House.

"Gi?"

She sniffled and wiped her eyes. "Yeah, I'm going."

Ryan spoke, whispering against the top of her head. "We can come in with you, talk to Tash if you want. This isn't—"

She cut him off. "It is though. I got so pissed at that mutt that I lost control in public, on a city street and managed to get my picture taken by some Marauder who sold it to the papers. I'll deal with the punishment. Whatever it is."

Not wanting to hear anyone else's offer of help, she bolted from the car and jogged up the steps to the front door of the townhouse. Tasheka met her there, eyes burning bright with anger and... Something else.

"*Inside.*"

Gina nodded. Didn't look like she'd get much of a reprieve. Not like she deserved one anyway.

*

Two days. Two days and fifteen hours to be exact. Daniel paced. Back and forth across the waiting room, he strode. Nervous energy burned through him while he and Patrick waited for their audience. The security they'd had to go through to get to this opulent sitting room had taken half a day.

Strings. Lots and lots and *lots* of strings had been pulled so that they could get this appointment. Between the ache in his gut due to the time lost to the hole in his heart that still hadn't healed, he hurt.

"Sit down, Daniel."

"How can you be so calm?" He glared at the other man. "Our..."

"Mate. The word you're looking for is mate."

"Fine." Daniel bit out. "Our mate disappeared *two days* ago. No one is telling us where she went. I don't even think Meg or Blaze know. And our *only* chance lies on the other side of that door and by all accounts, Sekhmet isn't the nicest or most reasonable woman in the world."

Patrick stood and opened his arms to Daniel. "Come here. We'll get through this, because we have each other. We'll find her, because we won't ever stop searching." Patrick wrapped his arms around his waist and Daniel dropped his head to his lover's shoulder. "And we'll love her forever, just as soon as we can get our hands on her. It'll be okay, Daniel."

"Really, it won't." The hard as diamonds, cold as ice voice stole through him and he knew without being told that it belonged to Sekhmet. His heart beat double-time and he stepped out of Patrick's hold. The two of them stood side by side as they faced their adversary.

"We won't stop looking." Daniel spoke for them both.

"You should. If the prides don't want her found, she won't be. We take care of our mistakes, *boys*. Rest assured that Gina *was* one of them."

His heart slowed almost to the point of stopping while the meaning behind her words seeped into his mind. *Was*.

Deadly calm washed through him. "I'll kill you." And he would. If it took a thousand years, he'd find a way. "She wasn't a mistake. She was a person, a beautiful, caring, energetic woman and if anything's happened to her... I. Will. Kill. You."

The woman laughed and he supposed to some, it could have been thought of as seductive. To him, it was nails scratching on a chalkboard. "Human, you couldn't kill me if you tried. No one can. I am the beginning and end of this race. Save your weak threats for someone who may take heed."

Patrick stepped forward. "We want her back."

"Why? Why do you want someone who is only half of what she was meant to be? Who *you*," she pointed at Daniel, "worked to have exposed to the world for what she was? You stole into her heart and then conspired against her and if I didn't have an agreement with the human President, you would both be dead, were-blood in your veins or not, Patrick descendant of Bastet." The *were's* eyes glowed in the dimly lit room. "Perhaps, she hasn't been found because *she* doesn't wish to be." Sekhmet turned away from them and her message hit him like a ton of bricks.

"What?"

She sighed and turned around. "People, especially humans, don't usually question someone who is written into the history books as a goddess. Do mind your manners."

He cleared his throat. "I..." he finished speaking through grinding teeth, "apologize."

She nodded in acceptance.

"If you could be so kind as to explain how she has come to believe that we—"

"Not *we*, you," Sekhmet pointed out.

"Right. How can she believe that *I* set her up?"

Sekhmet strolled forward and stopped in a soft beam of light. He had to admit, if he didn't want to choke her to death, she would have been beautiful to him. Long, silky black hair, softly angled, green eyes and smooth curves from head to foot. She wasn't Gina, but she wasn't a dog, either. "Your home smelled of dog."

He snorted. "We *own* a dog."

She shook her head. "No, you had a Marauder in your home, a friend of yours. The only conclusion that I, as well as Gina and her friends, could draw was that you'd set her up to be outed and subsequently captured. She has disappeared and you should consider her dead, as she considers you both."

Chapter Ten

A cool breeze filtered through the trees, ruffling the leaves. Autumn had pushed through, turning the naturally green leaves shades of gold and brown. Gina loved this time of year. Cool weather and beautiful scenery always lifted her spirits and this season was no different; especially since her mood *needed* to be lifted.

The screen door creaked and groaned. Gina didn't raise her head from its position. She kept it tilted back, resting on the comfy porch swing as she rocked back and forth. Her rhythm was disrupted for a moment as Ryan joined her. No words were exchanged. He simply pulled her legs into his lap and started working on her feet.

His large hands rubbed and soothed her aching feet. After leaving Daniel and Patrick at their townhouse two months ago, she'd gone to Half-were House. Tasheka tore into her the moment she stepped across the threshold, as she'd anticipated. Meg and her mate Ben had tried to save her from Tash's tirade, but the *were* wasn't deterred. Not until Ryan stepped in on her behalf did Tasheka calm down.

After hours of cussing and discussing, a decision was made. Ryan was willing to allow Gina to stay with him. The small town he lived in with Meg and Ben seemed like the perfect place to recover from all that had happened. From being sold out by a man she lo... cared for, to being nearly thrown out of yet another home, she needed a safe place to collect her thoughts. Meg's Valley was that place. Ryan offered to sponsor her in the community and off she went, her meager belongings in tow. Now, she had a waitressing job at a local diner and worked most days. And her nights... Her nights were spent mostly alone except for these quiet times with Ryan, swinging on the swing as the sun lowered in the sky. As a punishment for her behavior, it wasn't too bad. Being in a city of mostly *weres*, it wasn't like she could shock the town's residents. Much.

But, she really missed Half-were house, as surprising as it sounded. She missed the honking horns of rush hour traffic and the all-you-could-eat Chinese buffet that she always went to during the week. And the hotdog vendor on the corner of 5th and Vine. And the pretzel guy. And the bright lights of the city at night and ... her friends. She really missed her friends. All she had here in Bodunkville were cows and...

"It's getting cool out."

Gina snuggled into the corner of the swing and stretched her legs with a sigh.
"Yeah."

"It's been a few days, Gi."

Tears stung her eyes. Still. Two months and still Daniel's betrayal, and possibly Patrick's, cut her to the quick. "I know, Ryan."

Ryan rubbed his knuckles along the arch of her foot, kneading deep into the sore muscles. "I'm just thinking that maybe it's time to move on, baby."

She froze. It'd been coming. Sure, she'd seen the signs. She didn't imagine that a guy like Ryan would want some woman to live with him without a little somethin' somethin' in return. If she was honest with herself, she was pretty surprised they hadn't had this conversation before. Now, she'd have to go crash Meg's little leather-lined party and possibly fuck everything up. 'Cause the truth of the matter was, no matter how fucked in the head it made her, she still wanted Daniel and Patrick.

She cleared her throat. "Listen, Ryan... I don't think you and I getting involved is a good..."

Ryan talked over her. "Jacob's been asking me about you..."

"Jacob?" *The cook at the diner?*

"You what?"

She bit her lip and looked into the distance, praying their conversation could just be over now, fire burning her cheeks. "Nothing."

Her feet were still resting in his lap and he squeezed them. "Nuh uh. So, is it my looks, my lack of charm or the fact that I only have one cock and not two?"

She jerked, feet breaking free of his grasp and whacking into his groin. "*What?*"

"Ow, dammit, Gina!" Ryan shoved her feet off his lap and cradled his package.

"That *hurt*. Though, it does answer my question."

Gina couldn't miss the shit-eating grin on Ryan's face. She knew that look and she didn't like it. Not for one second. "What are you talking about, Ryan?"

"Nothing." His grin widened.

She hauled off and slugged him in the arm. "Jerk."

His smile turned into an all out laugh as he clutched his bicep. "Seriously, it's nothing."

"So... Jacob?"

His laughter slowly faded. "Naw. I was just bustin' your balls." He leaned back against the swing and pushed against the porch, putting them in motion again. "Truth is, I just needed to see how torn up you were about those two, that's all."

"I don't want to talk about it, Ryan."

He nodded. "Figured as much, but I told Meg I'd ask since I found out a few things and ... well, since..."

A car turned into Ryan's driveway. Dust covered from the trek down the dirt road to the home well off the beaten path, the once grey car looked brown. The setting sun reflected off the windshield, causing a glare so bright she couldn't see into the car or recognize the passengers.

The car idled in the driveway for a few minutes and Ryan slid her feet back to the floor. "I'll be inside if you need me, Gina. No matter *what*, I wouldn't let this happen if I thought there was any danger to you or the prides, okay?"

It felt as if a boulder dropped into her stomach, and her pulse sped up in a mixture of anticipation and fear. Her palms started sweating in the crisp autumn weather and she breathed as if she'd just finished a five-minute mile. Not that she'd ever actually been able to run that fast. "I don't... I don't... I-I-I..."

Ryan squeezed her shoulder and stooped to her level. "It's *okay*, Gina. I promise. Just hear them out. One word and I'm on this porch, ready to kick ass if you want."

She tore her gaze from the car and looked into Ryan's eyes. "Which?"

"Which what?"

"Word. What word will have you furry and ready to bust some ass?"

"Caramel. I'd kill for some caramel."

She whispered the word to herself and watched as the car's passengers exited the vehicle. Two men, one bulkier than the other, one light while the other was fair, unfolded themselves from the car. Two. Men. It didn't take a second look to see that they were *her* men. The guys she'd been pining for the last two months. Tears formed in her eyes and

she brushed them away. She wasn't going to break down like a blubbering idiot. Ryan said they weren't a danger to her or the prides, so she'd listen to what they had to say and then send them on their way.

Daniel and Patrick approached with slow steps, dirt kicking up and forming small clouds of dust in their wake. She stepped up to the porch railing and leaned against the weathered wood. Both men stopped at the bottom of the stairs and just stared. "What? Do I have a booger in my nose or something?"

Daniel smiled and Patrick just shook his head, but neither spoke.

Finally, Patrick took the plunge. "Can we come up? Sit on the porch with you?"

Gina stepped over to a grouping of chairs on the other side of the wrap-around porch and took a seat. "Sure, come on up." She put her back to the house, which left the men in view of the front door. *Caramel.*

This time, Daniel took the lead. "Missed you. *We* missed you." Daniel ran a hand through his hair. "We looked for you at the house after you disappeared. Tasheka wouldn't budge on where you'd gone, but—"

"She didn't know. She washed her hands of me."

"What?"

She nodded. "Tash didn't care where I went as long as it wasn't there. Ryan took me in."

Daniel stared at his clasped hands between his knees. "You could have come to us."

She snorted. "Right. The men who set me up and practically handed me to the government. Sure. Let me just change into a hospital gown and make it easy on everyone. How about I lay out on the gurney too, huh?"

"It wasn't like that, Gina. If you'd stuck around for five minutes instead of running off half-cocked and pissed, we could have told you. *I* could have explained."

She leaned forward, stared into those hazel eyes she'd cared for and demanded what he offered. "Then do it. Explain what you would have told me then. *Make me understand.* Tell me why I should be bowled over with gratitude that ya'll came to the middle of nowhere for me, and why I should drop and spread my legs for the two of you now."

Patrick cut in. "Okay, let's take a breather here. Daniel, you're not helping." The man sat back in his chair, attention never straying from her and she shifted her focus to Patrick. "Gina, what Daniel is *trying* to explain is that... It was all a mistake, a misunderstanding. We hunted down the original photographer and it seems he was in the park the day that Andy chased you like his favorite bone. The guy took pictures of the whole thing and was amazed at how fast you seemed to run and how easy it was for you to hop into that tree. He followed us back to the townhouse and snapped a picture of you with your tail by sheer luck. Don't worry, we paid him back for you, and he's now on the Prides' watch list. It wasn't a plan or instigated by us. We swear."

She rolled Patrick's explanation around in her mind and it rang true. She knew Patrick better than any other man. After years of working with him, she knew when he was lying and when he was honest to God, telling the truth. And he'd given her nothing but the truth. "But what about the Marauder in your home? Jack smelled the guy. You had one of *my* enemies in your home. Do you deny it?"

Swear to fucking god, if they fed her a line of bullshit now, the next word out of her mouth was caramel. No lie.

"No, we, *I*, don't deny it." Daniel spoke up. "My half-brother is part dog, but he's no

Marauder. I didn't know it until Jack, and Ryan, explained things to me. It seemed Dad had a thing for bitches and Cal was the result. He's been coming by a few times a week, just hanging out and watching a few games on TV." Daniel brought his gaze to hers. "He knows about you, knows who and what you are and doesn't give a damn. Apparently, life for half-*weres* in general sucks. You don't ever have anything to fear from him. Never."

Gina took a deep calming breath. Well, it was good to know she really *wasn't* in immediate danger. She rose to her feet. "Thanks for coming and explaining things. It was good to see you." She had to get away before she broke down. The realization that she'd essentially ruined everything with these two men was quickly becoming too much to bear. That she allowed her past to cloud her judgment and not even question her friends' declarations, crushed her. "Goodbye."

She turned on her heel and made it exactly one step before Patrick blocked her path. "Where do you think you're going, Gina?"

She gulped. She couldn't do this any longer; she needed to get away. "Inside. I appreciate..."

Daniel closed in on her from the back, his size overshadowed her, making her feel small and protected. Funny, considering all the frustration and anger rolling off the men.

"Only if we come inside with you," Daniel murmured near her ear.

"What?"

"You heard the man, Gina. Only if Daniel and I come inside with you." She shook her head. "You didn't think we'd hunt all over God's creation and brave a meeting with Sekhmet to find you and then walk away, did you?"

She gasped. "You went to see Sekhmet?" She grabbed on to Patrick's arms and stared into his eyes. "Why? She could have killed you ... could have..."

He stroked her face with the pads of his fingers, skimming her cheek. "Ah, baby, don't you know?"

She shook her head.

"We love you, Gina. That night was... We want that every night, every day, for as long as you'll have us."

"Us?"

Daniel nuzzled her neck. "Us."

"I like the sound of that."

"We do too, baby, we do too," Patrick assured her. "Now get your ass inside. There's a small matter of your lack of faith in us and forgiveness won't come until after a bit of punishment is served." Patrick turned toward the door and tugged her along behind him.

She dug her heels into the wood porch. "Punishment?"

Daniel pushed her from behind. "Yup. Think of it as being ordered to run laps after missing that fly ball and losing the game. It'll be over before you know it and you'll never forget your lesson."

She tugged her arm and leaned back into Daniel. "I don't like the sound of this. You know what? Maybe we should have some desert. How about ... some *CARAMEL*? Doesn't anyone want *CARAMEL*? I know I do."

Warm breath tickled her ear as Daniel chuckled. "Aw, baby, you looking for the big bad cat man? Why don't you look along the tree line?"

Gina looked where he'd directed and caught sight of Ryan in his panther form a second before the cat disappeared into the surrounding trees. "He lied."

Patrick pulled her arm and got her moving again. "I wouldn't call it lying. Think of it more as a stretching of the truth. I'm sure if he thought you were in trouble, he'd make dinner out of the two of us. Good thing for us, he knows you're not serious."

She whimpered and allowed herself to be led through the house. Patrick didn't hesitate or ask for directions. He just seemed to know where he was going which proved he'd spoken with Ryan and her erstwhile protector had agreed to all this. True, he'd told her as much, but this feeding of inside information proved he *really* agreed. Dammit.

With leaden feet, she followed Patrick up the stairs and they creaked and groaned under their combined weight. On the second floor, they proceeded to the end of the hall, last bedroom on the left. Her room.

As if she wasn't nervous enough, Daniel's words threw her into a panicking tailspin. "Now, you're in for it."

And the man seemed pleased about it, too.

Patrick released his hold on her wrist and leaned against the opposite wall while Daniel stayed with her near the bed.

Daniel immediately began tugging on her clothes, what little there was. He whipped her t-shirt over her head leaving her completely naked before the two men. He brushed a kiss across her lips before he worked on his own clothes. In seconds, Daniel was just as naked as she was and pulling her into his arms, nibbling her neck.

She should have been embarrassed, standing in the middle of the room, naked, with the two men who she'd hurt so badly. Instead, her body ran hot, aching and ready. From the moment she'd recognized them, her body began preparing itself for being loved by these two men. Her pussy was already wet and slick, her nipples hard and her tail ... with an uncontrollable shudder, the fluffy extension morphed and grew from her tail bone to trail down the back of her legs.

A quick glance at Patrick showed her that he enjoyed the little show. The length of his cock was hard beneath his jeans and he stroked himself through the cloth in slow, even rubs.

His watching worked to fuel her desire even more. She returned Daniel's kisses and strokes. She wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled his mouth to hers. Too long. It'd been too long since she'd been with these men, *her* men. Their tongues danced and twirled. She rediscovered the sweet, earthy taste of Daniel, the sugary sweetness that was only him. His cock, hard and pulsing, branded her stomach, proving to her that his arousal burned just as bright and hot as her own.

"Daniel." Patrick's voice broke their connection as surely as if he'd pulled them apart themselves.

Panting, he smiled into her eyes. "Right. This is supposed to be punishment." He grinned. "Come on, baby." He tugged her to the bed. He laid down first, thighs spread slightly, dick resting against his belly. "Hop on, sweetheart."

She stared at him, mouth hanging open. "Hop on, sweetheart? That's not much of a seduction." She crossed her arms over her chest with a harrumph, tail flicking behind her.

Patrick, fully clothed pressed into her back, his erection scorching her lower back. "This isn't seduction, Gina." He growled into her ear. "This is a punishment for your bad behavior." Patrick unfolded her arms and tweaked one hardened nipple. "Now, get on the bed and get Daniel's cock in that sweet pussy. Don't pretend you're not wet, that you don't want this. We all know you do." He abandoned her breast, stroking further south.

"You want whatever we'll give you, don't you?" His fingers teased her mound, so close... "You want his cock deep in that sweet cunt of yours." He slipped a finger between her labia, skimming her clit and sending a rush of pleasure through her. Her pussy clenched involuntarily. "Say it." He flicked her clit and she gasped. "Say it, Gina." He repeated the caress, pressing harder. "*Say it.*"

She groaned and her knees grew weak. The only thing holding her up was Patrick's steel grip beneath her breasts. "I want... I want Daniel's cock. I want whatever you'll do to me." He pressed her clit hard and shards of electricity shot through her. "*Please.*"

He pressed a soft kiss to the side of her neck. "Good girl. Now, go to him."

On shaky legs, she crawled atop Daniel, knees resting on either side of his hips. He stroked her outer thighs, a sweet smile on his lips. She reached between them and positioned the tip of his cock at her opening, shuddering at the initial, scorching contact of his flesh against hers. In a slow glide, she lowered down onto him, her pussy enveloping his shaft. When she'd finally sheathed him fully, they both groaned.

Stretched and filled by Daniel, she felt the tension and angst she'd been carrying through the months begin to melt away. His desire, regardless of her mistakes, hadn't dwindled. The hard cock buried in her cunt was for her, was because of her and she reveled in the attraction. She rocked her hips and rotated them in a tiny circle, glorying in the slight burn and tingles of sensation when her clit rubbed against him.

Daniel's broad hands stilled her movements. "Na ah, none of that just yet, Gina. Patrick's got other plans. Bend forward, baby."

She followed his instructions, bending at the waist, she lowered her upper body until her breasts were flush against his chest and she laid her head on his shoulder.

"Good girl." Daniel stroked her back, soft, soothing rubs from shoulder to ass.

So far, it hadn't turned out to be much of a punishment beyond not getting her way. This, she could deal with.

The sound of rustling clothes mixed with the soft whoosh of their breathing and her pulse kicked up. *Patrick*. She squirmed, pussy tightening around Daniel's dick.

A sharp slap to her ass stilled her wiggling and she gasped as the initial shock of pain zinged through her body.

"No." Matter-of-fact. Not angry, not sad, just an order from Patrick...

And it made her wet, even more so than before. Her pussy pulsed around Daniel and his hands stilled.

"Oh, she liked that. Didn't you, baby?"

She nodded.

The bed dipped and she felt Patrick behind her, the soft, crinkly hair on his legs tickled the backs of her thighs while his erection was hard and insistent against her ass. He leaned over them, pinning her to Daniel, resting his body weight on them both and holding them immobile with his presence.

"Liked that little bit of pain?" Patrick whispered in her ear and she nodded. "Good. You tore our hearts out when you left, Gina. It's about time you make amends, don't you think?"

Tears formed in her eyes and she closed them to capture the growing moisture before it could escape. The thought of hurting them ... was unimaginable. She should have stayed and talked things out. Instead, she assumed the worst and ran.

"Say it, Gina." Patrick said her name with a growl.

“I’m sorry.” She whispered. “I never... I never should have left you two.” She swallowed against the growing lump in her throat. “I’m so, so sorry.”

Hands stroked her, caressed her. “It’ll be okay, baby. Patrick’s going to take it out on your gorgeous ass, but then we’ll kiss it all better. Shh... Just relax.”

Patrick’s weight lifted, but his thighs remained pressed against hers, reminding her of his presence.

A sharp slap landed on her ass, the sting burning her skin. As the pain ebbed, another came on its heels on the other cheek. Again, before the pain flowed outward, Patrick struck her ass, causing tiny shivers of pain and pleasure to snake through her body. And yet again, he struck her. Her cunt pulsed with the strike, her arousal intensified by the sharp sting of pain that her body turned into pleasure.

Gina fought the urge to writhe on Daniel’s cock. Her body, her pussy, ached to rock and ride his dick, but she held fast to the directions she’d been given.

Patrick rained strikes on her rear. Over and over his hand collided with the flesh of her ass. Her tail flinched and flicked with each new blow, caught between his legs. Soon, if he didn’t stop soon, she’d come from the overlapping sensations.

What could have been minutes, but was probably seconds, later, the slaps ceased and he switched to soft, soothing rubs. “Good girl. So good, sweetheart.”

His palms left her ass for a moment and her muscles relaxed under Daniel’s soothing strokes.

All too soon, she tensed again at Patrick’s order. “Move your tail, Gina.” She whimpered. “Nothing bad is going to happen, sweetheart. Now, shift your tail.”

She did as asked, slipping the fluffy extension to her side, she curled it up next to Daniel’s waist. Cool, slick fingers stroked her asshole and she tensed.

Daniel was quick to reassure her. “Shh ... easy. Just going to love you, baby. Make sure you know who you belong to.” Fingertips circled her anus. “Relax for him. Let him in and you’ll feel so good, Gina. S’good.”

Round and around Patrick’s fingertip circled the tiny rosette and she forced herself to relax. Before long, he penetrated her, slipping first one finger and then another into her ass. Stretched in both holes, she pushed back against Patrick’s invasion. Strange, new feelings of arousal coursed through her veins, pulsing in time with her heart.

She braced her upper body on her hands, aching for better leverage as she fucked herself on his fingers. She rocked, back and forth, forward and back, luxuriating in the fullness and pleasure of being taken this way.

Patrick slid his fingers free and she whimpered and whined. Yet again, Daniel took the lead with words of praise and assurance. “Coming right back with his cock. Going to shove it deep in your ass and then you’ll be ours, baby. All ours.”

Her pussy pulsed with his promise and she forced herself to relax when she felt the tip of Patrick’s cock at her ass. So much larger than his fingers, she whimpered and jerked forward.

This time, it was Patrick who calmed her. “Going to fit just fine, sweetheart. Your body was made for us. Just relax and push out. Let me love you. Let *us* love you.”

“Yes,” she hissed and did as he ordered when he eased into her. Inch by inch, he stretched her ass, his cock filling and entering a place previously untouched. A feeling of fullness unlike anything she’d ever known threatened to overwhelm her. Double penetrated, she felt skewered by their hard cocks, caught between the two of them,

imprisoned above and below.

“Fuck, yeah.” Daniel groaned. “Fuck that sweet ass of hers ‘Trick. Move, you bastard.”

Patrick laughed, sending shivers of sensation along her spine and she moaned, deep and low.

In slow, sinuous thrusts, Patrick made love to them. His cock, sliding and slipping along her inner walls stroked her, which seemed to, in turn, stroke Daniel’s dick. In and out he glided, the slick lubricant eased his way.

Her body tensed and shuddered with each penetration, reacting and arousal rising to the call with each new thrust. Soon, they all panted, writhing together. Daniel rocked his hips in time with Patrick, which allowed him to rub her clit against his pubic bone, alighting every nerve in her body. Shards of pure pleasure danced along her spine and she let it. She let their bodies give her pleasure, caught between their pistoning forms.

Again and again Patrick slid his cock deep into her ass, touching her in places that she’d never known. They shared their love with her, showing through actions, just how much they cared and how much her desertion had hurt them.

Before long, the pace became frantic and she reached for her own orgasm. The dancing twines of her climax slithered around her waist before sinking low to her pussy. Her cunt spasmed in rhythm to Patrick’s thrusts, ass echoing those same movements.

Until she couldn’t hold back any longer. Her body tensed, as if frozen in time, and she shattered. She screamed Patrick’s name, Daniel’s quickly following, as the building pleasure crested and flowed through her, body tensing and releasing with each new wave of ecstasy.

Dimly, she heard Patrick and Daniel’s own shouts of completion; their bodies tensing above and below, thrusts becoming jerky, as they came within her.

She slumped against Daniel’s chest in exhaustion. As her energy flowed out, love seeped in to take its place. Patrick eased out of her ass and he flopped to the side, pulling her with him to settle between the two men.

Daniel at her front and Patrick at her back, she felt loved and protected. Sleep tugged at her and she allowed it to claim her.

“Gina.”

She snuggled closer to Daniel. “Hmm?”

“Who’s Teague? You’re going to break it off with him now, right?”

She snorted and wiggled closer to him.

Patrick pressed against her back. “You’ll have no one else but us, Gi. Period.”

Arrogant ass. “He’s a cat.” She closed her eyes, sleep tugging at her consciousness.

“We don’t care what the hell he is. You’re ours now and two men, humans or not, should be enough for you. End it.” Patrick squeezed her hip.

“Cat. C. A. T. of the domestic variety, *jackass*. Now, let me sleep. Ya’ll wore me out.”

“A *cat* cat?” She elbowed him in the gut and he grunted. “Okay, I get it. Just didn’t want to worry about you running off with someone else.”

“Please. Where else am I going to get two men who love my tail?”

“Nah,” Daniel drawled. “You got that wrong, baby. We love *you*. Your tail is just a bonus.”

The End

About the Author:

Celia would have loved to have written her own biography, but she just didn't know what to say. In a fit of desperation, she turned to me, her most trusted confidant and friend. I realize you're asking yourself, "Who is this?" I am Cali, her cat. I also go by a few other names, but those may be too strong for your delicate ears. Suffice it to say my mommy is very creative and not just with writing.

My mommy, Celia, began writing in August of 2006. I know this because it was around that time our meals started coming later and later in the day. As months passed, she spent more and more time in front of the boring screen. Though it was fun to chase the little arrow around every once in a while. You should hear her scream! But I digress.

She's worked hard to give readers sexy, quirky heroines they can relate to. And you better damn well appreciate it. All I got was late night feedings. And I didn't even make it into one of her books by name! That damn kitten, Katie O'Meghan, did. Bitch.

Well, enjoy her writings and if you want to praise her for her work... don't. I'd like to get fed at some point, people.

Fine. If you must contact her, her website is at www.celiakyle.com or you can send an email to [celia.kyle @ gmail.com](mailto:celia.kyle@gmail.com). But when I go hungry, I'll blame you all!

Half-Were House

Epilogue

The bridal boutique's entrance was decorated with white and pink roses, swathed in gauze. Gina approached the door with a sense of dread.

"This is number five, ladies. *Five*. We are calling it quits and I will pull a Britney for the damned thing if we don't find anything in here, agreed?"

Blaze flung the door wide. "Bitch, I say we call it quits now and do the Britney thing. Track suits are hella more comfortable than the froo-froo stuff we've been looking at all day."

Meg stopped in the entryway. "No, no track suits," She pointed at Blaze. "No bare feet." And then the tiny tigress turned on Gina. "And, yes, there will be clothes. This will *not* be a nudist wedding."

Gina's jaw dropped open. "Way to grow a pair, Meg-sie."

Meg caressed Gina's arm. "I'm forcing the dress, but I really do believe we can find the perfect one for you. This is your day to be a princess, Gina, to your pair of charming princes."

The woman smiled and strode into the store, her copper hair swishing with purpose. She and Blaze trudged along behind her. Meg grabbed a saleswoman while Gina and Blaze stared at the sea of white before them.

"I can't do it, Blaze."

Her long time friend threw an arm around her shoulders. "Ah, sure you can, Gina. You want to get married, right? Well, looking like a bleached circus tent is just part of the fun."

Gina elbowed her friend. "Bitch. You know you'll be doing this in a few months." The sparkle of Blaze's engagement ring caught a ray of the fading sunlight and threw rainbows along the floor.

"Yeah, yeah. Only, Jack and I agreed that comfort came before the whole 'following tradition' thing. We're not a terribly traditional couple. Plus, I'm hoping Meg will work out her mothering needs with planning your wedding. Maybe by the time mine comes along, she'll dig the whole track suit and bare feet idea."

Gina snorted. "Not hardly." Then she sighed. "Speaking of dog-boy, he won't try and mark his territory all over Ben's farm, will he?" Gina had chosen to have her wedding in a place that spoke of peace and freedom and change. Ryan would be giving her away.

Blaze snickered and she giggled in response before her partner-in-crime wiped the smile away. "Don't tell Jack I laughed. We agreed to do this whole cat and dog thing, but he still gets pissed when you guys crack dog jokes."

She swallowed her laugh. "It's just so hard, Blaze. I mean, dogs..." Gina looked around and lowered her voice to a whisper, "They eat their own *shit*. I hope you broke him of that habit when you moved in together." She shuddered. "Gross."

Before Blaze could respond, Meg yelled from across the store. Bridal Warehouse

was just that, a big freaking warehouse filled from front to back in nothing but frilly white dresses. With Gina's curly thick hair and dark golden skin, white looked stark and forbidding. White, the bane of a curvy chick's existence.

"All right, let's do this. I swear to God, though... If she's got more than ten dresses over there, I'm picking number five. I don't care how ugly it is. I am done with this wedding preparation shit. Daniel is much better at it."

Blaze squeezed her shoulder. "Agreed. I never knew that beneath that sweet exterior of Meg's lurked a freaking drill sergeant. It's all Ben's fault. Good sex can change a woman."

"*Gi-na!*" Meg's teacher-tone flashed Gina back to the first grade.

"Damn, the woman's got a set of pipes on her, too," Blaze muttered.

"You aren't lying. You should hear her and Ben going at it. I swear, his sole purpose in life is to fuck the stripes onto her. No lie." Gina laughed and the two of them meandered toward the back of the warehouse.

They passed rack after rack after rack of white and cream colored frilly-ness. Long dresses, short dresses and pieces of cloth that could never even pass for a dress hung all around them. Her skin felt tight and itchy just looking at them. Halfway through the store, a bright swath of red caught her eye and Gina paused.

"Whoa." She cut between two racks. There, lining the side wall of Bridal Warehouse, were mannequins dressed in ... colors.

She reached out and stroked the red dress that had caught her eye. It was a gorgeous, strapless, two-piece outfit that seemed made for Gina. The top, a lace-up satin corset, looked to be the right size, as did the floor-length skirt. It wasn't the deep, blood red color that called to her most though. No, it was the spots. Tiny leopard-inspired rosettes were embroidered all over the full skirt and lined the top of the corset as if proclaiming "I'm wild and I'm proud of it!" She needed this dress. Had to have this dress. No other outfit for her wedding would do. It was this or she'd go naked. Period.

"Uh, Gina. I'm not wearing that as a bridesmaid. A cat has to have some pride and I'm not dressing up—"

Gina cut Blaze off. "It's not for you, it's for me." She carefully removed the outfit from the rack and cradled it in her arms.

"But, Gi, it's a bridesmaid dress. We're in the 'bridesmaid' section, honey. White, remember?" Blaze reached for the dress.

Gina growled. "Nope. It's mine. It's this or naked, Blaze. Swear to Sekhmet."

Blaze sighed. "All right, but you're telling Meg."

Meg wouldn't care. Meg believed in the power of *The Right Dress* and now Gina knew why. She'd tell the world she was proud to love her men, would bind her life to theirs, and this was the dress to do it in.

An hour later they were all piled into Meg's little car, Gina's dress tucked safely in the trunk despite Meg's protests that they needed to keep shopping for veils, slips, shoes, jewelry, gloves, flowers...

"I hope Patrick's parents don't think less of you for you for not wearing white," Meg said.

"They'll think I have excellent taste," she stated, matter-of-factly.

Meg rolled her eyes and pulled into the flow of traffic, heading toward her farm. "You have some sort of taste, that's for sure."

Gina stuck her tongue out at her friend. "It was that dress or go naked, woman. Get over it. Besides, I think they'd much prefer me clothed, thank you very much. And at this point, I don't think I can do any wrong. Both Daniel's and Patrick's parents assumed they'd never get grandkids and now that they've got me, they're tickled pink. Even if the kid comes out with a tail."

Blaze laughed out loud and Meg smiled, shaking her head and sighing. "I can't wait to dress both of you for my wedding. Now that Blaze has opened my eyes to fashion, and you've opened my eyes to possibilities, my imagination is running wild."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. Whatever you say Meg-sie. I'll even keep my tail under wraps for your shindig."

Meg slammed on the brakes and Gina caught herself on the dashboard, face inches from the windshield.

"What the—"

"Whoa!" Blaze slapped into the back of Gina's seat.

"You'll *what*?" Meg stared at her as if she had two heads and that's when Gina noticed the cloud of dust surrounding the car. At least they'd made it onto a side road.

"Meg, you're really taking this disobedient thing a little too far. I don't think breaking laws and causing accidents should be part of the "new" you. Okay?"

Meg glared at her. "Don't try to change the subject. You are *not* to let the tail out to play at any of our weddings, Gina. Do you know how many cameras are at weddings? One near disaster was enough!" Pale black stripes appeared on Meg's neck and Gina knew the tigress was growing more agitated by the moment. But, dammit, this was her wedding.

"You know what—"

"Bitches, *please*." Blaze growled. "Meg, this is Gina's wedding, you'll let her do what the hell she wants with the exception of getting her freak on in the middle of the dance floor. Gina, your tail can come out and play, but no intentionally freaking out the human guests. The dress you picked will mostly hide it, and we can work with that for our weddings, too. Everyone got it?"

Silence reigned in the car as the seconds ticked by and eventually, Gina said what she was sure Meg had been thinking. "Damn, woman, we all move out of Half-were House and now you've decided to be our new Tasheka. Bitch, please."

Meg threw the car into drive and started their journey to the farm again as the three friend's laughter filled the car. They'd be all right. They'd all managed to find their own way in the world.

Gina supposed that her stint in Half-were House had actually done what it was supposed to. She had a life filled with love and she was making it on her own with two men who loved her and two friends who were the best unofficial pride anyone could ask for. Because she was happy, she had more control. Yeah, living in Half-were House hadn't turned out to be the hell she imagined when she first moved in.

The radio announcer's mellow background chatter fell away as Meg rumbled toward the farm where they were all staying. The day was bright and the fields green as they left the outskirts of the big city.

As the first strains of music swelled in the car, Blaze crowed out a laugh. "Purrrr-fect! Turn it up, Meg!"

Meg glanced at Gina, smiling happily, golden eyes sparkling. She was so different

from the shell-shocked woman who arrived at the House a short while ago. When Gina recognized the song, she actually managed a blush.

"I never will fo-o-orget, the wayyyy you look tonight ... my la-dy in reeeeed," Blaze's rich voice twined with Chris De Burgh's soulful voice.

"Is dancing with meeee," Meg's voice soared into a harmonizing octave, sweet and pure.

Gina grinned, looking out the window and seeing only color and light. Her throat swelled closed and she couldn't join in. Blaze's hands settled on her shoulders from the back seat, and Meg laid a hand on her thigh. Reaching with each of her hands to cover theirs, Gina laid her head back. And purred.

The End

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