



HALLE PUMAS
BOOK 4

STEEL BEAUTY

DANA MARIE BELL

SAMHAIN publishing LLC

She's everything a big bad wolf could want.

Halle Pumas, book 4

Coping with a devastating injury is hard enough for Belinda "Belle" Campbell. Forced separation from her destined mate while she heals is almost more than she can endure. Until she is strong enough to take up her duties as Luna of the Poconos Wolf Pack, however, the safest place for her is Halle. Now, after months of being alone, she is more than ready to be claimed. But is the pack ready for a *Puma* Luna?

Rick Lowell has waited long enough to bring Belle home where she belongs. He's aware of the danger, as well—and it isn't long before a bitch with an eye on Belle's position issues a challenge. The only way to put down the threat is for Belle to defeat the usurper in combat.

There's only one problem. Thanks to the pins in her broken hip, Belle can't shift. Without that tactical advantage, it won't be a fair fight. With his new mate's life on the line, Rick is forced to make a decision that will change everything.

That is, if Belle gives him the chance to make it.

Warning: This title contains explicit sex, graphic language, lots of doggie (or is that kitty?) style and some songs Rick will never want to hear again. Ever.

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Steel Beauty

Dana Marie Bell

Dedication

To Mom, who thinks, even after seventeen years, that Dusty and I are nauseatingly sweet together. It's not like we make goo-goo eyes at each other just to watch her gag or anything. We aren't *that* devious. Really. No matter how funny it is.

To Dad, who will probably start calling on Dusty again to fix his Diablo II game now that his live-in tech support is heading off to college. Remember, don't let my sister touch it lest you have to restart your level 60 paladin *again*. How many times would that make, anyway?

To Memom, who tells my mother to stop gagging every time Dusty and I make goo-goo eyes at each other. She thinks it just encourages us.

To my brother, for helping me think up ways to torture Rick at a certain Pack meeting.

To Dusty, who has decided that since I've named his laptop "Bertha, aka the Other Woman", my laptop needs a name. Last I heard he was muttering "Sven, maybe?"

And to Crystal Dee, who came up with the name Steel Beauty. May I say you rock?

Prologue

November

“No *fucking* way.” Rick stared at Max Cannon, the Halle Puma Alpha, and wondered what his head would look like rolling down the driveway. “My mate goes home with me.”

“How are the Wolves going to react to an injured, non-Wolf Luna? Think, Rick! Not only is she injured, she’s Puma. And until you can fully claim her, she’s Pride. *My* Pride.” Rick watched Max cross his arms over his chest. He wanted to rip them off and beat him over the head with them.

He’d had a thoroughly rotten day. He’d been shot, killed a rogue, found his mate, found out his mate was *hurt*, and now had to deal with a territorial cat intent on sending him on his way. “She comes home with me.”

Max sighed and rubbed his forehead. “Look, Rick, I know how I would feel if this were Emma.”

Rick nodded shortly. The big cat *would* understand, somewhat.

“But, and this is a big but, Belinda hasn’t had the easiest time of it in the last couple of weeks. You’re new to your position, as well. You need to solidify your Pack and prepare them for what they’re going to have to deal with when Belinda gets there. You’ll also have to prepare Belinda.”

“Belle.”

Rick looked at the pale mate of the Puma Marshall, Sheri Montgomery, the one who’d been the cause of Rick coming down to Halle in the first place. “Belle?” Who was this Belle, and what did she have to do with Belinda?

Sheri shot a look at Simon, who winced. Rick’s eyes narrowed at the guilty flush on the Beta’s face and wondered what the man was hiding. Sheri turned back to Rick with a grimace. “Belinda is who she was when she was friends with Livia, the mask she wore to fit into Livia’s social set. Belle is who she *really* is.”

Simon nodded. “And that’s something else that needs to be dealt with.”

Rick sighed and sunk down onto Max’s leather sofa. The Alpha had dragged him, literally, out of Adrian’s house, shoved him in his Durango, and carried him off. It hadn’t taken long for the rest of the Pride’s inner core to show up. Only the fact that his own Marshall hadn’t been worried for him had kept him from biting some cat ass. “You are going to explain all of this shit, right?”

Emma spoke up. “I’ll try. Okay, roughly a month ago Max marked me as his and claimed me as his Curana.” Rick nodded. Curana was Puma equivalent of Luna, the Alpha female of a Pack, or in Emma’s case, a Pride. “He gave me the Curana’s ring, and I wore it to the annual Halle masquerade. When Livia

realized Max had mated me, she freaked out. She attacked Becky, Simon's mate, while Becky was still human."

Ouch. That explained why the woman had been Outcast. An unprovoked attack on a human? This Livia person was lucky Max or Simon hadn't ripped her throat out. That's what Rick would have done. "What does this have to do with Belle?"

Emma shrugged. "Belle and Livia were best friends, and it was well known Belle wanted to mate with Simon."

Rick stiffened. *Mate with Simon?* Now he understood some of why the Beta had looked guilty.

Emma continued the story, leaning against Max with a sigh. "Because Livia attacked Becky, and Belinda wasn't anywhere near the party at the time it happened, most of the Pride assumed she'd helped Livia in some way or another. Hell, even we assumed it at first."

Rick clenched his jaw against his immediate response. He didn't know Belle well enough to know if she was capable of such a thing, despite every single one of his instincts screaming that she wasn't. "What happened next?"

"Livia was Outcast, and Belle..."

Emma looked up at Max, but it was Simon who answered. "Belle proved herself to us. She helped save Becky when Becky collapsed at work, and she sacrificed herself to save Sheri from a psychotic stalker." Simon shook his head. "I never thought Belle had it in her to do that, but she proved me wrong."

"She proved all of us wrong." Max snuggled Emma close, a frown on his face. "But we've had a difficult time getting the rest of the Pride to see that, despite everything she's done. In essence, they've shunned her. She's lost her job, almost lost her apartment, and even with her injury we had a hard time getting volunteers to protect her when she needed it."

Rick bit back a growl. The danger was past, and they *had* figured out how to protect his mate in the end. But the fallout on Belle had been, in Rick's mind, totally unwarranted. Just because her ex-best friend had been a psychotic bitch didn't mean Belle should be held responsible for the other woman's actions. He couldn't wait to get her away from the self-righteous assholes who were making her life a misery.

He stood, ready to walk out Max's front door, put his female in his car, and take off for home.

"Rick." Becky stood, ignoring Simon's outstretched hand. "I'm probably one of the last people Belinda would expect to stand up for her right now, but I have to say, she's had a horrible time of it. Don't make it worse for her."

Max blocked his path to the front door. "Are there any doctors up by you who can handle an injured shifter? Any who can deal with the physical therapy she's going to need?"

Rick growled.

Max, the smug bastard, smiled. "Are you willing to move down here for the next few months? No? Then go home. Let her heal. Then, when she's ready, come and take her."

“Take her home.”

“What?” Max turned to his little dark-haired mate.

“Take her *home*. You said take her.”

Max gave her a puzzled frown. “Well, that too.”

Rick snorted, amused for the first time that day, as Emma rolled her eyes at Max.

Max put his hand on Rick’s shoulder, squeezing reassuringly. “I give you my word that no harm will come to your mate while she is under my protection.”

The formal vow, accompanied by a flash of Max’s power, reassured him. Looking around, he saw the determination on the faces of the rulers of the Halle Pride, and knew he’d lost this round.

He accepted Max’s oath, and the separation that would accompany his decision, with a great deal of reluctance.

But there was no way in hell he was going to stay completely out of his mate’s life for the next few months. He might not have her by his side, but he’d be damned if he didn’t have *some* piece of her.

December

Belle picked up the little hand-held computer Rick had sent her and smiled. She’d only been out of the hospital for a little over a month, but he text-messed or called every single day without fail. He’d even set up the chat program for her. She’d laughed when she saw the handles he’d given them both.

BgBdWlf837: *How’s my Luna today?*

She started typing on the miniscule keyboard. The concentration helped with the pain, sometimes.

BellaLuna1345: *So-so. Therapy was a bitch. No pun intended. I think my therapist was trained personally by the Marquis de Sade in a previous life. You?*

BgBdWlf837: *Work work work.*

Something he very rarely discussed. One of these days she was going to nail his ass down and find out what he did for a living.

BgBdWlf837: *You get my Christmas present?*

She smiled as she thought of the present he'd sent. A beautiful aqua silk scarf, a pair of diamond earrings, and a thin gold chain had been in the exquisitely wrapped present. Knowing men the way she did, she wondered who he had buy the gifts, or if he'd actually bought them himself.

BellaLuna1345: *Yes. Beautiful. Thanks. You get mine?*

She'd sent him a watch. On the face was a howling wolf. She'd had it custom made by a friend of hers, who'd done the work for cost or she'd never have been able to afford it.

BgBdWlf837: *Yes! Love it! Wearing it now.*

That made her grin, even if he was lying through his teeth.

BgBdWlf837: *Let me know if I need to come down there and rip the gonads off your PT, k? And keep that pussy Beta away from you.*

Belle rolled her eyes. He had a real thing against Simon. She wondered who'd told him about her past relationship with the Pride's Beta.

BellaLuna1345: *Down, boy. Sit. Good dog. Gooooood dog.*

BgBdWlf837: *ROFL*

BgBdWlf837: *Merry Christmas, my Luna.*

She couldn't help the big smile. Just seeing his name brightened her day in a way she couldn't explain. Those times when they actually spoke on the phone were the best, though. Then she could hear that deep, rough voice soothing the aches and pains of not just her injury, but her near-shunning.

BellaLuna1345: *Merry Christmas, Fido.*

Not that she would let *him* know that, off course.

He might be her mate, but she could still play hard-to-get.

January

“Wow, you’re cranky today.” Belle put the phone between her ear and shoulder and scratched blissfully at her arm. The cast had finally come off and she could reach that damn spot that had been bothering her for eight long weeks.

“What makes you say that?”

“Oh, I dunno. The fact that you growled at me, maybe?”

“Oh. That.”

“Simon is mated, Rick. He’s also my Beta. I have to talk to him sometimes.”

“You may have to talk to him, but I don’t have to like it.”

“Really? Huh.” His chuckle was music to her ears. Her gasp of pain as she shifted in her chair, apparently, was not music to his ears. “Don’t growl at me, there’s nothing I can do about it. Besides, you’re the one who agreed to go back north until the doctor releases me for Lunatic duty.”

“Belle.”

She sighed as the pain subsided. It was so tempting to reach for the morphine when the pain got this bad, but she wouldn’t. Jamie was right; she’d become too dependent on it. They’d mutually decided she should go on Ibuprofen instead, counting on her Puma metabolism to get the drug out of her system as quickly as possible.

The night she went off the morphine she’d chosen to text Rick first, not wanting him to hear the withdrawals she was going through. She kept it short, merely telling him she was having a bad day and she’d speak to him the next night. He’d responded, but he hadn’t sounded happy. The next night her phone rang before the physical therapist was even done seeing her. That had been two weeks ago.

“I’m fine, Rick. The cast on my arm came off today.”

“Good!”

“Yeah, I can finally scratch.”

“And we all know how much cats like to scratch?”

“Very funny, Fido. Har har. Peed on any hydrants lately?”

“In this weather? Are you nuts? I’d be glued to the damn thing until the spring thaw.”

She laughed out loud, the first one in over a week.

“Now that is the sweetest sound.”

That rough, rich voice slid through her, speeding up her heart rate. And from the look of her no-longer-red nail polish her eyes had turned gold. *There go my panties, getting all wet again. How does the man do that when I’m ready to rip my leg off from the pain?*

She heard the front door to her small apartment open. Turning, she saw Sarah come in, a smile on her wind-kissed cheeks. “Sarah’s here. Gotta run.”

“Pizza and poker night?”

“Yup. I’ll tell Adrian and *Simon* you said hi.”

He was *still* grumbling when she hung up.

Chapter One

February

"You're coming home. Three Wolves will be there in the morning to pack your belongings. Your landlady has been informed that your lease will not be renewed, and your medical records have been forwarded to the Pack doctor. Ben and I will pick you up at the end of the week."

Belle pulled the receiver away from her ear and stared at it. Then she banged it as hard as she could four or five times against the bottom of her stainless steel frying pan.

"Damn it, woman, don't *do* that!"

She put the handset back to her ear. "I'm sorry. Did you want to ask me a question?"

He growled. Her Wolf was grumpy tonight. "I need you home."

She sniffed, secretly pleased he'd said that, but not willing to admit it. "I am home."

He inhaled noisily. "*Belle.*"

"My name is Belinda." She waited for the explosion, sure it was coming.

"Don't meet the Wolves with a gun, Belle. They have orders to take it from you."

Oh, poo. There go my shopping plans for tomorrow. "I would never do that, Rick."

She loved it when his teeth ground together. He did it the most when she pulled out her "airhead" routine. His long-suffering sigh was music to her ears. "Come home to me, Belle."

Damn. That sexy growl he got when he called her Belle made her panties wet. *The big dope.* Just for that she decided she'd played enough. "I have a few more things to take care of before I head into Winter Wonderland." She picked up the orange and started slicing it, holding her phone between her shoulder and her ear. *For instance, I need to get a Bluetooth or something.* Money had been awfully tight since she'd been fired from Noah's, and it was about to get tighter. Her medical bills were piling up. Unless Richard was independently wealthy, she'd need to find a job ASAP.

She heard the rustling of sheets. She could just picture that big body of his leaning against a wooden headboard, the cotton pooled around his groin, his chest naked and lightly furred, just like she liked her men.

Make that man. Simon had been her only, until his mating with Becky. Belle was over it, but the first month had been rough, dealing with her broken heart, a broken hip, a broken arm, *and* a new, unclaimed mate. Thank God she and Becky had overcome their differences. She now counted Simon and Becky among her few friends.

“What sort of things, my Luna?”

He used the term Luna the way other men used “sweetheart” or “honey”, growling it in that sexy as hell voice of his. Goose bumps shivered up and down her arms. “Just...things.” She laughed at his low growl. “*Girl* things, like shopping and haircuts.”

“Go get pampered then, Belle.” She almost sighed dreamily over the rough timber of his voice. Of course, he had to go and ruin it. “Just remember: no one pets you but me.”

She rolled her eyes. “No problem, *Dick*.”

He chuckled, sending a flood of heat to pool in her belly. “Good night, Belle. Sweet dreams.”

He didn’t wait for her reply, simply disconnecting, leaving her feeling empty. “Good night, Rick.” She set the phone back in its charger, put the orange slices on the plate and headed for her bedroom, hoping he didn’t find out that her special One-Fruit Fruit Salad had been dinner for the past three nights. Mr. Overprotective would have a hissy fit of epic proportions if he did.

I’d probably find a bunch of Wolves on my doorstep with doggie bags. She snickered as she settled in for the night, her water and orange on the nightstand and soothing music playing on her portable stereo. She wished, not for the first time, that Rick were there to share it with her.

“You’re joking, right?” Belle looked over at her Curana, Emma Carter, who would be Emma Cannon in two months’ time. Emma was staring up at the spa’s sign, a look of anticipation on her face. Becky, on the other hand, looked just as dubious as Belinda felt, but for different reasons.

“Emma, are you sure about this?” Becky pushed her long, curly hair out of her face, holding it back in the cold February winds. She frowned at Emma. “Half the stuff they do here, we can do at home.”

“First off, I’m not touching your feet.” Emma laughed when Becky stuck her tongue out at her. “Second, trust me! What’s a better mating gift than a day at the spa?” Emma grinned at the two of them. From the look of things she was eagerly anticipating the coming wraps, lotions and facials. Becky still looked like she was going to a torture chamber.

Belle, on the other hand, was feeling a little ambivalent. She hadn’t been to the spa, one of her favorite relaxation spots, in months. Not since the incident with Livia. The members of the Pride, despite Emma, Becky, and Sheri’s support, were still very much of the opinion that Belle had been in cahoots with her ex-best friend. So on one hand, she was looking forward to a little pampering. On the other hand...

Marie Howard stepped out of the spa, a breezy, relaxed smile on her face. It froze for just a second before sharpening. “Hello, Emma. Becky.” Those sharp brown eyes turned to Belle and all the warmth drained out. “Belinda.”

Hypocrite. Marie had been a friend of Livia’s too. She just didn’t bear the stigma of *best* friend. She smiled her toothiest human smile. “Marie.”

Marie turned back to Emma. “Are you and Becky planning on enjoying a day at the spa?”

Either Marie was stupider than Belle thought, or she just didn't feel the chill in the air as Emma stared at her. "The *three* of us are planning on spending the day here." She smiled, her teeth a little sharper than normal. "After all, tomorrow Belinda leaves for the Poconos and her mating with Richard."

Belle smiled sweetly at her ex-friend. "That's right. One more day and you'll only have to deal with me one more time."

"One more time?"

"Belinda has agreed to be one of my bridesmaids."

Shock and, yes, hurt, briefly flashed across Marie's face. Belle still wasn't sure what had made her say yes to Emma's request, but it had been worth it to see the excitement in Emma's eyes. The Alpha and Curana had booked a fairy-tale wedding in Disney World. How Max had managed to swing that in such a short time when the usual waiting period was nine months, Belle had no clue, but he'd managed it, and Emma was ecstatic over it.

Marie's expression was frozen as she nodded curtly. "Good luck, Belinda."

"Thank you." *I'll need it.*

"I'll see you in April, then."

Marie turned to go without another word. Belle stepped forward, leaning heavily on her cane as she followed her Curana and Beta into the salon.

"I'm telling you, Sheri, those women hate me." Belle sighed over her Coke, wincing as she tried to shift her legs and rub the irritation at the juncture of her thighs. The pain that shot through her hip made her hiss.

At least I can move my legs now without wanting to chop them off. Those first few weeks after the surgery had been horrendously painful. Thank God Sheri and Sarah had been willing to be with her during that time. She didn't know *what* she would have done if it hadn't been for them. The fact that Richard had allowed himself to be forced back to his Pack until she was well enough to deal with her new position had caused some serious friction between them in the beginning, even if she could understand why. At least Rick called daily, whether she could talk to him or not. It helped ease the sting of his not being there. And if he had been there, the big dope probably would have decked the physical therapist more than once by now, probably landing in jail or in the middle of a lawsuit.

Okay, maybe Max had the right idea, sending him away. Rick was overprotective on the phone. In person, he would have smothered her. She only hoped he'd gotten some of it out of his system by now.

If not, there was always the pepper spray.

"They do not hate you, Belle. I mean, they took you to a lovely day at the spa." The pale woman sighed, resting one alabaster cheek against an equally white hand. "They never offered to take *me* to a day at the spa."

Belle leaned across the table and held two fingers up to her new best friend. Her relationship with Sheri and her other friend Sarah was one of the few good things to come out of the fiasco of the last few months. "I have two words for you: Full. Brazilian."

Sheri sputtered, laughing.

"Oh, sure. Laugh. Some sick sadist slaps boiling wax on your nether regions, sops it up with a strip of cloth, and then just *rips* it off without a care in the world. And while you're lying there, screaming in pain and threatening their lives, the sadist takes out the tweezers to 'clean you up' while they tell you to suck it up and take it like a woman."

"They did not!"

"Oh, no, the girls torturing me didn't say it. My Curana and her Beta said it while they sipped fruity drinks and got their nails done." Belinda shook her head, trying not to squirm too much.

"Look on the bright side. Think about what they'd do to someone they *don't* like."

The women exchanged a look, well aware that Belle could easily have been one of those women on the bad side of the Curana and her Beta.

"Belle? Sheri? I'm not late, am I?"

Both Belle and Sheri smiled at the sound of that soft, sweet voice. Sarah Parker joined them at the booth, settling her purse between her feet as she pushed her bobbed brown hair behind her ears. "I'm late, aren't I?"

"You're not late, Sare-Bear." Belle grinned as Sarah made a face at the nickname she'd been stuck with for years.

Sarah pointed an accusing finger at Belle. "You are so totally lying, but I'll let you get away with it *this* time." She grinned. "And don't think you can intimidate me, missy." She struck a pose, nose in the air. "I am a High School Guidance Counselor. I face much scarier things than you every day."

"Amen," Sheri muttered, toasting Sarah with her diet Coke.

"Ditto." Belle raised her own glass, pleased when Sarah's and Sheri's clinked loudly against hers. No matter how much Becky and Emma did their best to draw her in, there was too much emotional baggage for them to be best friends. In these two women, women she wouldn't have given the time of day once, she'd found comfort and a deep friendship she hadn't known was possible. Both of them accepted her for herself, not the false persona she'd shown the world for so long under Livia's influence.

Sarah had been one of the only females willing to sit with her during her stay in the hospital, when Sheri's brutal ex-boyfriend had been stalking her. Belle had broken her hip saving Sheri from being run down by a car, a fact that had earned her Adrian Giordano's undying devotion. In fact, if Marie had tried to pull that cold as ice shit around the Marshall, she would have been in for a very rough time of it indeed.

“So, how’s Adrian?” Sarah grinned at Sheri, but Belle wasn’t fooled. Sarah had a serious crush on Adrian’s Second, Gabe Anderson. Too bad the man completely ignored her whenever they met. Belle knew that Gabe’s attitude was slowly beginning to wear away at Sarah’s cheerful façade.

“Fabulous.” Sheri drawled, fanning herself with her hand. She leaned in, waiting for the other women to join her. “I got him to agree to moonlight skinny dipping once the weather warms up.”

“Oh, you naughty girl, you.” Sarah reached into her voluminous purse and pulled out a notebook and pen, all without looking. She opened it with an evil grin. “Give me dates and times, so I can set up the hidden camera.”

Sheri cocked one eyebrow. “You are *not* filming my mate’s naked butt.”

“What about his naked—”

“No.”

“Damn. Foiled again.”

Belle grinned as Sheri snickered.

“Hey, Belle!”

Here we go again. She hid her grin by taking a sip of soda. “Hey, Frank!”

“What do you call a circle of blondes?”

She winked at Sarah and Sheri. “A dope ring.”

The entire diner erupted into laughter.

Belinda smiled at Chloe, Frank’s new waitress, as the girl set down Belle’s burger and fries. Two similar plates went in front of the other women.

“Thanks, Chloe.”

“No problem, Belle.” Chloe leaned over to whisper in her ear. “Congratulations on your mating, by the way.” She winked and sauntered off, much to the satisfaction of several of the male patrons. A few of them even leaned out of their booths to watch her ass as it sashayed over to the soda fountain. Her bright red ponytail bounced merrily between her shoulder blades.

Belle’s mouth hung open in shock. Chloe wasn’t Puma; how the *hell* did she know about Rick? She sniffed, catching a whiff of something elusive. Something definitely shifter, but whatever breed the girl was she’d never smelled it before.

“Belle?”

She turned, snapping her mouth shut and trying desperately to school her features. “Hmm?” She picked up her burger and took a bite, savoring the flavor of the meat. Frank made the best burgers she’d ever been privileged to taste.

Soft fingers touched the back of her hand. “Everything is going to be fine. I promise you that.” Sarah’s eyes had that far away look they sometimes got.

She's probably daydreaming about Gabe. Admittedly, if Rick wasn't such a hunk, she might be tempted to daydream about the black-haired, blue-eyed sheriff herself.

Peace flowed over her, as it always did when she was with her friends. She just wished she could pack them up and take them with her. She had the feeling she was going to need them.

Sarah leaned down and began scribbling something in her notebook, ignoring both her burger and the looks she was receiving. Everyone indulged Sarah in her eccentricities. She was just so sweet to everyone that they couldn't help it.

Suddenly ravenous, Belle devoured her burger. She couldn't wait for tomorrow. She'd get to see her mate for the first time in months.

And if he played his cards right, she'd mark him the moment she saw him.

Richard Lowell scowled at his Beta, David Maldonado, and his Marshall, Ben Malone. The only one who wasn't falling under his eye was his Omega; he hadn't informed her yet of her status. Until she recognized what she was, it would be a useless endeavor, ending only in more pain and degradation for her. "Let me rephrase that. I need you to pick up Belinda for me *without arguing*."

Ben had a faint frown on his face, while Dave was openly scowling. "Why aren't you going to get your mate yourself?"

Richard sighed and leaned back against his sturdy oak desk. What part of "no arguing" didn't they get? "Because the Pack females are giving me shit, that's why."

Ben nodded. "We know that, which is why we think it's important for you to be the one to go get her."

"First of all, the only reason she hasn't been brought here before this is because her doctors are in Halle. Second, the moment I show up, *informally*, with the Luna, the females are going to start giving *everyone* shit."

"They're demanding full protocol?" Dave looked shocked.

"No. *Gina* is demanding full protocol."

The three men exchanged a look. The strongest Wolf female, Gina had been vehement in her outrage over a non-Pack Luna, and her loud protests were stirring up the other females. Nothing would do but for Rick to follow *full* protocol, forcing the Pack to accept his mate as their Luna. The fact that Gina was Dave's sister made things even more awkward for the men.

"Shit. Sorry, man."

Rick eyed Dave with some sympathy. "Not your fault." He was beginning to wonder if it wasn't time for Gina to go start her own Pack, somewhere far, far away. Like in Alaska. "But because of Gina, I need you two to go get Belle."

The men nodded, all argument tabled. "I'll protect the Luna, Rick. Don't worry." Ben grinned. "Although from what I remember, she may not need much in the way of protecting."

"She can't shift, remember? Not until Doctor Howard says the pin can come out, and he told me it will be another six months before that happens."

"How's her physical therapy going?" Dave's concern was written all over his face.

"It's going well, but I've been warned she's been pushing herself a little harder than she should be." And when Belle found out he'd been monitoring her progress, she was going to be seriously pissed at him.

Not that he cared. Her Alpha had forced him to leave her behind four months ago, citing her injury. He'd agreed, reluctantly, his Wolf howling in protest at the thought of leaving his mate. Now, his patience was at an end. Phone calls were not enough to still the raging in his blood for his petite, fiery, *injured* mate.

Belle was coming home, if he had to fight the Pride Alpha and his own Pack bitches the entire fucking way.

Belle stood outside her small apartment, one small suitcase in hand, ready to bid the town of Halle, Pennsylvania a somewhat fond farewell. All of her other belongings were already winging their way across state to the Poconos thanks to a trio of very enthusiastic Wolves. They'd shown up on her doorstep as promised, cheerfully packed all of her belongings into a truck and driven away, leaving her only her bed, a folding chair and a small dinner tray. They'd even taken the television. She had the feeling if she hadn't hidden her little computer they would have taken that, too.

She shivered and wished Richard would hurry the hell up. The forecast had mentioned snow, and her hip ached like a son of a bitch. All of her belongings had been shipped the day before; the only thing left was good-byes.

Not that there are many of those to be said, which is why the farewell is only somewhat fond. Her parents had long since retired to Arizona; she'd talked to them more than once over the phone, but their relationship was distant at best. They hadn't even bothered to fly down to see her in the hospital, and as far as Belle was concerned that was a good thing. The Alphas and Betas of the Pride were there to see her off, and Sarah had sworn she'd be here, as had Adrian and Sheri. They'd yet to show, but Belle had faith that they would. These people here, and the man who waited for her, were the ones that mattered.

None of the other Pride members could be bothered, and Belle decided that, too, was a good thing. She had a limited supply of pepper spray, and the gun shop owner had told her that, without a license, she couldn't get a gun.

God alone knew when *that* would come through. Until then, she'd make do with her more makeshift weapons.

"Give me that." Max, the Pride's Alpha, took her suitcase out of her hand with a frown. "Sit in the Durango and get warm."

She opened her mouth to argue and saw Emma in the car, waving her over. “Fine.” She blew her blonde hair out of her eyes and limped to the SUV, trying desperately not to lose her balance on the icy pavement. *Fuck*. She could feel the cold seeping into her bones. *Why couldn’t Rick live in the friggin’ Bahamas?*

“Belle.”

Belle smiled. “Simon.” She automatically looked behind him for Becky; the two were rarely far apart unless they had to work. She found Becky settling into the Durango next to Emma, and grinned. Sarah sat there too, waving at her. She wondered when the other woman had arrived. How had she missed it?

He placed one hand under her elbow, steadying her on the ice. “C’mon, let’s get you in the car before you fall on your ass.”

He gently steered her towards the car, his body hovering over hers protectively.

She hoped they got to the SUV before Richard showed up. Simply mentioning Simon’s name was enough to earn her a growl. If he saw how solicitous Simon was being, he’d probably have an aneurysm.

“Thanks, Simon.” She started to settle into the seat, gingerly putting weight on her hip.

“Hey.”

She looked up into dark brown eyes that had once defined her world. “Yes?”

“If anyone hurts you, let us know. We’ll come up and kick some dog ass for you. Okay?”

Belle blinked back tears as Max, Emma and Becky all nodded their agreement. “Thank you.” She leaned over and took Becky’s hand as Emma’s landed on her shoulder. “Thank *all* of you.”

Simon nodded. “We’re Pride.”

And as far as they were concerned, that said it all.

Belle couldn’t hold back the tears, burying her face in her gloved hands. Only a handful of people still considered her Pride, but they were the most *important* people. She knew now she’d always have a home here, and friends, no matter what happened.

Soft arms circled her shoulders. “Remember what I said, Belle. Everything will be all right.”

She sniffled as Sarah, bless her heart, stroked her hair.

“Just keep picturing how Richard’s going to react to the full Brazilian you got!”

She gave a watery chuckle just as Simon said, “Really? A full Brazilian? Ow! Damn it, Becky! What did you do that for?”

Her shoulders shook as Becky started chewing on her mate. “What the hell are you doing picturing Belinda bare?”

“I’m not! I’m picturing *you* bare!”

“Ew. I’d rather eat honey-covered ants.”

Emma groaned disgustedly. “It’s not that bad, you big pussies.”

There was dead silence.

“What?”

“Emma!” Max looked like he was strangling on a laugh.

“What?”

Simon’s big, bellowing laugh had Belle lifting her head from Sarah’s shoulder. Becky was laughing so hard she was snorting. Sarah was trying desperately not to giggle and nearly biting her lip through in the process.

“What did Emma say that has you all laughing so hard?”

Simon moved, revealing Adrian and Sheri, grinning, standing by the side of the SUV.

“What makes you think it was me?”

Adrian’s amused snort said it all.

Belle leaned around Sarah. “She called us all big p-pussies for not getting full Brazilians.”

Sheri turned her back on the SUV. Her shoulders were suspiciously rigid.

Adrian blinked slowly. “Well. Spank my ass and call me Morris.”

They were still laughing when the Wolves pulled up five minutes later. Two men got out of the huge SUV they were driving. “Ms. Campbell?”

Belle stepped out of Max’s Durango with a little help from Simon, fully expecting to see a big, angry redhead sitting in the driver’s seat of the other vehicle. “That would be me.”

The man smiled and bowed his head. “Luna. I’m David Maldonado, Rick’s Beta, and I’m here to escort you home.”

Belle felt her face freeze. No one was in the driver’s seat. *Oh, Rick, you’d better have a good reason for ditching me again.*

And this time she wasn’t going to buy “Your Alpha made me do it”.

“Explain to me, *again*, why Rick couldn’t be here?” Belle stared out the window at the passing scenery, struck once again by the beauty of the rolling hills and mountains. She’d been in the Poconos once or twice before, for vacations, back in the day when she still took those. Back before things had gone horribly wrong. The Pocono Mountains were a ski and resort area in Northeastern Pennsylvania, a southern part of the Catskills mountain chain, and was roughly two hours away from Halle. Belle was pretty sure if it hadn’t been for Max telling Rick to stay away, Rick would have come to visit since two or so hours would have been no hardship on the Wolf Alpha. But she knew if he’d visited, he would have carted her off to the mountains with or without Jamie Howard’s approval.

Ben sighed. “Gina, the current dominant female, is demanding full protocol when you arrive. This means that Rick *has* to be there, waiting for you.”

Belle took a deep breath, already knowing she was going to hate Gina. *Thank God Rick sent me that package.* She'd read enough to know how important protocol was to the Wolves. "And what am I supposed to do?"

"Wait for Rick to greet you and welcome you into the Pack. Have you read over any of the material he's sent to you?"

She had. She'd rather read stereo instructions, but she had. "Yes."

"Good." The obvious relief in Dave's voice would have been insulting if he hadn't added, "We want to make sure that you're as safe from Gina as you can possibly be, at least until you're up to accepting challenges. Hopefully by then she'll have given up on the idea of becoming Luna."

Belinda saw the skepticism on Ben's face. "How many of the females currently follow Gina?"

The two men exchanged an uneasy look. "The most powerful ones."

She turned to stare at Ben, who was driving the land yacht they'd picked her up in. She'd never been in a Suburban before, and hoped to hell this wasn't Rick's car. There was no way she'd feel comfortable driving it. "And the others?"

Their silence was telling.

"I see." *Bullies, bullies everywhere, and I can't shift yet. Wonderful.* Not for the first time, she resented Jamie's insistence that the pins remain in her leg for another six months. If she didn't leave them in she risked having a bad limp for the rest of her life. If she waited to have the pins removed, once she shifted the bones would heal completely, and she'd be mostly pain-free.

"How soon can I expect Gina to challenge me?"

The men stared out the front windshield, their silence uneasy.

"Wonderful." *I gave up Frank's burgers for this?*

Rick dressed in his best silk shirt and his darkest jeans. As he pulled on his black boots, he noticed his hands were shaking. "Fuck." He took a deep breath, determined to meet his mate as a strong male, not a whimpering, shaking fool.

Belle was the only person on the face of the planet capable of tying him into knots. He'd come to crave the sound of her voice before he fell asleep at night, the conversations they indulged in were his lifeline in a world where his Pack was still in transition. She'd by turns confused him, amused him, given him advice and been the verbal shoulder he leaned on, whether she knew it or not.

And Gina, the bane of his existence, was determined to do everything in her power to see to it that, without *her* by his side, he could not run the Pack, despite his announcement of having found his Luna and mate in Belle.

Rumor had it she'd been down in the Lodge's archives, researching God-knows-what. He decided to have someone keep a closer eye on her. The woman was more trouble than she was worth, and if it hadn't been for Dave he would have already exiled the evil bitch.

When he'd first taken over, he'd been glad of the assistance she'd given him, grateful that someone was willing to take on the difficult task of controlling the Pack females. But Gina had taken things further than that, practically creating an Amazon Pack, and God help anyone she deemed weak or unworthy. By the time he'd figured out what was going on, he'd met Belle, and the balancing act had begun.

If he ever wanted his Pack to acknowledge his mate as Luna, he could do nothing to interfere with how she dealt with the females. All he could do was deny Gina's every request, refuse to see her, and defer all of her questions to "the future Luna".

To say Gina was pissed would be an understatement. A number of the weaker females had shown up bruised and bloodied at the Lodge's clinic in recent weeks. Ben was rapidly running out of patience; if Rick didn't get Belle installed soon, certain female heads were going to roll, and damn the consequences.

He stomped into the living room of his apartment, making sure his boots were firmly on his feet. He plucked his heavy leather jacket out of the closet and put it on, ready to face whatever his Luna had in store for him.

He only hoped Dave and Ben had been able to make her understand the situation. His playful kitty could be stubborn at times. He headed into the elevator and punched the button for the lobby. He had most of his shaking under control by the time the elevator stopped.

The doors opened. Immediately he wished they would shut.

"Hello, Rick."

His Wolf growled as the Pack's dominant female sauntered up to him, daring to stroke his arm possessively.

"When is your little mate due to arrive?"

"The Luna will be arriving shortly. Take your place with the other females."

Her eyes narrowed angrily, but the smile never left her lips. "I look forward to meeting your mate, Rick." She tried to loop her arm through his, not at all deterred when he pushed her hand off. "I'm sure she and I will get along just fine."

She blew him a kiss, laughing huskily as she glided out the front doors of the lodge.

"God, I hate that woman."

"Amen."

He turned, not surprised to see Graciela Mendoza hovering by the elevator. She was sporting yet another bruise on her cheek. He could see red finger marks, recent, around one slender wrist. Her expression was sullen and defiant. "Please tell me the Luna is going to eat that *puta* for breakfast."

Rick nearly choked. He'd never heard Chela curse before.

“Sorry.”

He sighed as Chela’s head dropped, her shoulders hunching inward. Her small defiance appeared to be over. “Go outside and wait for the Luna, Chela.”

Her curt nod was swiftly followed by her jerky exit. Not even her breeze touched him as she gave him a wide berth.

He followed her out, determined to keep Gina away from his mate, at least until he had a chance to properly mark her as his.

After that, unfortunately, she was on her own.

Chapter Two

Belle stared as they pulled up to Rick's "home". "Wait. It's a lodge?" Rick had failed to mention that during their long conversations. Everything they spoke of had revolved around Pack, Pride, her injuries, and whatever else had popped into their heads.

You'd think the fact that the man owns a freakin' ski lodge would have come up in conversation at some point during the last two months...

Ben was grinning with pride as Dave nodded. "Yup. We're not as popular as some of the bigger lodges around here, but we're one of the best." He carefully maneuvered the tank Belle was beginning to think of as Big Bertha up the driveway. It was plowed and sanded, something Belle was grateful for. "We cater mostly to people who don't want the experience of the larger runs, and crowds, but still want a relaxing week of skiing."

"What are the facilities?"

Dave's brows rose at her professional interest. "Two ski runs, one bunny, one intermediate. We have a four-star restaurant we're hoping will someday become five. We have a spa on-site. There are rooms in the main lodge, as well as cabins that can be rented on the west side of the mountain. The east side is reserved for the Pack and their families, all of whom work for the lodge."

She stifled a laugh as the lodge's sign came into view. "Red Wolf Ski Lodge and Spa, hmm?"

Ben grinned. "Like it?" He chuckled when she snorted. "Most of the big ski resorts around here shift into water parks for the summer, but people mostly come here from New Jersey, New York and Philadelphia for the skiing. Recently we upgraded some of our facilities to be more wheelchair accessible.

"We have a full gym, a day spa, babysitting services offered by some of the Pack females, and even a small golf course. All of it sits on about three thousand acres, a third of which is forested. Hiking and horseback riding are popular in the spring in this area. We just warn the humans to beware of wild animals. Right now, our only guests are shifters; Rick arranged it that way because...well, you'll see."

She stared at the huge wood and stone building. It looked like a mountain cabin on steroids. It was long, two stories high, with a vaulted, dark grey rough barely visible under the snow. She could see the doors of the hotel rooms through the railings of the huge deck that ran all around the second story. "Where are the cabins?"

Ben took one hand off the steering wheel and started pointing. "The cabins are around the back. If you follow the road to the right, it leads to them. Follow the road to the left, and it takes you to our banquet facilities."

She turned back to Dave. "Banquet facilities?"

"Winter weddings are pretty popular up here. Wait until you see the room. With the fairy lights lit, it looks like a winter wonderland."

Ben flicked a glance at Dave. "Damn, Dave. You're such a girl."

Belle covered her mouth before Dave could see her smile.

"What?"

"Fairy lights?"

"Isn't that what they're called?"

"Yeah, but... I mean, real men don't say *fairy lights*. Call them Christmas lights, or, I dunno, string lights."

"Are you questioning my masculinity?"

"All I'm saying is, if I see you dancing around in a tutu, I'm not gonna be surprised."

"Asshole."

"Fairy."

"I'm gonna kick your ass when we get out of the Pack meeting."

"You can try, Tinkerbell. You can try."

Belle leaned forward. "Dave?"

"Hmm?" He stopped glaring at Ben long enough to turn towards her.

Belle grinned and kept her voice low, but not so low Ben couldn't hear her. "I think he likes you."

She sat back and waited for the explosion.

"On, no. No way." Ben's face was beet red as he pulled up outside the lodge.

Dave leaned over, an evil look on his face. One hand fumbled the door open behind him. "Admit it, sweetie. You want my ass." He blew Ben a kiss before hopping out of the truck, sprinting for the front of the lodge before Ben could even turn the truck off.

Ben scowled after the Beta as he exited the car. Belle smirked as he opened her door and held out his hand, his eyes still on the figure of the Pack Beta as he took his place next to Rick. The Pack Alpha stood surrounded by his people, men, women and children waiting to welcome her to her new home. A tall brunette woman stood next to Rick, too close for comfort in Belle's opinion. The smirk on the taller woman's face brought up her hackles. Her resemblance to Dave marked her as his sister, Gina.

"Oh, c'mon, Ben. You have to admit, he got back at you." Belle accepted Ben's outstretched hand as he helped her out of the SUV.

Ben's jaw ticked as she watched him reach in and grab her cane. "Yes, he did."

She put her hand on his arm, suddenly concerned. "It was a joke, Ben."

He took a deep breath and bowed slightly. "I'm aware of that, Luna." His expression was more relaxed as he handed her cane to her and threaded her free hand through his arm. "Dave doesn't always know when to stop pushing."

Belle frowned thoughtfully as Ben assisted her to the Lodge. *What the hell is going on there?* She looked back and forth between the two men. *Huh. Maybe Ben really does want Dave's ass.*

Her speculation was abruptly halted as Rick stepped forward. That waist-length red hair was blowing freely in the wind. His ice blue eyes were glued to her face. The scar along his left cheek was pale against his wind-kissed skin. He was so hot she felt faint.

Right. That's why I left Frank's burgers behind.

No one would ever think to call Rick a handsome man. Tall, broad, intimidating, with hawk-like features, he radiated danger on a visceral level. Belle shivered under the intensity of Rick's stare, her chin rising in unconscious defiance.

Rick smiled, feral, hot, and possessive. He stood before her, tall and proud, looking down at her with burning satisfaction. "I welcome you, Mate and Luna, to your new den. May our cubs—"

"Kits."

His smile faltered. She raised one brow, demanding he acknowledge the change.

His expression warmed. "*Children*, be strong and healthy, nurtured by our Pack *and Pride*." His smile turned to a grin as she regally nodded her acceptance of his phrasing of the old, traditional greeting.

The growl of the dark-haired female right behind Rick did nothing to deter her from making sure that the Poconos Pack understood that they were now a mixed-race Pack.

Rick continued, his gaze never leaving hers. "May your strength be our strength. May your courage be our beacon on moonless nights. May your wisdom guide our paws to the right trail." Rick took her hand as the rest of the Pack knelt on the porch. All except Gina, who smirked and crossed her arms.

When Rick turned and saw Gina standing there, he snarled.

"You can't force me to accept a crippled cat as my Luna, Rick."

Belle took a step forward, heedless of the warning hand Rick laid on her arm. "Are you challenging me?"

Gina smirked. "Yes."

Belle smiled sweetly. "According to Protocol, you must withhold challenge until the injury that prevents me from shifting is resolved."

The smirk fell off Gina's face. "What?"

"As the injury was sustained in defense of my Pridemate, it is considered a badge of honor. Therefore, you have no choice but to withhold challenge until I can shift and face you on an equal footing."

“Just because you decided to save the fur of some worthless pussy I can’t challenge you. Is that what you’re saying?” Gina took two angry steps forward before a voice stopped her.

“The Luna has correctly cited protocol.”

Belle looked up to see a bruised, battered female step forward. Her dark brown eyes were full of loathing as she stared at Gina.

Gina growled and turned on the smaller woman. “Excuse me?” Some of the other Pack females took places by her side, five in total, all of them growling at the now cowering woman.

“*Gina.*” Belle closed her eyes as Rick’s deep, commanding voice flowed over her in a sensuous caress. She opened them to find the Pack bowing before him as he stood on the bottom step. He towered over Gina, a soft mist whirling around his feet. Belle felt that soft mist touch her ankles and nearly groaned at the erotic sensation.

The Pack female was desperately clutching her head and trying to stand. Rick’s expression was cold as he stared down at her. “You demanded full protocol. Now you will abide by full protocol. Are we clear?”

Gina growled, but Rick stood unmoving. The females surrounding Gina tugged on her, and Gina bowed, acquiescing to her Alpha.

Rick backed up and slipped his arm around Belle. He addressed the Pack, his power flowing over them, an intimate caress against all of her senses. “I introduce you to my mate, Belinda Campbell, your new Luna.”

She wasn’t certain who let loose the first howl, but it was swiftly followed by another, then another, until the entire Pack, other than Gina and her band, were welcoming her with their song.

Belle grinned, lifted her face, and showed them why Pumas were called mountain screamers.

She tried to hide it, but he could tell his little mate was stunned at the look of the lobby. “We tried to go for a Northwest feel for the lodge without losing the urban touch. Do you like it?”

He watched as she turned in place, taking in the red leather club chairs, the geometric red, brown and tan rug, and the dark leather sofa. Dark walnut end tables were scattered between the chairs with tall wrought iron lamps providing reading light. Huge wrought iron chandeliers illuminated the space. Dark walnut exposed beams were a rich contrast to the creamy yellow walls and the pale fieldstone floors. The check-in desk was the same dark wood touched with rich golden accents, as were the elevator doors across the lobby.

“It’s beautiful.”

Rick couldn’t stop from beaming at her. “Thanks. I helped decorate it.” His smile dimmed as he remembered the frequent arguments he’d had with the old Pack Alpha over renovating the dying Red Wolf Lodge. The old man had refused to see what was right in front of his face. If they lost the Lodge, the Pack

would be forced to move, something Rick wouldn't tolerate. Rick had eventually been forced to challenge him, even though it grieved him to do it.

The old Alpha had put up a hell of a fight. Rick reached up and touched the scar on his cheek. To him it was a badge of honor, and a salute to the man who'd held their Pack together for nearly thirty-five years. Now the old Wolf was sunning his days away in a house in Arizona, his mate by his side. Rick couldn't wait to take Belle out to meet the old coot. His grandfather was going to *love* her.

"Where's our cabin?"

He blinked and looked down at his mate. Her shoulder length blonde hair sparkled from the beginnings of a fresh fall of snow. He missed the longer length she'd had the last time he saw her. He hoped she was willing to grow it back out. "We don't have a cabin. We live in the Lodge."

Her nose wrinkled. "That won't be very private, will it?"

"We have our own elevator up to the third floor. That entire floor belongs to us."

Belle's jaw dropped. "The entire *floor*?"

He nodded to the front desk clerk, pleased when the woman merely nodded back rather than baring throat. She was checking in a couple who'd just arrived and, even though it was a shifter couple, he wanted everyone who worked with the customers to act as human as possible. It was a habit they'd lost long ago, as his grandfather kept the Pack, and the Lodge, as isolated as possible. "We hold private, employee-only functions up there as well." He slid his keycard through the lock on the door behind the counter marked "Employees Only". Once the door shut behind them, he led her down the hallway towards the elevator in the back, ignoring the doors to either side.

"Wow, this is fairly nice for an employee area."

He grinned. "What were you expecting, a dungeon?"

"I'm not sure, but it wasn't that you'd carry the lobby into the offices." She poked her head into Ben's office, waving at the Marshall. "Hi, Ben."

He grumbled something under his breath, his cheeks turning red. Rick frowned, wondering why his Marshall wouldn't look him in the eye. "Ben—"

"Bye, Ben."

Rick allowed his mate to tug him away, seriously curious now as his mate's shoulders began to shake. "What did you do to Ben?"

She looked up at him with wide, innocent green eyes, so startling against her fair skin. "What makes you think I did anything to Ben?"

He frowned at her, not fooled for a moment. "Belle."

She laughed as he opened the elevator, pressing the button for the third floor. "Well, it all started with fairy lights."

"Fairy lights?"

“Uh-huh. Seems Dave really likes them.”

Rick nodded slowly. “I don’t get it.”

“Do you want to?”

He thought about Ben’s red face. “I’m not sure.”

The elevator doors opened and they stepped out. He growled at her wince as she stepped forward. “You’re in pain.”

Her smile was extra toothy. “Yup. I’m going to be in pain for at least six more months, too. Get used to it, big guy.”

Rick picked her up and strode down the hallway to a set of double doors. He ignored her weak attempts to get free, only easing his grip when she gasped. “Sorry.”

“Put me down, Fido.”

He stopped just outside the double doors and glared at her. “You bite me and you’ll regret it, Belle.”

“Oh, I’m so afraid,” she cooed. “Watch me shiver in my boots.”

And the amazing thing was, she *wasn’t* afraid of him. Not one tiny little bit. If anything, she was getting seriously pissed off at him.

He loved it.

Everyone was afraid of him, from small children to grown men. But Belle was no more afraid of him than she was of a gnat. A dead one, at that.

“Don’t make me break out the rolled-up newspaper.”

If her hip hadn’t been broken he would have dumped her on the floor for that one. “Don’t worry, sweetheart. I’ve made sure the place is just the way you’d like it. I even got your litter box all set up for you.”

He set her down as she bared her teeth and hissed. He opened the door and waved her in with a laugh. “Welcome home, Belle.”

She shivered as that deep voice washed over her. *Welcome home, Belle.*

Home.

She stepped over the threshold, eager to see Rick’s idea of *home*.

She stopped, shocked at what she saw. She’d expected him to continue the theme he’d had in the lobby up here, since it so clearly matched his tastes.

Instead, he’d built something straight out of Casablanca. Dark, rich woods with brown, tan and green textiles in tropical patterns littered the living room. The exposed wood of the sofa and chairs had richly carved fronts and sported “pineapple” feet. The side tables and coffee table were also exquisitely carved. The drapes were pale ivory, a contrast to the mocha latte walls and exposed, dark beams. The floor was the same wood as the furniture, with a large sisal rug underneath to define the area.

She could see the intricate dining table and chairs beyond the living area, as well as a kitchen that would make any serious chef swoon. Because the whole area was so open, instead of feeling dark and dreary the living space felt open and earthy.

He'd even painted the ceiling a soft, barely-there blue, finishing off the look nicely.

"Is there anything you'd like to change?"

She looked around, taking in the stone and wood fireplace, the massive entertainment center with the plasma screen TV, the bric-a-brac and photos that lined the wall...

Wait a moment. "Rick, when did you start hanging my pictures?"

"I did that yesterday. I wanted you to feel at home as soon as possible."

Big dope. She didn't know whether to sigh or to hit him. "You went through my things?"

He rolled his eyes and stepped past her into the living room, shutting the door behind them with a very final sounding *click*. "It's not like I read your diary or jerked off in your underwear. I hung a few pictures, that's all."

She bit back a snarl as he hung up his jacket. "They are still my things. You can't just go through someone else's things." *What if he found my medical bills?*

He stalked towards her. His hands curled around her shoulders, halting her progress when she tried to move back instinctively. "I didn't 'just go through someone else's things'. I went through my *mate's* things."

"Without her permission." Her chin went up, daring him to deny he'd done something wrong.

"*This* is all the permission I need." His mouth swooped down, taking hers in a kiss that set her soul on fire.

Soul afire or not, they needed to get a few things straight. She picked up her foot and slammed the heel of her boot down, hard, on his instep.

"God damn mother-fucking son of a bitch!" Rick howled, hopping back from her, his face completely blank with shock. "What did you do that for?"

She leaned on her cane, trying her best to keep her expression serene in the face of his growing anger. "You do not go through my things. You do not open my mail. You do not answer my cell phone unless I ask you to. You do not read my e-mail. You do not go through my checkbook." She stopped for a moment, mentally counting up the things she didn't want her overbearing mate to stick his big nose into. "You can take my car to be inspected. All insects shall be slain by you. If I have a doctor's appointment, you may drop me off, but I won't have you there growling at the nurses or my physical therapist, so you'll go do shopping or Pack things until I'm done. You will not *forbid* me to do anything, or you'll live to regret it. 'Nair in your shampoo' type regrets." Not that she'd ever go through with that threat. His hair was truly beautiful, and she'd sooner cut off her own arm than one single inch of it. "Oh, and one other thing." She reached up and patted him on the chest. "The Halle Pride leaders are my friends, okay? So I want you to

stop picturing Simon's balls in a pickle jar in your fridge." She smiled up at him, all sweetness and light, not surprised by the fact that his face had gone expressionless.

"Is that all?"

"Not quite. You're going with me to Florida in April. You'll need to buy a suit."

He pulled her jacket off, his jerky movements betraying his lingering anger. "Why is that?"

"Emma asked me to be a bridesmaid, and I said yes. One of the garment bags brought up here should be my dress, in fact."

"I already own a suit."

She sniffed, knowing how it would annoy him. "I'll have to see what it looks like." She tried to saunter into the living room but was hampered by her limp.

His long suffering sigh followed her as she made her way into the bedroom.

Holy moly. If the front of the home had been full of decadence, the bedroom eclipsed it entirely. Sapphire blue silk mixed with burgundy on a four-poster bed so massive it would swallow her five-foot-six-inch frame whole. It looked like something out of a tropical bordello.

"I can't wait to see your skin against all that silk."

Belle turned to find Rick standing behind her, so close she was surprised she didn't feel his breath on the back of her neck.

She did feel it when he leaned down and licked a slow, torturous path from her shoulder to her ear, stopping to nibble at the sensitive juncture where her neck and shoulder met. Without even thinking she tilted her head, giving him better access.

His hands went around her waist, holding her steady as he nibbled and sucked to his heart's content. "I have a few ground rules, myself."

"Hmm?" Belle opened her eyes, only then aware she'd closed them. The ruby silk had turned a deep brown, letting her know her eyes had changed. Her Puma was purring as her mate's scent surrounded her.

"Fuck, that's sexy." His low growl against her neck sent a shiver down her spine.

"What ground rules?"

Is that my voice? Even at his best, Simon had never gotten her to whimper, and Rick had barely touched her!

She could feel his smile against her neck and knew he'd heard it. "My rules are simple." His hands slowly lifted the hem of her black turtleneck. "Rule number one. When we're in the bedroom, you have to be naked."

She dropped her cane as he pulled her sweater up and over her head, tossing it carelessly onto a fringed, backless chaise done in the same sapphire blue as the bedding. At least she thought it was blue. It was the same shade of brown as the blue parts of the bedding.

His hands began a slow caress of her breasts through the lace of her bra, paying special attention to her nipples. “Rule number two: when it comes to your health, I *will* be involved. Get over it. And I already paid your medical bills, so get over that, too.”

She would have protested, but he chose that moment to unclasp her bra and pluck at her bared nipples.

His hair cascaded over her shoulder, brushing her breasts and belly with butterfly touches. “Rule number three.” His hands began smoothing down her stomach, heading for her black slacks. “I will stop picturing Simon’s pickled balls when I know for certain you’re completely mine.”

Belle turned in his arms, not surprised by the fierce, possessive scowl on Rick’s face. She reached up and stroked his cheek. “I’m all yours, Rick.”

His hands stilled at her waist. With a muffled oath he picked her up, buried his face against her neck, and bit.

Belle screamed as the pleasure-pain ripped through her. Her claws dug into his shoulders, earning a growl from his Wolf as the orgasm rolled through her with the force of a freight train. She jerked in his arms, her good leg lifting to wrap around his waist, her pussy grinding against his rock-hard erection through her slacks and his jeans.

When his teeth pulled out of her shoulder she groaned in regret, only to scream again as he bit down in a different spot with a rough snarl. He howled against her flesh as she bit back, right through his silk shirt, claiming the man who held her so tightly she knew he’d never let her go.

Chapter Three

Rick couldn't stand it any longer. He pulled and tugged her slacks as gently as his growing sense of urgency would allow, unwilling to cause her a moment's pain. He longed to just use his strength to rip the damn things from her hot little body, but he retained enough sanity to know how much that would hurt her hip.

So he unzipped, and unbuttoned, and *thank God*, pulled them down those long, luscious legs of hers. The boots she wore flew as he toppled her onto the bed face first, that incredible ass of hers right in his face. He moaned out loud at the sight of the black lace thong she wore.

She tried to stand up but he stopped her, placing one hand between her shoulder blades, the other at her waist. "Stay down." He knew his smile was wicked as she snarled, those bright gold eyes of hers glaring at him from under the fall of her pale hair. "Don't make me spank that pretty little ass of yours, Belle."

The red sheets had turned gold, almost the same shade as her Puma's eyes. It was one of the reasons he'd picked that color, knowing what he'd see when his vision changed. He'd had more than one erotic dream centered on what he was looking at right now, in fact.

He stroked her under her thong, reveling in the gathering damp between the bare folds of her pussy. She was getting off on this, big time.

He used his strength to keep her down, pulling one hand away long enough to unzip his jeans and free his cock. "Are you ready for me, Belle?"

She opened her mouth—

The phone rang. His private number, the one used only by the Pack. He closed his eyes, willing whoever it was to *go away*. He had a mate to fuck, and he wasn't about to stop unless the Lodge was burning around their ears.

Hell, the Lodge could burn merrily as long as he was between her thighs when it happened.

He slid the head of his cock past the thin line of her thong, pushing gently into her swollen pussy. "Take me, Belle."

She snapped at him, those sharp, pointy teeth of hers still in evidence. Claws ripped into the bedspread under her hands.

He stopped, totally shocked. *My little kitty has been holding out on me*. Wolves had the power to shift between wolf and man; no Wolf could stop in between, never mind what the myths about his kind said.

Now he knew where some of those myths had come from. In self-defense he leaned over her, grabbing both of her hands and forcing them flat against the mattress.

He growled as she bucked under him, furious and delighted as she fought him for dominance. *Him!* He was twice her size, and she *still* tried to throw him off.

She was the most incredible woman he'd ever met, bar none.

He moaned as her jostling forced him deeper inside her. "Oh yeah, baby." He snarled, his own fangs dropping as he fought the Wolf for dominance and won, barely. "Submit."

She stilled. "What?"

He grabbed her wrists and forced her arms apart, causing her upper body to lay flat against the mattress. He slid even further inside her, his Wolf demanding he dominate his mate. His cock was now halfway inside her. Her moist heat was nearly his undoing. "Submit to me."

"Oh, Fido. Them's fightin' words."

He would have been worried if he hadn't heard the humor threading through the threat. He leaned down, letting his hair form a curtain around them. Distantly he heard the answering machine pick up, but really couldn't give a...well, okay, he *was* giving a fuck, wasn't he? He brought his lips to her ear. "Submit to me."

He felt the shudder that ran through her, saw the hot, speculative gleam in her eyes, before his pretty little kitty turned into a wildcat in his arms.

She bucked against him, writhing, her claws moving in and out as she tried to toss him off and out of her body. He held her as still as he could, trying to put as little weight as possible on her hip, only forcing the issue when she grunted in pain.

"Enough!" He held her down, immobile, his body trapping hers against the mattress. His cock was now fully seated in her body, throbbing with the need to move before he exploded like a teenager with his first hot pussy. "Submit, Belle."

"Never!" She bucked one last time, but he could see the exhaustion beginning to war with the need.

Time to end this. "Submit, my Luna." He moved back cautiously, the smooth, silken glide of her snug passage nearly his undoing.

"I submit—" his heart jumped into his throat, "—that you're crazy."

He slammed his cock home, smirking as she gasped and shuddered. "Submit, Belle." He pulled back again in a long, slow glide.

"Ah, I submit my taxes every year."

He could feel her shoulders shaking as she grinned up at him.

He grinned back, slamming his cock home again. "Submit." He didn't even have the heart to growl it. He was no longer sure which of them was submitting to the other.

"I submit to a gynecological exam every year, too."

He nipped her shoulder as he rammed into her, reveling in her sighed moan. "Submit, love."

She looked up at him through her bangs, shocked. "What?"

He backtracked. He hadn't meant to reveal that yet. "Submit, Luna."

She smiled slowly, bucking back into him as he fucked into her again. "Make me. *Alpha*."

With that one insolently drawled word, Rick lost control of his beast, and thanked God for it, too.

Oh my God! Belle felt Rick lose it as he began ramming his cock in and out of her wet pussy. She yowled and pushed back, trying her best to get him even deeper, not caring in the least that she sounded like a cat in heat. He bit savagely into her shoulder, once again claiming her and marking her for all to see as his. She shrieked, her orgasm nearly robbing her of breath, the Puma in her glorying in the strength of her mate.

He let go of her hands to grab at her waist, heedless of her hip, pulling her back into his thrusts like a wild man. "*Submit*." His voice was deep and gravelly, like he battled his Wolf back.

She couldn't fight him anymore. She collapsed beneath him, allowing him total access to her body.

"Mine."

She withheld that one, final thing that would tip him over the edge, knowing it would mean all the more when she finally gave it.

He reached under her body, between her legs, and began stroking her clit, timing it to coincide with the motion of his hips. When she moaned hungrily he picked up speed. "*Mine!*"

She could feel herself building up to one hell of an orgasm. She bit her lip, determined to save that one final word for when she came.

"Say it!"

"Yours!" She could barely get the word out as her body clenched around him in a climax so strong it robbed her of breath.

When he howled out his own release she couldn't even move, so satiated with pleasure she couldn't have said her name if her life depended on it.

All she knew was she was his.

Rick collapsed over her, too stunned to do more than pant.

Where the hell has she been all my life?

He could feel himself beginning to snarl as he remembered where, and with whom, she'd been. He took a deep, calming breath, amazed at the depth of rage in him at the thought of her with any man but him.

His Wolf mourned the fact that he hadn't been her first. The man rejoiced in the fact that he would be her last.

"Ow."

He headed into the bathroom without even stopping to think. He had an Ibuprofen and a glass of water in hand before he even realized he'd moved. He shook his head at himself in the mirror and chuckled.

So this is what it's like to be pussy-whipped.

He decided not to share that little observation with Belle. She'd probably do something gruesome to him in his sleep.

He wet down a washcloth and added it to his pile to bring his hurting mate. He carried everything back into the bedroom, smiling to see her exactly as he'd left her. He put everything down on the end table but the wet washcloth. "Hold on one moment, and I'll have you comfortable."

"Mm-hmm."

He would swear she purred as he gently cleaned her off. He was just glad she couldn't see the bruises he'd left on her hips, or the multiple bite marks he'd left behind. They would heal, given a few days, but everyone would know she'd been most thoroughly claimed.

He got rid of the washcloth after cleaning himself up. Picking up the bed's control, he pressed the button that lifted her side of the mattress.

"What the hell?" She opened her eyes and stared at the remote in his hand. "You got me the extra deluxe hospital bed?"

He shook his head. "It's one of those beds you see on TV. I can raise your legs or back, depending on what's most comfortable for you. Didn't you see that the sheets are two twins?"

She blushed bright red and glared up at him sleepily.

"I mean, your face was right there." The devil was in him tonight, it seemed. He wanted to see her all feisty again. "It's not like you could miss it."

He laughed when she snarled at him, swiping at him half-heartedly with her claws. "You just wait until I can feel my legs again, you bastard."

He smirked. "That good, was I?"

She rolled her eyes as she accepted the pain pill he held out. She sipped the water, swallowing the Ibuprofen. "Uh-huh." She sighed dramatically as she snuggled down into the bedding, her breasts jiggling under his delighted gaze. "But you know I'm the best you've ever had, so I think that makes us even."

He had no intention of telling her she was right. She was smug enough as it was.

Belle listened in as Rick made a few phone calls. He thought she was asleep. She had been, up until the Ibuprofen wore off.

"Yeah, Gina tried calling last night. Like I was going to answer the phone on my mating night." He paused, obviously listening to the person on the other end. "No, I want you to show her every aspect of the restaurant." He sighed. "Chela, just do this for me. No, I don't give a flying fuck what Gina thinks." He chuckled. "Good girl."

Maybe I should bring a Milk-Bone for Rick's friend. Belle tamped down the unreasonable jealousy she felt over his call to another woman.

"Just remember, Belle is in charge. Any changes she wants to make are pre-approved by me."

What? Belle sat up slowly as what Rick was saying filtered through the haze of pain that had woken her in the first place.

She could see him slowly pacing, a slight frown on his face as he listened to whatever Chela had to say. "Uh-huh. No, I took care of the paperwork two weeks ago."

What paperwork? She felt her heart trip as possibilities, good and bad, ran through her mind.

"This is her dream, Chela. Help me make this happen."

Whose dream? She was practically screaming in her mind, wondering what the hell her mate was up to. She totally hated not knowing what was going on.

Rick froze, his gaze darting to the open bedroom door. "I'll see you in a bit." He hung up the phone and walked into the bedroom, his eyes turning brown as he saw her sitting up. "You should be asleep, my Luna."

She bit back a smile. "You think I can sleep through big clumpy feet stomping around the dining room?"

He slid beneath the sheets, one hand coming to rest on her bare stomach. "I was quiet."

She tapped one of her ears. "Cat hearing." She sniffed. "*Much* superior to *dog* hearing."

She giggled when he growled and nipped at her breast playfully. "*Dog* hearing?" He started to tickle her but stopped as soon as she grunted. "You're in pain, aren't you?"

She nodded, biting her lip to keep from screaming. Her hip hurt like a son of a bitch, no offense to the man next to her.

Rick practically ran for the bathroom. She could hear him slamming open cabinet doors and running water. He came back and helped her take the pain pills, frowning until she'd finished the glass of water.

Mumbling to himself, he left the room, returning with two graham crackers. "Eat."

She looked up at him suspiciously. "The doctor told you about my stomach, didn't he?"

Two imperiously raised eyebrows demanded she eat.

"Fine." She nibbled the crackers as his expression relaxed. He was right, anyway. The amount of Ibuprofen she'd been taking had done some damage to her stomach, but they'd caught it before it became a full-blown ulcer. "Thank you." She batted her lashes up at him. "You're my heeero."

He threw his head back and laughed. "I'm sure I am." He sat on the edge of the bed, gently brushing her hair back from her cheek. "I want to be."

She gulped. The yearning in that normally hard face had her reaching up. His beard, soft as silk, grazed her palm as she stroked his cheek. His eyes closed in pure bliss, his head leaning down until she was scratching at the top of his head. "Typical canine."

“Hmm?” He was barely lucid, turning into her hand. If he’d been a cat he would have been purring.

“You have a happy spot.”

He grinned, his eyes never opening as she continued to scratch. “Give me a few minutes and I’ll pet *your* ‘happy spot’ until you purr.”

He leaned down to kiss her. Just as their lips met, the doorbell rang.

Belle looked over at the clock. It was seven in the morning. “Expecting someone?”

“Yes.” He grinned wickedly. “Get dressed. I have a surprise for you.”

Belle stood, wincing as she put weight on her abused hip.

“Here.”

She took the underwear he handed her, pausing to watch him pull on his jeans. She nearly groaned as she realized he’d be walking around commando all day.

She looked down at the panties in her hand, then looked back at him. With a smirk she tossed them onto the bed, then pulled on her own jeans.

His groan was music to her ears.

She pulled on the lacy bra and reached into her bag for her favorite shirt. It was a men’s style button up in a pale blue pinstripe with wide collars and cuffs. She covered it with a low scoop sweater in sapphire blue.

By the time she was pushing her feet into her low heeled boots Rick had the door open.

“Chela. What’s wrong?” The worry in his voice was barely audible, but it let her know something wasn’t quite right.

“Sorry, Rick. Rumor has it Gina’s planning on starting trouble at the restaurant today. If you want me to introduce the Luna as the new manager, we’d better make it quick.”

Belle stumbled, pulling up short against the doorjamb.

Manager?

Rick looked over his shoulder and started towards her. “Where’s your cane?”

“Um...” Belle looked behind her into the bedroom, still dazed.

He shook his head, gently lifting her aside. He went in, got her cane, and handed it to her on his way out. “I want you to meet Graciela Mendoza, Chela to the Pack.” He followed Belle’s slow progress into the living room, his gaze riveted to her white-knuckled grip on the cane’s handle. “Chela, Belle.”

The woman bowed and bared her throat to Belle, something that would take some getting used to. “Luna.”

Belle nodded back, uncomfortable in a way she hadn’t been yesterday. Rick was watching her, his gaze sharp. “Chela.” She put out her hand, expecting Chela to take it.

Chela looked at it, slowly standing to look her in the face. The bruises marring her skin were numerous.

The dark-haired woman blinked before reaching out slowly to take Belle's hand. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Luna."

The uncertainty in her voice tugged at Belle. "It's a pleasure to meet you too."

Chela nodded, the gesture abrupt and tinged with fear. "If you'll follow me, I'll take you down to the restaurant."

"Wait, Chela." Rick strode into a different room, off to the right of the bedroom. He emerged pushing an electronic scooter, complete with basket, in candy apple red. "Here."

Belle looked at the scooter, then looked up at Rick. "I can walk."

"I know. But you're in a lot of pain today, and you'll have a *lot* of walking to do. When your hip gets tired, use the scooter to get around."

Belle was stunned. She knew how much the damn things cost. She'd looked into it once, but her COBRA insurance had denied her claim and she hadn't been able to afford it on her own. They didn't seem to understand that you couldn't push yourself in a wheelchair with a broken arm. She'd had to rely on Sarah, Sheri and Adrian to get around. Now that her arm was healed, she could use a standard wheelchair, but he'd spent a couple grand to make her life easier, knowing she'd only need it for a few more months. What kind of man did that?

He smiled like a kid when she settled into the seat. "The controls are simple." He leaned over her and pointed at the handle bars. "Forward, reverse, and horn. The headlamp comes on automatically when you move." He turned it on and watched as she learned to maneuver around the apartment. She could feel his gaze burning into her, the pride on his face visible to any who looked.

She stopped next to him and climbed off the scooter. "Thank you." She wrapped her arms around him, cuddling in close, trying without words to let him know just how much both of his gifts meant to her. Not only had he done everything in his power to see to her comfort, he'd handed her dream to her on a silver platter. She had no clue how he'd found out she'd always wanted to run a restaurant, but she wasn't about to turn the gift down. No one had ever done anything like that for her before. It made her feel...cherished. She was going to have to make sure she did something for him, something that would show how much he meant to her. She'd just have to figure out what that something was.

He hugged her back, his face buried in the crook of her neck. She felt him smile just before he placed a small kiss there. "You're welcome." He let go and winked at her. "Have a good day at work, my Luna."

She watched as he strode out of the apartment, that incredible hair of his swishing above that equally amazing ass.

When the door shut behind him she turned to Chela. "Where can a girl get breakfast around here?"

"So, that's the general layout, all of the financial paperwork, and the employee records. What do you think?"

What do I think? I think I want to kill Gina Maldonado, that's what I think. Gina had been acting manager of Lowell's Steakhouse for the past year, and she'd pretty much run it into the ground. Key staff had quit, preferring to work the front desk rather than be under Gina's thumb. The financial records looked like they'd been done by a toddler.

But what really, *really* pissed her off was the fact that she'd signed certain documents as Gina Lowell.

Belle had learned a few things in the last four months. First, she'd learned who her true friends were. Second, she'd learned that, distance notwithstanding, Rick Lowell was *hers*, damn it.

And third, she'd learned that she had zero tolerance for self-absorbed assholes with delusions of grandeur. *Been there, done that, thank you very much.*

Belle looked up and met Chela's gaze. "Does Rick know any of this?"

Chela shook her head. "He's been avoiding Gina ever since he realized what she was up to."

"Up to?"

"Trying to forcibly become Luna."

Belle tapped her nails on the wooden desk. "And how was she doing that?"

Chela hunched in on herself, becoming nervous. "By beating up the lesser females and surrounding herself with the strongest. Making sure she was the one who made the decisions normally made by the Luna, citing the fact that she's the dominant female and Rick *had* no Luna." Chela's shoulders relaxed as she refocused on Belle. "At least, not until now."

"And don't you forget it." Chela's startled laugh was sweet. "So we need to deal with Gina, first and foremost." Belle tried to discreetly squirm in her chair, but the pain in her hip was steadily growing. *Looks like the Ibuprofen wore off again.*

Chela frowned as Ben entered the office, a glass of milk in one hand and a small plate in the other. "Luna. Chela." He put the plate and glass on Belle's desk with a smile. On the plate were two pain pills and some graham crackers. "Rick asks you to meet him for lunch, if your schedule permits."

Belle smiled at Ben. "Thanks. I'll meet him." *I don't think I'll ever get used to how formal the Woof-Woof set is.*

"He also wanted to let you know there's going to be a Pack meeting tonight. If you're not back at the apartment by six, he asks that Chela escort you, as the meeting is at six thirty."

Belle saw Chela nod to Ben before he smiled at both women and left. "If Ben knows you're in pain, you can bet Rick does. You might want to take that."

She'd forgotten that, as Marshall, Ben could feel the physical well being of each and every Pack member. He'd know quickly if her medication was wearing off, and knowing Rick, he was under orders to let him know if Belle was trying to hide her pain. Belle quickly took the medication. The last thing she needed was Rick breathing down her neck right now. "Okay." She leaned forward, her expression intent. "You're Pack. Born or made?"

“Born.”

“So you have a pretty good idea about what will get Gina to back off, right?”

Chela nodded. “Total annihilation.”

Belle was silent for a moment. “So talking things out diplomatically won’t work, huh?”

Chela ran her hands through her hair, a hopeless look on her face. “Gina Maldonado wants to be you. She wants to be Luna, and she wants Rick. Always has, always will. If she can find a way to get rid of you without harming Rick, she’ll do it. If she has to share you with Rick, she’ll do it. And if she can kill you without it killing Rick, she will.”

“Oh.”

“I know things are different in the Prides.”

You think? In the Pride a female like Gina would have been Outcast long before now for her treatment of the “weaker” females. Not that any of the “weaker” females would have stood for it. They would have found many, many ways to make Gina’s life miserable...

“I know that grin. The Grinch gets that grin every Christmas on my TV.”

Belle motioned Chela closer. “I have *a plan*.”

“Does it have tweezers, very hot water, and Sea Breeze astringent in it?”

Belle waited, hoping Chela would explain what the hell she was talking about.

“Um. Never mind.”

“Oh, no. You can’t just let that one sit in my brain and percolate.”

Chela choked on a laugh. “My father made my mother very, very angry one day before he went to work on a big project.”

“Uh-huh. Men do that to women.”

“He called her from work and told her he was very sore after a long day, and that he wouldn’t be back until the next day.”

“Why not?”

“He works construction in New York, and the drive can be murder when you’re hurting. Anyway, he asked what he could do to soothe his muscles.”

“Oh, boy.”

“Yeah. She told him to take a very long, very hot shower, as hot as he could stand. Then, when he got out, he was to splash Sea Breeze all over his body.”

“But...that would...” Belle’s eyes widened as she realized exactly how much pain splashing astringent into wide open pores would be caused.

“Yeah. He had to sit in a cold tub for *hours*. He called her and cursed her in three different languages and didn’t come home for a month.”

“Didn’t that cause problems?” Now that she’d lived with Rick, even if it was only for a day, she couldn’t imagine spending a month away from him.

“Oh, yes, but his other mate went up and took care of him. Then she and Mom got into a fight—”

“*Other* mate?”

Chela gulped, and Belle wondered exactly what her expression looked like to make the previously friendly woman look wary. “Yes. It happens sometimes, that a Wolf finds he has two mates.”

Not my mate.

“It’s very rare, though, and unfortunately was the cause of a lot of my parents’ fighting.”

“Where are they now?”

“My mom lives in Santa Fe. My father and Brenda live in Texas.”

“So they don’t live together?”

Chela shrugged. “My father flies up to see my mom once a month. Now that they don’t have to live together, they actually get along fairly well. My mom doesn’t have to take care of him anymore; Brenda does all of that.”

“Huh.”

Belle started when she felt Chela’s hand on her arm. “Don’t worry about it, Luna. Rick has only one mate.”

Belle felt her anger drain away at Chela’s touch, felt the brush of the other woman’s power as it soothed her Puma. She looked at the other woman in wonder as the knowledge of what was going on moved through her with swift assurance. “You’re the Omega.”

Chela’s hand drew back, her expression startled. “What?”

What? How the hell... What the...

It was like knowing Rick’s eyes were blue, or that drinking water would quench your thirst, or that Gina Maldonado was a bitch in both senses of the word.

Belle bit her lip, wondering how to fix what she’d just blurted out. She knew she was right, but how to make Chela see it? “Trust me, nobody these days takes me from pissed to pleased with just one touch.”

“Not even Rick?”

She shook her head slowly, watching the other woman’s face carefully. Belle wasn’t certain how to make Chela see what was so clear to her. “Do me a favor, will you?”

“Sure.”

Chela still looked wary. She’d have to fix that. “I want you to think, *really* think, about how the Pack feels right now.”

Chela’s head tilted to the side and she frowned. “How the Pack feels?”

“Are they angry? Are they upset? Who’s fighting right now? Who’s in need of a shoulder to cry on?”

Chela’s brow furrowed.

“C’mon, Chela, I know you know the answer. I can feel it in you.” Belle felt something strange moving within her as she concentrated on Chela. “Tell me.”

And that something whipped out of Belle and wrapped around Chela, cocooning her in Belle’s strength.

Chela’s eyes blanked. “Gina is supremely pissed, and heading to the restaurant. Her flunkies are spoiling for a fight. Rick is distracted. Not sure why. Ben is...” Chela looked startled before a muffled laugh erupted. “Um. Not going there.”

Huh. Go Ben. “How does the Pack as a whole feel?”

Chela’s eyes slowly focused back on her, a wide smile lifting the corners of her mouth. “Hopeful.”

Belle matched Chela’s smile. “We need to talk to Rick. And I have an idea of how to deal with Gina.”

“You do?”

“Uh-huh.” Belle outlined her plan to the new Pack Omega. The look of wonder on Chela’s face was a balm, but the unholy glee that eventually replaced it was even better.

Just as she stood to get settled into her scooter, Chela’s hand landed on her arm. “Luna?”

“Yes?”

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

Rick stepped into Lowell’s, prepared to meet Belle for lunch, and stopped cold.

Gina was hovering over his mate, snarling at her, right in the middle of Lowell’s dining area. Patrons, shifters all, watched with amusement as Belle stood there, her expression one of vapid confusion. The scooter was right behind her, what looked like paperwork shoved willy-nilly into the basket. Her cane rested against the seat as she stood under her own power and faced her rival.

“Who authorized these changes?”

Belle looked innocently baffled. “I did.”

Rick grinned at the sound of his mate’s voice. He stepped back and prepared to be entertained, crossing his arms over his chest and leaning back against the wall.

Gina had no idea what was about to happen, and he had no intention of enlightening her. He’d been on the receiving end of *this* mood often enough that there was no way he could not recognize it.

“You had no right.” Gina was speaking through clenched teeth, never a good sign in a Wolf. It made him wonder how long his mate had been playing with the alpha bitch.

“Oh, but I did. Rick made me not only manager, but part-owner of Lowell’s.” She smiled sweetly.

Ah, my curious little cat. I thought she’d find those papers.

Gina drew in a deep breath, her fury obvious. “He had no right to give you what is mine!”

“I believe it is the Alpha’s right to gift his Luna with whatever he wishes.”

Rick's eyes widened as Chela boldly stood beside his mate, her gaze never leaving Gina's face.

One of Gina's minions moved forward, but Gina held up a hand. "Well, someone's getting brave." The sneer on her face as she stared at Chela was met by a cold glare.

"I wouldn't if I were you." Belle's gleeful sing-song words went right past Gina.

"Perhaps you need a lesson in who's boss around here." Gina stepped forward, her arm lifting, her hand clenched into a fist.

Belle's hand shot out so fast Rick barely saw it move, grabbing Gina's wrist and stopping Gina's fist an inch from Chela's face.

The most interesting thing was, Chela didn't even flinch. She just kept that cold, steady gaze on Gina. That fixed, dead gaze was starting to give him the willies.

Gina howled in pain as Belle smiled vacuously. "I *really* wouldn't try to hit Graciela any more, okay? That's bad." She shook her finger at Gina, who was desperately trying to get her wrist out of Belle's curled hand. "Bad woof-woof."

Half the patrons of the restaurant had their faces buried in their napkins, their shoulders shaking. The rest were openly laughing.

Rick scented blood and realized his kitty had unsheathed her claws right into Gina's arm. Her pretty green eyes had turned bright gold. Her expression was still as vapid as she could make it. A cheery smile graced those full lips as she put her free hand in her pocket.

Gina managed to get her arm free of Belle's grasp. "Bitch."

"Oh, silly poodle. I'm not the bitch, you are, remember?" Belle shook her head sadly. "Didn't your mommy teach you *anything*?"

Rick swiped at his mouth, desperate to wipe the grin from his face as Gina shook with anger. To be defeated by someone she considered inferior was bad enough, but to be defeated by someone who was acting like a complete imbecile was intolerable to someone like her.

"Why you little—" Gina lunged forward, losing what little self-control she had.

Only to be brought up short by the air horn Belle pulled out of her pocket and set off right next to her ear. The dominant female dropped, hands over her ears.

Belle let up on the button. "Not done yet." Belle's cheery voice floated through the sudden silence, causing more than one patron to choke out a laugh.

Mental note: take Belle's new toy away. Rick's ears were ringing from halfway across the room. He could only imagine what Gina and her coterie felt like. With another quickly hidden grin he realized Chela had covered her ears, muffling some of the sound.

"So, here are the new rules, okay?" Belle looked dementedly happy as she started ticking things off on her fingers. "No more trying to piddle on Rick's carpet. If anyone's going to mark territory there, it's me."

Gina snarled up at Belle but rapidly pulled back when Belle brandished the air horn.

"No more beating up on the other women or I will take you to the vet and have you tutored."

"Neutered." Gina corrected her with a frown.

Belle leaned down and patted Gina's cheek. "Don't worry, sweetie, *someone* would learn *something*."

Rick coughed as Belle straightened. He lost his fight with his grin as she winked saucily at him.

"And last, but not least, you will show deference to the Omega. Because if you don't, you *will* regret it in a very bad, not good, terribly awful way." She was really laying on the inane sincerity. Rick wondered what she was up to, and how much in damages he'd probably have to pay.

Gina bared her teeth at Belle. "Who's the Omega?"

"Me." Chela's grin was not in any way friendly.

"You?" Gina's laugh reminded Rick of a hyena, especially when her loyal minions joined her.

There was a gasp as Belle rapped Gina on the nose with...

Rick lost it. His Luna had just hit the dominant female with some rolled-up papers she must have grabbed from her scooter.

God I love that woman.

"Bad woof-woof." Belle shook her finger, completely ignoring Gina's shocked expression. The alpha covered her nose with her hands. "No Milk-Bone for you." Belle gave Gina that horrendously serene, vacuous smile, and Rick tensed. "Now, remember. The Omega, that's Graciela for those of you with two-second scrolling memories, outranks all of you. So," she clapped her hands together, setting off the air horn for a brief, shrieking moment of pain, "I want you to treat her with respect."

"No."

Belle looked sad as she shook her head. "Oh, honey, you're just not the quickest bunny in the forest, are you?" Someone snickered. "It's not me you need to be afraid of."

Gina stood, her sneer not nearly as pronounced as it had been. "No?"

"Nope. Well, okay, *sometimes* you need to be afraid of me. But not right now."

"Then who do I have to be afraid of? Rick?"

"Nope." That scary cheer was there again.

"Then who?"

Belle sighed, and looked at Chela. Chela never took her eyes off Gina.

Gina's face went white as Chela let Gina and her friends have it with both barrels. Rick had no idea what Chela was doing to them, but it did *not* look pleasant. Gina was soon a sobbing wreck on the floor, curled into a ball of misery, and her friends weren't any better.

"Now remember, poodles, the Omega outranks everyone but the Alpha, Luna, Beta and Marshall." Belle tapped Gina on the head with the rolled-up papers. "That means you. So I would treat her with respect, or this could become a daily, perhaps an *hourly*, occurrence around here."

The savagely gleeful anticipation on Chela's face let him know that she would probably use any infraction of the Luna's new rules, intended or not, to inflict pain on Gina and her minions.

"Now shoo. I have a lunch date." Belle waited patiently while Gina and company beat a hasty retreat.

Rick caught one glimpse of the dominant female's face as she left, and his blood ran cold. He pulled out his cell and called Ben.

"Ben here."

"Keep an eye out for the females. Belle just put a verbal smack-down on Gina and the woman looks like she might be out for blood."

"Will do. Enjoy your lunch."

Rick hung up and made his way over to his Luna, shaking his head at her antics.

"I *really* don't like her."

He took her hand and led her to a seat. "Don't worry. No one would ever be able to tell."

Chapter Four

Belle stood there, shivering her ass off in the cold night air, and wondered what the hell was going on.

Rick, his arms crossed, stared at the gathered Pack intently. The Pack grunted, Rick nodded. Then there was silence as his gaze drifted over them.

Belle looked back and forth at the group of silent people, all of them eerily staring back at Rick. She could see the occasional person nodding, or in Gina's case, sneering. Then Gina flinched and glared at Chela, who smiled smugly back.

What the fuck is going on?

She started tapping her foot, fidgeting the change in her pants pocket. She stared up, watching the stars twinkle through the break in the trees. She huffed out a bored breath.

"Belle?"

She turned to Rick, startled to see the Pack was gone.

"Aren't you coming?"

"Coming where?"

He looked shocked. "We're heading back to the Lodge for drinks, to celebrate our mating."

"Um. We are?"

"Yes."

"When was this decided?" Belle could feel her temper beginning to spike, and it felt good. She'd never dared lose her temper in Halle for fear of losing her so-called friends.

And just look where that got me.

No, it definitely felt good to let go. Witness how Gina had gone out of her way to avoid her all day! There were definite perks to this lack of anger management.

"Just now." He looked genuinely confused, and a little concerned.

"You didn't say anything."

"I spoke to the Pack."

Her eyebrows rose into her hair. "When?"

He stared at her intently for a moment, a look of shock passing over his face. "You didn't hear me, did you?"

"When?" She was moving beyond annoyed to seriously ticked.

Rick blew out a breath, running a hand through his hair. "C'mon. I'll explain it on the way in." He put a hand under her elbow and started walking. "I have a mental connection to every Pack member."

"Yeah, so does every Alpha."

"No. I mean, I can hear them, and they can hear me."

"Of course they can." She patted his arm soothingly.

"No, Belle. I mean, like telepathy."

She stopped. "In their heads?"

"Yes."

"Can you read my mind?"

"When I try to, or when you think something very loudly, yes."

She growled.

He held out his hand commandingly. "Give me the air horn."

Damn. She handed over the air horn with a frustrated sigh. "You never let me have any fun."

His expression softened as she pouted up at him. "If I had known, I would have mentioned it earlier. We've only been mated for a day."

They started walking again. "So from now on the Pack meetings will be held verbally. Problem solved."

"Problem *not* solved."

"Why not?"

"Because I can't hold the Pack meetings verbally."

"Why not? Some ritualistic bonding thingie that you're not going to explain because I'm a cat and I'd never understand?"

"Ritualistic bonding thingie?"

The indulgent amusement in his voice grated on her rapidly fraying temper. "*Rick.*"

He snorted, a smile flirting around the corners of his mouth.

"Why can't you hold Pack meetings verbally?"

"Tradition holds that all Pack functions held by the Alpha be done mentally."

She let her mouth move into her sweetest smile, mentally crowing at the worried look that crossed his face. "But I can't hear you when you do that."

"I know." He patted her hand. "I'll make sure to fill you in after the meetings."

She could feel her teeth trying to grind together and did her best to relax. From his wince, she didn't think she'd succeeded. "How am I supposed to function as Luna if I can't hear you?"

"I'm sure we'll figure something out."

They were almost at the Lodge. Belle smiled again, delighted when she felt him shiver under her hand. "Yes. I'm certain we will."

Belle felt insanely giddy as Rick carried her into their apartment after their mating party. The best part? Gina and company had chosen to skip the event.

She was still humming “Little Red Riding Hood” as Rick took her straight into the bedroom. Dave was completely insane once you got a few mojitos into him. He’d actually gotten up on a table and begun to sing that. He’d been leering at Ben the whole time. He hadn’t stopped even when Ben turned his back on him and walked away.

“You, my Luna, are plastered.”

She giggled and aimed a kiss at Rick’s mouth. She hit his chin. “Oh, scratchy.” She reached up and stroked a hand over his cheek, feeling his beard. It felt good against her palm. She spared a thought to how it would feel on the flesh between her thighs.

Rick groaned. She wondered if he’d heard her thoughts. From the flush creeping up his face, she thought he might have.

She thought about it harder and felt herself getting wet.

“Bedtime, little kitty.”

Belle pouted as he put her on top of the comforter. “What if I’m not sleepy?” She shimmied a little bit, trying to entice him into the bed.

His eyes turned brown. “Belle...”

She sat up and slowly pulled off her sweater and dropped it to the floor. His gaze was glued to her fingers as she began slowly unbuttoning her blouse. She made sure to have her fingertips linger at her breasts as she pulled the shirt away from her chest. The shoulders slipped down and hung on her elbows. She looked up at him from under her lashes and licked her lips.

He growled, his fists clenching. “You need to rest.”

“I can rest. After.” She allowed the top to fall off her, her hands moving to the front clasp of her bra. “Did you know the chemicals released during orgasm can help control pain?”

His gaze left her breasts to collide with hers. A wicked smile was beginning to curl his lips. “So orgasms are good for you?”

She nodded, giving him her most innocent, come-hither look. She bit her lip and unclasped the bra, allowing her breasts to spill free. Her nipples were already beaded in the cool air. “And you don’t want me to feel any pain. Right, Rick?”

“What? Oh. No. No pain.”

His absent tone nearly made her laugh. She held the seductive pose with some difficulty. Her fingers slipped to the snap of her jeans. He whimpered as she drew the zipper down as slowly as she could.

She bit her lip to keep from grinning as he rushed to remove her boots. He stood and dropped them to the floor, staring as she shimmied out of her tight jeans.

He gulped as her bare pussy was revealed. She didn't know if he'd forgotten she'd gone without panties that morning.

He nearly tripped over his own feet as he hastily ripped his own clothing off. She finally allowed the grin to break free as she leaned back against the pillow and began absently stroking her clit.

"Dear God, woman. Are you trying to kill me?"

She moaned in response, shutting her eyes as the sensation of her own fingers stroking her pussy began to overwhelm her. She wanted desperately to thrust her hips upwards to increase the sensation but knew better than to try it.

She felt the bed dip as Rick joined her. His big hand covered hers, stopping the motion of her fingers. Now it was her turn to whimper.

"Allow me." One long, strong, thick finger entered her, finding just the right spot to rub against. She gasped as she flung her head back against the pillow. He took advantage of her exposed neck, sucking and biting hard enough to leave a mark. The scrape of his beard only heightened her pleasure, sending shivers down her spine as his hand stroked her closer and closer to orgasm.

His mouth left her neck and worked its way down to her breast. He suckled her, harder and harder, matching the rhythm of his finger to the rhythm of his lips until she had no choice but to move against him.

"Uh-uh. Stay still." His hand left her pussy to press at her hip, stilling her movements. "No pain, Belle."

"You're kidding me, right?"

His wicked grin flashed across his face; that glorious red hair of his was golden brown, letting her know her eyes had definitely changed. "I'm going to fuck you until you don't remember your own name, but *only* if you stay perfectly still."

"I'm not sure I can stay still." She reached up and brushed her hands across his furry chest. "Besides, you know how much you love it when I buck back." She tempted him again with a glimpse of her tongue against her lips, loving how his grin faltered.

It didn't take long for the grin to return. "You're right, I do." He picked her up, ignoring her squawk of surprise, and placed her feet on the floor. He turned her around, pushing her shoulders until her face was once again buried in the bedspread.

"Y'know, Fido, there's more than one position. Even for a dog."

"Belle."

She could hear the laughter in his voice as he took hold of her hands, holding her down. The head of his cock nudged the opening of her pussy. "There's the cowgirl position." He sputtered a laugh as he began to slowly push inside her. "Then there's the lap dance position." He began slowly fucking her, nibbling on her neck, and she started to lose her train of thought. "There's, um, missionary. Yeah, miss...oh, right there."

He nipped at her neck sharply, causing her to see stars. She needed him to bite her in the worst way. “Any others?”

“Others? Oh, right. There’s...can’t you go any faster?”

He slapped her ass and she yelped. “How fast would you like me to go?”

She began slamming back against him, setting the pace. “How’s this?” She panted.

“Good.” His voice sounded strangled. “Very good.” He began matching her stroke for stroke, building the fire between them. “You’re gonna make me come, my Luna.”

“Oh, God, Oh God.” She chanted with each thrust. “It’s so good.”

“Come for me, Luna.” He let go of one of her hands and reached between her thighs, flicking her clit as he bit down into her shoulder. He pierced her skin with his teeth, growling. She screamed, coming so hard his cock nearly got pushed out of her pussy.

His Wolf howled as his hips jerked, coming so deep inside her she swore she could taste him.

She barely felt him pulling out, picking her up, and placing her on the comforter. She was asleep within seconds, thoroughly sated, a contented smile on her lips.

Rick was surprised at how quiet things had been, considering how furious Belle had been the night before about the whole telepathic thing. Although the make-up sex had been amazing, he was surprised she’d decided to let it go. She’d gone to the restaurant that morning with a cheery wave and a smile after they’d finished breakfast. She even let him know she was planning on working through dinner. She’d made a face when he told her about the Pack meeting that night, but she’d agreed and, feeling that she’d somehow let him off easy, he let her go without any further interference. He got the feeling that perhaps the Pumas didn’t get together as often as the Wolves and made a mental note to discuss that with her.

And here she was at the Pack meeting, all bundled up warm and cozy. He’d brought her a lawn chair to sit in, hoping to ease the pain he knew she was in. He planned on taking her home after the meeting, tucking her in under a nice, warm blanket, and personally massaging every inch of her sweet, creamy skin.

He began slowly opening his mind, allowing the others into his thoughts. He could hear each of them quieting their minds, preparing themselves for his nightly speech.

“WHO LET THE DOGS OUT! WOOF! WOOF! WOOF! WOOF!”

Rick flinched, his eyes nearly crossing, as the loud, grating music poured into his mind from...

Oh, Belle. You are in deep, deep shit.

He turned to find his mate curled up in the chair he’d brought her, her head bopping merrily to the tune coming from the iPod she’d turned on. She smiled at him cheerfully, wagging her fingers at him as her toe tapped the beat. He could hear her singing along in his head, especially the part where they sang, “*a doggie is nuttin’ if he don’t have a bone*”.

Rick did his best to tune out the annoying songs playing so loudly in his head, but he wasn't certain he succeeded. "How Much Is That Doggie in the Window" was bad enough, but when the K9 Advantix flea and tick jingle started going on a loop he nearly lost his temper. After a while people began rubbing their foreheads and peering at him strangely. He wondered if he was beginning to shout.

He cut the meeting short, sending the Pack off to romp in the snow, and stalked over to Belle. She was still sitting there bopping to the music. This time it was an oldie by the Monkees called "Gonna Buy Me a Dog".

Staring down at his wayward mate, he began to agree with the sentiment. A dog would be a *lot* easier to deal with than his woman.

He reached down and pulled the headphones out of her ears. Thankfully, the sound in his head muted along with the sound in hers. "Okay, Belle. Point made. Let's figure out a compromise."

"What are you talking about?"

He picked her up out of the chair and cradled her close. He'd come back for it later. "The Bimbo Barbie act might have worked on Simon, but don't ever assume I don't know *exactly* how smart you are." He watched as she blushed, her eyes turning gold in pleasure. He wondered how many times men had focused on her beauty, not realizing the sharp mind behind those gorgeous green eyes and full, killer lips.

He stared towards the Lodge, determined to work a few things out with Belle before she drove him mad. "I promise I will try to figure out some way to satisfy both you and tradition if *you* promise to never play flea collar jingles ever again."

She reached up and kissed his cheek. "Okay, Rick."

He climbed the steps into the Lodge, careful of his precious burden. "You're still not getting the air horn back."

She smirked, but the genuine laughter behind it was obvious. Belle was having fun. "You don't honestly think that was my only one, do you?"

All he could do was shake his head as he carried her back towards their private elevator. "You are a damn dangerous woman."

"You say the sweetest things."

Despite everything, he couldn't help but laugh out loud as she batted her eyelashes at him outrageously.

Rick had been upset when they'd gotten back to their apartment and found Ben standing outside their door, pain killers in hand. The Marshall had been rubbing his hip and wincing. Rick had immediately drawn a bath, undressed her carefully, set her in, and told her to stay put. She could hear him talking to Ben out front, but couldn't quite make out the words. She decided to let it go, figuring if it was something important Rick would tell her about it before bed.

The hot water had done the job almost too well. By the time he returned to help her out of the huge Jacuzzi tub, she was mostly asleep. He'd dried her off, put her to bed, and settled in next to her. He'd put his big hand on her stomach, kissed her good-night, and pretended to go to sleep. He didn't even try to seduce her.

She could tell something was bothering her Wolf. The tension took quite a while to leave his fingers. She couldn't help but wonder what was wrong, but unlike him, she couldn't hear his thoughts. When she tried to ask him, he'd laid his finger gently across her lips, shushing her quietly, before settling back down.

She placed her hand over his, stroking those long, strong fingers, and drifted off to sleep, determined to find out what was wrong as soon as possible.

Rick was gone when she got up the next morning. Whatever had bothered him the night before, he was apparently determined to keep it from her.

It seemed they were going to have to have another little chat about sharing.

She headed for the offices, ready to discuss things rationally. She was only carrying the air horn and pepper spray in case she ran into Gina again.

Really.

She smelled them before she heard them. Chela, Ben, Dave and Rick, all in Ben's office. She made her way as silently as she could, wondering if she would find them all goofing off over video games or something. She'd seen the console Ben kept in his office the day she'd first come. *Hey, if shooting space aliens relieves some of that stress Rick was carrying around last night, I'm all for him playing hooky. But we're still gonna talk.*

"We have to do something about this before Belle finds out."

The controlled anger in Ben's voice halted Belle in her tracks. *Before Belle finds out what?* She tried to think as quietly as she could, knowing Rick might hear her.

"God, I *hate* her." The venom in Chela's voice sent a shaft of pain through Belle's heart, but her next words erased it. "How could Gina do this?"

"It's the only way she could think of to get what she wants." Belle had never heard this level of ice in Rick's voice. Whatever it was Gina had done, it was bad.

"I tried talking her out of it, but she's adamant." She could hear the anger and sorrow in Dave's voice.

"Not your fault, man. You can't choose your family." Ben's voice was soothing.

"The hell I can't. She's no sister of mine."

"The sad thing? She's right. Protocol is on her side. As dominant female, she has every right to demand that Rick take a second mate to fill the slot of Luna since there's a good chance his mate is permanently disabled."

Belle listened to Chela's voice with a sense of shock. *Second mate?*

Rick growled menacingly. "I would sooner fuck Dave."

A low growl came from within the room. "Hey, no fighting over me, now. I know I'm such a prime piece of real estate, but, really."

Dave's weak attempt at humor didn't seem to go over too well as Ben spoke up. "Knock it off, asshole. This is serious. If Gina gets enough of the Pack on her side, Rick and Belle are screwed." Belle's eyes narrowed as she took a cautious step closer. "We could wind up with Gina being our Luna."

Rick sighed wearily. She could picture him running his fingers through his hair. "This must be what she was researching in the archives. Damn it." She heard a thump and wondered what Rick had hit. "How long?"

"Thirty days. If Belle can't shift and accept the challenge Gina threw down by then, you'll have to accept Gina as the Luna. It'll be your duty as Alpha."

"Don't tell me about duty. I know where my allegiance lies."

Belle felt numb. She stepped back, moving away from Ben's office as quietly as only a Puma could, wounded or not. She took the elevator back to the third floor and let herself into the condo. She went to the phone, picked up the receiver, and dialed a very familiar number.

"Hello?"

"I need your help."

Simon didn't even hesitate. "We're on our way."

She hung up the phone and headed into the bedroom. She packed a small bag, waiting for the hurt she knew was going to come. She just hoped that what she had in mind would put Gina's ambitions to rest once and for all.

And then she and Rick would have a little "chat" about duty along with the one about sharing.

Rick stared at the open closet door, the knife of pain twisting even further in his chest. Belle was gone. He could feel himself beginning to lose it as his Wolf howled in misery.

"She can't have gone far, not with that limp."

Rick turned blind eyes to Ben. "She must have heard us."

"Why didn't you warn us?" Ben was scowling at Chela as he wandered the bedroom. He stopped suddenly, stared intently at something on the bureau.

"She did, she just warned us too late." Rick didn't want anyone blaming Chela for this. It was his damn fault. He should have told Belle about Gina's bullshit move to claim him last night, but she'd been in so much pain he hadn't wanted to bother her with it.

"I think Belle didn't let herself feel anything until after she left." Chela bit her lip, looking more like the woman Gina beat up on than the Omega she'd so recently become. "I'm sorry, Rick."

"Not your fault. Mine."

"No. Not your fault. No one's fault. Take a look." Ben pointed with his chin to the bureau.

Rick hurried over, eager to see what Ben did.

There, nestled in one of Belle's silk scarves, lay her air horn. On top of that was a can of pepper spray, a small gold necklace, her diamond earrings, and a tiny soapstone sculpture of a wolf.

Relief settled in, so swift he felt dizzy. "She's coming back."

"How do you know?"

"She left her jewelry. She's also letting me know she's safe." Rick saw the confusion on their faces. "The air horn and pepper spray are still here."

"Why does that strike me more as a threat than an attempt at reassurance?" Rick ignored Ben's murmur, knowing deep inside he was right and Ben was wrong.

He fingered the aqua silk scarf, sniffing as Belle's sent wafted from the fabric to tease his senses. "But, why did she leave? That's the question."

"Well, I can feel her now, and she's upset. I think she's arguing with someone."

Rick turned to Chela. Her face was filled with strain as she struggled to connect to the Luna. "Do you know where she is?"

"No...other than she does feel safe wherever it is."

The two men turned to each other. "Halle."

Rick pulled out his cell phone and dialed. "Where is she?"

"Hello to you too, Rick!" The cheerful voice floated through the phone.

"Emma, please. Where is my mate?"

"Which one?"

Ah, fuck. "My only."

"She's seeing Jamie Howard right now. Can I take a message?"

She's seeing the Pride doctor? Fear pulsed through him. "What's wrong with her?"

"Other than a mate who might be forced to shack up with a real bitch?"

"EMMA!"

"Okay, Jeez. No need to yell. And don't growl at me, either."

Rick sucked in a deep breath and tried desperately to calm his Wolf down.

"Oh wait, gotta run. Jamie's coming for us. Bye!"

It took every ounce of Rick's willpower not to throw the phone across the room. "She's seeing her doctor."

"Call him. As her mate, you have every right to know what's going on with Belle." Ben took the phone from Rick's hand and dialed Jamie's number.

"Give me that." Rick took the phone back and listened to the options. When the receptionist came on line, he was practically frothing at the mouth. "Where is Dr. Howard?"

“I’m sorry, sir, Dr. Howard is preparing for an emergency surgery right now. Can I have him call you back?”

Rick hung up the phone without answering. “Emergency surgery?” Rick had a sinking feeling he knew what the “emergency” was. He pocketed the phone. “Get the car ready. We’re going to Halle.”

“You can’t, Rick. Gina will—”

Ben never finished the sentence. Rick’s hand shot out, wrapped around Ben’s throat, and pulled the smaller man closer. He bared his fangs as, out of the corner of his eye, his comforter turned from blue and red to blue and gold. “Get. The. Car. *Now*.”

“Yes, Alpha.” Chela patted his arm. He released Ben, who backed away, wide-eyed. “We’ll get right on that.”

Rick watched his Marshall and Omega run out of the room. He dialed Dave. “I need you to take over for a little bit. It seems something unexpected has come up in Halle, and I need to take care of it.”

“Yes, Alpha. Don’t worry, I’ll make sure nothing happens until your return.”

“Thank you, Dave.”

He quickly gathered some things up and headed down to the lobby. He stepped into the car, ready to fetch his female and drag her back home by the top of her head if he needed to.

Chapter Five

Belle opened her eyes to the sound of a mountain lion's scream. She sighed and closed her eyes again, hoping no one would notice.

"Guys, stop fighting! Belle is awake!"

Belle winced. *Dear God, who let Emma into the room?*

She opened her eyes again to see the petite, dark-haired Curana leaning over her. The smile she wore was strained. "Can I let the big bad Wolf in now, before he eats Max?"

Belle groaned. "Sure." She shifted slightly and immediately wished she hadn't. The throbbing agony rushing up her leg was all too familiar.

There was the sound of a gasp, quickly followed by a thud. It sounded like someone had fallen to the floor.

"Hey, Belle." She tried to smile as Adrian's face swam into view, but just couldn't manage it. "Looks like you're definitely one of the Pack."

She frowned.

"I'm still standing. Ben isn't. Last I saw Rick was helping him to a seat. What did you do, anyway? Try to move?"

She nodded feebly. She'd forgotten the Marshall would feel her pain. Poor Ben. She wouldn't wish this on anyone, not even Gina.

Okay. *Maybe* Gina.

"Don't. Rick is already fighting his Wolf tooth and nail. As soon as Ben hit the ground he nearly lost. Can you imagine a red Wolf running through Halle General?"

"Which one of you screamed at him?"

Adrian made a face. "Max. He's feeling a little protective right now, and Emma decided to get in Rick's face over the second mate thing."

Belle winced. When Emma decided to let go, most people knew to duck. Rick, however, wouldn't. He'd go toe-to-toe with the Little General, which would only succeed in pissing Max off. "Send him in."

Adrian left. Belle closed her eyes and concentrated on not passing out. Nausea rose up in a wave as her hip throbbed in time to her heartbeat.

"Just answer one question. Why?"

Belle looked up into Rick's furious face. His voice was quietly lethal, and his eyes were brown. "Why what?"

His expression tightened, his fangs dropping as he growled. "Why didn't you talk to me first?"

She licked her lips. Her mouth was dry as cotton, and tasted horrible. "Why didn't *you*?"

He took a deep breath, throwing his head back. She knew he was struggling to keep his Wolf contained. "*Belle*."

"I am your *Luna*, Rick." She was losing her battle with the pain. Soon she'd have no choice but to summon a nurse. "You can't keep things from me that affect the Pack, not if you want me to actually *be* the Luna."

He studied her, his expression closed off, and her heart sank. He didn't understand what she was trying to do, and she was in too much pain to make him see it. "Do you want me to stay?"

His cold, formal wording hurt. "You have to do what your duty compels you to do."

Anger flashed across his face before he visibly forced it back. "I'll return for you tomorrow, after I get over the urge to strangle you."

She opened her mouth to respond, only to have her words cut off by his mouth descending on hers in a desperate kiss that told her exactly how scared he'd been. She reached up, careful not to jar her hip, and threaded her fingers through his hair. Whisper soft, it fell around her, cocooning her in his scent until she felt safer than she'd ever been.

His mouth lifted abruptly from hers and he strode from the room, tension thickening the set of his shoulders.

No! She resisted the urge to cry out to him, knowing he needed a little time to sort things out in his own mind. But, damn it, she *needed* him!

He paused in the doorway, his shoulders slumping as he turned back to her. The agony on his face reflected the agony in her body. He walked slowly towards her bed, his gaze never leaving her face, and pulled up a chair next to the bed, as close as he could get and still sit in it. Once in the chair, he picked up her hand and held it until the painkiller the nurse injected into her IV tipped her over into sleep. His gentle kiss on her palm was the last thing she knew.

"I still say you've pulled some stupid stunts, but this one takes the fucking cake."

"Look, we both know why I did this. Do you *want* Gina's socks sharing space with ours? And didn't we already have this argument?"

Rick set her down on the huge sofa, carefully unwinding the blanket from around her shoulders. No matter how careful he was, she still hissed in pain. He was afraid if he heard that sound one more time he would break.

The drive from Halle had been painful for all of them. Ben had ridden shotgun, Chela taking the seat furthest in the back. Belle had had the entire middle seat to herself.

By the time they got back, Ben and Chela were both pale and sweating. Belle never spoke, only whimpering occasionally when Rick was forced to go over a rough patch in the long drive up the mountain.

Chela had immediately gone up to her cabin, claiming a splitting headache. Ben had headed straight for the bathroom in the lobby. Rick had the sick feeling Ben had gone there to throw up. He'd felt relieved when he saw Dave following Ben, a concerned look on his Beta's face.

Belle smiled at him, a pale imitation of the expression he'd grown to love. "Can I have something to drink, please?"

Rick examined her face. Lines of strain were visible around her mouth and eyes, dark circles standing in stark contrast to the paleness of her skin. "Do you need a painkiller, my Luna?"

When she bit her lip and nodded he headed straight for the kitchen. He poured her a glass of water and grabbed the prescription he'd had filled against her protests.

He closed his eyes, the memory of her lying in that hospital bed overwhelming him. He didn't think he'd ever be able to tell her how he sat there, long after she'd gone to sleep, terrified of moving in case it hurt her. The big bad Alpha of the Poconos Wolf Pack had held his mate's hand and cried as quietly as he could, not wanting to disturb her in even the slightest way.

For a moment he thought he might wind up joining Ben in worshipping the porcelain god.

He'd known even before she'd left for Halle what his decision would be, but watching her moan in pain, through sleep and morphine, had merely cemented his determination.

Gina could go fuck herself. He was done. This was the last time the Pack was going to come between him and his mate.

He carried the medicine back to the living room, stifling a grin. She'd put on some reality TV program and was growling at the contestants.

"What are you doing?"

She made a face. "Would you look at that?"

He turned and saw what looked like a runway. A woman, model thin, was walking down it wearing the frumpiest outfit he'd ever seen in his life. *What the hell?* "I'd rather not."

"The challenge was to design something for a hot twenty-something out on the town. Instead this idiot designed something my Great Aunt Bertha would be proud to wear."

"Great Aunt Bertha?"

"Yeah, she was a real looker back in the thirties."

"Ouch."

"Speaking of ouch..." She held out her hand.

“Open up.” Rick brushed the pill against her lips, not surprised that her eyes remained green. He didn’t think he’d get to watch her eyes change for quite a while longer.

She opened and he fed her the pill, holding the glass steady so she could sip through the straw. “Thank you.”

He decided he couldn’t put it off any longer. “I’ve called a Pack meeting to deal with the Gina situation.”

“It’s a little soon, isn’t it?”

He frowned at her confused expression. “I hardly think so.” Getting Gina off his back would be one of the few pluses to what he had in mind.

“Okay. Just do me a favor and make sure you’ve got a first aid kit handy.”

He blinked. He hadn’t thought she’d want to be present for this. “Sure.”

“What time tonight?”

“Ten. I want to make sure the Lodge is mostly shut down for the night. The few guests we have will understand an emergency Pack meeting.”

She shrugged. “All right, if you say so.” She turned back to her show, but not before her hand buried itself in the strands of his hair brushing against her thigh.

He settled in on the floor and watched her stupid show with her, totally at peace for the first time in three days as her fingers played with his hair.

Belle hated the outdoor Pack meetings, never more so than now. Pumas did it right; they held them indoors, with wine, cheese, and more importantly, *heat*. She could barely stand, even with the help of Rick’s arm, her cane, and the six Ibuprofen she’d gulped on the way out the door. But he was right. Gina needed to be dealt with as soon as possible, before she’d gathered too much power. She’d already acquired more than her fair share. “Good evening, my Pack.” The Pack jumped as Rick spoke out loud. Only Dave seemed unsurprised. “I called this meeting to deal with the challenge Gina Maldonado laid down before my mate, Belinda Campbell.”

The Pack looked back and forth at one another, obviously confused. She knew they were aware of Gina’s challenge, so she could only assume it was the fact that Rick had chosen to address them out loud.

“Due to the fact that my mate is currently unable to shift, Gina has also issued, as dominant female, a proclamation. If Belle cannot change forms within one month’s time, Gina must be declared Luna of the Pack.”

Ominous silence greeted that pronouncement. Only Gina and her flunkies looked pleased. Gina smirked at Belle.

Belle smiled back sweetly. Gina’s smirk faltered.

“If Gina was to be declared Luna of this Pack, I would be forced to accept her as my second mate.”

Belle's smile deepened, showing her suddenly sharpened teeth. She felt her claws rip through the fabric of her gloves. *Damn. Those were leather, too.*

"In light of the fact that I have more desire to bed a grizzly bear than Gina Maldonado—" Rick ignored the snickers, and Gina's fierce frown, "—I have chosen the only course open to me."

Belle shot Rick a sharp look as his shoulders straightened. Suddenly she knew what he was about to do.

She couldn't allow that. Rick was the best thing that had ever happened to the Red Wolf Poconos Pack. She took a step forward, already prepared for what was coming.

"I am ready to face Gina Maldonado's challenge."

"BELLE!"

She ignored Rick's roar as she stepped forward, letting her cane drop to the ground. She heard several of the Wolves surround Rick, and only hoped they were restraining him. She sneered at Gina, feeling nothing but contempt for the she-Wolf. "I'm ready to bring it, bitch. What about you?"

Gina laughed and stepped forward, her posse right behind her.

"Uh-uh-uh." Belle shook her finger at the females. "This is between Gina and me. No back-up singers allowed."

"Which means your 'friend' can't help you either."

Belle took a deep breath and removed her coat. "I've gotten used to that."

"Damn."

Belle shook her head and looked back at Chela. "Down, girl. It's my turn now."

"Look out!"

Belle turned and caught Gina's fist just before it landed on her face. She sank her claws into the other woman's hand reveling in the bitch's screech of pain. She felt one of Gina's finger bones snap under the pressure from her claws. "Oh, now, *this* looks familiar."

She smiled wickedly down at the fallen Gina as Sarah's words in the diner suddenly replayed themselves in her mind. "*Everything is going to be fine. I promise you that.*"

Rick relaxed as Belle's words flowed over him. "*Everything is going to be fine.*"

He watched as his mate finished undressing. Gina took longer due to the wound already inflicted by Belle.

"I'm okay." He shrugged off Dave and Ben, pushing Chela's hand off his arm. He was so intent on watching the women strip he barely felt the three of them move behind him, flanking him, protecting him.

When Belle was gloriously naked she waited, hands on hips, tapping a foot in the snow. He nearly whined at the sight of the new, jagged scar on her hip but stopped himself. He would be strong for her, for what she'd sacrificed to stop Gina's plans.

Gina slithered out of her panties, stretching, trying to tempt him with a knowing look.

He retched, then spit on the ground. "Sorry. I threw up a little in my mouth."

Gina gasped, infuriated.

"God, I love you."

Rick blinked, stunned. It was the first time Belle had thought that. Her thoughts were filled with such amused affection he couldn't doubt her sincerity. He wished with all his heart that she could hear his answer. *"I love you too, my Luna."*

Her breath hitched. The smile she turned on him was smug, cat-like, but she couldn't hide the happiness shining from her. *"I know. You show me every day."*

He blew her a kiss, crossing his arms over his chest as he settled in to watch his pretty little kitty kick the ass of one truly obnoxious bitch. He'd figure out how she'd heard him later.

She turned to Gina with a feral grin. "Let's get this over with. I'm tired of looking at your cellulite thighs."

Rick threw his head back and laughed, the sound booming through the trees, as Gina snarled at his mate.

"We can tell your ass has never seen a treadmill before, either. I mean, yeesh."

Rick laughed harder as Belle shuddered delicately.

When Gina howled, the fight began.

The women were evenly matched as they swiftly shifted. No winner there; if one had managed to complete the shift before the other, serious damage could have been done. And he had no doubt Gina intended to inflict serious damage, if not death. Belle had pushed Gina to her limits one too many times.

The differences in the sleek, powerful Puma and the aggressive, determined red Wolf were obvious to all those who watched. While Belle had the advantage of power and size, her limp remained, hampering her movements. Gina was swift and unhampered, but smaller. The two women circled each other, growling, watching with golden eyes for the slightest hint that the other was preparing to pounce.

Rick couldn't tell for certain which of them moved first. They came together in a furious clash of paws and claws, teeth ripping into shoulders as the Wolf tried to dominate the bigger Puma.

Belle's rear paw slipped, causing the Pack to gasp. She corrected, almost letting Gina push her over and onto her back. If Belle let Gina have access to her belly, the whole fight would be over.

Not that it mattered. He'd decided to walk away before the challenge. If Belle lost, he still had that option.

He stared around at his Pack. The raw anger on most of their faces was surprising. The majority of them were growling at Gina's friends. The five women nervously backed away, separating themselves from the rest of the Pack.

"She's going to win." Rick looked at the serene smile on the face of his Omega. Her eyes had a blank look to them. "Even if she loses, she's won. The Pack will no longer accept Gina as their dominant female." She looked up at him, an odd expression on her face. "I can't feel them anymore."

"Who?"

Before she could answer Gina yelped. He turned back to the fight.

Belle had gotten a hold of Gina's back leg. She shook her head, her powerful jaws snapping the red Wolf's thigh like a twig. Gina whimpered, dragging herself away from the Puma slowly stalking towards her.

Gina turned, obviously hoping to take the fight into the woods, when Belle pounced. She landed on Gina's back, forcing the Wolf's smaller body to the ground, her teeth clamping on the back of Gina's neck.

With one movement of her head she could take the life of the dominant female. She was well within her rights to do so. Half the Wolves present obviously expected her to do it. The silence in the clearing was deafening.

Gina's legs scrabbled in the snow under Belle. She fought to get the big cat off her, but it was too late. Belle was not letting go of her nemesis until she'd secured Gina's full surrender. He could see the determination in her golden eyes as she held Gina still underneath her powerful jaws.

She snarled as Gina made one final attempt to buck her off. A bead of blood dripped down into Gina's fur, making it obvious even to her that there was no getting out of Belle's hold. Gina panted her surrender, her legs going slack under Belle's weight.

Belle held on, more blood falling to coat Gina's fur, making a point none of them could miss.

When it came to a lone Puma versus a lone Wolf, the Puma would win.

Eventually Belle got tired or bored, and let go. The bitch's fur was matted with snow and blood. Belle stood over her and began slowly raking her paw through the snow over and over again.

Rick chuckled. His kitty was burying the offal.

Finally Belle was done showing her contempt for Gina. She turned her back on the Wolf and sauntered over to Rick, only the slightest limp hampering her movements. She butted her head against his thigh, purring as he scratched her behind her ears. She turned and sat by his side, cleaning her whiskers with her paw, totally unconcerned as Gina shifted back to human.

The alpha bitch was clutching her leg. "Someone help me." Her five women scrambled quickly into the center of the Pack and assisted their fallen leader to her feet. She stared at Belle, different emotions warring across her face until it settled into Gina's usual arrogance. "This isn't over."

"I'm afraid it is." Chela stepped forward. "I can no longer feel you."

Gina's face whitened.

Ben stepped forward. "She's right. I can't feel *any* of you." He pointed towards Gina's broken thigh. "I should feel that, but I don't."

Belle shifted, swifter than the first time. She stood tall and proud next to him. He quickly removed his jacket and covered her nakedness. "You are no longer members of this Pack."

Her voice flowed over him, smooth as honey, touching him in places he had never been touched before. It felt like she'd slid inside him, caressing him with smooth fingers, arousing him in ways he hadn't known were possible.

The rest of the Pack bowed before the power in their Luna's voice.

"The Pack has spoken. Challenge has been met; Protocol is satisfied. You and the members of your Pack are to leave our territory before the dawn of the day, never to return."

Rick shivered, and not from the cold. His cock hardened in his jeans, straining towards the one woman who could ease him. He slipped his arm around Belle and nuzzled the side of her neck, pleased when she tilted her head to allow him greater access.

But his mate's hard gaze never left the alpha bitch. The six women, stunned, turned away. Gina's stare flitted from one Pack member to another, looking for something, anything, that would refute what the Luna had said.

Rick allowed his power to slide along Belle's skin, delighting in her surprised gasp. She moaned and shuddered, resting her weight against him. Their power meshed, just as he'd always known it would when he finally had his Luna.

He held her easily. The two watched as, one by one, their Pack turned their backs on Gina and her Pack. A small cry escaped the woman's lips as Dave turned, a look of disgust on his face.

Gina stood, proud to the bitter end, and stared at the Alpha pair. She nodded regally before one final smirk crossed her face. "My Pack and I will be gone by morning."

Belle answered with a regal nod of her own.

Gina walked off, accepting the help of the five women who'd stood by her in her attempt to take over the Poconos Pack. No one was sorry to see them go.

Chapter Six

“Remember what I said about the surgery being the stupidest stunt you’ve ever pulled?”

“Yes.” Belle drew her finger down Rick’s chest, knowing what was coming and trying to avert it.

“I changed my mind. *That* was the stupidest stunt you’ve ever pulled.”

“Did you really think I was going to allow you to abdicate?”

“Did you really think I was going to take Gina as a mate?”

She sighed. “No.”

“Good.”

Rick cuddled her closer, sighing when she squirmed her naked bottom against his rapidly growing erection.

They’d gone straight back to their apartment once they were certain Gina was gone. He’d left her clothes out in the Pack’s meeting place, not even stopping for her boots. He’d just picked her up and carted her off. She was pretty sure he’d said *something* to the Pack in their heads, because they’d scattered to the four winds. She just didn’t have it in her at the moment to be pissed about it.

The first thing he’d done had been to take his jacket back. He’d bundled her up in the big comforter from their bed (she was really beginning to like the big, loud thing), settled her in front of the fireplace, and proceeded to get naked. He’d pulled her into his lap and held her close for a few moments before apparently deciding she was safe. That was enough to set him off.

“But there was no way I was going to allow you to give up the Pack.”

“Belle.”

“Rick.”

He sighed roughly. “How did you know you’d win?”

“I had a little chat with Jamie before the surgery. He assured me the change itself would be painful, but doable. And, may I say, his new nickname should be Captain Understatement? I thought he meant toothache pain, not tits in a meat grinder pain.”

“You realize you’re not helping, right?”

She looked up at him through her lashes. She kept her fingers moving through his chest hairs, trying to soothe her grumpy Wolf. “It dulled down to an ache once I was done, so he was right about that. After that, it was pretty easy.”

“Easy.”

“Yup.”

He sucked in a deep breath as her fingers wandered over to his nipple and plucked.

“You know what?”

“What, my Luna?”

She looked up from under her lashes again. “There are a whole lot of positions we haven’t tried yet.” She bit her lip, knowing he loved it when she played innocent seductress.

His smile was slow and decadent as his eyes shifted over to brown. “So there are, my Luna.” He picked her up and carried her to the bed. “Lots and lots of positions.” He placed her carefully on top of the covers and opened his bedside drawer. He dropped a book onto the bed and flopped down next to her. She caught a glimpse of the cover and started giggling. “A whole book’s worth.”

She pointed to one of the pictures, still giggling. It showed one man having sex with multiple women. “No way. Don’t even daydream about it.”

He caressed one of her breasts, a happy sigh leaving his lips just before he kissed her. “Don’t worry, my Luna. You’re more than enough for me.” He nipped at her neck. “One pussy is all I can handle.”

He was up and running before the comment fully registered. “Get back here, Dick!” She climbed out of the bed, reveling in the lack of pain as she chased him into the living room.

He laughed, ducking behind the sofa. “Rick!”

“Not after that comment!”

She chased his laughter all over their apartment. He swore later the only reason she caught him was he was dying to get caught.

About the Author

Dana Marie Bell wrote her first short story when she was thirteen years old. She attended the High School for Creative and Performing Arts for creative writing, where freedom of expression was the order of the day. When her parents moved out of the city and placed her in a Catholic high school for her senior year she tried desperately to get away, but the nuns held fast, and she graduated with honors despite herself.

Dana has lived primarily in the Northeast (Pennsylvania, New Jersey and Delaware, to be precise), with a brief stint on the US Virgin Island of St. Croix. She lives with her soul-mate and husband Dusty, their two maniacal children, an evil ice-cream stealing cat and a bull terrier that thinks it's a Pekinese.

You can learn more about Dana at: www.danamariebell.com

Look for these titles by Dana Marie Bell

Now Available:

Halle Pumas
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True Destiny
Very Much Alive

Coming Soon:

The Gray Court
Dare to Believe

Is she a victim of a madman's agenda, or a willing player in his demonic games?

Forsaken Talisman

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Talisman Bay, book 2

Kidnapped and mind-wiped by the Shadow Walkers' greatest nemesis, Skylar has no memories of her own, except for her name. All she knows is what memories she does possess belong to someone else—as does her face—and that she can't trust anyone, including herself.

Shadow Walker Dusty Clements goes against direct orders to rescue Skylar and take her into hiding. It's the only way to get to the truth, and keep her out of the hands of an enemy who could use her to wipe out the entire organization. The last complication Dusty needs is to fall for her.

As Dusty and Skylar work to uncover the secrets of her past, they discover a mystery more than twenty years in the making, and a love they can't deny.

The enemy has one more trick up his sleeve though—a magical kiss capable of probing the deepest secrets of the mind. All he needs to bring the Shadow Walkers down is to get his lips on Skylar one more time...

Warning, this title contains the following: Sex in an interdimensional cave. Hot men ripping demons apart bare-handed. Liberal use of the f-word as verb, adjective, threat and sexual promise. Oh, and wet and soapy sex in the shower followed by warm bodies sliding between cool sheets—yes, sex in a bed. It's almost normal!

Enjoy the following excerpt for Forsaken Talisman:

When he set it in the cradle, a slow song started playing. It wasn't offensive, so Dusty let it roll.

"Is this ok—?" The word got mangled in his throat when he turned to face Skylar. She wasn't lying in bed anymore, but stood next to it instead. The light from the fire pit in the center of the cave made her skin glow...and made her nightgown damn near see-through again.

Those dirty thoughts about her rocketed to the surface. His cock got so hard so fast it actually hurt. He didn't want to scare her, far from it. She'd been through enough tonight. Maybe if he stayed a reasonable distance from her until he got himself under control she wouldn't notice his predicament.

Smiling, she arched up onto her tiptoes and rocked back down, bouncing in place. "Dance with me?"

She said it as though she didn't have a care in the world, and he almost believed it too. Except right after she spoke the invitation she drew her bottom lip between her teeth and smoothed at her nightgown, before twisting her hands together in front of her.

Innocent temptress. Self-assured one minute, nervous the next. It just made him want her more.

He'd danced with a lot of women tonight, but not a single one of them made him feel like he was more than a stand-in until another better man came along. Even Mariah and Twyla had only danced with him because the person they wanted to be with wasn't available. Skylar though...

Maybe he was reading too much into this. He was—literally—the only man in the room. Except she didn't have to ask him to dance. She didn't have to climb out of bed and stand there and look so damn beautiful he couldn't remember why he was trying so hard to stay away from her.

Dusty crossed the empty space between them and took her hands in his. "If we do this, I feel like I should warn you. I'm not a very good dancer." Especially with his calf injury causing all sorts of cramping. Not that it would stop him. He'd suffer every last ounce of pain in the world rather than turn down her request.

She lifted her face to his, and her eyes sparked with laughter. "And I don't remember how to dance so we'll probably step on each other's toes and trip each other and end up falling on the ground at some point. You up for the challenge? I am if you are."

Hot damn. If it meant holding her in his arms again, he'd fumble his way through anything—even his entire leg falling off. "I'm game."

"Okay then." Skylar kept one hand in his and moved her other hand to his shoulder. He curved his free hand over her hip. The position brought them closer together, their bodies not quite touching, but close enough he smelled her sweet scent with every breath he took.

He tried to stop breathing.

It didn't work. To take his mind off the constant desire to rub his face in her hair, to kiss her and sweep her off her feet and carry her back to the bed, he forced himself back on track. "Is this music sparking any memories?"

"The song seems vaguely familiar, like maybe I've heard it before, but..." She shrugged and peered up at him. The look in her eyes changed, like she was staring far, far away. The hand on his shoulder shifted, soft fingers trailed back and forth along his collarbone. Her brow wrinkled. Was she in pain?

"Skylar, you okay? Are you remembering something?"

"Your bowtie. It was crooked. I fixed it." She shook her head. "No. Not me. Mariah. Not my memory." A sad smile lifted her lips. "Sorry. I guess Mariah's memories are still floating around inside my head. I got confused for a second. I knew I hadn't seen you in a tux, but I could remember..." She paused. "It's so strange having another woman's memories, someone I don't know, someone I've never met. I know things about her, things I shouldn't, but I don't know *her*. Can you tell me a little bit about her, Dusty? It'd be nice to know something about this woman whose memories I share."

Damn. This was something that could get him in a world of trouble if he wasn't careful about what he said. From prior experience he'd learned that women in general don't like to hear a man talk about other women. This wasn't exactly a normal situation though.

“She’s had a rough life. A few years ago, before she moved to Talisman Bay, she got beat up pretty bad, so bad she almost died. It had something to do with her asshole boyfriend at the time, so she didn’t trust men for a long time. Actually, I don’t think she trusted anyone except Twyla, her best friend. Until Stephan. But even with all the hell she’s been through, she has a good heart.”

Following the rhythm of the surprisingly decent slow song, he moved them in an easy circle.

“Do you love her?”

Well, hell, he sure hadn’t expected that question. Before he could say anything, she clarified, “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t be prying. I just have the strangest memory from Mariah, and I don’t know if it’s real or one Craze put in my head. Did you ask Mariah to marry you?”

He laughed. He couldn’t help himself. He’d never expected his impromptu marriage proposal to come back and haunt him. “Yes, I did.”

Her eyes widened. “But Stephan?”

“It wasn’t serious. Well, not completely serious. See, Mariah makes a really good cup of coffee. I mean, like nectar-of-the-gods good. After my first sip, I proposed, hoping she’d stick around and make coffee every day. She turned me down, but she still makes coffee every day, so I’m not complaining.”

She arched an eyebrow. “You proposed because of a cup of coffee? You do know there are fancy places you can go where brewing coffee is their specialty, and you don’t even have to propose to the baristas.”

“Really?” He looked at her like she was pulling his leg. “Tell me more about these mysterious java palaces.”

“I’ll do you one better. I’ll take you to one tomorrow. You can usually find one on every corner.”

“Hey, is that a memory?”

She scrunched up her nose. “I don’t think so. It’s like how I know the sky’s blue and the earth’s round, I think it’s just common knowledge.” She let out a frustrated sigh. “You’re trying so hard to help me get my memories back and my brain’s not cooperating. I’m sorry about that.”

He wanted to erase the tension from her face. Kiss away the worry. But what he wanted and what she needed were two very different things. “Skylar, there’s nothing for you to apologize for. You didn’t ask for this to happen to you. I’ll do anything I can to help you, whatever you need. I promise.”

Seconds passed and she didn’t say a word. Her eyes were so wide, so open, so trusting. Had anyone ever looked at him that way before? He didn’t think so.

Swaying to the gently sensual rhythm, she leaned her head against his chest and circled an arm around his neck. Her cheek was so warm, so soft where it met his bare flesh. Her eyelashes fluttered as she closed her eyes. “Thank you,” she whispered. “Thank you for making me feel okay inside.”

He breathed in her scent and lifted his hand to cradle her head against him, to keep her from ever leaving him. He couldn’t force her to stay though, no matter how much he wanted this moment to last. So

he trailed along the curve of her skull, following the path of her hair, teasing the silky strands between his fingertips before settling his hand on the middle of her back.

She snuggled closer, rubbing her cheek against his chest. Her quiet exhale heated him straight through.

It was the first perfect moment of his life.

Think it's glamorous being a vampire? Think again.

Called by Blood

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The Faustin Bros., book 1

Alexander Faustin is ready to settle down. He travels from NYC to sunny Colorado to find his destined bride. His delicate mission: to explain to her that vamps exist, that he happens to be one himself, and that he'd like her to be one, too. But the moment he lays eyes on Helena MacAllister, talk is the last thing on his mind.

It's not like Helena to make out with a stranger on her front porch, much less invite him into her bed. Somehow Alex makes her feel safe, even while he's dismantling her defenses. But in the wake of an accident, her faith in him is shattered. She learns her dream lover is a monster.

When a vampire betrays and terrifies his beloved, what can he offer her to make it up? Pancakes, of course. It's a start, at least. And Alex has to think of the next step quick, because if Helena won't take him back, he'll never love again.

Warning: Contains graphic sex scenes, blood play, and one scene of voyeurism. There's also a scary part in the middle. The author and her lawyers remind you that this is a work of fiction. In real life, a one-night stand with a stalker is a bad idea, unless the stalker is a vampire, in which case it's an amazingly bad idea. (Note: No actual elk were harmed in the writing of this novella.)

Enjoy the following excerpt for Called by Blood:

She hadn't been able to concentrate all day. At an important lunch meeting she'd embarrassed herself by spacing out mid-sentence. More than once. After that she'd gone straight to the high school track. That seemed a safe enough place to run. But even running failed to do the trick.

Alexander Faustin just wouldn't leave her thoughts. It was like she was in heat or something, and as her temperature rose, her intellect dropped by equal degrees. She didn't want to tangle with him again, but another moonlight talk was tempting. Because as horny as she was, she was also curious. The journalist in her wanted to know more. Why would a man like that stalk her? She had good instincts—not for relationships, admittedly, but for strangers—and he honestly didn't seem dangerous. If he didn't mean to harm her, why did he lie to her? Was it a habit of his? Did he get a buzz from the risk? Maybe another talk would help her see the outlines of his subtle insanity. Then she'd feel better about turning him over to the police.

That morning she'd Googled his name, trying different spellings and came up with nothing. A Lexis-Nexis search revealed nothing about Alex or Alexander but did yield some hits on a Gregor Faustin who was some kind of nightclub impresario in New York. A small picture of a man in his thirties or early forties

scowling at a flashbulb accompanied one of the articles. All she could say was that their coloring was the same. A relative?

Hell, she didn't even know if Alexander Faustin was his real name.

As soon as Lacey left, Helena stepped out onto her balcony and surveyed the back yard.

"Looking for me?"

She yelped. He was on the balcony with her, standing in the shadows.

Helena backed away. "How'd you get up here?"

He advanced, stepping into a pool of light. He wore the long woolen overcoat, the one that had rubbed against her naked body. It was open. Beneath, he wore a black turtleneck sweater, the chunky fisherman kind, jeans and expensive work boots. GQ Italy. He shrugged. "Ladder?"

What ladder?

Helena darted back into the house, slammed the sliding glass door shut and clicked the tiny locking arm into place, thinking that maybe this home-alone thing was not such a good idea after all. She picked up the phone, but didn't call anyone. Instead, she returned to the door.

He stood just on the other side of the glass, smiling a crooked smile. What beautiful lips he had. Oh God, he was hot. Why did he have to be so hot? He drew his finger along the glass as if he could touch her face through it.

"Helena..." He spoke as if they knew each other, as if he'd been missing her for years. "You shouldn't be afraid."

"I don't know you." Helena's voice wavered. She tried to strengthen it. "This is too strange. It's just not right."

Yet she wanted to touch him more than anything in the world. Instead she splayed her palm against the glass and he matched it with his own hand, so much bigger than hers. She had thought of those hands all day, how they held her breasts and circled her waist. She'd thought of his mouth on her throat, open and wet.

"It's an unusual way to meet, I'll give you that, but that doesn't make it wrong. What do you want to know about me? I'll tell you anything."

The glass muffled his voice a little, made it sound like it was coming from a distance. She didn't know what else to do, so she thought of a question.

"Well, where are you from?"

"New York. I live in the city."

Ah ha.

"What are you doing in Colorado?"

His dark eyes bored into hers, sincere, yet so forceful she lowered her lashes. "I came to meet you."

"Why?"

“My mother told me to find you. That you’d be my perfect one.”

Mother? Like Norman Bates’s mother? Oh man, that was creepy. “Who is your mother?” she snapped. “And what the hell does she know about me?”

Faustin was a model of patience, standing out there in the freezing cold. It didn’t seem to bother him. His nose wasn’t even red. And he didn’t seem to mind her shrewish tone either. “My mother’s name is Natalia Grigorevna Faustin.” He ground through those hard consonants like a real Russian. “She lives in Brooklyn. She...well...she dreamed about you, dreamed you and I were meant for each other. It’s sort of an old world thing.”

“And on the basis of her dream, you came here to find me?”

He lifted one shoulder and smiled, as if the whole thing was a little embarrassing, but unavoidable. “It’s better than internet dating.”

“Yeah, I’m sure you’ve had to resort to that.” Helena sniffed, imagining him striding around Manhattan with hordes of Sarah Jessica Parker types staggering after him in their expensive heels.

“My family, our traditions, they mean a lot to me, Helena. I’m ready to settle down and I want to do it in the old way. It worked for my parents.”

“They met by dream?”

He nodded and leaned his head on the glass. “I think my mother dreamed right, Helena.”

The longing in his voice stopped her breath. *His perfect one*. To think that such a thing might exist—a perfect mate. Two halves coming together to make a whole. Never lonely again.

That was delusional thinking. A good relationship was all about hard work, compromise and mutual respect—not magic destiny crap. That’s why happy couples were as rare as hen’s teeth.

She put the phone down and twisted her hands together, trying to think of something else to say when she had all of two brain cells firing. “Do you have brothers or sisters?”

“Two older brothers, Mikhail and Gregor.”

Gregor. His name really was Faustin, and he really was from New York.

He slid his palm down the glass and straightened up. “Do you have any siblings?”

“No, I’m an only child.”

“Where are your parents?”

“They’re...they’ve passed on. A year ago. This is their house, actually.” *That’s it, tell him you have nobody.*

His brow creased in concern. “So you’re all alone? I’m so sorry.”

The empathy in his voice brought tears to her eyes. The hormones were surging again, making her sappy. Yes, it was hard to be alone. She loved her friends, but they were not family. Family had to put up with you no matter what. She wanted them back. Before she started bawling outright, she changed the subject. “You’re Russian. Your background, I mean?”

“Right. But I was born here.”

“What do you do for a living?”

“I trade in foreign currency.”

Whatever that meant, exactly. Helena never had enough money to spare for investment or trading and so paid little attention to the subject. She imagined him sitting at a big table with piles of exotic coins stacked in front of him, even though that was retarded.

“Do you have a card?” she asked. Also retarded. But she wanted to see something solid, something that proved he had a life outside of hanging around her house.

His lips twitched in amusement as he reached in his jeans pocket and brought out a slender wallet. “Do you want to see my driver’s license? My social security card?” He flashed these things at her, all legitimate looking. He showed her a couple of credit cards, a library card, a subway pass and a Borders gift card in there too, decorated with candy canes. Then he pulled out a business card and pressed it against the glass.

“FFS?”

“Faustin Financial Services. I also do some investment consulting.” He tucked the card in the door frame and left it there like a salesman. “What about you? What do you do?”

“I’m a freelance radio producer. I do a lot of work for NPR.”

“Really? I listen to NPR all the time.”

A public radio fan? Then he must be her life mate. Well, unless maybe he was Garrison Keillor’s life mate.

But he seemed interested, truly interested. “Tell me something you’ve produced that I might have heard.”

“Uh...” Helena’s mind went marvelously blank. It was hard to remember anything when he looked her straight in the eye. A warm fluttering started between her legs. *Oh, jeez.* “Uh, last week they aired a story about the little kid who rode his bike across America...”

“To commemorate his brother’s death? I heard that one.” He had the strangest look to him as he said that. Something like pride. “That was your idea?”

She nodded, dry mouthed. “Look, this is a ridiculous way to talk. I should let you in, but I...”

“No.” The sudden harshness of his voice made her take a step back from the glass. “Don’t let me in if you have any doubts in your mind, because once you invite me in, I’m going to make love to you. It is the first thing I will do. We will not have dinner or a glass of wine first. We will not chit chat or watch a movie. You let me in this door and I’m taking you. Understand that.”

Scared of him once again and scared of her own reactions to him, Helena took another step back and hugged herself. “Why are you like this?”

If looks could melt glass... “You were on the stoop with me. Answer yourself.”

Helena paced back and forth in front of the sliding glass door, chanting her inner mantra, *Dang, oh dang, oh dang*.

Since the first moment she'd laid eyes on him, she'd wanted him, and that was the truth of the matter. He didn't hide his desire, he was clear in his intentions. That was the difference between them. He told the truth while she waffled and flirted and lied and called the cops when things got too intense. So who wasn't playing fair?

Let him in.

He'd probably talk to her through the door all night, but she didn't know if she could do it. She couldn't think. Hell, she could barely stand. Either she had to take him up on his offer or go lock herself in the closet.

She'd been thinking of him as caught on the deck, behind glass, but she was the one who was trapped. He had all the world behind him.

I'm tired of being afraid.

Faustin leaned against the door while he waited for her answer, head down, palms flat against the glass as if he was thinking about pushing the door off its tracks. "I need you," he said, almost too low to be heard.

Her breath caught in her throat. Frightened, she wrapped her arms around herself. That gentle pressure made her breasts ache and tingle. Her skin was oversensitive, stimulated by the soft knit of her sweater dress. She'd never been so aroused. Part of it was knowing a man wanted her that much. Another part was knowing that she'd have to risk her life to find out if her instincts were right. The instincts that told her to open the door.

Trust yourself.

He's a public radio fan, for crap's sake.

Do it.

Her destiny rests in their hands...

Very Much Alive

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True Destiny, book 1

Kiran Tate and Logan Saeter have been on the run from Oliver Grimm for so long they've forgotten what it's like to be free. Ending Grimm's power games won't be easy, but this time they have an ace in the hole. PI Jordan Grey, Guardian Investigation's resident hot shot—and Grimm's step-granddaughter.

Jordan Grey has her doubts when Logan and Kir show up in her office with a tall tale of how her step-grandfather has framed them for murder. And to top it all off, they're claiming that they're really the ancient Norse gods Loki and Baldur, and that Grimm is Odin!

When the two lovers see the sexy detective for the first time, stopping Grimm suddenly takes a back seat to seducing her into their arms. But Grimm never rests, and when his anger spills over onto Jordan, it sets them all on a collision course with a destiny that will rock their world...

Warning: This book contains explicit sex, graphic language, some violence, and hot male/male/female action. In fact, it could be considered a religious experience.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Title:

Kir closed the door behind himself and Logan after having seen Jordan onto the elevator. He sighed and closed his eyes tightly, completely mortified.

Fuck. Logan saw my reaction to Jordan.

The knowing gleam in his lover's eyes did not bode well for the coming conversation.

So it was with some surprise he felt Logan gently push his hand into his hair, pulling Kir's mouth to his own. The kiss was a languid stroking of tongues, not the usual kiss Logan gave. Logan usually preferred hot, heavy kisses, full of passion and the promise of sex. This one was the kind of kiss Kir preferred. Soft, sweet, and full of the love they both felt.

"I love you, you know that, right?"

Kir focused on Logan's face. "No more than I love you."

"We need to talk."

Kir closed his eyes again, not wanting to see the pain in Logan's.

"Hey."

He sighed and moved past Logan's body and into the living room. Dejected, he sat on the sofa, his head in his hands. "I'm so sorry."

"For what? The fact that you're attracted to Jordan?"

Kir groaned.

“Kir.” He looked up, surprised to see the understanding on Logan’s face. “Me, too.”

He felt a surprising flash of jealousy at that, but wasn’t sure if it was for Logan or Jordan. *Not good...or very good?* “You want her, too?”

“Don’t sound so surprised. She’s a hell of a woman.”

Kir found himself nodding his agreement. “She took everything we threw at her in stride.”

“If I was her I would have kicked our asses out of my office, gone and had a few drinks, then convinced myself it never happened right after I called to have the carpet replaced.”

“So what do we do about it?”

They stared into each other’s faces, reading the promises they’d long ago made to each other and the new, sudden *want* they both felt. No matter how startlingly strong, there was no way Kir would act on it if it meant losing Logan.

Logan was his everything.

Kir reached out first, cupping Logan’s cheek. “I would *never* do anything to hurt you, Logan.”

“Ditto.” Logan’s face was flushed with pleasure, that demonic grin of his once again gracing his features.

“So, what do we do?”

He watched Logan slouch down onto the floor at his feet, resting his head against Kir’s knees with a contented sigh. “The way I see it, we have two options.”

“Those are?” Kir’s heart rate picked up. He began absently stroking that fiery hair, wondering if Logan was thinking what he was thinking.

“Option one: we walk away from her once this is all over.”

No!

The instant denial raced through his body, causing him to jump. *What the fuck?* He *never* had that reaction to losing anyone or anything...other than Logan.

It didn’t help that Logan started to chuckle. “Thought so.”

“Option two?”

His heart was in his throat right up until Logan looked up at him with a leer. “Don’t you just love the French?”

Kir blinked. “Huh?”

“They come up with words for the most amazing concepts.”

“Like?” Kir drawled. He was pretty sure now he knew where Logan was going, but he wanted confirmation before he said anything.

“Ménage a trois. It has such a sexy ring to it, doesn’t it?”

“*Permanent* ménage?” The words had left his mouth before he even realized the significance of what he was saying. Something about Jordan just...felt *right*.

Logan's expression turned serious. "I'm not sure yet." He shook his head, smirking. "But tell me you aren't already a little in love with her, and I'll call you a liar. I mean, damn. She's got a smart mouth, hot body, bodacious ass, and she's clever as all hell. And she wants *both* of us."

Kir opened his mouth to say the words and found them stuck in his throat. "Damn."

"Ditto."

"How the hell did *that* happen?"

"I don't know, but it did." Logan was frowning again, this time in confusion. "It's like we've found something we didn't even know was missing. But if you asked, I would walk away from this. You know that." For the first time, Kir saw Logan's uncertainty peek through, reminding him of the broken man Loki had been after Baldur freed him from the mountain. The reckless youth he was had been burned away by the snake's acid, leaving behind a damaged man who tossed and turned at night, screaming denials as he relived everything over and over again. It had taken Kir a long time to ease his lover's torment. He also knew their relationship was the foundation the now confident, cocky man who was *still* inclined to take risks stood on.

Which was why he'd been so upset about his reaction to Jordan. But knowing that Logan felt the same eased that guilt

Kir thought about taking Jordan and making her theirs. Thanks to Logan's ability to shift genders as well as shape, Kir had been happily bisexual for centuries now. He'd felt no need to go outside the relationship when Logan could, literally, be everything and anything he needed. Logan, on the other hand, hadn't been able to explore that side of himself with Kir, since Kir couldn't change his shape. He knew that sometimes Logan longed for soft, scented flesh, rounded breasts and bellies, all of the things he'd given up when he'd pledged himself to Kir. But Logan, for all his wild youth and unhappy marriage, hadn't cheated on him once. And not once, through all of the long centuries, had either of them had the urge to add a third to their relationship.

Now, with the advent of one small, half-human woman, all of that was about to change. He could give the touch of a female back to his lover, *and* have them both for himself. He thought back to the odd feeling he'd had on the beach, that something was about to happen that would change them, and felt that sensation once more before it settled into a comfortable purr.

He saw the relief on Logan's face as he nodded his acceptance.

Jordan was theirs. Now they just had to seduce her to them.



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