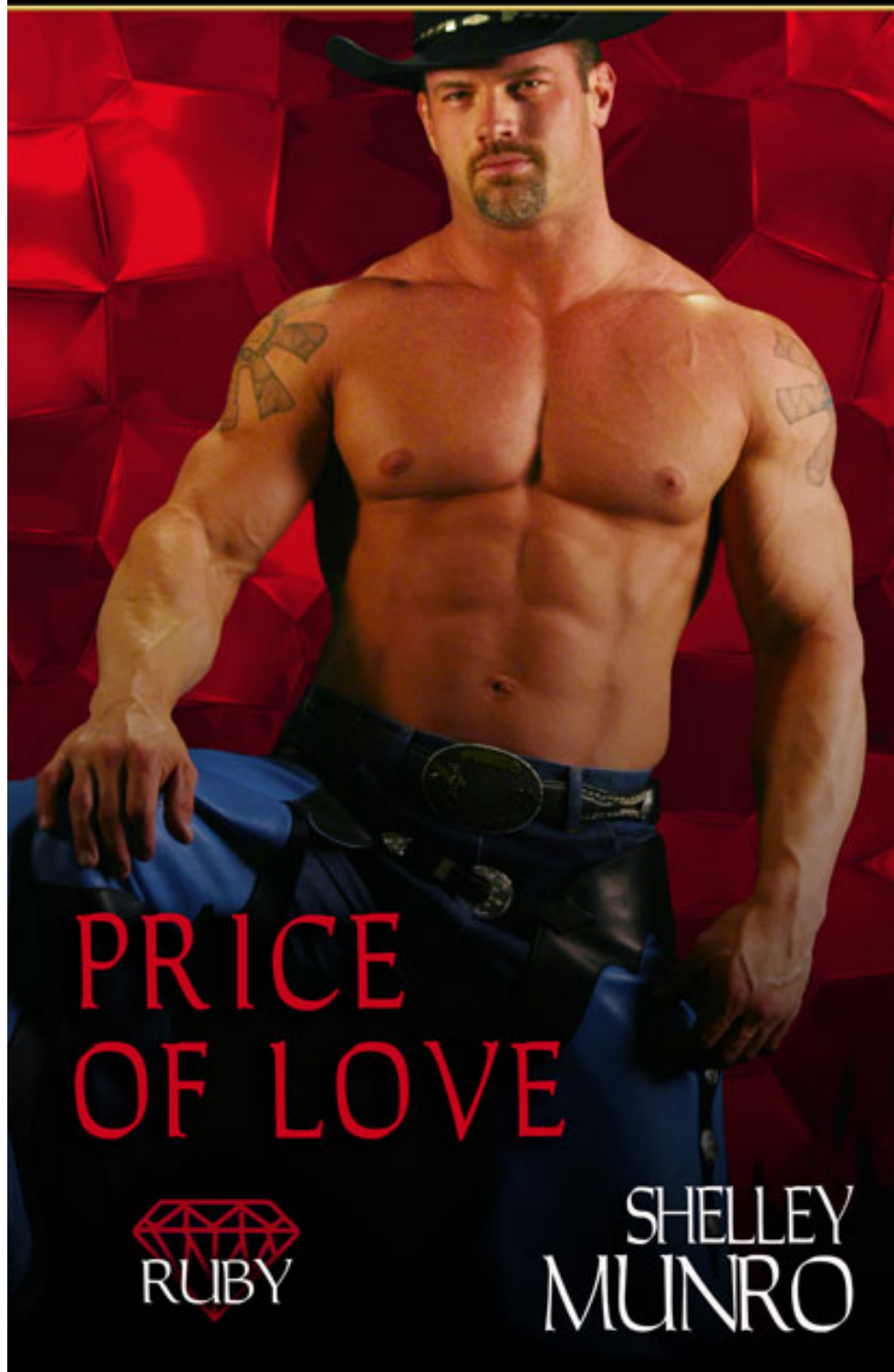


ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS



PRICE OF LOVE



SHELLEY
MUNRO

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



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Price of Love

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PRICE OF LOVE

Shelley Munro

Chapter One

Conflict litters the history of Myanmar or Burma, as it was formerly known. The resource-rich country has fallen to raiders such as Kublai Khan and warring kingdoms from neighboring lands, all seeking power and wealth. To this day, life for the Burmese people is a struggle under military dictatorship. With this history in mind, the shifters of the tiger and leopard clans decided there was strength in numbers. If they hoped to exist as a species, protect the wealth generated by their ruby mines and preserve the right to live in their jungle kingdom, they had to work together. No longer was it enough to travel and integrate within the human education system and society as they'd done in the past. They needed to secure their jungle haven where they liked to return to recharge and live the simpler life. In a secret ballot carried out amongst their kind, they voted to join forces and if individuals so desired, allow them to mate together with any offspring automatically given equal rights. It was the way of the future.

Tiger Kersen Amat approved of the new regime, enjoyed mixing with the leopard shifters. And now things were looking up since the previous evening he'd concluded talks with a high-ranking leopard family and won the right to court their beautiful daughter Jarita Namar. The delicate negotiations had continued long into the night. Now all he needed to do was prepare a bride price of two ruby necklaces, one for his prospective mate and the other to give to his mate's family within a week. And of course he needed to romance the female because she didn't know about the agreement yet. Despite adhering to the bride-price tradition, they were modern in outlook and Jarita had the right to refuse him. The courtship would be the fun part.

He grinned, peering past the screen of jungle ferns to watch the subtle sway of Jarita's curvy hips. Sexy. Independent. His smile widened as he added disobedient to

his thoughts. The beautiful leopard shifter shouldn't be wandering the jungle paths alone, and judging by the quick glances over her shoulder, she knew it. He padded after her, cautiously following the woman deeper into the cool jungle, his good humor slowly dying when she moved into forbidden territory—the area where the shifters mined for rubies. Only authorized persons entered the region. Was she meeting another male? One he and her family didn't know about? Or worse, could she be the traitor who had let the opium lords learn of the hidden ruby mines deep in shifter territory?

A chill swept Kersen. His jaw set in determination while he tracked her silently, not moving too close since he knew with her highly evolved senses she'd discern his presence.

Overhead a brightly colored parrot flitted, squawking when another encroached on its territory. Jarita started, a small *EEK* escaping before she shrugged irritably and continued down the leaf-covered dirt path.

Part of the security force, Kersen was skilled at tracking and knew the jungle intimately, including the paths trodden by the men who worked for the opium lords. He couldn't understand why Jarita marched so precariously close to danger. Once he discovered what the woman was up to, he intended to teach her a lesson. And that would be a pleasure, he thought darkly, anger and arousal warring inside. Sweat glistened on his bare chest. Hands clenched to fists while anger swelled, overtaking warm thoughts of passion. His biceps expanded, pushing against the tight band of his ruby-encrusted armband as he considered the possibilities, the trouble she might have attracted.

Without warning, the jungle went silent. Kersen moved quickly, prompted by gut instinct and familiarity at the signs of intruders. He darted down the track and pounced on the woman, ruthlessly containing her scream with the palm of his hand.

"Jarita, it's me. Kersen. Intruders. We must hide. Do you understand?" He spoke the local Burmese instead of the English they used when dealing with foreigners.

Part of him regretted it when she abruptly ceased her struggles. The curve of her ass against his groin felt damned good despite his anger with her. His cock strained against the cotton *longyi*, the skirt-like waistcloth he wore. Oh yeah. Once they were safe, he intended to smack the rounded globes of her ass so she remembered not to walk blindly into danger again. That was after he discovered what the hell she was up to out here on her own. By the time he finished, she'd know she belonged to him and he'd have her complete loyalty.

He moved rapidly, lifting her into his arms. Once clear of the path, he set her on her feet.

"What is it?" she whispered.

"I think it's the men with the opium lords. Shift. We'll climb into the trees. As long as we remain silent they won't think to look up."

"Vermin," she said with a hiss.

Either she was innocent of wanting to meet with them or the female was a very good actress. He didn't know what to think of her behavior.

Kersen waited for her to transform, watching protectively while her formfitting blouse and *longyi* melted into her body, replaced by glossy black fur. She dropped to all fours, letting the change take her. Attraction for the woman swarmed through his tight body despite the approaching danger. So beautiful. And his—as long as he managed to seal the deal with an acceptable bride price and her cooperation.

"Up in the tree," he ordered.

She shook her head, ears flattening in defiance.

"Dammit, woman. Go. I need to know you're safe."

They stared at each other in a duel of wills. Finally she barked a soft, abrasive grunt, telling him she intended to obey but not with good grace. A single leap was all it took for her to scale to the first branch. The leaves of the trees barely rippled under her weight.

Kersen let out a sigh of relief, angry with her but amused at the same time. She'd wanted to return the favor and protect him because he was vulnerable while shifting. Hell, none of the tiger women would have hesitated to follow orders. And he doubted any of them would have attempted to protect him either. Both aroused and humbled at her fierce loyalty, he called his tiger to mind and shifted smoothly, leaping into the neighboring tree seconds before a line of men trudged into sight. Maybe he'd been mistaken about her reasons for being in the forbidden territory?

The men walked in single file, passing the trees concealing the felines without an upward glance. A guard, armed with a rifle led the group, his dark eyes alert for danger. The men toiling after him carried full sacks on their backs. The sweet scent gave away the contents. Opium, destined for clandestine transport across the border to Thailand. They moved past, shoulders bowed under the weight of their sacks. Another sentry followed in the rear, heavily armed with a machine gun, a pistol at his side and a knife sticking prominently from one of his muddy leather boots.

Intently, Kersen stared at their faces, committing them to memory. Ah, the fat one-eyed man was the bastard who'd helped steal the girl-children from the local village, holding them for ransom until the Burmese people had agreed to plant poppies. Although they'd returned the girls, Kersen had heard the children still suffered nightmares from their rough experience. A roar of displeasure squeezed from his throat, echoing below the jungle canopy. A startled bird fluttered from the tree to their right. The men jabbered uneasily in Burmese, darting glances over their shoulders and increasing their pace. In the distance an answering roar sounded. A second snarl, closer than the first, carried across the silent jungle.

Help was on the way.

Currently off-duty, Kersen knew the other security force members would handle the interlopers. The shifters would destroy the opium rather than allowing it to reach the city streets. He was free to concentrate on Jarita.

Kersen peered through the branches and intercepted Jarita's gaze. Her golden eyes focused on him, unblinking. Heat seared his groin. He couldn't wait to get his hands on her.

Once the spooked men were no longer within hearing distance, Kersen crawled along the tree branch and leapt to the ground. Jarita followed suit, prowling over the mud caused by yesterday's rain and leaf litter to rub against him. Her head nudged his shoulder and her soft purr vibrated along his side. Once again his thoughts jumped to sex despite his worries. He backed away to shift, needing to talk to her. Why was she out here on her own? Hell, if she intended to meet another man...

Fuck, he couldn't let that happen. Refused to stand aside and let another male steal her away. *His, dammit.* She belonged to him or at least she would by the time he was finished.

Fully changed to a man again, Kersen frowned down at her. She rubbed against his legs, showing affection like a damned housecat. "Shift," he ordered. "I want to talk."

Jarita grunted, an unhappy sound, but stepped back to transform. "You want to talk?" she purred, her breasts heaving under the tight turquoise blouse. He couldn't help but notice the hard tips of her nipples pressing against the cotton fabric. "You didn't wish to talk during my cousin's party. All you did was flirt with that stupid Rani and her sisters."

Kersen's brows rose at her tone. Interesting. "Were you jealous?"

"No!" The word exploded from her in a snarl. "Why would I be jealous about you making a fool of yourself?" Delicate pink shaded her coffee-colored cheeks, her dark brows lifting until they resembled thin slashes of displeasure.

Damn, she was beautiful. His palms itched with the need to touch and his gaze wandered to full pink lips. Unconsciously he took a step forward. The dark-haired princess backed up until a broad tree trunk halted her retreat.

"Maybe you wanted me to kiss you like I kissed her?" Kersen picked up a strand of her long straight hair, winding it around his finger. "I could kiss you now, if that was what you wanted."

She swallowed, the slender column of her throat moving in a telltale sign of her unease. "Why would I want to take Rani's leavings?"

Kersen chuckled at the hint of jealousy in her words, feeling more confident. *Maybe not another man.* He dipped his head, savoring the tart scent of her, the hint of green leaves and the underlying sandalwood. It wasn't the normal flowery scent of the other women and he liked the note of originality. "Because I tempt you?" He brushed his lips over the corner of her mouth, savoring her sharp intake of air. *She wasn't immune to him.* His lips touched the tip of her nose, the curve of her cheekbone while his hands wandered across her shoulders, drawing her closer until her breasts brushed his chest. "I do tempt you, don't I, Jarita?"

"Let me go."

To his relief her body spoke an opposing language, leaning into him, silently daring him to take what he desired. Her family was pleased with the idea of the match because it gave a clear signal they supported the move for the clans to join forces. Not that Jarita knew. Originally he'd intended to court her, woo her until she gave in to the powerful force between them. Recognized it as readily as he. Maybe a more immediate approach would work better.

"You're very beautiful." He smoothed a lock of hair away from her face, his fingers tracing the whorls of her ear, tugging lightly at the ruby stud piercing the lobe. He fingered it carefully while his lips nibbled at her chin. The ruby necklace he intended to design for her would look stunning when draped around her neck. "No wonder all the males want you." He felt her shiver when his fingers traced along her collarbone to the spot where his ruby necklace would lie just above her cleavage.

"I thought you were going to kiss me?"

"I thought you wanted me to let you go?" He confused her—that was obvious. It was good to keep her off balance. His lips brushed the corner of her mouth again, this time letting her feel the smooth tip of his tongue. She trembled, a gasp escaping. Although she didn't say anything, Jarita angled her body closer, pressing her high breasts more firmly against his bare chest. The beginnings of a satisfied smile twitched at his mouth. *It would be good between them.*

"I...what if they come back? They might catch us unawares."

Kersen laughed. "We're shifters. We'll hear them long before they see us. No, you're worried about what punishment I might exact after finding you in the forbidden territory. What are you doing here?"

"I...I don't have to tell you." She refused to meet his gaze, studying the surrounding trees instead.

"Are you meeting with a lover?"

"No!" Her attention snapped back to him. "I...my lovers are none of your business."

Anger bloomed, swift and dark. Of course she'd have previous lovers, no doubt when she'd worked in Europe. They were a modern society, many of their people traveling to the West for their education and to work or live. He'd had lovers while abroad, but it didn't counteract the wash of jealousy curling through him. "I don't wish to hear about your former lovers."

"Then don't flirt with Rani and her sisters in front of me."

Ah, the resentment worked both ways. Relief replaced his anger, the knowledge she'd at least wondered about him enough to experience jealousy soothing his angst and possessiveness. He pressed a swift kiss to her lips, desperately wanting more but knowing this wasn't the time. That would come later tonight.

"Then what are you doing out here alone?"

A flash of unease crossed her face replaced immediately by enigmatic and mysterious. "I don't have to tell." Her mouth flattened into a sullen pout and she concentrated on her sandal-shod feet.

"It's dangerous out here. Those men are ruthless, and they're not above taking women and selling them into slavery. Do you want to end up in a brothel in Thailand? Paying for board by offering your body to any man with money to pay? Or were you meeting with the men?"

"Of course not!" She shoved at his chest, but he refused to back off. He wanted to frighten her, to keep *his* woman safe. "I would never betray our clans. Never! Those men are scum."

"Then what were you doing out here?"

"None of your business."

He frowned, going back to thoughts of another man, even though she'd denied it already. Had he miscalculated and left things too long? "We can't stay here. Come." Kersen grasped her left hand and led her swiftly through the jungle, following a path forged by deer. Around them the jungle came to life again, the insects and birds resuming their song, the upper canopy alive with music caused by a mischievous breeze.

"Where are we going?"

"Why does it matter?" he countered, suspicions rising again.

"I...um..." She trailed off, chewing the plump cushion of her bottom lip between sharp, white teeth. Her eyes looked everywhere except at him.

The woman looked guilty as hell. "Do I have to beat the truth out of you?"

"You wouldn't hit me." The words rang with conviction, but unease spilled through in her body language.

"Try me," he muttered. "I'll place you over my lap, pull up your *longyi* and slap your backside until it goes bright pink."

"You wouldn't," she said, sounding shocked.

"You'll see." He took pleasure in her harsh inhalation followed by rapid breathing. She wasn't as scandalized as she made out. Intrigued – maybe – but shock didn't come into it.

Kersen headed unerringly for the tiny clearing he and three friends had discovered while searching for rubies. The spot was a concealed jewel and unknown to opium-workers. A small stream ran through and the nearby cave was his destination. He knew he'd find the perfect stones for his bride price here. Traditionally the bride price needed to come from a private source, preferably discovered by the male offering it. A formerly unknown stone was considered a good omen.

By the time the sun rose again, Jarita would know she belonged to him and feel confident that he was hers. She'd help him choose the rubies she'd wear to proclaim she belonged to him. Jarita would want to display them with pride.

* * * * *

Jarita stumbled after Kersen, her thoughts in turmoil. Despite the danger, she'd thought a visit to the temple in the forbidden territory was worth the risk. She'd wanted to make an offering and ask for a chance with Kersen. Instead, the man had ambushed her and she wasn't quite sure what to make of this turn of events.

He'd kissed her like a child and threatened to punish her, except the way he'd described it made her body prickle with pleasure, her breasts swell with longing. Even now each step made her nipples brush against her blouse. The calloused touch of his hand, clasping her fingers as he dragged her along, sent tingles of pleasure galloping up her arm. Kersen was so strong, yet he had a gentle and patient side, taking time to teach the small shifter boys how to whittle figures from teak. It was this that had attracted her despite his fearsome reputation as a warrior.

His glistening muscles rippled, his shoulders powerful and strong, chest broad. Each time she looked at him her breath caught and she'd wonder what it would feel like

to touch his bronzed skin, to tunnel her fingers into his chocolate brown hair with its pretty golden strands. All the other tigers had black hair with golden, almost red highlights. Not Kersen. A sigh of longing escaped as she studied his naked chest and wondered what he'd look like with the cotton *longyi* brushed aside to reveal his bare buttocks and cock.

Her body heated with yearning and each breath came in a tiny pant. A memory of watching him train with the other men, his chest bared and glistening with sweat brought an audible swallow.

"Is something wrong?"

Jarita bumped into him because he stopped so suddenly. *Everything is wrong. I don't know how to tell you I need you, which is why I decided to visit the temple in the first place.*

"No, nothing is wrong."

"You look hot."

Stupid male. How could he not know? She was hot for him. "It is always hot in the jungle."

"There is a pool suitable for swimming where we're going."

"We're not going back to the village?"

"Not yet," he said.

"But I thought—" Jarita broke off. Maybe things would work out after all. She'd flirt with him and jump him, seduce him into thinking they had a future together. It had worked for her best friend.

"You thought what?"

"Nothing." Jarita sank into thought, putting together a seduction plan and rapidly discarding every single idea. She kept coming back to the fact she was leopard. Although Kersen was friendly with her father and brothers, that didn't mean they'd welcome a tiger into their family. The alliance between the clans was still new and they were all learning to adjust. Besides, she wasn't about to bring up the subject, not even

when her father had asked her this morning if there was a male she favored for a mate. She really needed to make an offering at the temple.

The faint trickle of water grew louder and Kersen led her into a small clearing, the track so faint she would have bypassed it had she been on her own. Shards of sunlight pierced the jungle canopy, sweeping away the shadows of the jungle. A stream ran through the clearing while colorful butterflies flitted across the wildflowers growing in the patch of open ground.

"It's safe here. We can rest."

The slight emphasis on the word "rest" made her study him closely. His face was impassive but his amber eyes glowed with heat. She held her ground when he prowled toward her. Instead of grabbing her as she'd half thought he would, Kersen brushed the back of his hand over her cheek, a gentle caress that made her feel treasured. His lips sought hers again, but this time his kiss dominated, demanded. There was nothing gentle or childlike about the thrust of his tongue, the hard grip of his hands on her shoulders or the hard spike prodding her in the stomach.

Shock held her immobile. Kersen was kissing her. Properly. Like a starving man, when in the past he'd never indicated interest. Here, she'd thought she'd have to throw herself at him to gain attention, and he was doing all the work for her.

Kersen lifted his head and frowned down at her. "Is there a problem?"

A problem? Only if he stopped. But what came out of her mouth was, "Why are you kissing me?"

He stared, his large body still. "Don't you want me to kiss you?"

Answering a question with a question. Huh, she was wise to that sort of prevarication. Her father did it all the time and her older brothers were starting to emulate the pattern. "It depends." Of course she wanted him to kiss her. She wanted a hell of a lot more besides.

"Yeah?"

Now he was waiting for her to hand over relevant information without giving anything in return. Staring at him defiance, she lifted her chin and said, "Yeah."

He chuckled suddenly, the ripple of humor tugging an unwilling smile from her. "I'm going to swim." He backed up and flexed his golden chest. A glint of sunlight reflected off his silver armband, making the embedded rubies sparkle with fire.

One look at the powerful muscles and her throat tightened. Unable to tear her attention away, she stared. Her mouth felt dry and the need to touch had her taking a step toward him. A flash of challenge fired between them. Her tongue snaked out to moisten her lips and she took another hesitant step.

"Do you want to touch me?"

"Yes." Jarita didn't try to lie.

"Why?"

"Enough with the questions," she snapped. Surely it was obvious. The man was beautiful, strong and very touchable. Sexy.

His eyes glittered, but this time she had no idea what he was thinking. He moved, kicking off stout leather sandals. With a few tugs his *longyi* fell away from his body. For an instant he poised, naked, his cock jutting outward.

Even better than her imagination. She stretched out her hand to touch but he moved before her fingers met the golden flesh of his hip.

"Are you coming for a swim?" He hit the water with a splash almost before the question had left his lips. She caught a flash of muscled buttocks before he disappeared beneath the water.

Jarita stared in bemusement and bent to unfasten her sandals. Seduction. Standing, she glanced at the water and saw he'd surfaced to watch her in return. Her hand trembled noticeably. Kersen made her so nervous. It wasn't as if she hadn't done this before. She unfastened her blouse and removed it, letting the cotton garment drop to

the grass. Before she could rethink, she unwrapped her *longyi*, leaving her as naked as him.

Seduction.

Jarita sauntered to the edge of the stream, putting extra sway into her hips and slipped into the water. The coolness brought a shiver until Kersen's muscled arms reached for her.

Effortlessly, he drew her nearer. "You're beautiful."

She knew it wasn't true, but his words warmed her, as did his arms drawing her against his chest.

His cock rose between them, digging into her stomach again. Pleasure and satisfaction filled her at the proof he wanted her. She wound her arms around his neck and raised her head for his kiss. All the pent-up desire she'd kept hidden flared into evidence. Jarita rubbed against him, legs tangling beneath the water while she licked his lips, nibbled at his bottom one and chased his tongue with her own. Her heart slammed hard against her ribs, pleasure soaring. Yes, this was exactly what she'd imagined. Deep, breath-stealing kisses, limbs rubbing in exquisite friction. A whimper backed up in her throat as her body strained against his hardness. This was good, far better than she'd imagined in the middle of the night. His kiss gentled but he didn't lift his head. His hands brushed over her back, tossing her into a maelstrom of pleasure filled with touch, taste and sight.

Good things like this *never* happened to her, which was why she'd decided to make the trip to the temple, but it seemed as if her path had changed for the better.

Without warning Kersen lifted her from the water, wading to the bank of the stream, he strode to where they'd dropped their clothes. She shivered but not from cold. No, heat suffused her both inside and out.

He let her slide down his body until she stood on her feet before stooping to smooth out his *longyi* on the soft grasses. Leisurely, he turned to her, a question in his eyes.

"Do you want this?"

"Yes. Yes, I want you."

"Why are you out here?" he asked, sliding the question in while her mind was sluggish and still drunk on his kisses.

"I...I can't tell you," she said finally, lifting her chin to face him. A wash of heat flooded her cheeks, seeping down to her breasts. He might laugh at her.

"I am a great believer in truth."

He might like truth, but she had her pride. How could she tell him she was so desperate for a man, for him in particular, that she'd decided to make an offering of her blood and forest flowers at the small secluded temple dedicated to the goddess of seduction? She lifted her head to face him proudly. "There is no man in my life."

"There is now," he said softly, scooping her off her feet. "An impatient one." He dropped her onto the *longyi*, following her down and trapping her with his larger body. His amber eyes glowed while the droplets of water on his skin sparkled in the sunshine. "Mine." Kersen kissed her again, driving every single thought from her head except pleasure. One hand shaped a pert breast, fingers strumming across her pouting nipple while his lips continued to create havoc, nibbling at her lips before moving to the tender skin of her neck. Her heart thudded erratically, part of her wondering if this were a dream.

Kersen lifted his head without warning. "Do you want this?"

"Yes." Nothing less than the truth.

"Touch me back. I want you to touch me." He rolled so suddenly she was looking down at his smiling and encouraging face. "Show me how much you want me."

A gift. Stunned, she stared down at him. This was a dream. To test her theory she reached down and pinched one of his flat nipples.

"Ouch! What did you do that for?"

Perhaps it wasn't a dream. Instead of murmuring an apology, she leaned over and licked the abused nipple, soothing it with the delicate lash of her tongue. This time he shivered, his arms coming around to hold her in place.

"Maybe you could do it again," he murmured, his words full of dark promise.

The opportunity to explore his large body at her leisure. This gift she would grab with both hands. With trembling fingers she brushed his chocolate hair away from his strong jaw, brushing her thumb over the thrust of his nose. His large body was relaxed but he was open with his reactions, letting her see his response to her every touch. Full of wonder, Jarita traced his sensual lips with the pad of her finger. He opened his mouth, taking the digit inside and sucking on it. A gasp escaped as she felt his touch clear to her toes. She shifted on his body, aware of the wet arousal between her thighs.

"I thought this was my turn," she said.

"Just want to keep you on your guard."

Well, yeah. He was doing that all right. Since the moment they'd met earlier in the jungle he'd kept her off balance, scrambling to understand. "Put your hands under your head and don't touch me." He obeyed, but the glitter in his amber eyes told her it was only to humor her.

"Close your eyes." She didn't really expect him too, but once again he complied.

She shuffled farther down so she could see his cock instead of feeling it poking her in the ass. A flicker of sensation shot from her clit, the sensual drag of skin over skin a source of pleasure.

"I can smell your arousal," he murmured. "You have no idea what it does to me to know you desire me in return."

But she could make a pretty good guess because sexual tension thrummed through her, desire a tight ball in her lower stomach. She ran the heels of her hands over his muscled chest, wondering where to touch him next.

"I'm going to lap up all those juices your body is making for me. I can't wait to taste your sweet honey."

A shiver worked through Jarita, her hands hesitating as she visualized his tongue sweeping down her slit, nibbling at her swollen folds and thrusting into her tight channel. He was so big. His cock would stretch her. She'd heard gossip about him from one of the women who had been lucky enough to attract his attentions. Kersen had shared her with one of Jarita's brothers, and the woman had said she couldn't sit comfortably for three days. Jarita hadn't wanted to learn of her brother's sexual pursuits, but anything about Kersen interested her. Jarita frowned, knowing she would never agree to share Kersen with another female. She stared down at the swollen head of his cock, visually measuring length and girth. She wriggled as another surge of juices dampened her folds.

"Do you have no comment?" he asked in a casual tone.

Jarita checked to see if he'd kept his eyes closed. They were. Her eyes flickered back to his cock. The dark red almost purple head jerked. Sucking in a deep breath, she said, "I won't share you."

His body tightened beneath her straddled thighs before a faint smile twitched his lips. "I don't share either."

"That's not true," she blurted.

His eyes opened and she caught the blaze of passion. "It's true I've shared before, but those women meant nothing. They were mere diversions." The blaze of truth shone from his face and she relaxed, still unsure of what was happening but willing to go along with whatever he wanted.

She nodded.

"Your time is up."

Suddenly she looked up at his laughing eyes, the move so fast shock filled her. "But I hadn't finished exploring your body."

"I'll give you another chance later."

She sighed loudly but grinned inside. Somehow she didn't think letting him take a turn would be a hardship.

Chapter Two

The little leopard wanted him. Her words and actions were clear even though she still wouldn't admit why he'd found her in the forbidden territory.

He stared down at her, memorizing her beautiful body. If he had his way, they'd never be parted again. He cupped one breast, kneading the fleshy globe while scrutinizing her reactions. Ah, she liked being stroked and petted. He leaned lower to take the brown nipple into his mouth. She gasped, a soft sound that made his cock jerk, and when he nipped, giving a little pain, she whimpered, arching upward in an attempt to get closer. Kersen pulled away, admiring the glistening tip.

"You like that?"

"Yes."

He admired her honesty—honesty in all things apart from why she was in the forbidden territory. "Why were you wandering the jungle alone?"

Fascinated, he watched delicate pink flood her cheeks.

"It's embarrassing."

"How so?"

Her full lips tightened into stubborn. Her brothers had warned him of her determined streak. They'd called it obstinate and willful. He quite liked the personality quirk because it made her interesting. And he'd noticed something else. The harder he pushed her sexually, the more information she offered.

"I don't want to talk about it. Honestly, it's nothing bad."

The tightness around his chest loosened at her words, and he began to release thoughts of a mysterious lover.

With forefinger and thumb, he plucked at her nipple until it hardened and her body arched beneath his. His responsive leopard craved more. He'd give her more. He trailed his fingers over her rib cage and dipped his tongue into the indentation of her bellybutton. A groan squeezed past her lips.

"More?" he asked.

"Please."

"Please, who?" He wanted to hear his name on her lips, know that he was the one she was thinking about.

"Please fuck me, Kersen." Her eyes opened to glare at him despite the sugar-sweet tone.

"Soon," he promised. *But not before he pried the truth from her.* First he needed to tease her a little more. He placed a kiss to the right of her bellybutton and sucked hard enough to leave a mark. He liked the idea of leaving signs on her so others knew she belonged to him. She smelled great. His. He had to taste her and imprint her with his scent.

"How long are you going to make me wait?"

"For as long as it takes." But as he spoke, he moved down her body, tempted by the scent of her arousal and the need to savor. Her hips strained upward, legs parting when he shifted his weight. Pent-up desire flared in him, a fine sheen of sweat coating his chest and shoulders. He hoped he could hold back his release until she told him the truth.

Her pubic hair was dark but clipped short and no real barrier to sight. His eyes widened when he saw the juices coating her folds and couldn't resist trailing a finger down her slit, a featherlight touch designed to tease. Aware she watched him, he lifted his finger and curled his tongue around the tip, cleaning off her honey.

"Delicious," he said.

She tried to move, to touch him, but he used his superior strength to keep her on her back. Jarita sniffed and glared but held her tongue.

Time to ratchet up the pleasure.

He settled between her legs and lifted her to his mouth. With his gaze on hers, he ran his tongue down the same path his finger had taken seconds ago. He watched her mouth slacken, her eyes glow. Smiling, satisfaction simmering through him, he settled in to sample her more fully. When her eyes fluttered closed, he smiled against her moist, swollen flesh. Just one more taste. His tongue circled her clit, the tiny nub peeping from its hood, before lifting his head.

"Why were you in the forbidden territory?"

Her eyes flew open and they stared at each other.

She exhaled, her chin jutting up in a show of obstinacy. "You're not going to let this go, are you?"

Suppressing a smile, he shook his head. "No."

Her breasts rose and fell rapidly, the sight making his balls ache. He wondered if she realized how close he was to fucking her without control, without finesse or gentleness. A snort erupted. Hell, she didn't have the slightest idea or she wouldn't be staring at him, she'd be trying to push him into losing control or running for home.

"I was going to the temple," she said, the words almost blending together in her rush.

"Why?"

"I needed to make an offering." She wouldn't look at him now.

"Why couldn't you use the temple in the village?"

Her mouth tightened. "Because."

Kersen presumed she meant to visit the one honoring the goddess of seduction. Frowning, he kissed the paler skin of her inner thigh. Why would she want to make an offering there?

"So you weren't meeting another man?" He raised his head in time to see her shock.

"Idiot," she said, fire flashing this time. "I don't want another man."

Did she mean... "You're here with me."

"Yes." Irritation flashed. Her chin lifted in an imperious manner, her glare full of challenge.

A jolt of heat leapt through him and he literally felt blood crowd into his already hard cock. Her anger and clear exasperation acted like an aphrodisiac, firing his body to unheard of heights of pleasure. His eyes narrowed while he worked to tamp down the impulse to shove his cock inside her tight cunt and fuck her hard. Was she implying her visit to the temple had something to do with him? While his mind circled the information, she tried to wriggle away. Wasn't gonna happen. He placed his hand on her belly, using his strength to hold her.

"Keep still," he confirmed his demand with sharp words.

"Why? You're not doing anything."

"But I'm going to."

"Promises, promises," she snapped.

He chuckled. "You watch too much satellite television."

"How else am I going to keep up with women's rights when I'm here in the jungle?" Although her words remained sharp, she ceased her struggles, silently surrendering to his will. Her submission played havoc with his body. An ache sprang up in his balls and beads of pre-cum leaked from his slit, coating the head of his cock. He noticed her scanning his body, her gaze coming to rest at his groin. Her tongue darted out and she lapped across her bottom lip, the innocent flash of pink getting to him.

"Do you want to taste?" Damn, he was going to explode at her first touch.

"Can I?"

He swallowed, tempted beyond reason. Finally in self-preservation, he shook his head. "Later. I promise." Hell, he'd stick to the basics at the moment, and even then, he wasn't sure he'd manage to hold his shit together.

Before she could offer an opinion, he ran his tongue down her cleft. Immediately she froze and he grinned against her plump folds. He rasped his tongue across the delicate tissues again, smiling at the quiver of her belly and the tiny whimper. While he licked, he probed her entrance with a single finger. Her tight flesh clung as he dipped and delved. She trembled.

"Kersen."

He raised his head. "Yes?"

"Don't you dare stop!"

"I won't," he promised, an easy assurance to make since he needed her so bad. The sweet honey taste of her rippled across his tongue while each panting breath and cry she made sounded like music to his ears. *More*. He needed more right now. The need to go slow warred with the intense ache in his balls. His cock won the fight. Damn, just the thought of sinking into her warmth had him quivering like a green kitten. He withdrew his fingers, ignoring their tremor and guided his cock to her entrance. With one thrust he surged inside, going balls-deep in an easy plunge. *The pleasure – it held him in its grip*. He panted, enclosed in her sweet cunt, vaguely wondering if she was taking herbs to prevent conception. Not that a child would bother him, but he didn't want her to feel trapped. Kersen needed to know she came to him of her own free will. "Are you taking something to prevent pregnancy?" he blurted.

"Of course. I don't take risks. I can feel you throbbing deep inside me," she purred, dismissing the subject.

"I'm frightened to move," he said frankly. Pique flitted through his mind, but he knew she was right. Children were a discussion for the future.

Her eyes widened before a smile bloomed on her full lips. "I turn you on that much?"

"You do." Might as well go for total honesty. Truth seemed to work for Jarita, judging by the delighted smile on her face.

"If you move, I will explode. I promise you."

The pleasure rippling through Kersen blindsided him. The knowledge that he affected her tightened his chest with emotion. "Then let's explode together," Kersen said, taking her lips in a hard kiss while he set up a rhythm of thrust and withdraw. The flecks of gold in her eyes gleamed, and he was almost sorry when her lids closed. Instead he watched her face, her lips, while he pushed deep, her pussy stretching to accommodate his size. He pistoned his hips in time with the tempo drumming in his ears. Hard. Fast. Struggling to hold on until she came. The base of his spine prickled and he groaned at the intense burst of heated tingles. She felt so fuckin' good beneath his straining body.

"Come now," he gritted out, his finger squeezing between their bodies to rub over her slippery clit. The hard nub pulsed beneath his fingers, and she moaned, her pussy clamping around his cock. All the air squeezed from his lungs and fire swarmed through him. Jets of semen blasted from his cock and all he was aware of was the acute pleasure and the sting of sharp claws raking his back.

Jarita's eyes flickered open and she watched him in awe, the way his head was thrown back in release, his teeth clenched with his sharp canines protruding a fraction. She felt the pulse of his cock as it contracted, prolonging the pleasure rippling through her pussy. The male was so beautiful, and at the moment, all hers. Her hands traced over his back, learning the hard, masculine contours of his body. When she glanced at his face, she saw his eyes and the heat in them brought a gasp.

"I don't even know if you came." The husky timbre of his voice made her body clench. Everything about the male was sexy.

"I did, but feel free to make me come again."

He chuckled. "I knew we'd suit."

Jarita stilled, staring up at him in puzzlement. "What do you mean?"

"Last night I asked your father and brothers for permission to court you."

"But you're a tiger."

"You have a problem with that?"

"No! I agreed and voted accordingly. It's the only way to progress into the future. It's just a mixed marriage hasn't happened yet. Um...what did my father say?"

He scrutinized her intently and her stomach churned. "Yes, as long as I pay the bride price, and of course that you're agreeable with the offer."

Happiness zapped through her, but she couldn't speak past the lump of emotion clogging her throat. She gave a rough cough, her entire body jerking. Kersen hissed. She froze. "Did I hurt you?"

"Hell, no." He twisted so he lay beneath her and she was draped over his chest. "When you coughed your cunt squeezed me. I'm still hard as a rock."

Jarita kissed him, her heart full. "Maybe you should swim in the stream. That's cold enough to deflate you."

"I can think of a better way."

Her stomach did a funny little flip. He wanted to court her, mate with her. "What is the bride price?"

"A ruby necklace for you and one to give your family."

Jarita snorted. "Probably for Garack. My brother has no artistic talent but needs a bride price if he wishes to court Azura."

"I don't mind." He played with a lock of her hair, the intimate action giving her a warm feeling inside.

Jarita squirmed, feeling his hard cock stretching her each time she moved. His breathing was deep but a trifle unsteady and her mouth dried as desire flared inside. She needed him again. Jarita pushed to her knees, changing the angle of their bodies. Immediately she felt fuller, but frenzied shivers of excitement kicked in her stomach

and the glow of approval in Kersen's eyes fed her hunger. She rocked, lifting a fraction and sinking back down. She danced in a seductive rhythm, tightening her inner muscles and glorying in his open pleasure.

"Touch yourself," he said in a hoarse whisper.

"Where? Tell me where you want me to touch myself." A new exciting game, and one he liked the sound of, if the glitter in his eyes was anything to judge by.

"Cup your breasts. Show me how you like to be touched."

She rose and fell on his cock. With great daring she dampened a single finger in her cream then lightly circled one pouting nipple.

"Again."

Swallowing, Jarita repeated the move, sliding her finger over her clit each time and painting her breast with delicate precision.

"When we've finished, I'm going to lick every bit of that off."

His sultry promise made her shudder and powerful desire kicked in her belly. With a thundering heart she quickened her rocking, no longer in the mood to tease. Her orgasm swelled like a storm, sensation building layer upon layer until she whimpered, raw need filling her in a riptide.

"Faster," he commanded, his face contorted in a mask of pleased pain.

She obeyed, her breasts bouncing with the force of her snapping hips. The sound of flesh slapping together echoed in the clearing. Jarita slid her fingers over her swollen nub and suddenly hot pleasure spilled free. The violent spasm took her like a giant wave, her body reacting with a surge of wetness. She slumped against his chest, each breath emerging with a harsh sound.

Kersen rolled her over and plunged into her. Once. Twice. Then he let out a heartfelt groan, stilling as his semen jetted into her cunt, splashing against the mouth of her womb. He clutched her tight, making her feel wanted. Loved. When he kissed her, a

gentle brushing of lips, it brought tears to her eyes. She could hardly believe he'd wanted her enough to approach her family.

He separated their bodies and immediately she mourned for the close contact. Kersen bent and scooped her off the ground, surprising a squeak from her.

"Let me wash you."

Jarita relaxed against his chest, loving the rich scent of him—a hint of musk and something clean and green, not that different from the perfume she favored. The muscles of his chest flexed when he carried her to the stream, each of his steps silent but still disturbing the colorful butterflies flitting across the grasses and wildflowers.

"I can wash myself," she said.

"Why?" He paused to look down at her. "Why, when I would take such pleasure in cleansing you?"

She shivered as a delicate tickle slithered through her stomach and lower to ripple through her pussy. "Um, okay." Just the thought of him touching her with his big hands, with any part of his body, made her want to squirm. He stepped into the water, graceful despite his size, with barely a splash and sank low.

"That's cold."

"Don't be a baby," he murmured before taking the tip of one breast into his mouth. The suction of his mouth and bite of his teeth sent her soaring. She curled her hands into his broad shoulders, forgetting about the cold, her head tilting back to enjoy the sensations racing through her. One big hand slid up her leg, coasting along the sensitive skin of her inner thigh. His fingers traced in ever-increasing circles, moving closer and closer to her drenched core.

"I thought we were cleaning up," she said on a rush.

"We are, baby, but I enjoy touching you. I promised I'd lick the juices off your breasts." His eyes fluttered closed for an instant and she watched his pink tongue lap across the curve of one breast. His eyes opened and they stared at each other for a long,

heart-stopping moment. "I love the way you respond to me, and I especially like the way you wanted to make an offering at the temple. For me."

Jarita bolted upright, both angry and embarrassed. The masculine satisfaction was clear. She opened her mouth to contest the claim before shutting it again, her teeth clacking in an audible sound. It was the truth. She could hardly refute reality.

"Mine," he said, eyes glowing, and before she could disagree or comment, he'd moved her body, his mouth at her pussy. She floated awkwardly while watching him. The rasp of his rough tongue made her groan weakly. Damn, that felt good, even better than his mouth suckling her breast. Slowly he dragged his tongue back the other way, curling it around and over her clit. He massaged the tiny bundle of nerves, tormenting her cruelly until she wanted to beg.

"Kersen." She could have cried when he lifted his head.

"I love hearing my name on your lips. The way you say it."

In the distance a troop of monkeys started to shriek, their cries of alarm echoing beneath the jungle canopy. A gun fired and birds flocked to the air, filling the sky with a burst of color and activity.

Kersen let her go and Jarita stood, cocking her head, listening intently. Heavy footsteps thrummed underfoot, a distinct animal smell bringing a snarl from Kersen.

"Elephants, and heavily loaded."

"Who do you think they are?"

"Probably some of the opium lord's men," Kersen said. "They won't find this clearing. We're safe here."

"I'm not scared. I am trained to fight."

Kersen's hands clamped on her shoulders and he turned her to face him. "As a last resort. My woman does not need to fight."

Jarita drew a sharp breath. "I am not your woman."

"Aren't you?"

They stared at each other intently, as if danger wasn't approaching. Her heart beat in three distinct pumps and she nodded, acknowledging the truth. "I'm yours," she said. "But that doesn't mean you can boss me around. We'll be partners."

"Of course." The words were smooth and what she wanted to hear, but she bristled. It was obvious he didn't mean them. Yet. She would show him, turn his mind to her way of thinking. A private smile flitted across her lips. This would be fun, and if he thought his threats of spanking would put her off, he could think again.

Chapter Three

Tension thrummed through Kersen. The elephants were slowly moving closer, and if he concentrated, he could hear the murmur of men's voices. Since they spoke English, he didn't think they were part of the opium lord's team of men. More likely ruby hunters.

"Get dressed, Jarita." Kersen grabbed his *longyi* and wound it around his waist as he spoke.

"What are we going to do?"

"I came to mine some rubies for your bride price. That's what I'll do. The elephants are probably traveling through to the village to provision. No one knows of the ruby mines here except our people." Because they dispatched anyone who wandered this area and made it seem dangerous to the curious. Whispered rumors did the rest, scaring away the inquisitive.

"You'll let me help choose the rubies?"

Kersen couldn't resist touching, running his hand down her back and letting it come to rest on her ass. *His*. "Yes. Come." He bent to right his sandals and thrust his feet into them. "Having you help me choose the stones will add to the value of the bride price."

She smiled brightly, making him feel like a prince. His body felt loose and relaxed after their lovemaking. His woman showed both strength and love. They would have beautiful children together.

"Shift to leopard," he said, standing back to give her room. "The entrance to the cave we found is here but we'll need to enter carefully and take care not to leave signs." Kersen waited until she'd shifted and pointed to a tree at the far side of the clearing. "Climb the tree but leave room for me to move past."

Jarita didn't move, merely blinked at him and waited.

Cursing under his breath at her determination, he smoothly morphed to tiger and led the way to the tree he'd indicated. With a powerful leap, he scaled the branches, walking along a sturdy one until rock lay beneath instead of grasses. He dropped onto the weathered surface and sat on his haunches, waiting for Jarita. She never hesitated at the six-foot jump, landing at his side in relative silence. Proud of her, he rubbed his head along her flanks before swiping his tongue over her face. A contented purr escaped despite the continuing march of the elephants. They sounded closer now, but he knew the path branched off and assumed they'd continue to the village where the security force would track them. They'd deal with them civilly at first, taking stronger measures if necessary. The last thing the shifters wanted was to attract the attention of the military regime who ruled the country.

Kersen padded across the rock, climbing rapidly before leaping down onto a ledge. Once confident that Jarita followed, he prowled along it until he reached a crevice. It was a narrow fit for him but Jarita wouldn't have a problem. He squeezed through, wriggling and forcing back the slight panic he always felt in the close atmosphere. Once inside, he paused to let his eyes adjust to the darkness and for Jarita to join him. Kersen sensed rather than felt her at his side. He made a rumbling sound and she rubbed against him in reassurance. His breath eased out in a puff of warm air before he moved off, his steps rapid and confident despite the lack of light. Having Jarita at his side, her calm presence helped him concentrate on the mission instead of the dark pressing in on him.

The sudden echo of a man's voice froze Kersen in place. The bob of lights piercing the shadows indicated the presence of several men. Jarita moved up alongside him, and he could feel the tension in her body.

"Damn, these rubies are good quality."

The man was just around the bend of the cave but hadn't heard them.

"Yeah, the woman from the village really came through for me. Stupid slut. She thinks I'm going to marry her." The man's smug tone made Kersen take umbrage. Although the woman was a traitor, she obviously trusted the man enough to confide shifter secrets. None of them shared information about their species without carefully weighing the consequences.

A third man spoke, his voice low and gritty. "She doesn't know about your wife?"

"No, and I'm not about to tell her. The woman's cunt is tight and sweet. The fucking is bloody good."

Jarita bristled beside him, taking half a step forward before Kersen growled in a low warning.

"What was that? Did you hear something?" the first man demanded.

"Huh. You see ghosts where there are none," the second man said, his tone a sneer full of jeering laughter.

"Didn't you hear anything?" The first man spoke again.

"No. Let's get these buckets of gravel outside, ready for the elephants to haul to the sluice."

Thumping and harsh grinding interspersed with grunts while the men dumped shovel loads of gravel into buckets.

Kersen waited even though every inch of him quivered with the need to attack. He couldn't take the chance, not if he wanted to keep Jarita safe. No telling what these men would do to her since ruby hunters were a depraved lot. She wasn't safe in either form.

The noise stopped and Kersen tensed.

"That's it," one of the men said. "That's as much as we can manage."

"Yeah, pity we had to sneak in and everything is so bloody primitive. Give us a couple of months and we should have it easier," another said.

Not if he could help it.

Jarita nudged him, and when he ignored her, trying to work out what action to take, she swiped her paw across his nose. A growl rumbled low in his throat and his top lip curled back to display his fangs. With her superior eyesight, he knew she'd see his displeasure. Jarita repeated her action, jerking her head in a manner that told Kersen she wanted him to follow. Damn it, he couldn't walk away. His lip curled up again in an effort to communicate this to her.

Jarita retreated and Kersen was glad she had the sense to keep safe. He couldn't concentrate if Jarita was in danger. Cocking his head, he listened, moving closer to the exit of the cave when he heard the men stagger in that direction.

A hand on his back had him spinning with a hiss, his front quarters gathered, ready for attack.

"Kersen, it's me. There's only three of them. We could take them."

Furious, Kersen shifted. He stalked across the rocky ground, fury pumping through him. Wisely, she remained silent but backed up until the rock wall at her back foiled retreat. He loomed over her, breathing deep to control his agitation, his fear.

"Dammit, woman."

"I refuse to hide while you take care of things. I've only just found you. I don't want to lose you now." Her eyes met his directly, without artifice. Her nose lifted in the cute way she had when she'd set her mind on something. Despite his anger, he had to work hard to hide his amusement.

"How can you help me? These men will have guns. They have help coming. You heard what they said about the elephants."

"They're stealing rubies that could go into making my bride price. Besides, they won't be expecting us. If we time things properly and take them by surprise, we'll gain the upper hand." She paused. "It was Simi he was talking about. I'm sure my friend wouldn't talk about the mines if she didn't believe he loved her and intended to take her as his mate. You know her. She's shy and quiet, not the type to betray her people. I like her."

"The clan leaders will punish her." Damn, Aran for his gossip. His other two friends had kept quiet about their find.

"I know. Please can we just do this before they escape?"

Kersen stared at Jarita, scanning her face for any trace of fear or doubt. All he saw was implacable determination. But she wasn't overconfident, which was good. "It's dangerous. I don't want to lose you."

"Life is short. You're just as vulnerable as me. I want to know you trust me in all things, that we're a team."

For a drawn-out second they stared at each other. Finally he nodded. "Okay. A team. We need to take them out before the elephants arrive. If there are elephants, they've probably hired local *mahouts*, and you know how superstitious they are."

"When they hear us they'll run a mile," Jarita said.

"Yeah, and the elephants won't like our scent much either. If we try hard enough, we should be able to scare them off."

Kersen sucked in a deep breath and smoothed his hand over the curve of her head, moving it lower until he cupped her smooth cheek. She leaned into his palm, nuzzling him in total trust. Awe filled him.

His mate.

He leaned forward and brushed a kiss over her lips before stepping back. The loss of contact rocked him, as did the knowledge they might not make it through this alive.

"Let's do this."

They shifted together, equal partners. Kersen led, picking his way carefully across the scarred floor of the cavern where the men had gouged rocks from the wall and floor. He listened carefully for the three men in case they returned. Another scenario they hadn't discussed was the possibility of more men being present outside.

Footsteps made them both hesitate. The rattle of an empty bucket striking the wall of the dank cave signaled the return of at least one man. The flash of a lamp flickered, scanning over the cave wall and giving away their presence.

“Shit.” The man fumbled for the gun tucked into the waistband of his jeans.

Kersen sprang before he could clear his weapon. The bucket he’d carried crashed to the ground, clanging in an eerie echo. He was vaguely aware of Jarita standing on guard but had his attention claimed by the man. He thrashed beneath Kersen, screaming in a panicked shriek. A sickening crunch filled his ears. The cry cut off and the man stilled.

Kersen backed away, stepping up beside Jarita. She rubbed against him, offering silent sympathy and the tension loosened inside him. They never took a life lightly.

“Max?” The tentative voice brought renewed strain in Kersen. Both of them waited, watching the bob of the approaching light and listening to the cautious footsteps. “Max? Are you okay?”

Kersen crept forward and Jarita slinked at his side. The cavern widened and they parted, each hugging a rock wall.

The man stepped closer. “Max?”

Kersen waited until he stood between them before letting out a sharp bark, a signal for Jarita to show herself. The man turned toward him. Seconds later, he was on the ground with Jarita crouched over him. The man fought and stilled. Jarita moved away with scarcely a backward glance. She knew as well as him that death was the only way they’d survive. In the past they’d tried scaring the intruders away, but greed always made them return, hence the hard line by their species.

Kersen stepped out into the light with Jarita at his side. Elephants. He could hear their slow, measured steps. He also heard Jarita’s low bark of surprise to find herself standing in the temple surrounds, the partially ruined main building over to their right.

The third man appeared, large and rough with his skin tanned to dark brown, from behind a plant-choked stone wall. On seeing them, he froze.

"Fuck. I didn't realize she spoke the truth. I thought she was drunk."

Jarita let out a shriek of rage. The man's hand went to the weapon at his belt, but the gun never cleared his holster because Jarita sprang before Kersen could intervene. She snarled. The man screamed. A shot rang out. Both fell to the ground.

Blood.

He could smell it. Panic struck, a sharp pain in his chest. Kersen shifted. The acute tang of fear lent him extra speed. Unconscious, she shifted back to human form. He lifted Jarita off the man and saw the blood oozing from a wound on her shoulder, spreading in a widening splotch on her blouse. He cradled her in his arms, anguish twisting his face. *Hell, he couldn't lose her, not when they'd only found each other.*

With a trembling hand he checked her pulse. It was there. Praying fervently under his breath, he shoved aside the turquoise fabric to check the wound. His arms tightened when he saw the furrow caused by the bullet and the hole in her shoulder. Her beautiful skin—marred by a thief's hand. He closed his eyes, sick to his stomach. He should have kept her safe, made her stay in the clearing.

"Kersen, don't hold me so tight. Can't breathe."

"Jarita?"

"Yeah. My shoulder hurts so I can't be dead yet."

In the nearby valley a tiger roared. The sharp bark of a leopard answered. Help was almost there.

An elephant trumpeted, the sharp note full of fear. A man cried out. Another shrill trumpet and sounds of an elephant thrashing through the undergrowth in clear panic allowed Kersen to relax, secure in the knowledge the on-duty security force had arrived.

"What the hell have you done to my sister?"

"Kersen hasn't done anything to me," Jarita said before Kersen could answer.

“And he’s not about to do anything—not if he can’t keep you safe. I’m taking you home.”

Garack scooped Jarita up and hustled his sister away. Kersen watched them depart and sighed before helping the rest of the security force deal with the bodies, the terrified elephants and the buckets of gravel taken from the mine. Garack was right. He hadn’t kept Jarita safe and didn’t deserve her as a mate.

* * * * *

The look on Kersen’s face said it all. It was the same expression mirrored on her brother’s. But Kersen hadn’t failed her. It was about time the stupid man realized they were a team. Although knowing he wanted to care for her made a warm tingle flow through her heart, he couldn’t protect her all the time. He needed to know that, realize life wasn’t always easy. It was a gamble. Jarita sighed. A gamble all right—because if she didn’t knock some sense into his stubborn head, they’d both end up alone and miserable.

Back at the village, in the safety of her room and with her mother in attendance, she refused to talk about what had happened, merely telling her family it wasn’t Kersen’s fault.

“You love him,” her mother said once her brothers had stormed out.

“Yes.” And in a sudden moment of clarity, she knew exactly what she was going to do about it. Kersen didn’t stand a chance.

In a fever of impatience she waited for night to fall. Thanks to her shifter genes, the bullet had pushed out of her wound and although her shoulder ached and the skin appeared pinker than normal, she felt well enough to put her plan into place.

A mosquito whined, searching for a food source when she left her bedroom and padded quietly down the carved wooden staircase to the rear door near the kitchen. The faint scent of turmeric and ginger filled the air, remnants of the evening meal. Jarita

slipped outside into the dark street and headed for Kersen's house at the other end of the village. She put her foot on the bottom stair leading to his front door.

"What are you doing here?"

Jarita jumped, surprised by his voice coming from the dark verandah. Finally she saw Kersen seated on a wooden chair. Bother. Her plan to slip into bed with him foiled before it even got off the ground. "I came to see you."

"Your brothers won't like that."

"Too bad. I want sex, and you're just the person to deliver."

"Garack warned me off."

Jarita snorted. "And you'd listen to him over me? I want you and I intend to have you. Tonight."

"Brave words, little girl. I should have spanked that curvy ass when I had a chance."

A shiver sped through Jarita. *Please*. She loved the idea of him touching her bottom. "Yes please," she said finally. "I'll be in your bed when you've finished with your sulk." Jarita glided past him, trying to quell her excitement, and opened the carved wooden door to enter his house. Guessing the location of his bedroom, she only made one wrong turn before she found it. Taking a deep breath filled with his masculine scent, Jarita undressed, her clothes making a faint clunk when they hit the floor. She peeled back the silken covers and slid beneath.

"Does your family know you're here?" He wore only his *longyi*, his chest and feet bare.

Jarita exhaled slowly, relief allowing her tense muscles to relax. "My mother knows."

"You should go home."

"I need sex. Do you want me to go elsewhere?"

He cursed, a rapid string of harsh words that made her brows rise. "Damn, what am I going to do with you?"

Impressive cursing. "Love me," she said.

Kersen scooped her out of his bed and placed her over his knee before she had time to blink. She stared down at the wooden floor, flinching slightly when she felt his calloused palm smoothing across her bare butt.

"Not so brave now," he said in a silky voice. He rubbed his palm back and forth across the curve of her buttocks until heat spiraled from the place of contact to her core. A shiver worked through her limbs and her breath caught while she waited for his next move. "Such a sweet ass."

His hand lifted, but heat continued to bubble inside her. She shifted her weight, intending to wriggle away and put her seduction plan into action.

The tap on her ass stung. The two blows in quick succession made her cry out.

"Ow. That hurt."

"Maybe next time you'll listen before jumping into action. You shouldn't be here."

Jarita turned her head to glare at him. The heat in her ass trickled downward and she shivered. Unbelievable. How could punishment give so much pleasure? "I'm here," she said, going on instinct. "And I'm not leaving unless you physically throw me out." This time she turned her head to catch his expression. One of anguish with a hint of yearning. "That all you have? I don't scare easily."

The pain faded, replaced by pure sensual hunger. He slapped her ass with a sharp tap. "That a fact? Hell." His hand smoothed across her heated flesh, one finger following the valley between her buttocks. "Your ass looks so pretty. Pink and luscious." His finger drifted across her puckered entrance, dragging a gasp from her. "You like that?"

"Do it again."

A secret smile bloomed when he petted her again. *Gotcha*. He slipped a hand beneath her chest, the fingers of one hand rolling a nipple while his finger pressed firmly against the skin between anus and her damp entrance. All at once twin sensations throbbed, moistening her folds. She swallowed, hips canting in a silent demand for more. She wanted the slow thrust of his fingers in her pussy, his hard cock. Jarita huffed out a sharp breath and swallowed again at the change in her heartbeat.

"Your brother will kill me, but I can't walk away."

Anger hit her as she spun on his lap and slithered to her feet. "Garack has nothing to do with this. You told me you wanted me as a mate. You can't change your mind and walk away. You can't pretend there's nothing between us. I want you so badly my body aches. I'm wet for you and you know it. Dammit, you want me too. You want to shove that hard cock into me, feel the hot, wet slide when you push inside."

"I put you in danger." But he let his *longyi* drop to the floor.

"Maybe I like danger." She grasped his cock, pumping it roughly. It pulsed and thickened in the firm grip of her hand.

Kersen grasped her shoulders and pushed her away, his chest rising and falling in visible agitation. "You could have died."

Jarita stalked him, knowing she couldn't let him get away with this, not if they had any sort of future together. "I didn't. I'm alive and incredibly horny." She ran her hands over the bare skin of his chest, savoring his warmth and the pulse of hard muscles beneath her fingertips. His pectoral muscles flexed under her touch. She clutched his biceps, her hand meeting the cool silver of his ruby armband, and bent to lick across his ridged abs. His cock reared and she smelled his arousal. A bolt of pleasure shot to her clit. Heady power. It filled her knowing she pulled a reaction from him.

"Jarita."

She smiled against his flat stomach and knelt to nuzzle his cock. It left a damp trail on her cheek. "Do you want me to stop?"

His hands tunneled into her hair, holding her head in place. "Hell no. That's the last thing I want."

After pressing a kiss to the veined underside, she mouthed one of his balls, glorying in his soft curse.

"I don't want you to have regrets."

"Then you shouldn't have taken me in the clearing. One taste and I want more." Jarita licked his cock and finally took him between her lips. The tang of pre-cum danced across her taste buds. His hands released their tight grip on her head, massaging it instead. She sucked, head bobbing, intent on giving him pleasure before she took hers. By the time she finished, he wouldn't have a single doubt they were perfect for each other.

Without warning he yanked his cock from her mouth, his chest heaving. "On the bed."

"My pleasure." Jarita stood and crawled onto the bed, placing her hands under her head as a pillow. She parted her legs, leaving herself open without shame.

Kersen pounced, his strong arms caging her against the mattress. A delicious spiral of heat filled her lower belly and her breathing became shallow. *Hurry*, she urged him silently. As if he heard her silent plea, he lined up his cock and entered in a seamless thrust. Fully seated, he paused, allowing her to adjust to his girth.

"More."

Kersen barked a laugh and set up an easy surge and retreat, his shaft dragging against her sensitive inner tissues.

"Harder," she demanded, arching her back to prolong the pleasurable sensations.

He nuzzled her neck beneath the curtain of hair, the warm, wet suction of his mouth bringing a buzz of sensation and a whimper. Their lips met in a gentle kiss while his fingers plucked at a single nipple. Sounds of fucking filled the room. He lifted his mouth from hers to stare deep into her eyes. A needy cry escaped as he filled her with

fast digs, each stroke brushing her clit. The pressure built. She gasped again, her eyes closing to better enjoy the feel of his body pumping into hers, the power and strength of him. He was so much bigger, yet he treated her with gentleness. Her mouth curved—apart from when he smacked her ass, and even that had brought pleasure rather than pain. This was right where she belonged. Kersen thrust again and starbursts exploded against her eyelids. She groaned.

“Come for me, Jarita. Now,” he said in a firm voice.

His husky voice pushed her over the precipice. Another moan squeezed past tight lips as she shattered, sensation racing down arms and legs, throughout her entire body. She was vaguely aware of Kersen’s rough, hard strokes into her softness and the freezing of his body buried deep in hers. Her pussy pulsed in aftershocks, gripping his cock.

When Jarita opened her eyes, she felt like one of the limp noodles from her favorite breakfast dish. She smiled up at Kersen and gently brushed the damp hair from his face. The recent injury in her shoulder made itself felt, protesting her exertion with a faint ache. Nothing she couldn’t live with. The twinges were worth the reward.

“Are you okay?” she asked, noting Kersen’s faint frown.

“I don’t have the bride price, even if your brother changes his mind about the two of us.”

“Is that all?” She pushed at his shoulders, one hand slipping down to touch the fiery armband. “When we’re together, will you make me a matching armband?”

His brows rose but she caught the quick flicker of pleasure that chased across his face. “I could.”

“You’re talented at making jewelry. Maybe you should start selling the pieces you make.”

Kersen nodded, his attention caught by the gentle sway of her breasts when she rolled out from under him. "Maybe one day."

She squatted by her discarded clothes and pulled something from the depths of the small bag she had attached to her *longyi*. "You don't need to worry about the bride price because I have these."

Kersen gaped, staring at the blood-red stones she held out in her hand. About a dozen. Despite the scant light they sparkled. He knew the stones were high quality. In good light and set into a necklace they would surpass any he'd seen. "I picked them up in the cave before we attacked the men."

"I can't take them. It is tradition for the male to provide the stones."

"You know you can't return to the temple cave because the clan has claimed it. All stones recovered go into village funds for advancement and modernization. It could take ages to find another source as tradition demands." Jarita set the stones aside, placing them on the small teak table. She glared at him, tossing her head to send a ripple of silken hair cascading over one shoulder. "You will accept them because we are meant to be. I won't go away. I refuse to let another feline get her claws into you. You belong to me. I belong to you."

Kersen's heart thundered against his ribs, in awe of her strength, her determination, her sheer stubbornness in going after what she wanted. *Him*. Hell, she'd even risked going into the forbidden territory to make an offering at the temple. She had made an offering when her blood spilled onto the dusty ground outside the cave. "I'm going to need to do something about your tendency to disobey orders and your stubborn streak."

"Maybe if we knock heads together often enough the stubborn gene will shake free." She smiled and it built until her lips curved in a full-out grin.

"Somehow, I doubt that. If we fight, the making up will be sweet."

Jarita cocked her head, reminding him of an inquisitive parrot. "Will you spank me?"

"You seemed to enjoy that too much, so maybe not."

"Oh shame," she said.

Kersen chuckled. "You are a handful." He stood and tugged her into a tight embrace, pressing a kiss to her temple. She turned in his arms and stood on tiptoes to kiss him, her bare breasts pushing against his chest. Immediately his hunger grew, the blood rushing to his cock. The minx knew it, reading his reactions as easily as he interpreted the signs of nature. She hummed under her breath, rubbing against his body with erotic intent. Kersen scooped her off her feet and tossed her onto the middle of the bed, following her down. He knew her lips were soft and wanted to taste them again. He pressed his mouth to hers. Cupped the back of her head and let his tongue stroke lazily over her lips, pushing into her mouth the second she opened for him. Her exotic taste and scent surrounded him while her hot, wet mouth went from sweet to demanding. He groaned, feeling the velvety head of his shaft brush across her hip. A surge of intense feeling shot through his body to settle in his heart. He pulled away, breathing hard.

"What?" Her golden eyes glittered in the dim light.

"I love you."

"About time you admitted it."

He sighed. "Don't you have anything to say in return?"

"My favorite color is blue?"

"Minx."

Jarita ran her tongue across his collarbone toward the fleshy part of his neck. He felt the sting of her teeth and it seared a path of fire directly to his balls. She lifted her head to grin. "I love you."

"Glad we got that cleared up."

"Yeah, now make love to me."

He didn't answer but used his hands, his mouth and tongue to worship her. A nibble at her neck. A quick kiss on her lips. The slow drag of his tongue down her cleavage. She touched him everywhere. Body and mind. The loving was unhurried, a claiming and an exchange of promises. Kersen tugged at her nipple, twisting it to give her a bite of pain before soothing it with the damp heat of his mouth. He kissed across her rib cage, learning every part of her body, ran his tongue down her honeyed slit, gathering the juices her body wept for him. She shivered at the rasp of his tongue, groaned when he filled her with a single finger.

"Kersen, I need your cock rather than a finger."

Yes, that was what he wanted too. He removed his finger without haste, giving a slow drag against her needy flesh. He'd intended to move leisurely when he thrust but she gripped him hard, her cunt squeezing tight, demanding a fevered response. He pushed into her damp flesh, shafting her deep. Delectable agony. Heat blossomed, curling through him with each thrust. Her breath caressed his face and the hungry little noises coming from her made him smile. *So good.* He couldn't imagine anything better. She cried out, her pussy compressing hard on his cock in a series of rhythmic contractions. In a succession of rapid-fire thrusts, he plunged into her, the tension ramping. His head fell back as tingles shot from the base of his spine and down his cock, the tightening of her sheath milking him, tossing him into more pleasure than he'd ever experienced.

Gradually they stilled, both breathing hard.

"I love you, Jarita."

"I love you too."

A curse from the doorway jerked them both into attack positions. "What the fuck are you doing with my sister?"

Chapter Four

"It's none of your business, Garack. Father approves of Kersen. And what do you mean by entering Kersen's house uninvited? It's rude."

"Put on some clothes! Father won't approve when I tell him how Kersen placed you in danger, how you were injured. As soon as he returns from his trip to the city, he'll back my decision. Kersen doesn't even have the bride price. He asked me for a time extension."

Kersen shared a glance with Jarita, melting at the pleading in her eyes. "I have the bride price."

Jarita grabbed the nearest *longyi*, which happened to belong to him. It gave him a warm feeling seeing her wrapped in his clothes.

"How?" Garack demanded. "You haven't left the village since our return this afternoon. Prove it."

Kersen lit a lamp and allowed the light to shine over the surface of the table. It picked up the fiery glint of the rubies.

"You're just pissed because you thought you'd have to postpone your courtship," Jarita said. "You have no artistic talent and are relying on Kersen to provide your bride price. I know Father asked him for two necklaces, which is higher than any other bride price."

"I would gladly pay more for you, Jarita." Nothing less than the truth. To have this woman stand at his side he would have paid double the price. She was a jewel beyond price.

"My god. You have the bride price." Garack stared at the rubies in awe. "I want that one."

"I will have first choice," Jarita said.

Kersen nodded, trying not to smile while she bossed her older brother around. "You will."

"All right," Garack said in a grudging tone.

"Did you talk to Simi?" Jarita returned to Kersen's side and cuddled up next to him. He placed his arm around her shoulders, savoring the warm heat of her pressed into his side.

"Yes. It was as you said. She thought he loved her because he'd asked her to marry him. Luckily she hadn't told him much about our shifter status, but she'd mentioned the ruby mines during a discussion about the village's obvious wealth. Someone must have gossiped about the mine you found." Garack shook his head, looking discomfited. "She cried. Hell, I hate it when a female cries. Never know what to do."

"I'd guess the info came from Aran. He can't keep his mouth shut. What action are you going to take? From what the man said before he died, I thought he suspected something," Kersen said. The security council was within their rights to either kill or banish Simi but took account of each case and any special circumstances. Since she was a leopard shifter, the leopards took chief responsibility for punishment.

"We'll push for leniency. There will be a punishment but it won't be death or banishment."

"Good," Jarita said. "Now go away and leave us alone. We have things to do."

"I'm not meant to hear things like that," Garack muttered.

"Then go away before you have to witness them again," his younger sister said. "You weren't invited in the first place. I mean to keep Kersen busy for the rest of the night."

"Don't tire him out. He needs to work on my bride price."

"Garack, show yourself out," Kersen said without taking his gaze off Jarita. The minx winked at him and he felt the warmth in his heart expand to fill his entire chest.

"And don't ever barge in here again without an invitation." His hard voice held a threat.

"On the bed," Jarita said, ignoring her brother.

"I heard that," Garack muttered striding out of sight.

"Move faster because we're going to get down and dirty," Jarita shouted after him.

Garack's footsteps hastened, and Kersen heard his front door open and shut. "Alone at last," he murmured. "How exactly are we going to get down and dirty?"

"On the bed."

"Yes, ma'am."

Jarita left the lamp burning, unfastened the *longyi* and let the cotton fabric drop to the wooden floor. He watched her closely, his heart full as she scooped up the raw rubies and glided toward him, a picture of feminine grace. Her eyes glittered full of mischief. For a few seconds he tensed before realizing that no matter what she intended they'd have fun.

She jumped onto the bed and straddled his body. "We went through a big adventure to get these rubies. I figured we should give them some memories so whenever we see them in the future we'll smile."

"Um, will Garack like these memories?"

"He'll need to make his own because I don't kiss and tell." She pressed a kiss to his lips, the caress deepening when he wound his hands around her neck and held her prisoner. She laughed against his mouth. "Let me go. I want to explore your body for a change."

Kersen released her but took the time to smooth his hand over her dark, glossy hair. She growled, the playful sound rumbling inside her throat.

"Hold onto the headboard," she instructed. "Don't move and don't touch me until I tell you to."

"My punishment if I don't obey?" He held back his smirk, enjoying the play between them. She was small compared to him. He could overpower her in a moment.

"You don't want to find out," she said, her tone dark.

He nodded, once again restraining his amusement to follow her orders.

She bent her head to lick across one flat nipple. The rough rasp of her tongue sent pleasure through him. Jarita placed a ruby over the damp flesh, tracing a tight circle around it with her tongue. "Don't move."

He sucked back a groan. Hell, she intended to torture him.

Jarita repeated the same move, licking and teasing his nipple until it rose in a peak before covering it with a ruby. She placed several rubies on his stomach, in the dips of his abs. When she finished she had the largest ruby still in her hand.

"Very pretty," she said, straightening to study her handiwork.

"I'm going to get hard whenever I work with rubies," Kersen muttered.

"You're hard now. I can feel your cock prodding my back."

Kersen gave a strangled laugh. "I'm hoping you'll do something about that."

"One finishing touch first." She bent down, tracing her tongue around the indentation of his bellybutton.

Kersen bit back a curse. She was gonna kill him. All the petting and licking—the sensations crept down to his groin until his balls ached. Sensual torture.

Jarita placed the largest stone in his bellybutton. "Beautiful."

"You're the beautiful one."

She smiled, the blush of pleasure in her cheeks making him desperate to hold her, but he also wanted to give her the illusion of control, for her to know she could trust him. He thought she trusted him now, but letting her call the shots made it special between them.

Jarita lifted up and guided him to her entrance. Slowly she impaled herself on his cock.

"Jarita." He reached for her, but she stilled him with a frown.

"Don't move. The rubies will fall. Let me do the work."

"You're going to kill me."

"Good. You can return the favor another time." She accompanied the words with a clench of her pussy and a slow rise and equally unhurried fall.

"Count on it, sweetheart." Kersen's hands gripped the headboard a fraction tighter and inhaled deep, trying to control the rapid rush into loss of restraint.

"You feel so good inside me." The dreamy look on her face fueled his pleasure. He silently willed her to hurry.

As if she could read his mind, she hastened her speed while he concentrated on keeping the rubies in place. The tension escalated, the air thick with the liquid sounds of sex and their heavy breathing. He watched Jarita's face, loving the delight she openly showed.

"Touch yourself."

"Not too good at waiting, tiger?"

"No."

Jarita laughed and slid a hand down between her legs, rubbing her finger over her slippery clit. Seconds later she came. A soft sigh followed the languorous waves of pleasure. Unable to stand the tension, he moved, displacing several rubies. He turned their bodies so she was beneath him and drove into her wet heat. The orgasm thundered through him, sparks of pure molten pleasure fraying his nerve endings.

"Mine," he ground out hoarsely.

"Yours," she agreed in a sleepy voice. "Ow, we need to collect the rubies."

"Good idea," Kersen said. "Somehow I don't think Garack would want his bride price displayed in your butt cheek."

Jarita laughed, and Kersen had a vision of how it would be in the future. The two of them surrounded by their children, laughter with the odd power struggle and lots of sweet loving. He plucked the rubies from the bed before returning to Jarita's side.

Jarita—a jewel beyond price and she belonged to him, just as he belonged to her. The best bride price a man could find.

About the Author

Shelley lives in Auckland, New Zealand, with her husband and a small, bossy dog named Scotty.

Typical New Zealanders, Shelley and her husband left home for their big OE soon after they married (translation of New Zealand-speak: big overseas experience). A year-long adventure lengthened to six years of roaming the world. Enduring memories include being almost sat on by a mountain gorilla in Rwanda, lazing on white sandy beaches in India, whale watching in Alaska, searching for leprechauns in Ireland, and dealing with ghosts in an English pub.

While travel is still a big attraction, these days Shelley is most likely found in front of her computer following another love—that of writing stories of romance and adventure. Other interests include watching rugby and rugby league (strictly for research purposes *grin*), being walked by the dog, and curling up with a good book.

Shelley welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at www.ellorascave.com.

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