

A shirtless man with dark hair and a serious expression stands in a lush, green jungle. In the foreground, a black panther with striking yellow eyes is partially visible, looking towards the camera. The man's torso is bare, showing his muscular build. The background is a soft-focus view of dense tropical foliage.

GATO NEGRO

ALI KATZ

Gato Negro
by Ali Katz

Amber Quill Press

www.amberquill.com

Copyright ©2008 by Ali Katz

NOTICE: This eBook is licensed to the original purchaser only. Duplication or distribution to any person via email, floppy disk, network, print out, or any other means is a violation of International copyright law and subjects the violator to severe fines and/or imprisonment. This notice overrides the Adobe Reader permissions which are erroneous. This eBook cannot be legally lent or given to others.

This eBook is displayed using 100% recycled electrons.

CONTENTS

[Also By Ali Katz](#)

[UNO](#)

[DOS](#)

[TRES](#)

[CUATRO](#)

[CINCO](#)

[SEIS](#)

[SIETE](#)

[Ali Katz](#)

[Amber Quill's Rewards Program](#)

* * * *

Gato Negro
by Ali Katz

GATO NEGRO

By

ALI KATZ

* * * *

Amber Quill Press, LLC

www.amberquill.com

Gato Negro
by Ali Katz

Also By Ali Katz

Glory

Only One Regret

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

UNO

The woman crouched between him and the water his body craved. Fortunately for her, he was not hungry. The peccary he'd taken this morning would keep him for a few days. Yet the sight of her naked haunch, straining to hold her crouched over her work, held him captive.

Instinct told him the meat was forbidden. But he watched for the tightening of muscle that would herald an attempt to flee as though she were prey. She was not prey.

And his full stomach demanded water, not meat.

Whatever prompted her to block access to the stream, arrogance or inexperience, getting rid of her was a simple matter of letting loose the growl forming in his chest.

Or he could move on to the next watering hole.

But he waited and salivated, watching her with something akin to hunger as she prepared a ... syringe ... with a barb ... a needle ... as long as her finger, hovering over the bright blooms like a hummingbird. He almost understood, but his cat brain couldn't quite make the connection.

From flower to flower she moved, more purposeful than a hummingbird, filling the syringe but not feeding. Instead, she emptied each flower's gathering into a small vial, making notes on its label before moving on to the next.

She's collecting nectar. The lucid thought warned him of the pending change a fraction of a second before the cramp struck his thigh. Without time to prepare, his body reacted with a jerk and low grunt.

The woman spun on her heels. Her eyes locked to his, immediately aware.

A look of wondrous awe shined in those eyes. Then he smelled the fear a moment before it registered on her face.

* * * *

My God, a black jaguar. The cat crouched behind an elephant ear at the edge of the tree line, less than five meters away. An amazing specimen, perfectly formed, stocky, with the powerful jaws and shoulder of a male in its prime. The black fur gleamed with health. Beth was close enough to distinguish the shadowed rosettes on its back. Her gaze moved to study the face. Golden eyes scrutinized her thoughtfully.

Off in the distance, a howler screeched. The cat gave a low huff. The eyes narrowed.

Awareness of what those jaws could do struck her like a blow. She froze, knowing her fifty kilos had no hope of outrunning or overpowering the predator's eighty.

Lips curled into a snarl, the cat tensed. A growl grew from deep in its chest, grew and grew, then exploded into a yowl.

She thought she was dead. But the great cat wheeled on its haunches and disappeared among the trees.

Her body went limp with relief and the aftermath of an adrenaline rush. Her legs threatened to drop her to the forest floor, but the other members of the team rushed to her side. She clung to her dignity and stayed upright.

"Beth, are you all right? It's gone. Come here. Sit down." Jean-Paul grasped her arm and led her to a mossy area

upstream. Dignity was the last thing on her mind by the time he helped her to sit. Her eyes focused on nothing while she waited for the feeling to return to her limbs and her heart to stop racing.

"Stupid," she reproached herself under her breath. "Working next to a watering hole. I blocked his way. Stupid." She needed to pull herself together. The mistake was bad enough. Falling apart over one could get her sent home.

Kate plopped down beside her. "Damn, Beth. You're supposed to stay with the group, for God's sake." Her voice was at least an octave higher than normal.

Beth couldn't argue the point. She'd moved without thinking, not a good behavior to embrace anywhere, especially in this environment—as she'd just proved to herself. The shock was finally passing, the numbness fading; her body was starting to come back to her. But the cat—the initial thrill returned.

"Did you see him?" Astonished laughter rose in her throat. "A black jaguar! My God, did you see how beautiful he was?"

"I saw it looking at you like breakfast," Kate said. "Beth, get over it. You were careless. You could have been killed."

"You're right. I'm sorry. We better get back, don't you think?" Unable to muster the appropriate amount of remorse, Beth picked herself up and started back to the watering hole to collect her sample bag. "Carter said he hasn't seen a cat or wolf in this area in years," she mused. "Where did this one come from?"

* * * *

Ch'aho'm—no, he reminded himself, *Carlos*—didn't understand how he came to be back in his old territory. When the research center with its influx of people took over the area, he'd moved rather than fight. Moving territory was easy in the forest these days. He didn't have to worry about stepping on another cat's toes; his were the only toes to step on.

His old scent markers were faded, but if he followed the creek in this direction, he'd eventually come upon the sagging wooden suspension bridge and orient himself. The cabin wasn't far.

A night under a roof, a mattress to sleep on, not to mention clothes, sounded wonderful. How long had he been a cat this time?

A long time, weeks. The transformation had been hard. The muscles in his legs still cramped as they re-acclimated themselves to this shape. His bones ached. Still, it felt good to be walking on two legs again. He glanced down at his nakedness to discover part of the discomfort had nothing to do with muscles. He had an erection. Is that what brought him to human form? The woman? Not surprising. After all, how many years had it been since he'd had sex?

While here, he'd make the rounds he'd neglected far too long. A grin crept over his face. A visit to the research center might offer a chance to do something with the erection.

But not with his hummingbird. He sensed danger there. Looking back on their meeting with human perception, she still smelled like prey. Pale skinned, raven-haired, obsidian-eyed—he could get lost in those eyes. For a few seconds, he'd

seen into her soul and recognized the desire to reach out, to touch, to stroke, to nuzzle. No wonder he had a hard-on. No, the hummingbird woman was off limits.

With some relief, he found the path to his door overgrown and undisturbed. Not wanting to risk his tender new skin, he picked up a fallen branch to help clear a way for himself through the overhanging foliage and made his way home to see if he still had a job.

* * * *

Beth knew she was dreaming, so the cat's appearance at her window didn't surprise or frighten her. Even when it leaped into the room, all she wanted was a closer look, but night in the cloud forest was pitch dark.

It was early; frogs still sang. The moon must certainly be out, but the canopy didn't let in much light, just enough to detect the black on black shadow of his stocky body and the golden glint of his eyes—two brilliant flashes in the night.

Thunder sounded as the cat approached in slow motion, its powerful shoulder muscles rolling beneath the blackness. His head nudged her, setting the soft cocoon of her hammock into a peaceful sway. The motion lulled her deeper into a languid state. On the return swing, her hand brushed the length of his jaw. The cat leaned in, turning the glancing touch into a caress. With the gentle rocking and soothing contact, Beth soon dropped into dreamless sleep until soft lips whispered across her cheek.

The touch startled her. Still, she didn't wake. Instead, she fell into the dream, opening her senses to the awareness of a

man's lips caressing her face, neck, shoulders—a beautiful dream, purely sensual and more than welcome.

Warm, wet, his mouth covered her breast, tongue playing over the hardened nipple until it tightened to the point of pain. Her body arched into the sensation; the play grew more heated. Soft puffs of hot breath souged over her skin, faster, harder, a prod to her growing arousal.

The hammock tilted. She gripped the edges, rolling to one side as two arms came up from below to cradle her through the fabric. The mouth had a body, a strong, hairless, naked chest pressing against her. And a face, his soft, short-stubbled beard, sparse, grazed her skin as a man's teeth and lips gnawed at her torso. Long, moist strokes of his tongue followed, awakening every nerve.

No sound from him but the soft whistle of air through his nose as he took in her scent, and the hot whoosh of his exhaled breath washing over her.

This was like no wet dream she'd had before. The man, in the dark, eating her alive as though he couldn't remember his last meal—his hunger came off him in waves. Her body responded, arching into his need, offering a banquet.

His mouth moved back to her breasts. He tilted her, giving himself access to both, sucking at each until her sex throbbed with pulses of fire and her hips rose in supplication.

Taking pity, he abandoned her breasts, chewed and licked his way down her torso until his head slid between her thighs, where he stopped and breathed her in.

A whimper escaped her, rousing her a little, but she fought to maintain her languid state, to hold onto the dream. She

raised her knee, opening to him, hips thrusting, brazenly rubbing her sex against his soft beard. Finally, his tongue reached for her in one long stroke from front to back. Her pussy wept for joy. He lapped it up.

Please, she thought, but in the dream, he heard. His mouth fell on her. His tongue stroked the length of her, petting, creating liquid spasm, which he drank greedily with hard swallows that moved in waves down his throat pressed to her belly.

In the dream, she had no shame. Her hips bucked, riding his face, giving him the rhythm to take her over the edge. He followed. Finally, he took her clit between his lips and sucked.

The orgasm exploded through her—like nothing she had ever experienced in life, let alone in a dream. His breathing grew ragged. Finally, little growls escaped his throat, sending vibrations to increase the intensity of the spasms that went on and on.

The arm beneath her shoulders vanished. Only one arm held her, pressing her cunt to his face while the rest of her hung supported by the hammock, head lowered, blood roaring past her ears to her brain as he sucked, growling, huffing, grunting. She heard the slap of flesh against flesh and knew he was bringing himself to climax. The knowledge sent her into a second orgasm. He stiffened, cried out against her, and his teeth clenched the soft flesh of her thigh as his body heaved. A wild sound escaped her.

When it was over, she stretched, every muscle loosened and burning from the powerful force of the orgasm. Her body hummed.

He kissed her thighs, her belly, still panting with exertion, and made his way up her torso, peppering her with gentle kisses, soothing after the ravaging he had given her. His sweetness touched her breasts, first one than the other, careful to avoid the over-sensitive nipples.

She waited, murmuring her pleasure, for the kiss to reach her mouth. His teeth gently closed on her throat.

He was gone...

* * * *

She dropped into a dreamless sleep to the sound of rain splashing on the leaves and the jungle laying itself to rest.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

DOS

Despite his intention to avoid the woman, Carlos's gaze settled on her the moment he crossed the tree line into the compound.

Six sat at the table—two women, four men, all young—eating breakfast and talking softly, their voices barely audible over the constant, annoying hum of the generator doing battle with the birds. Only the fairest of the men paid her special attention, casting moony-eyed glances her way. Carlos found himself taking the blond's measure as a low growl formed. The growl died in his throat. The boy represented no threat. Off in her own world, his hummingbird didn't appear to care he existed.

Perhaps coming here this morning was more mistake than he feared if his self-control teetered so precariously.

Seeing her in the flesh, the pull grew undeniable. Enough light filtered into the clearing to allow his human eyes a clearer picture of her earthy beauty. Her hair wasn't black, as the cat had perceived, but the color of rich, dark chocolate. She wore it free this morning. Out of the braid, it hung almost to her hips, thick and wavy, inviting fingers to play. Her eyes shone as black as he anticipated, beautiful and mysterious beneath her dark brows. Right now, they focused on some faraway place, perhaps a land of fantasy where lovers came in many shapes.

More likely thoughts of a lover left behind inspired the scent that drifted across the yard to fill his head.

She smelled of arousal. The dream came to mind in a flash no less vivid than the dream itself. If he hadn't awakened this morning in a puddle of semen, he might have sworn some demon had brought them together. At all costs, he must take care to hide his response in her presence, to avoid recalling her sweet taste on his tongue.

"Elizandro, my God, man. Where the hell have you been?" Carter, the station's manager and expert on epiphytes, came out of the main building trailed by his wife and Antonio Alvarez, the resident local ecologist. Seeing Antonio, some of Carlos's anxiety over his long absence dissolved. As a native, Antonio understood the complex ecosystems in the preserve far better than any outsider did. He was a strong defender of the forest, and Carlos trusted him implicitly.

"South, working a new territory," Carlos said. His mind bent around the task of choosing unpracticed words while keeping his answers vague. He tried to keep his comings and goings as understated as possible. "Has it been so long?"

"Must be three years," Antonio said, coming up to grab his shoulders in an intimate gesture of friendship. "*Como estás, amigo?*"

"*Bueno, Tony. Muy bueno.* How is your family?"

"Growing," Carter answered for him with a grin. "His third is on the way—which makes your arrival perfectly timed. Are you looking for work, man? We could use you for a couple of months. We've got six new grad students and he wants paternity leave."

"Congratulations." Apparently, human men had grown a new interest in their progeny. Or Antonio wanted time off. His

gaze drifted again to the woman. She listened to something her friend said, then glanced his way, studying him with apparent interest.

"I've got some time," he said without a thought to the caution he'd promised himself.

"Join us for breakfast. I'll introduce you and then we can talk."

* * * *

"Beth, are you paying any attention?" Kate poked at her arm, bringing Beth out of her reverie.

The graphic dream had left her dazed. She'd actually checked under her hammock this morning for evidence of her dream lover. Thank God she found none.

"What's up?" she asked, somewhat annoyed at the intrusion.

Kate nodded her head in the direction of the main building. Carter and Antonio stood talking to a stranger.

"He keeps checking you out," Kate said.

"And?"

"And, look again. The man belongs on the cover of a romance novel."

On closer inspection, Beth agreed; he was checking her out. The discovery inspired a rush of interest. Dark-haired, broad-shouldered, tall, his shadowed brow hid his eyes from this distance, but the chiseled angle of his jaw, the prominent cheekbones, exuded masculinity. The dream came to mind. Heat rose to her face. She had to turn away, hoping he didn't notice.

"They're coming this way," Kate whispered.

Beth busied herself with her breakfast to avoid looking at the three men as they settled at the other end of the long table. Mrs. Carter came out balancing three plates of food and a second pot of coffee. Once the men were served, Carter clinked a fork against the side of his coffee cup to get their attention.

"Kids, this is Carlos Elizandro, the ranger in this part of the forest. He's pretty autonomous since he covers a huge territory. We haven't seen him in a few years, so he's going to make up for his neglect by giving us a couple of months. He'll be your guide until Antonio gets back. Introduce yourselves when you get a chance. Beth, Kate, Richard, Sam, I'm hoping to send you out to do some collecting as soon as Carlos and I get everything settled—maybe as early as tomorrow."

At last, Beth had a legitimate reason to look. When he turned his gaze in her direction, the breath caught in her throat. She'd expected dark eyes, but his were light, hazel, almost golden. Her heart skipped a beat.

"This is Beth," Kate said boldly. "I'm Kate. Richard, Sam, David, Jean-Paul, all accounted for. We're glad to have you, Carlos."

Carlos smiled shyly at them all. Beth put his age at about thirty—young to be responsible for what amounted to a section of wilderness half the size of Rhode Island, most accessible only on foot.

"How well do you know the area?" Beth asked. He couldn't have been at the job long.

"Well enough," he said, eyeing his plate as if he hadn't eaten in a week.

Avoiding me? Of course, he might just be very shy. Which has its own appeal, she thought, lips curled into a grin.

"No worry, Beth," Antonio said. "Carlos knows this jungle better than anyone. I wouldn't leave you in any but the most capable hands. Carlos, Beth had an encounter with a jaguar the other day at *Rio Sardinal*."

Carlos glanced up, expectantly. The hazel eyes were disconcerting on someone so dark.

"Melanistic," she said, ill at ease, "young, watching from the tree line." Antonio would bring up the cat.

His scrutiny made her squirm. "I know this cat. He is shy of people—not dangerous. Still, fortunate for you he wasn't hungry."

Beth nodded, praying he didn't question her further. She couldn't take much more of that intense regard without melting to her seat.

Sitting back with her coffee, she held her other questions and left them alone to eat their now-cold breakfast. Her gaze kept returning to Carlos. More often than not, he was glancing her way out of the corners of his eyes while savoring each bite as though it was *fois gras* and truffles instead of eggs and bacon.

When his tongue slid out to clean a bit of egg from the corner of his mouth, her eyes fixed on his movement, hypnotized by the act of bringing food to his lips, pausing to smell, sliding the fork between his teeth slowly, relishing every morsel. And with each bite, it seemed, he glanced her

way. Until, after one of those bites, his gaze lingered and the expression on his face made her feel like his next.

Her dream lover's hungry kisses stared back at her. Embarrassed to have been caught gawking, Beth picked up her tray and left.

* * * *

The following morning, they all met at the Jeep after an early breakfast. The faded light of dawn had just begun to seep through the canopy.

"You have all brought something for getting wet?" Carlos reminded them. Carter told him these four had arrived only two weeks ago and had not traveled as far from the compound as he had in mind. Many things needed to be taken into account when hiking a jungle trail. The unremitting dampness was one they'd have to get used to, but this morning's trip included a soaking. "There is no electric dryer where we are going."

Each nodded his assent as they piled into the Jeep. The one called Kate brazenly opened her shirt to show him the swimsuit she had on beneath, then laughed at his surprise.

He returned her smile. He was not so out of his element that he'd misinterpret a bit of playfulness. The disorientation he'd lived with since walking into the compound yesterday had begun to fade—except around Beth.

Carlos slid behind the wheel and paused, staring at the unfamiliar configuration on the dash. "What is all this?" he muttered, already unsure his foot would remember how to

use a clutch after so long. He didn't need all these dials and gauges.

Beth leaned over him from the back seat and started naming them all.

"All you need to worry about is RPMs and fuel," she said. Her hand gently gripped his shoulder. One supple breast grazed his upper arm. Hot breath brushed his cheek. When he turned to her, she met his eyes with a smile. "You do know how to drive, don't you?"

The scent of vanilla and heat wafted over him. He swallowed and turned back to the wheel.

"Sure." How could he resist a woman as willing as this? He couldn't quite remember why he should want to.

The Jeep slipped into gear with little effort and took off with only a few lurches, then smoothed out. Now all he had to accomplish was to stay on the road. He could handle that.

Even in the half-light of dawn, her presence in his peripheral vision distracted him. Every time her gaze fell on him, its heat seared the back of his neck. And she watched him constantly, as she had all day yesterday.

Last night, her scent had carried to him across the compound. With his man's intellect, Carlos resisted the temptation to cross to her room and take what he wanted, but the cat—well, the cat had his own thoughts on the matter. Carlos dreamed of her again, but woke unsatisfied and restless this morning.

Even now that scent tore at his mind as all the blood rushed to his groin. Better not to look, but knowing her eyes were on him, and knowing her scrutiny to be the source of

her heat, made looking unnecessary. She wanted him, and unless she did something to change his mind, he would not be able to resist her for long.

Perhaps he should take what she offered and hope in the end only his heart suffered.

The road ended two hours from the camp. They proceeded on foot. The four were not quiet walkers. Though they kept their voices low, the constant chatter drowned the peaceful sounds of the jungle and raised the raucous cries of angry howlers.

They reached the ford by ten as planned.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

TRES

"We will cross here," Carlos said.

Beth regarded the rope spanning a narrow part of the river with more than a little trepidation. Apparently, they were supposed to wade across using the stretched and worn line for leverage.

"Is this s-safe?" she stammered. She was the shortest and smallest of them. Picking up a twig, she tossed it into the middle of the deceptively calm stream and watched it sweep away in the current. "There has to be another way."

"Nothing in the forest is without risk, *colibrí*," he said. "The water is little more than waist deep. I've crossed here many times. There is a rope bridge six kilometers upstream. We'll use it coming back, but Carter said you must take readings at noon. We will not reach the site in time if we try to walk that way."

She hadn't heard him string so many words together in the two days since he'd shown up at the compound. Soft and low, melodic, with the hint of a purr, his voice flowed over her, harmonizing with the murmuring of the water until it seemed as much a part of the forest as the bird and insect song.

He called me hummingbird. At the moment, Beth thought she might follow Carlos Elizandro anywhere.

"Well, I'm game," Kate said and began unbuttoning her blouse where she stood.

Beth moved behind a tree for at least the illusion of privacy while removing her shirt. She folded it into her small

daypack to keep dry. They all wore quick-dry shorts, but the bathing suit would be more comfortable than a wet T-shirt.

Carlos took the ford first, striding through the current with apparent ease. The muscles in his back rippled as he tugged and pulled to test the strength of the rope. Among the three men, they'd keep the lead taut for the others to cross.

Kate followed Carlos. Her confident stride took her into water midriff-deep until, about halfway across, the current redoubled. She moved more cautiously. Gripping tightly with both hands, she leaned against the force of the water for about three meters, then strode through the shallows and did a little victory dance in the mud on the opposite bank.

The crossing took longer than Beth had anticipated.

Sam grabbed her pack. She tossed him nervous thanks and waded in.

The water was surprisingly warm, but dragged at her legs so her muscles strained in unfamiliar ways with each step. By the time she moved into the midstream flow, the water reached her breasts. She froze.

With only one foot in the current, she already recognized the unsteady hold it had on the rocks. Kate's extra height and fifteen kilos would come in handy right now.

She paused a moment, considered asking for help. Thought better of it—by the time one of the men reached her, she could be on the solid ground of the other bank with her pride intact.

One more step. Her legs flew out from beneath her, and she went under.

Beth clutched the lead, holding on for her life.

The rope stretched under her weight as the current dragged her legs downstream. She hung on. Forget trying to get her feet on the ground, she needed to breathe.

The surge of water tore at her hold on the rope and the breath in her lungs. Panic tried to swallow her. She thrust it aside and fought to raise her head above the surface.

One hand lost its grip. The current flipped her over.

She finally gulped a breath of air and water. The rope ripped from her fingers.

Two arms came from nowhere, grabbed her about the waist and lifted her to her feet. She gasped, choking, fighting for air and trying to get a grip on the rocks as Carlos dragged her to the bank. Still clutching his arm, she leaned forward and vomited an amazing amount of water into the mud.

Carlos supported her up the bank and held her as she fell against him, shaken, cold and weak-kneed.

"*O, lo siento*. I'm so sorry, *mija*. I didn't think you are so much smaller," he crooned, while she clung to him.

She became aware of his naked chest against her cheek at the same moment he did. He gasped, and his heart stuttered beneath her palm. Something deep inside her melted.

"She needs mouth-to-mouth," Kate quipped.

Beth shot her a scathing glance and pulled away from Carlos as a violent coughing spell erupted to expel the rest of the water from her lungs. When she was finally able to stand on her own, she glanced up at him and found him frowning, his golden eyes full of concern.

"Okay?" He attempted a lopsided grin.

"Yeah, good."

As the other two crossed, without incident, Beth sat on the ground, silently contemplating her mortality while pouring water out of her boots and squeezing her socks dry. Occasional bursts of laughter attempted to erupt from her chest like the monster in *Alien*, but she managed to control her hysteria.

An uneasy silence fell over the group. Once everyone was put back together, they continued along the path for another hour to the site Carlos had in mind for them. She waved off help from both Carlos and Kate and let the slow, steady pace clear the shock and adrenaline from her system.

By noon, she was fine. They entered an oak grove deep under the canopy where orchids and fungi of every imaginable color wound their way up the thirty-meter trunks and out of sight. Beth recognized half-dozen genera at first glance.

The men went off to find a mid-height tree to set their tackle in, hoping to get samples from higher up.

The equipment she'd packed was safe and dry in its waterproof case, thanks to Sam's foresight in taking her pack before the crossing. Kate and Beth worked at ground level, metering the light available at this, the brightest part of the day under the canopy, photographing, taking inventory and notating each species' population and growth pattern. They took samples only of the least familiar species, since keeping the delicate blooms intact on the way back would be a challenge.

At three, they stopped to allow time to get to the Jeep before dusk. The others prepared the samples for transport

while Beth took a second set of meter readings for comparison.

As she finished the last reading, Carlos walked up to where she worked. Without a sound, he leaned against a tree, watching her.

I've wandered away from the group again. She winced. Carlos looked like he had something to say about her carelessness, but, thankfully, kept his peace.

She sat on a mossy deadfall, filling in her notes and feeling self-conscious. If he didn't stop looking at her, she was going to come unglued. She glanced up to tell him and met his eyes. Her heart hiccupped. She closed the notebook, packed the meter away and got to her feet.

"You'd better either kiss me or quit staring at me like that," she said.

His brow rose to his shaggy hairline.

She'd taken only a few steps to join the others when he came from behind. Grasping her arm, he pulled her into a gentle embrace. His mouth came down to connect with hers.

She'd been waiting for this and meant to enjoy every second. But she was not prepared for the heat.

Carlos gently brushed his lips over her face, mouth first, then chin, cheeks, brow, feather-light kisses on her eyelids, down her nose, back to her lips. His tongue reached for her, tasting, coaxing.

Her whole body tingled. Heat rose between her legs and he hadn't even really kissed her yet.

Instead, he breathed her in.

The kiss became something new. He latched onto her mouth, sucking. His tongue pressed insistently for entry. She opened to give him access and melted into him.

No ravenous, rude rape of her mouth, but a steady invasion. He kissed as he ate, savoring every nibble, pausing to taste, smell, lick. The gentle devouring awakened every nerve cell, visited every pore. His essence became part of her.

His chest beneath her hand quivered and he moaned. Slowly, his arms surrounded her about the back and hips, pulling her tight, and her legs lost the ability to hold her up. He grew hard against her belly as she softened.

Skin to skin, she clung to him, willing the kiss to continue. This was the stuff of life, inevitable, like breathing, like her heart beating. *How do you end a kiss like this?*

But it had to end. Carlos set her on her feet and pulled back to peer into her eyes.

"This is not a good idea," he growled. The sound sent shivers through her.

"Oh, yes," she whispered. "This is a great idea. Like a dream, like something I've waited for a long, long time."

* * * *

If he didn't sleep, he couldn't dream, so the cat ran. All seemed well. Whatever had brought him back to his old territory was gone, or too insidious to discern with a cursory examination. *TE'e-le*, the forest, kept her secrets tonight.

He'd fished earlier. Without hunger to drive him, the running was mere restlessness, an attempt to escape. The

woman's scent carried to him on the night air, relentlessly drawing him toward the compound where she slept until, after the third time turning away, he shifted. In human form, her pull was stronger, but the instinct to surrender was easier to fight.

The man, however, needed rest.

Back at the creek where he'd eaten earlier, he gathered his clothes, donning the jeans, and bundled the rest into the T-shirt. Moving a little away from the bank, he built himself a nest of fallen leaves among the roots of a strangler fig. He rested his back against the trunk and let the night's lullaby wash over him.

When he was a god, women were served to him. They knew what he was, and whether they thought they wanted him or not, after a week or a month or a year, each returned to her village a goddess and happy for his attentions. He'd loved a few and lost them all.

He'd failed as a god—his people were no more.

Still, *TE'e-le* held him in her grip. Why she kept him was a mystery—he'd failed her as well, a thousand times, ten thousand times. He was beyond redemption. But she kept him. He must stay until he understood what was needed of him, and neither cat nor man could resist the woman.

He must approach this as a man.

Beth wanted him. She would ask for all he had to give, and what he had wasn't enough. Eventually, now or ten years from now when he hadn't aged, she would discover his secret and run. He should tell her, but he didn't want her to run.

Gato Negro
by Ali Katz

Maybe she would tire of him before Antonio returned. Then only he need know the pain.

He dozed and dreamed.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

CUATRO

In the dream, he came through the window, soundless as the cat, a silhouette against the black of night. His naked shadow stood over her, unmoving, except the eyes. The dark hid them from her, but she felt their path. Where his gaze fell, her skin sizzled.

Tonight, when she reached for him, her body obeyed. She pushed herself up. Her arms wrapped around the shadow, drawing him to lie beside her.

Slowly, carefully, he settled into her capricious bed, turning her gently to spoon against her back. His hard cock burrowed between the cheeks of her ass. His hands explored what his eyes had already taken in.

Her body responded with a gush of arousal. His mouth descended to her shoulder, biting, then licking away the sting. The hammock creaked beneath their combined weight, swaying to the movement of her hips as she rubbed against his hardness. Cradled in its soft fabric, their bodies tried to meld into one.

Rough hands cupped her breasts, thumbs petting the nipples until they tightened into hard little kernels. The empty, throbbing place between her legs ached to be filled.

Perfectly timed, he pulled her leg over his and penetrated her with the length and breadth of two fingers. Thumb on her clit, he plunged into her wetness, bringing the ache to a demanding need.

She wriggled against him, begging for more. Pitiful, whimpering sounds escaped her. She'd never begged to be fucked. Tonight she did, her only fear that she'd awaken too soon.

With a roll of his hip, he brought his cock to her opening, pressed, stretched, filled her. She cried out as the first spasms struck her before he had even seated himself within her.

His teeth brushed her shoulder. A low growl sent vibrations coursing through her, electrifying every nerve. He rocked, gliding through her slickness with easy, careful strokes, fueling the flames.

A solid lunge and she boiled over into a maelstrom of pleasure. His arm against her belly pulled her tight. He drove her to the peak and beyond, gnawing at her shoulder and neck, growling in her ear. When she fell limp in his arms, his hand slid to the apex of her sex, gathered moisture from their joining and caressed her clit.

The hammock rocked precariously as his thrusts grew more heated. Sharp, barking grunts pulsed against her neck.

Until that moment the dream was hers—all about her pleasure. But now her shadow lover lost control, thrusting hard and deep and long with her squeezed in his arms. His finger on her clit brought her back to a state to match his own. Between them, civilization vanished. In the pitch-blackness, only He and She, sweat-slick flesh and the liquid sounds of their most primal need.

He shuddered when he came, his thighs quivering against hers, his body quaking. The sound he made tore through and out of her in explosive spasms.

When the hammock finally came to rest, he turned her onto her back, slipped between her legs and started again.

* * * *

From the shadows, Carlos leaned against a mossy trunk watching the woman who'd yanked him from the comfortable oblivion of his most basic nature to this—this semblance of humanity. A masquerade so skillfully wrought he himself fell to its allure.

She sat on a rock behind a camera and tripod, downwind of several clumps of bright orange blossoms, observing through binoculars. Now and then, she penciled something into the notebook in her lap or snapped a shot of a feeding hummingbird. He'd found her like this at seven and again at ten. It was now noon.

At long last, Beth stretched, set the notebook aside and stood.

He coughed softly to alert her before speaking. "How do you sit so still for so long?"

Her face turned in his direction already wearing a brilliant smile. Her unabashed happiness at seeing him tugged at his heart.

Exiting the shadows, Carlos moved one step closer to taking the leap he'd avoided for a hundred years. He was about to let himself fall in love. It was inevitable. The only

question remaining was would she go home happy for his attentions.

"Sitting for all this beauty isn't hard," she said, walking toward him. "For instance, I could sit and stare at you all day—would be no chore at all." Reaching up on her toes, she planted a welcoming kiss on his cheek that burned through to his loins. "This is my project, *heliconia* and hummingbirds—at least in part."

The expectation in her face prompted a question.

"What are you looking for?"

"The unfortunate likelihood of losing two species because one is going extinct," she said. "Let me get my camera." She returned to her abandoned perch and began packing the equipment away. "*Heliconia beckneri* is dependent on the Sabrewing for pollination," she continued. "But, the flower is on the endangered species list. I need to determine if the relationship is as strong in the other direction—if *Beckneri's* demise will affect the hummingbird population—and extrapolate the extent of the damage."

All packed up, she stood in front of him expectantly. "It doesn't look good, actually."

He took the pack from her hands and slid an arm about her waist. They walked together toward the compound.

"So, the Sabrewing will be no more," he said. "Sad to hear." Another notch in his belt of failures.

"It is a beautiful bird—worth saving, if possible. It might adapt, but *Beckneri* nectar has a much higher nutrient value than the other *heliconia* I've tested. But you know all this, don't you?"

He answered with a grin.

"I thought so. You could probably write my thesis for me right now."

"No, the research so far proves only the relationship. Yours might save a beautiful creature from extinction," he said, in no way wishing to subvert her enthusiasm for the project. If only he had a thousand more like her.

His answer pleased her. The way her face lit up when she smiled stopped his breath.

"But you didn't come looking for me to talk about birds and flowers, did you?"

No, he came to court a broken heart and, in all likelihood, one for her as well. "There is a place I want to show you. Are you working this afternoon?"

"You mean, like a date?" She grinned. "How does after lunch sound?"

"A date after lunch sounds good. You'll need your swimming clothes—no fords this time."

* * * *

The Jeep bounced over a rutted track, hardly a road at all, in a direction Beth had not taken before. At first, Carlos's efforts to maintain his half of a conversation were obvious and endearing. He loosened up after a while, but his answers to any personal questions, though forthright enough, provided little information.

"No family," was all he said when she asked.

"How old are you, Carlos? Carter told me you've been around at least as long as he has, but you can't be that old."

"Older than I look." The playful grin he threw in her direction softened the obvious avoidance.

They came to an abrupt halt a few feet from a fallen tree blocking the road. Carlos leaped out to investigate.

"You can't imagine you'll move that alone. Is there a way around?"

"Wait in the car," he said.

She ignored the instructions. "Could we use the Jeep to push it out of the way?" she asked, coming up to him where he studied the end of the log.

"Poachers. See how the end is cut, not broken. This is fresh." He took her by the arm and led her to the driver's seat. "I have to take care of this. I want you to drive back to the compound."

"No, I'm coming with you."

"No, you are not." He dug around in the back of the Jeep for his backpack and pulled out a gun and holster that he donned low on his hips. "Poaching in the reserve is a serious crime. These men will be dangerous."

"How will you get back?"

He pointed. "The compound is less than eight kilometers in that direction."

"Through the jungle? No way. I'll wait here, and we'll go back together."

"Beth, do you see the roadblock? They may be watching us now. Get in the car and drive. I have lived here all my life. I know these people."

Beth stopped arguing. This was his job. Rather than continue to give him a hard time, she climbed back into the

Jeep and started the engine, but watched as he disappeared into the trees.

She hated leaving him. She threw the car into reverse and stretched to keep her eyes on the road behind. Backing up was not her strong point, but the rutted track was too narrow and overhung to turn around. She moved backward at a snail's pace until she found a spot wide enough, maybe, for a five-point turn. Carefully, slowly, she eased the rear end to the right.

The vegetation muffled the loud bang when the tire blew. She slammed her hands on the steering wheel and cursed. What choice did she have? Beth snatched her pack from the back seat and set off after him.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

CINCO

Carlos found the place where the poachers' vehicle had been parked—two men, gone now, but not long. The smell of their exhaust still lingered. They'd probably fled when they heard the Jeep drive up to the roadblock.

They'd left a wake of litter and torn vegetation. He sifted through some of it, looking for a hint to who these men were or which village they'd come from, but found nothing that would stand as evidence. He'd need to come back here with the right equipment to clean up. After propping up a few saplings that might be saved, he tracked their path into the forest to survey the extent of the damage.

This was why *TE'ele* brought him here—to stop these men, two of hundreds driven as much by need as greed. The job was like trying to halt a landslide one pebble at a time.

Before he'd gone far, Beth ran up to him out of the trees.

"I got a flat tire," she said, hanging her head. "I thought I'd be safer with you than alone on the track trying to change it."

Speechless, he stared. *How did she find me?*

The trees whispered the answer. The forest had delivered her to him. His heart soared with gratitude. Could this mean *TE'ele* approved?

Still, Beth had taken too big a risk. He opened his mouth to tell her so, but took her in his arms instead. "They're gone."

"Thank God!" The relief on her face was palpable. "What damage did they do?"

"They got a couple capuchin babies, I think. Hear the mothers wailing?" Each mournful hoot the tiny monkeys voiced tore at his heart. So little left after five hundred years of man, yet the rape of his forest continued. "The price they will get for those babies will keep two families for a year. Other than that, probably birds. A breeding pair of scarlet macaws nests in the area. I would like to know they're safe before calling this in." He glanced up, checking the light. "We have two hours before we will have to start back. Would you help me try to find them?"

They walked a ways, heads up, checking the canopy for the brilliant plumage. At the sound of running water, Carlos took her hand and, clearing a path through the dense foliage, led her to the river's edge.

"Look," he said, grinning and pointing as she stepped onto the rocky bank right behind him. "*Ara macao cyanoptera*."

* * * *

"Show off."

A little upstream, the jungle encroached on a crystal pool carved into a layer of moss-covered rocks by three waterfalls cascading over gray cliffs. The lush greenery, scent of flowers and the susurrus of running water brought instant tranquility.

Where Carlos pointed, a pair of scarlet macaws perched, decorating the cliffs in bright reds and blues.

"They eat the clay from between the rocks," he said.

"You knew they'd be here, didn't you? Is this the place you wanted to show me? It's beautiful, Carlos."

"No, we will save that place for another day. Come. Do you swim? No current here." He was teasing her. She hadn't thought it possible.

"Last one in is a rotten egg," she shouted, stripping off her shirt while running sure-footed over the rocks.

Beth dropped to a seat on a large flat rock at the edge of the pool and was still struggling with her boot when Carlos appeared on the ledge between the two upper falls. She gasped. All the blood in her body rushed to her sex. She couldn't move.

He was wet, having parted the waters of the smaller fall, and he was naked. Head thrown back, he let the spray sluice over his face and body in an act akin to worship. Mouth agape, she followed its course from his shoulder to his feet over a form sculpted by imagination.

Even as her eyes took in the powerful muscles of chest and arms, the long sinews of his thighs, the flawless skin stretched taut over all, she thought such perfection could not be part of the natural world.

On the return trip, her gaze lingered at his groin. His relaxed scrotum hung loose from its dark nest, his flaccid cock resting neatly between his balls. As she studied him, it stiffened and pulled away to stand on its own an inch or two from his thighs.

When she discovered him watching, she flushed, embarrassed to be caught examining him, but the expression

he wore held no amusement, just a hint of concern that confused her a moment.

With a downward glance, he dove gracefully into the pool.

He took to the water like an otter, coming up for air and diving back to the bottom. When he came up the second time, he swam over to her with strong, smooth strokes. The sight of him stole her breath away.

He rested his arms on her rock, watching, with his upper torso above the water. His long black hair washed back to reveal the whole of his face. Heart-shaped, with a small widow's peak at the hairline. But it was his eyes that held her, wide-spread, golden orbs, deep-set and shadowy. He had a dangerous look about him.

"Kiss me, or stop looking like that at me." His voice was silk over gravel.

Eyes locked to his, she slowly finished removing her boots and socks and slipped out of her shorts. Down to swim trunks and bra, she rolled onto her stomach, and taking his head between both hands, had her way with his mouth.

At first, he stood still for her gentle nibbles and licks, lips parted, wearing a tiny smile. She grew bolder, sucking. His taste was cool, fresh. She wanted more and took it, invading the moist warmth, exploring every crevasse. Deep inside, the smoldering coals of her desire ignited.

On cue, he took possession of the kiss with a needy hunger of his own until she had to come up for air.

She rolled onto her back and lay over the boulder so she could inspect his face, upside down.

"I dream about you," she admitted.

"What do you dream?" His fingers played with her hair, unraveling the braid, combing through the long locks until they flowed over the mossy rock and touched the water below.

"I dream you come to my room in the dark and make love to me."

His eyes widened a little and locked with hers. The silence went on too long. Had she made a mistake, baring such an intimate detail?

"Do you enjoy these dreams?"

For a moment, she hesitated, fearing this was too much too soon. But Beth didn't want to settle for the dream any longer. "Very much. I'd like them even better if they were real."

To avoid seeing his reaction, she pulled him into an inverted kiss.

The earth moved. He took her mouth with slow, sucking strokes until her lips parted for his tongue. Fingers entwined in her hair, he held her to his mouth like some ripe fruit and supped.

He lowered her head to its mossy pillow and kicked away from the rock. Throwing himself backward into the water, he floated, staring through the canopy at the sky.

Beth sat up to watch, holding her knees to her chest. What was he thinking? Any minute now, he'd come back and tell her it was all a misunderstanding. He wanted to be friends.

But when he did come back, he pulled himself out of the water and stood over her in all his naked glory, inviting her eyes to feast as long as they cared to.

"What you see is what I have to offer, *colibrí*."

She glanced up, eyeing his beautiful body on the way and bit back the glib response she had prepared. He was dead serious.

"Will it be enough?" he asked.

Her gaze slid back to his impressive erection jutting from its nest of black curls. He couldn't possibly be asking...

Not quite understanding, Beth had no answer.

"Because, when Antonio returns, I must leave." His voice had lowered to a hoarse whisper.

A dagger twisted in her heart. She believed him. "What if I don't want you to leave? What if you don't want to go?"

"Already I don't want to go." There was pain in his voice and in his eyes. "But I will."

She reached for his hands and pulled him to the ground beside her. For a long time, neither said a word. Her fingers toyed with his hair, then traced the curve of his neck and shoulders, his arms, finally her hand splayed over his heart, she asked, "Is it a deal-breaker?"

"What?"

"Your secret—will it change how I feel about you."

"Yes."

She paused only a moment at the honest answer given without hesitation. Her eyes swept over him and all rational thought escaped. "In that case, I don't want to know. Make love to me."

Still he hesitated, so she took the initiative. Getting to her knees, she straddled his legs, took his face between her hands and laid her hungry mouth on his.

Carlos caught her around the waist and stood in one smooth move, lifting her with him. Holding her tight, he invaded her mouth with persistent pressure of his ravenous tongue. Blood rushed through her veins like distant thunder.

Beth hadn't noticed her feet didn't touch the ground until he set her down. His hands trembled against her back. The clasp of her bathing suit released, spilling her breasts against his chest. She shook the top down her arms and tossed it aside.

Carlos broke the kiss, standing back to look.

She lifted her eyes to his face and forgot to breathe. Unfiltered lust darkened his brow as he bent to take a turgid nipple between his lips. His arms caught her as she swooned into the rising tempest his mouth created in her.

With kisses and nips to her torso, he lowered himself to his knees. He tugged at her trunks, baring her bottom to his caresses as his tongue circled and plunged into her navel. Tugged lower, and buried his face in the nest of curls at the juncture of her thighs.

His chest expanded in a slow, deep inhale as his hands on her ass pressed her tight. His tongue reached out, licked a path through the wiry curls, delved between her lips and found her clit. A few strokes set her body trembling.

"Carlos, please." She didn't know yet if she begged for more or less.

He lowered the shorts to the ground, lifting one foot free, then the other, replacing them at a distance that left her open to the tickling warmth of his breath against her sex. A fresh wash of arousal bathed her secret parts. His hands stroked

the back of her legs firmly on the way up, slipping between her thighs at the top, spreading her swollen labia.

His tongue reached to capture the moisture.

Her legs turned to rubber. "Carlos." Afraid to fall, Beth clung to his shoulders, trembling, sure now she couldn't take any more without crashing to the ground.

Cool hands glided up her body, leaving chills in their wake as he rose to his feet. Imprisoning her wrists behind her back, he pulled her tight against the blazing heat of his naked flesh.

It was so right, this heat, his rock hard cock gliding against her belly as he rocked, unthinking. His balls tapped, tapped at the apex of her thighs like a slow, pulsing orgasm.

He dipped his head to take her mouth, the kiss hard, demanding, possessive.

Too soon, he drew away. His lips moved over hers whispering, "Follow me."

Still holding one hand, he took her to the edge of the rock, met her eyes as he let go and dove. A few seconds later, he surfaced in the middle of the pool, shaking the water from his face. With an intent expression, he said, "Don't make me wait."

She dove in after him.

The water was clear as crystal and warm. She searched for him below the surface and found his legs by their gentle movement. Swimming to him, her arms circled his thighs and smoothed up the swell of his buttocks. Her cheeks and lips brushed his erection. As she kicked to the surface, the water surged between them in a full body caress, while her breasts

grazed him from knees to chest. He gave her a second to breathe, then covered her mouth with his.

Breaking the kiss, Carlos wrapped an arm about her and kicked them to the side of the pool. The muscles of his chest stretched and bunched with each single-armed stroke. Water cascaded around her as he floated away and pulled her to the rocks between the falls where she'd first seen him. Letting go, he lifted himself onto the ledge and reached down to pull her up beside him.

"Here," he said, over the roar of the falls. He pulled her through the bridal-veil where an overhang left a small, mossy place just wide enough for two bodies to lie close. He lowered her to the spongy bed and knelt beside her. "I want to make love to you here."

One arm stretched above his head, resting against the overhanging rock. The other shoulder captured an occasional splash from the water falling just inches behind.

Beth found herself mesmerized by the way the rivulets ran over his body. She let her fingers trace their paths over dark pecs and nipples, then leaned in for a taste. The cool, clear liquid captured a bit of the salty flavor of his skin. She lapped at the flow over his rippled abs, drinking her fill.

Her gaze and fingers skimmed his torso, awed by their power to raise a storm of quivering muscle along their path.

Even in daylight, with the evidence plain before her, something deep inside expected to wake from the dream. And she would. She believed him. Six weeks from now when he left, she would wake alone in her bed one morning, and this little time they'd had together would be a vaporous dream.

The others would probably say he dumped her. She would feel dumped, but in the end, the memories would keep her. She intended to make as many as possible in the few short weeks they had.

Her caress traveled lower; her gaze followed. She cupped his balls in one hand, testing the weight of them. Her thumb explored their size, their silky texture and their slippery movement within the scrotum. He had a beautiful erection, not huge, more than sufficient, curved slightly upward. She ran her lips over the silky surface of the exposed glans and felt him gasp.

When she sought his eyes, they were closed. Lips parted, just the slightest crease between his brows, fists clenched, he waited.

She sent her tongue out to explore, licked a drop of pre-cum from the surface and delved for more with the tip of her tongue in his slit. Her efforts were rewarded. The sharp, metallic bite of his semen burst in her mouth and filled her head. His scent was clean, pungent, and sent a wash of heat straight to her core. She might come just from the musk of his arousal and the gruff sounds of his pleasure.

When she gripped his cock in her hand and took the head into her mouth, circling with her tongue, he quaked. Every muscle tightened and a low moan sounding like pain escaped. His back arched bringing his hips closer, sending his cock deeper. She sucked. He growled.

She didn't rush, but took the time to savor his sweetness, his scent, the hot satiny texture of his crown against her

tongue—all suffused with the fragrance, the taste, the cool caress of water falling around them.

Holding him between her lips, she sent both hands to explore the hard muscles of his ass. One finger drew the length of its cleft and farther to the baby-soft skin behind his balls. His scrotum shrank, cradling his testes tight to his body. His cock swelled as she opened her throat for him and his flesh quivered beneath her touch.

He thrust once, hard and deep, then hesitated. His thighs trembled. With a whispered moan, his hand cupped her jaw to free himself. His body tensed, brow furled in concentration. His chest heaved with long, hard, controlled breaths.

Beth removed her hands, not wanting to break his concentration.

He leaned over her and his hot, hungry mouth covered hers. Hand in her hair, he lowered them both to the mossy bed.

Beth stretched out. Carlos stretched beside her, engulfing her in his arms, pressing flesh to flesh along the lengths of their bodies. She lay breathless in his embrace while his mouth moved over hers with gentle passion. His cock, hard and demanding, pressed at the cleft between her thighs.

Lacing their fingers together, he raised her arms above her head and pinned them to the ground. Her back arched, pressing her breasts hard against his chest. He dipped his head to lay gentle lips on her shoulder, her neck, back again, then lower, following the curve of her breast to its turgid nipple. His tongue played, circling, flicking. His wet hair dripped cool beads of water onto her chest.

Beth moaned, a long, hard sound, and arched further. His lips covered her and sucked.

A current of lust flowed to her center and overflowed, bathing her pelvis and thighs. Imprisoned by his hands, breathless with desire, she had nothing but her body to speak for her, to beg for him. It undulated against the hard press of his flesh, yearned toward the granite hardness of his cock still pressing for entrance at the apex of her thighs.

She opened slightly, making room for his cockhead to slide through her slickness until it grazed her opening. She rode the length of him, while he sucked and grunted his pleasure upon her breast.

"Carlos. Now. Please."

But he was already responding to the pulse in her sex that heralded her orgasm. He rolled, pinned her body to the mossy rock with his own and on his next thrust, his cock slid beyond her threshold. His mouth covered hers. He stiffened. She wrapped a leg around his thighs and pulled him in, deep, deeper, every inch punctuated by his helpless grunts echoing off the back of her throat.

His thickness glided through her swollen, overheated flesh. The muscles of his powerful thighs bunched as she brought the other leg up, around, gripping him tightly with all she had to hold him. Heat coiled around her core, tightened.

Carlos read her need. He thrust and thrust again, following her body's rhythm.

The orgasm shuddered through her, fierce, and he took her cries into his mouth as he tried to bury himself in her cunt, each thrust sending her higher, each more erratic than

the last until he stiffened, gasped. Every inch of him trembled.

He cried out, plunged deep, and stopped.

And again, and shuddered. She felt every pulse along the length of her body. Her tongue invaded his mouth, delving deep, mimicking his movements. Hot cum bathed her tunnel. And again, until he sobbed into her mouth with each spasm. And again.

The second orgasm took Beth by surprise. She came apart in a sinuous, writhing dance beneath him, driving her hips against his, accepting his thrusts with a burning emotion that could only be joy.

He released her arms and rolled them onto their sides still locked together. She, buried in his arms; he, buried in her cunt. Water rained over them.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

SEIS

"Come on, girl, give me something." Kate leaned over the Jeep's console to get closer to Beth, as though spicy details might be easier whispered than spoken as they bumped along the jungle trail at fifteen kph. She had been prodding for some all morning.

Immediately on their return the first day, the entire compound guessed what had happened between Carlos and Beth. And any doubts which may have lingered were put to rest when he moved into her room the same night. For the last two weeks, they'd spent every moment together, until yesterday. He couldn't put his rounds off any longer, he'd said. He'd be gone a few days.

Kate simply took advantage of the opportunity to get Beth alone by volunteering them to drive into town for supplies. "Don't be so selfish. Since you're the only one getting any around here, we all have to live vicariously through you."

Beth didn't fall for Kate's pitiful attempt to wring details from her. "Jean-Paul likes you." She grinned. "He's cute. And the accent—*très* sexy. He'd make a great fuck-buddy."

"Pfah," Kate puffed as she sat back in the passenger seat. "Wake up, Beth. Jean-Paul likes *you*. He just knows better than to try competing with Tarzan. I'm not desperate. So, tell me," she said, turning back to Beth, "is he as good as he looks?"

Beth smiled a secret smile. "He's as good as it gets and that's all you'll get from me."

The road took a tight turn around a rise, forcing Beth to brake. A moment later, they came to an abrupt halt as the front end of the Jeep slammed into a downed tree. Beth caught herself with a hand to the dash, but her chest hit the steering wheel, knocking the breath from her.

"Damn," Kate said. "And I so looked forward to getting my hair cut."

"We have to turn around. Now." Beth gripped the wheel until her knuckles hurt. If these guys wanted to spring a trap, they couldn't have picked a better spot.

"There's no place to turn around," Kate muttered, catching some of her nervousness.

"How are you at backing up? I could get out and direct." Hopeful, Beth glanced at Kate for an answer and found her staring wide-eyed over Beth's shoulder. A second later, something cold and hard poked the side of Beth's neck. Her heart leaped into her throat, but she focused on the gun with perfect clarity and swallowed the fear.

"*Salga!* Get out the car," a heavily accented voice said near her ear. "*Ándale.*" The man stepped back. Both women scrambled to the ground.

Before turning to face the gun, Beth glanced up at Kate where she stood stock-still at the passenger side. Even wide-eyed and afraid, she appeared to be calculating her options. Kate being Kate, Beth felt sure she'd make some kind of move. She cleared her throat to get her friend's attention and mouthed "no." She wanted only to get out of this in one piece.

The gun swung a few inches, pointing the way to the compound, then back to Beth's face. "*Vaya!* Walk."

Carter would not be happy losing the car, but Beth didn't expend too much energy worrying. She reached into the bed of the Jeep for her pack without taking her eyes from the man.

He waved the gun at her. "No. Go."

Damn, she needed the things in her pack—her camera, her ID, her birth control pills, for God's sake. Things not easily replaced in the middle of the jungle without transportation. Though she didn't think he would use the gun, she wasn't about to argue with it either.

"Let's go, Kate," she said and turned into the chest of a second poacher. She tried to go around. Big as a bear and smelling like one, he grabbed her wrist and shoved her against the tailgate of the car.

"Where is your boyfriend today, *chica?*" The idea this man had been watching them sent shudders through Beth. What did they want with Carlos? She shrugged and didn't answer.

The first said some angry words in Spanish. Big Guy answered without taking his eyes off her. Beth stood squashed between the back of the Jeep and his unwashed body, quietly dreading the argument's end.

Movement in the corner of her eye drew Beth's attention. She turned her head in time to catch Kate running toward them. Every instinct told her to call out, to stop her friend from doing something which might anger these desperate men even further, but her voice stuck in her throat.

Kate shoved Beth's captor hard enough to make him stumble. "Leave her alone. We're going." She took firm hold of Beth's arm and pulled her away from the car.

As Beth slipped past him, Big Guy snatched her arm away from Kate and twisted her to the ground. At the same time, he thrust Kate at his partner.

The smaller man held her roughly against his chest, still arguing, still waving the gun.

Then Kate screamed.

A black streak passed behind Beth. The man pinning her to the ground disappeared with a grunt.

Freed, she turned and stared, transfixed for a second, as the cat tore at him. The urgency of their situation cut her interest short. She scrambled to her feet in time to see Kate shoulder her stunned captor aside, knocking the gun from his hand.

Beth kicked the weapon under a shrub at the side of the track. She followed Kate's trail into the relatively sparse growth beneath the canopy. They ran.

Behind them, the man's screams cut off.

They wove through the trees in the almost dark. The monkeys' frantic hooting made it impossible to hear if anyone followed.

The cat roared, much closer than Beth expected.

Kate cried out. Beth slowed to a stop, looking over her shoulder, terrified she'd find the cat attacking her friend.

Kate sat, legs splayed, on the ground where she'd fallen, safe for the moment. She stared back the way they'd come,

her expression confused and frightened. Beth followed her gaze.

Carlos strode toward them from the shadows. Speechless with relief, Beth spun on her heels and ran to him.

He stopped where Kate sat and bent to offer his hand.

Kate gaped at him, her face a mask of confusion. "*B'alam*," she said. She took the hand he offered and let him pull her to her feet as Beth walked up.

"Are you okay?" Beth asked. Had Kate bumped her head when she fell? What did she say?

Kate blinked a few times, never taking her eyes from Carlos. Her confusion turned to awe.

"You're naked," she said.

His gaze fixed on her, but he made no comment.

Beth said as calmly as she could manage, "Carlos, poachers ... two at least. The cat attacked. He must be near. Why are you naked?"

"I took care of the poachers."

"He's the cat."

"You took care of them? Are they dead?"

"No, running for town." His eyes, still locked to Kate's, filled with despair.

"Carlos?"

"Did you hear me, Beth? He's the cat."

Beth gaped at her like she spoke some obscure language.

"*B'alam*," Kate said. "Leave it to you to get a god to fall in love with you."

"I don't understand. Carlos, what is she talking about?"

Carlos turned sad eyes to her. "I'm so sorry, *querida*. You were never to see this. Talk to Kate. She can tell you what she knows. I should go now."

"You mean I'm right?" Kate said. "Don't go. I have a million questions. How old are you?"

"Older than I look. Beth, forgive me. I will go now."

"No, Carlos. Wait!"

He walked three steps and his body began to contort. A scream developed in Beth's throat and stuck as his legs shortened, back lengthened. When the cat stood before her, it glanced back. All that remained of Carlos was the eyes.

"Jesus," Kate said.

Beth felt her legs give way, then nothing.

* * * *

She came around slowly to the sound of Kate calling her name. When her eyes finally opened, her friend's worried face looked down at her.

"Are you all right?"

Beth shook her head. She was far from all right, but couldn't put two thoughts together coherently enough to voice it. With no energy to protest, she let Kate help her to her feet and walk her back toward the road in silence.

The Jeep was where they'd left it, but turned around facing the way they'd come. Both their packs lay in the back undisturbed.

Without a word, Beth climbed into the passenger seat. If Kate didn't feel up to driving, they would have to sit here until

she did. Beth had no desire to get behind the wheel, or to hurry back to the compound.

Kate started the engine right up. No one said a word for the hour drive back to where they'd started. Beth went directly to her room and lay in her hammock, leaving Kate to decide what to tell the others.

He'd warned her. She'd thought he wanted to hide the fact he'd been in prison, or had smuggled drugs in his sordid youth, or some other perfectly normal skeleton. That he wasn't human—scientists' minds did not go in those directions. He was beautiful beyond belief, but everything about him said man. He tasted like a man, smelled like one. Yes, he made her body sing like no man had before, but the only magic there was the magic in her heart.

Yet she had to believe what her eyes told her. As a scientist, she should want to explore, to find out why the impossible was, after all, possible. She didn't, though. She wanted only to remember Carlos as he lay beside her after love, sweet and vulnerable, spent and happy.

The secret revealed. Carlos did not exist. She couldn't think of him as he was, so she mourned what he wasn't.

Later in the afternoon, Kate stopped at her threshold. She held a thick book much like the dozens of textbooks Beth had hoped never to see again after four years as an undergrad science major.

Beth roused herself, ready for answers.

Kate spread the book open on the small desk next to the window.

"Here he is." She pointed to one of four statues pictured on a page of pre-Columbian art. "*B'alam Agab*, the night jaguar—supposedly one of the four progenitors of mankind—that's the Maya legend. The *Olmec*, however..."

"Kate, you're not talking hundreds of years here; you're talking millennia."

Kate glanced up. "Yeah."

Beth skimmed through the passage next to the picture, then read it more closely. When she finished, she flipped the book closed and shoved it at Kate. "You can't tell anyone."

"Like, who would believe me?" Kate said, pulling the book to her chest. "I want to talk to him, though. Imagine the history he could clear up. *Olmec*! Beth, so little is known..."

"Anything he told you couldn't be proved."

"Well, I understand that. But you can't expect me to stop wanting to know. That's my job, right?"

* * * *

At breakfast, Carter clinked his cup for their attention.

"Carlos has been called away. He won't be back," he announced.

Everyone turned to Beth.

"What did you do?" Sam asked.

Kate stuck up for her. "Leave her alone. Beth didn't do anything to make him go."

"The situation was a disaster waiting to happen," Sam said. "Just great, Beth. Now we don't have a guide for a month until Antonio gets back."

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

SIETE

From the underbrush beyond the clearing, the cat watched the woman working. The man was wrong. She was more cat than hummingbird, always silent, motionless, patient. Females made the best hunters.

He couldn't stay long here. Her scent called. Already the change cramped his thighs, though the man-shape resisted.

The cat endured the pain as long as he dared, then returned to the forest.

* * * *

The *heliconia* were fading. It was time to move—to find another site or perhaps another project. She'd lost enthusiasm for this one.

A rustle in the vegetation to the left warned of someone approaching. Beth sprang to her feet. Carlos! Only Carlos visited her here.

But the man who stepped past the tree line into the clearing stopped her heart in fear. She recognized the smaller of the two poachers. He held the gun pointed at her.

She opened her mouth to scream. The sun exploded.

What seemed like a moment later, the acrid smell of exhaust woke her. Her body bounced uncontrollably against the hard bed of a truck, an old one by the sound of its unmuffled engine. Every uneven spot in the road amplified the pain with bruising force to her shoulder and hip. A dull

pounding in her head erupted into blinding agony when she tried to lift her eyelids.

Hands behind her back, a rough, narrow cord bit into her wrists, tightening painfully each time she tugged. The foul-tasting rag they'd used as a gag bit at the corners of her unbearably dry mouth.

I'm in trouble.

What did they want? Why her? She had no skills, no special knowledge to offer.

Right at the front of her mind was the leer in the big poacher's eyes as he'd crushed her to the back of the Jeep. She choked behind the rag. *Oh, God, please don't let me throw up.*

Even as she struggled to control the panic, she knew the look had nothing to do with whatever they wanted from her. They'd planned this, ambushing her in a place no one but she ever visited—she and Carlos.

Does this involve Carlos?

The heat and the sound of insects told her it was probably midday. She'd been out for a couple of hours at least.

She didn't always go back to the compound for lunch. It could be dinner time before the others missed her.

The truck veered sharply to the right, throwing her against the side of the bed. This time, when she opened her eyes the dim light beneath the canopy shielded them. The pain eased a bit, but, off road, the jostling and beating her body took grew much worse. Finally, Beth's misery got the better of her. Her face crinkled. Silent tears fell.

They stopped between the roots of a huge, buttressed oak where, she assumed, the truck would be partially hidden. A door slammed.

A moment later, someone grabbed a foot and pulled her from the bed. Her legs didn't hold. The world spun out of control. Arms caught her about the waist before she fell to the ground, but she was useless to help. All her effort went into not throwing up behind the gag. Her captor spoke a few soft words in Spanish, as though trying to soothe her, and waited a moment for the dizziness to pass.

It was the smaller poacher—the one who didn't speak English. She'd get no answers there even if his kindness extended to removing the gag. It didn't.

Big Guy came around the side of the truck and grabbed several hanks of rope and a long parcel from the bed. He said a few word to his friend and took off through the trees.

They followed. The little guy's fingers dug painfully into the soft underside of her upper arm. Any attempt to pull away only urged them tighter.

Beth stumbled along for a few steps, her mind reaching for a quiet place to endure the misery and confusion. Her legs gave way. She fell to the ground. The painful grip tore at her shoulder, and her captor's attempts to jerk her to her feet sent jolts of fire through her shoulders and back. She cried out. He stopped pulling long enough to allow her to get her feet under her. When she fell again a few steps farther along, he called to his partner.

The big guy came back, cursing in Spanish, passed what he carried to his friend and hauled Beth up, slinging her over a shoulder. The two continued deeper into the woods.

The stink of unwashed male had a head-clearing effect. Her stomach heaved. She tried breathing through her mouth, but the gag made that difficult. Struggling for breath, Beth fought to free herself from the miasma.

A rough, beefy hand slid up her inner thigh under her shorts, reaching. She froze.

"That's it, *mamacita*. Better be still. You're making me hot."

He did it to intimidate her—and it worked. Beth found the quiet place and fought to keep it, ignoring the pressure of his shoulder against her queasy stomach, the pounding her head took at each heavy step and the aches in her body as bruised muscle and bone stiffened.

Their noisy progress went on for what seemed like hours to Beth but was probably twenty or thirty minutes—long enough that her sense of direction failed. She couldn't have pointed to the road if her life depended on it—and it very likely did.

In an area of widespread canopy trees and little ground cover, they stopped. He set her on her feet while his partner caught up, dropped the load he was carrying beneath an oak, and walked over to where they stood.

Beth felt a tug at the back of her neck. Her gag fell away.
"Scream."

She stared, uncomprehending, at the man's dark, foreboding eyes and did nothing.

A blow to the side of her head came from nowhere. She cried out.

"Good. Again."

They wanted her to scream, and she wanted to know why. Teeth set, she refused.

In one swift move, too fast for her to duck, Big Guy brought a knife to her cheek. Beth screamed.

With a flick of his wrist, the four-inch blade disappeared into its handle. He dropped the weapon into his shirt pocket and laughed. "Good. Now we wait."

The gag went back on before Beth could ask for what.

He strode away, toward the pile of equipment they'd carried in. His partner came from behind, grabbed her waist, and led her to the foot of a tree in the middle of the semi-clear area. He shoved her to the ground between two roots, where the detritus from the canopy had created a nest of sorts, and waited while she squirmed into a more comfortable position. Then he brought out a length of rope and tied her feet together.

Beth pulled her knees to her chin, feeling like a trussed turkey—or bait. But for what? For Carlos?

Big Guy sat in the shadows ten meters away with a dart rifle across his lap.

The sound of rain striking the canopy washed over the clearing. Very little fell as far as the ground, but the chill reached them.

She buried her face against her knees and breathed.

Time passed.

The rustling of dead leaves from behind her warned the little guy was on the move. He tugged at her bindings, testing them.

Satisfied she was not going anywhere, he whispered next to her ear, "*Tu novio llega,*" and ran.

The cat leaped into the clearing, giving chase.

Carlos!

She heard the loud pop of the gun. The cat stumbled, ran three more strides, then fell on his face with a yowl of pain.

Beth fought against her bindings, bucking violently, tugging until the ropes cut into her wrists and bare calves. One look at the dart sticking out of his thigh added panic to her efforts. What were they trying to bring down? A rhino? Too much of the tranquilizer would stop his heart. She tried to cry out, to warn them of their mistake, but the men ignored her.

Big Guy walked up to the cat, prodding his side with the butt end of the rifle before moving close enough to touch. He wore a huge smile. His hand ran the length of Carlos's back in an appreciative caress. "Your boyfriend will make us rich men, *chica*."

The smaller poacher came out of the shadows carrying rope and the pack, the same expression on his face. He smiled in Beth's direction with a hint of remorse that disappeared when his gaze fell back on the cat. He tossed a coil of rope to his partner and, together, they bound the cat's legs, then dragged him out of the rain.

"*Ve por los guacamayos,*" Big Guy said.

Beth heard the word for macaw. They wouldn't go after the birds, would they? How much more did they need?

The little guy swiped up the pack and took off into the forest. His buddy settled back beneath his tree, the rifle again over his knees, lids drooping, the corner of his mouth lifted into a permanent grin.

Couldn't the idiot see how Carlos's chest heaved? Her muffled calls for attention fell on deaf ears. She tried to remove the gag, rubbing against her shoulder, then the tree, but it was too tight. All her efforts produced nothing from him but that indifferent grin until Beth started inching her way toward Carlos.

The poacher grunted a warning and waved the rifle in her direction.

If he shot her with one of those elephant darts, she'd never survive. Beth settled back into her nest, eyes glued to Carlos. If his breathing grew any worse, she'd take the chance. She would get that dart out of the cat's thigh.

"How was it, hey? Fucking a god?"

Beth glanced up to catch him staring. His grin had changed to something more like the one he'd worn when they first met. She wanted to spit in his face.

"I don't think a man will be much good to you now. What do you say?" He leered, then his gaze slid to the cat. "*B'alam*. Always there are stories. He is like your Big Foot, or the snowman. Everywhere people say they see him, but no one can ever find him. Until you make him careless. Careless, huh, to change before we are out of sight? You must be one hot fuck to make a god so."

Tears ran freely down Beth's face now.

Off in the distance, they heard a man shouting. Scream. Then nothing.

Big Guy sprang to his feet, staring in the direction his friend had gone. He cursed.

His hard glare traveled from Beth to Carlos. Walking over to the cat, he bent down, placed a hand on its chest.

"He is going nowhere," he said, looking pointedly at Beth. He tested the binding around the cat's legs, did the same to Beth's while indecision cast his face.

Beth was certain he'd knock her out. She prayed with his fist rather than a dart.

He looked long into the forest in the direction his partner had gone.

"Maldita sea!" he cursed, shaking his head. When he returned his gaze, she read surrender in his eyes and understood—he needed the little guy. He couldn't do this alone. He patted her cheek and took off through the trees after his friend without another word.

Beth didn't waste a second sliding over to Carlos and pulling the dart out with her teeth. She spat it to the side, then working with swollen, numb fingers, fought the rope binding his front legs. If he woke, he could change and free them both.

She grunted her frustration as the knot slipped from her fingers time and again. If she could only see what she was doing!

The vibrations started in her arms and crept to her chest. By the time they reached her throat, the cat's low growl was

audible—a sound that sent ice water through her veins. How much of Carlos remained when he was the cat?

Enough. The cat had rescued her twice from the poachers. She went back to worrying the knot.

Warm and wet, his sandpaper tongue ran the length of one forearm, then the other. She sobbed.

The jaguar's teeth made quick work of the rope at her wrists. She tossed the broken strands aside and turned to find him freeing himself.

The pain of returning circulation ripped through her hands as she tore at the knots binding his back legs.

The cat raised onto his elbows. His cold nose nudged her arm. She glanced up and found herself confronted by his open jaw—fangs nearly two inches long a hair's breadth from her face. This time she needed no reminder what those jaws were designed to do.

He was panting hard. His breath, hot and moist, bathed her face. He lowered his head. Carlos's eyes stared at her.

Another nudge broke the spell. She redoubled her efforts with the knot while he licked from elbow to shoulder. His rough, broad tongue covered the exposed skin. His next stroke brushed the side of her breast through the fabric of her tank top. The next, more purposely, chafed the nipple.

Beth hissed. A gush of arousal flooded her.

The cat huffed, sniffing its way down her torso. His tongue bathed her hands as they worked. The warm strokes soothed the pain and brought movement back. Finally, the knot slipped away.

While she freed her own ankles, the cat rose to its feet. A little wobbly, he shook himself and stretched.

She stared in amazement as its shape blurred. One hind leg moved forward. He raised himself slowly. As each new muscle became part of the movement, it stretched or shrank, straightened or bent into the shape of a man.

Without meeting her eyes, Carlos squatted and made short work of the knot.

* * * *

"Come. Hurry." Carlos turned, walking quickly back the way he'd come, trusting she followed. He couldn't look at her. Not for shame—he had no regrets—but only to hold onto the memories: soft, sweet Beth melting in his arms, the heat of lust in her eyes as they made love. Those memories warmed his blood.

What might he find in her face now to replace them?

"Should we see if the man needs help?" she asked, her voice ragged, short of breath as she tried to keep pace with him.

No reason to hide the truth now. "He's dead. The birds attacked before he robbed their nest. He fell from the tree." He slowed a little to account for her shorter stride.

"How do you know?"

They were far enough from the clearing that the poacher's return would not complicate their escape. He turned to her. The sight of her tore his heart.

"Listen," he said, lifting her chin gently. The rustling of the trees floated down to them. "The forest tells me."

He studied her uplifted face. He saw curiosity and wonder, but no sign of the disbelief he expected.

She caught him watching and her expression didn't change. "What about the other? He'll tell."

"He won't make it out of the forest." This news was hardest. "I am sorry for their families. But *TE'e-le* protects me far better than I have protected her. Everyone who has ever known my secret is dead."

Mouth open, eyes wide, she reacted with the shock he expected, but none of the fear or disgust. "Except me."

"Yes," he said. "And Kate. I worry. I watch over you. Beth, I put you in danger."

He'd never forgive himself if something happened to her. She'd never forgive him if something happened to her friend.

"Perhaps the forest trusts you. I think you are safe from her, but there are always more men—always." He turned away, not wanting to know her reaction. "Let's go."

They walked through the trees to the place where he'd thrown his clothes in his hurry to answer Beth's scream. They lay scattered as he'd tossed them, his pants draped over a shrub. He grabbed them up, pulled them on, and turned to find her standing close holding the shirt out to him. Every ounce of his strength went into stopping himself from taking her in his arms.

"He said I made you careless."

"Who said that?" He slipped the shirt on without buttoning it and began searching for his socks.

"The poacher. They saw you change."

"I thought as much," he said, still searching. "The cat does not reason as a man would. He knew only I needed to find you."

"Is that why you can't be with me? I make you careless?"

He stopped in mid-search, unsure what the question meant, not liking the rush of hope her words sent sweeping through him. He couldn't look. He could barely speak. His voice, when the words finally came, cracked. "Beth, this is not your fault."

"Then take me with you," she whispered.

Joy burst through him. She didn't know what she asked for, but the fact she'd asked made all the difference. With an involuntary step closer he gazed into her eyes. "Beth, I have nothing to offer you."

"You call this nothing?" Her hand swept the area, taking in the whole forest as she mirrored his move.

He smiled. "And how would my little *colibrí* handle life in the wild?"

"You think I can't?" Her challenge raised a chuckle. How had he ever lived without her?

"Are you immortal, Carlos?"

Here was the other reason she should run from him. "Once, the forest was immortal. I will live as long as she does. Perhaps not so many seasons any more, but more than you will know in your lifetime. How long before you grow tired of a man who never changes?"

"Does it matter?" she asked quietly. "You had a wife. Did she grow old and wrinkled? Did you love her to the end? Do you remember her?"

How did she know about Choimha?

"Kate's book," she answered the unspoken question.

"Yes, I remember her." He was so full of memories, their weight more than anyone should be asked to bear. But he carried them for the sake of his forest and his people. "I remember everything."

"Then that's enough. Take me with you."

One more step and he closed the distance between them. He took her in his arms. "Do you know what you are asking?"

"Probably not," she admitted. "But I know what I want." She pressed a kiss to his naked chest, hot breath bathing his skin, sending waves of want through him. "To be with you, Carlos, for as long as you'll have me. We aren't so different. We're both here to do what can be done to protect the forest. It's a noble goal. We can do it together, don't you think? Two are better than one, even if one is not a god."

"I have never been much of a god."

Her hand slid to the back of his neck and pulled him to her. She touched her lips to his and whispered, "Stop arguing and kiss me."

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Ali Katz

Ali Katz grew up in a house full of women who've proven to be a wonderful source of inspiration for strong, romantic heroines in her stories. The oldest of four girls, she's the black sheep of the family, though not much of one, as black sheep go. These days, she lives in Tucson, keeps her family close and has a job, not a career, which helps support her real life. That takes place in the wee hours of the night, while everyone is asleep, when she sits at the computer, cornered into weaving the tales her characters demand telling.

* * * *

Don't miss Salute, by Penny Dawn,

available at AmberHeat.com!

Liberty Wilson deserves a few minor indulgences.

Her sister Bianca—also her roommate—is a catty bitch, constantly reminding her she hasn't had a decent relationship in months, and judging by her reflection in the mirror, she ought to spend more time at the gym and less time staring at the mysterious ex-soldier, Sergeant Jefferson Muldoon, performing his morning ritual across the street.

But it's Liberty's birthday, the fourth of July, and she's in the mood for a few fireworks.

There's no air-conditioning at Thirty-two Sprucewood Lane, and it's nearing triple digits. Yet the heat index is no match

for what happens when she enters the patriot's lair. Libby and Jefferson light an unrelenting fire, making this a birthday she'll never forget. Who needs to declare independence when coupling is this hot?

* * * *

Don't miss *The Wolfe Proxy*, by T.D. KcKinney & Terry Wylis,

available at AmberAllure.com!

Ruthless CEO Quinton Wolfe sets off every alarm on sculptor Max Bowman's warning system. No way is that playboy getting near Max's sister, the newest shareholder in Wolfe's multinational corporation. No matter Quint's charming smile and sexy form, Max won't let his kid sister get taken in by that Lothario. Even if it means Max cuts a deal with Big Bad Wolfe himself.

And what a deal! Max becomes Quint's play toy. Good thing Max enjoys it. He'll just play the game until he can turn the tables on the CEO. Or that's the plan. But somehow, even knowing the CEO is a ruthless snake at the core, Max still lets Quint worm his way right into Max's heart.

Cutting Quint out of his life is the best thing Max can do. So why does it feel like Max might never be able to breathe again? It doesn't help that Quint's every bit as heartbroken and miserable. So maybe Max's view of Quint was skewed by the media. But can he separate the ruthless CEO from the gentle, caring man who loves him? And can he trust either one?

* * * *

Don't miss *Dressed For Dying* by Janet Quinn,

available at AmberQuill.com!

In 1892, reporter Sean Madigan is pitted against the New York police when he's assigned his first high-profile murder story, the slaying of the wealthy Marshal Haversham, clothing industry mogul and sweatshop owner. While Sean hunts for the killer in order to prove his worth to his newspaper editor, the madman goes on a violent spree, burning down Haversham's warehouses and sweatshops and killing young women who work within them. Each victim is found dressed in a fancy ball gown that was secretly made within the sweatshops themselves.

When Madigan's sweetheart, Bridget, becomes the killer's next target, Sean determines he will find the man and his connection to the ball gowns. But the murderer has other designs, and it soon becomes a race against time and the police to discover the fiend's identity before he silences Sean or Bridget ... permanently...

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Amber Quill's Rewards Program

For every ten books bought, receive one free!

Visit all three of Amber Quill's web sites

for our very latest releases!!

* * * *

AMBER HEAT EROTICA

Gimme Fever!!

Steamy, sensual genre fiction...

www.AmberHeat.com

* * * *

AMBER ALLURE

Where love is blind to gender...

www.AmberAllure.com

* * * *

Gato Negro
by Ali Katz

AMBER QUILL PRESS, LLC

Quality Books, Print And Electronic

Genre fiction at its best!

www.AmberQuill.com
