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The Feline Fugitive



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Back Cover Copy

You'll never look at your cat the same way again.

Claudette Richards adores Fluffy, her cat. Little does she know how much he adores her in return, nor that he's secretly a man named Luca Doyle, who has chosen her for his life mate.

Framed for murder, Luca hides out in cat form while he hunts down the real killer, a battle that could reveal him to Claudette before he's ready. If it happens, will she match his passion or send him to the pound?

Content Warning: This title contains funny references to cat-nip and other cat characteristics. But don't let the beta shifter form fool you. The hero is all alpha, and this title contains hot sex and graphic language.

Highlight

“I’ll ask again, where is my cat?”

“Claudette...”

“How the hell do you know my name?”

This was freaking surreal.

“If you’ll listen for a moment, I’ll explain.” He lowered his hands.

She brought the bat back in a perfect batting pose. “No way. Put those puppies back up!”

“Okay, okay.” The man raised his hands to his shoulders.

Shuffling to the left, she grabbed her robe, then backed to the bedroom door and flipped on the light.

Dear lord, he was perfect.

“Claudette. I’m Fluffy.”

“You can’t be Fluffy, you’re a man. Fluffy’s a cat.” Though a stranger, he seemed familiar to her. His intense green stare unnerved her as Fluffy’s had on countless occasions.

“If this is what it will take to prove to you I am who I say I am, then so be it.”

Before her, his skin altered to a purplish hue. Black fur sprouted, coating his flesh. His face shrunk, elongating as whiskers budded from his cheeks. Shocked, she dropped the bat and covered her mouth with her hands. The striking man had shrunk into none other than her beloved pet.

Her last thought as she fainted was that magic does exist.

The Feline Fugitive

by

Esmerelda Bishop

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Dedication

This one is for all the cat lovers in the world.

Chapter 1

Oh, yes. Right there.

Luca nudged his mistress's petite hand as her fingers scraped up and down his body. God, this woman knew how he liked it. He rubbed against her, encouraging the motion, and long red nails scored his skin.

Oh, yes.

Higher.

Higher.

There.

Perfect. He pressed his head further into her hand as she scratched the area between his pointed ears, and purring, pushed his face against her soft cheek.

"Such a good kitty. Momma loves her kitty."

Momma, his ass. One day Claudette would learn how far from a Momma she was to him.

"You're the only male I can count on."

The only male she'd ever count on, he'd see to that. Whiskered face close to hers, he waited for her to honor his nose with a kiss. "Are you hungry, Fluffy?"

The name made him cringe. He was a male cat for Christ's sakes, a shorthaired, black cat. Fluffy in no way described him. For weeks he'd used every pissed-off cat tactic in the book, from refusing to eat to ignoring her, even going to the extreme of hissing every time she called him by the repulsive name. In the end, he'd realized he fought a losing battle. So he'd accepted it, but one day she'd call him by his real name.

If he didn't get cracking on who had framed him for murder, 'one day' would never happen. Life loved to play cruel games with its participants. Like the one he lived right now—being forced to live as a pet in his life-mate's home.

She had no idea she was his life-mate, of course. Hell, she didn't have a clue he was even human. One day she would.

"Would Fluffy like to eat?"

As she nuzzled his head with her nose, purrs rose from deep within his body and he kneaded her chest. She had gorgeous breasts he longed to cup in his hands. Claudette grasped him under his front legs and set him on the ground, then walked into the kitchen. Disappointed, he raced after her, winding himself between her legs as she prepared his food.

"Here you go, my sweet kitty." She placed the dish on the floor and patted the top of his head. The unseasoned foulness hit his tongue and he shivered.

"It's a new flavor. Tuna hearts and gizzards. I knew you'd love it."

He gagged. Oh dear God. What the hell was the matter with the people who made this crap? Really, cats had taste buds, too. How hard was it to chop up a juicy rib eye and shove it in a can? Steak. His mouth watered for a medium-rare slab of meat while the mushy food lay heavily on his tongue. He forced the lump down his throat, and fearing it would come back up, waited a moment before moving. Thank God, he only had to eat this shit twice a day. Once his rolling belly settled, he ran to his bowl and lapped water until his tongue was cleansed of the disgusting taste.

After eating, he sat on her lap anticipating what would come next as she watched television. When she clicked off the set, he jumped off her lap and headed toward the bathroom.

She filled the two person whirlpool tub as she lit candles around the room, and the scent of vanilla wafted through the air. The lights dimmed and he sat on the edge of the tub, flicking his tail.

Being a cat did have its perks. As if he were a fixture in the house, she undressed in front of him, bathed, and his personal favorite, masturbated.

She unbuttoned her shirt, then slipped it off her narrow shoulders. Reaching behind her, she unclasped her purple bra. Down her arms went the straps, revealing large breasts with pink nipples. He licked his lips. At times like this he loved being a cat.

Her hands went to the waistband of her jeans. Head cocked to the side, he observed the unintended strip tease.

The sound of her zipper filled the small bathroom. Moments later, she wiggled out of her pants and purple lace panties and straightened. Magnificent. As she freed her blond hair from its restraint, masses of wavy hair cascaded over her shoulders. She shook her head. Meow.

Then she walked over to the tub and scratched the top of his head. "I love coming home, Fluffy. It's so nice to strip down and relax in a hot bath."

He couldn't agree more.

She stepped into the Jacuzzi, sank into the water and began to wash as he lay on the edge of the tub, envious of her hands. One day he'd join her in the hot water and his hands would replace hers. The scene played in his mind. She'd sit between his legs, body relaxed against his, soft skin under his palm as he washed her arms then moved to her perky breasts, where he'd tease the sensitive nipples. Then work his way down her flat stomach to the heaven that waited below. He'd tantalize that hidden nub until she bucked against his hand, begged for release.

Damn, he needed to stop this line of thinking. He hadn't touched another woman since meeting Claudette. And it wasn't easy finding time to jerk off his frustrations with her in the apartment.

Time to cool off his overheated body. He jumped off the rim of the tub. A run around the house sounded like a great idea right now.

* * * *

Claudette wrapped the towel around her damp hair, shrugged into her terry cloth pink robe and knotted the front closed. Striding into the bedroom, she looked around for Fluffy. Where was that cat?

She walked into the hallway as Fluffy came barreling around the corner, straight past her and into the kitchen. She knew the routine well. Then he'd run through the kitchen, into the dining room, back into the hallway, where he'd continue for only God knew how long. It never ceased to amaze her how much energy he had.

The phone rang, and she jerked in surprise. Who would call this late?

She lifted the receiver. "Hello."

Fluffy came around the corner and watched her with his intent, unnerving stare that shone with an intelligence far surpassing an ordinary house cat. Until Fluffy, she'd never wondered what a cat thought.

The deep voice that greeted her on the other end of the line made her shiver.

"Roger! How are you?" The charming blond god had asked for her number a couple of days ago, in the coffee shop down the street. He'd actually called. Her. Oh. My. God.

"I wondered if you would like to see a movie tomorrow night, maybe grab a bite to eat afterward?"

"Tomorrow night sounds wonderful."

She gave him her address and hung up the phone, then squealing, flopped back on the couch. Finally! A date. How long had it been since she'd been asked out? Six months? She grimaced. More like eight. Men didn't flock to her door in droves.

On her feet, she raced to her room, flung open the closet and peered into the dark recesses. Nothing. Absolutely nada. This called for an emergency outfit purchase tomorrow after work. Nothing too tight or sexy. He'd suggested dinner and a movie, so a slinky body-hugging dress was definitely out of the question, but a pair of snug jeans and cleavage revealing blouse could work wonders for her non-existent sex life.

She missed sex.

Fluffy followed her into the room. Rushing over, she scooped him up. "Did you hear? I have a date tomorrow!"

He twisted, trying to escape her grasp.

"Fluffy! What has gotten into you?"

He hissed and she dropped him, surprised by the aggressive show of anger. Maybe he'd hurt himself in his marathon around the house.

"Are you ready for bed?"

She doubted he was tired. In the two months since Fluffy had arrived at her doorstep, she'd never once seen these feline naps cat lovers talked about. No, this cat reminded her of a kitten on speed.

She took off her robe and placed it on the red chair in the corner, crawled between the crisp clean sheets and pulled the blanket over her. Nine o'clock. If she didn't go to sleep soon, she'd be exhausted tomorrow night. Exhaustion was not in her plans. Vigorous energetic activity was. "Fluffy. Come here, baby."

He pierced her with narrowed feline eyes, then spun around. Tail straight in the air, he strode from the room. What in the world? He never acted like that. Every night as she lay down, he jumped on the pillow by her head. But this...? Could he be mad? And if so, what had she done?

Chapter 2

Where the hell was she?

She should have been back from work an hour ago. Luca stalked through the rooms, a nearly overwhelming urge to spray the entire house and mark his territory burning inside him. Damn bastard, taking his mate out on a date. He had no right to be angry with Claudette for accepting the invitation but still a slow rage built.

The door flew open, and Claudette entered the apartment like a whirlwind with an assortment of shopping bags. Glancing at him as she ran past, she yelled, “Oh my God, Fluffy. I’m running so late!”

He followed her. As he lifted his paw to step into the bedroom, she slammed the door, blocking his entrance.

What the fuck? She’d never refused him entry.

Howling, he clawed at the door. How dare she close the damn thing in his face!

When she didn’t answer his insistent clawing, he stared at the door in shock. She wasn’t going to open it. So that’s how it’d be. Some loser showed her a little interest and her beloved pet became yesterday’s trash.

To hell with that.

He thumped his tail, and when she appeared minutes later, stilled it.

Oh hell no.

No way in hell would she leave this apartment with another man dressed like that. Even from his perspective on the floor she showed too much cleavage. God only knew what Roger would see looking down.

Nope, the shirt had to go.

He dashed into the living room and searched for anything to ruin the blouse. A sage coffee cup sat on the mantle above the fireplace. Perfect. He strutted across the room and hopped on the chair, then onto the mantel. Positioning himself behind his weapon, he waited for her to notice him.

And waited.

A growl of rage vibrated in his chest. She stood across the room applying makeup in a small mirror, primping herself for another man, completely ignoring him, her life-mate. With his paw, he swiped the closest thing to him. A picture in a pewter frame sailed off the mantle and onto the floor with a crash.

She whirled around. “Bad kitty! Get down from there!”

Tensed, he waited for the perfect moment as she walked across the room, and when she reached for him, tapped the cup, knocking the mug over. Coffee spilled over the edge and onto the front of her brand new, too revealing blouse. Smug as a cat in cream, he jumped to the floor.

“Oh my God... Oh my God. Now I have nothing to wear.” Tears shone in her eyes.

Just tears of disappointment over a too sexy blouse. He refused to feel bad about it.

“He’ll be here any moment.” Shoulders slumped, she walked to the bedroom, and he followed.

On the edge of the four-poster bed she sat, looking dejected.

Okay, now he felt bad.

Crawling onto her lap, he pressed his head under her chin. She petted his back.

“It’s okay. Wasn’t your fault.”

Guilt stabbed through him.

“This is the first date I’ve had in a long time. I wanted everything to be perfect.” She sighed heavily. “Who am I kidding? I want someone to love me. I’m tired of being alone.”

If only he could tell her he loved her, and not in that sexy revealing clothes sorta way. In a no makeup, ponytail wearing, frumpy pajama kinda way. He butted her chin again.

“Oh, I know you love me, Fluffy. It’s just not the same.” She kissed the top of his head. “I guess I better rinse off and find a new shirt.”

A moment later, the shower started. He lay down on the bed, chin on his paws. He’d made her feel bad. That hadn’t been his intention. He’d expected anger, maybe a curse word or two, not tears. He was an ass. If he were in human form, he’d go out and buy her flowers to apologize.

The sound of running water ceased and Claudette entered the room, drying her nude body. Lifting his head, he gulped. One thing he loved about her appearance was her fuller figure. He didn’t understand women and their quest to be skin and bones. Women were supposed to be curvy and soft, not pointy and jagged.

As she sifted through her clothes, he took the moment to gaze at her bottom, a firm rounded ass that would one day fill his hands.

“This will have to do.” She revealed her choice, a red, turtleneck velour sweater. Excellent. He’d take plain sexy over sexy-and-revealing any day.

The doorbell chimed.

“Shit!”

She threw on her clothes, rushed into the living room and opened the door.

“Hey!”

The flirty, breathless voice she used sent waves of anger shaking through his body. He peered around her, catching a glimpse of Roger.

Damn.

GQ fucking perfect.

“Claudette, you’re gorgeous!”

She giggled and blushed. Enraged at her reaction, he hissed and swatted at the offensive man.

“Fluffy! Be a good kitty.” She pushed him aside with her foot, grabbed her purse off the table and sailed out the door.

Good kitty, be damned. She'd be lucky if he didn't rip the entire house apart while she was away.

* * * *

"Would you like to come in for a moment?" Claudette asked, hating to see the night end at the front door. If she coaxed him in, poured him a glass of wine or two, maybe, just maybe, she'd get laid tonight.

A seductive smile spread over his mouth. "I would love to."

Perhaps she wouldn't need the wine.

She pushed the door open. "Why don't you have a seat on the couch and I'll get us some drinks."

Just a glass each to cinch the deal.

She hurried into the kitchen, poured them each a glass of burgundy liquid and strolled back into the living room. Startled, she stopped. Roger wasn't alone on the couch. Fluffy sat next to him, ears at attention, tail whipping in the air.

"Claudette, does your cat have a problem with strangers?"

"No, why?" She crossed the room and handed Roger his wine glass.

"Well, it's almost like he's staring daggers at me, and every time I reach to pet him, he tries to bite me."

"Fluffy? No, he's harmless. The sweetest cat in the world." She lifted Fluffy off the couch and ignored his yelp of protest.

Lightly, she tossed him to the floor and slid down beside Roger.

A strong arm snaked behind her as he leaned forward. "Why don't we put these down?"

He took her wine glass and placed it on the coffee table. Oh yes, she was going to get laid tonight. When he faced her, his gray eyes filled with desire. Leaning over, he kissed her lips while his hand groped her breast.

Not caressed, massaged or teased. Just grabbed it and squeezed. Not really what she was looking for tonight, but she'd take what she could get.

He pushed her backward until she reclined among the couch pillows. Not a good kisser, either. Just shoved his tongue in her mouth and darted it in and out. How far did he want to stick it down her throat? Much further and she'd gag.

A howling reached her ears, then Roger leapt off her with a wail of pain and stood before her, shaking his hand with a jerky motion.

"What happened?"

"Your fucking cat just bit the shit out of me."

"Really?"

For the first time, Fluffy actually lived up to his name: every hair on his tiny body puffed out, back arched, teeth bared. The epitome of a cat defending his territory. Ah, so sweet. "Aw, Roger, he thought you were hurting me."

“Well, I wasn’t.”

“He’s a cat. He doesn’t know that.” When Fluffy turned on her and hissed, she jerked in shock. “Maybe we should relax and let him see you’re not a threat to me.”

“Fine.” He sat back on the couch.

“How about a little television?”

“Fine.”

Fine, grumpy ass. She rose, grabbed the remote and plopped back on the couch. Before she could fully sit, Fluffy jumped onto her lap. Roger glared at the cat, who seemed to return the look. “Leave him be, Roger. Let him think he’s protecting me.”

“Fine.”

She would clock him one if he said that word one more time. Frustrated, she stroked Fluffy, trying to calm him. Roger was proving to be a real jerk. More than likely a bad lay too, but sex was sex. Pleasuring herself had lost its appeal. She wanted strong, masculine fingers to skim the delicate flesh.

Roger inched his hand toward her leg. She suppressed a disgusted sigh. This so wasn’t the night she’d planned. Then he grabbed a handful of her thigh.

Fluffy popped the top of his hand with his paw.

Roger jerked his hand back.

Stifling a giggle, she focused on the toilet paper commercial. Roger reached for her hand. Just as he grasped her, Fluffy hissed and bit toward it.

“Jesus, Claudette! Can’t you lock the damn thing up in a room?”

Fluffy tensed under her fingers. Ears pointed straight back, he turned his green eyes on her. An overwhelming feeling of being forced to choose between a cat and her date went through her. Absurd, but undeniable. She looked between the two males.

Sorry, Fluffy. He can do things you can’t. Rising, she put Fluffy under her arm and moved toward the bedroom. Her cat struggled, howling and hissing. A protective little thing, better than any watchdog, for sure.

She tossed him in the bedroom and shut the door. The wood shook from the force of his attack on the other side. Paws reached from underneath the door, swiped at the air, and she bit her lip. He’d calm down in a few minutes.

She hurried back down the hall and returned to the couch. “Now, where were we?”

“Right about here.” He squeezed a breast, pushing her backward again.

So much for hoping a cool down would improve his foreplay technique. His other hand went to the waistband of her jeans, unbuttoned them, and he shoved his fingers inside.

Unprepared for his invasion, she squirmed against the roaming hand. This *man* reminded her of a randy high school virgin. Eager, clumsy, and boring!

In fact, her nipples hadn’t even puckered in arousal. Damn. Did she really want to do this?

Sex was sex. But she found more pleasure and arousal by herself than she did with him. She lay there, contemplating her options. The fact she actually had to think about it helped make her decision. As she started to push him away, he screamed and jumped off her again.

He flailed around the room. When he turned in his mad dance, Fluffy was attached to his back. Laughing out loud, she rescued her cat before Roger hurt him. Once she had the spitting feline in her hands, she said, “Roger, I don’t think this is going to work.”

“I think you’re right. You and your rabid cat have a good night.” With that, he slammed out of the house.

Oh well, maybe next time.

Flopped on the couch, she released Fluffy. As he flew from her lap and out of the room, she groaned at the retreating cat. Men.

Who needed them?

Chapter 3

Luca didn't give a shit, he pouted. A little sulk while he nursed his bruised feelings wouldn't emasculate him. Never in his life had he wanted to kill a man more, but all he could do was hiss and jump around like a fucking bunny. Yeah, some man he was.

'He's a cat, Roger,' she'd said.

If only she knew how very wrong she was. The longer he lived here the harder it became to mask himself from her. The need to become Luca and mark her as his grew stronger with each passing day.

He'd refused to stay in the bedroom with her. For the second night in a row, he'd missed out on watching the innocence of her relaxed features, the soft sigh that passed her full lips as she dreamed and the small smile gracing her mouth as deep sleep captured her.

Down the hall, the usually closed bedroom door stood partially open. His heart swelled. She'd thought of him. Even was willing to bet she missed him. He sure as hell missed her. Tomorrow, he'd rejoin her.

Flopping on his side, he closed his eyes and tried to get some sleep. A muffled noise caused his eyes to pop open.

He strained his ears forward then jerked back when the sound repeated. On all fours, crouched low to the floor, he crept down the hall. He might be angry, but he wasn't stupid. If Claudette lay in bed sating her unfulfilled body, he would watch.

He craned his head around the door, expecting to see Claudette in the throes of passion by her own hand. Instead, an unknown man straddled her lower body, his hand pressed against her mouth.

Caterwauling, he raced forward and launched into the air. Claws dug into skin, teeth sank into flesh as he landed on the head of the assailant. The attacker screamed and grabbed him by the scruff of the neck.

Hissing, he struggled to free himself from the man's strong grasp, but the man hurled him across the room. Pain exploded throughout his body as he slammed into the wall. Dazed by the impact, he slid to the floor with a thud. Stars shot in front of his eyes, and he shook his head. With effort, he came to his feet.

The human inside the cat churned, clawing forward. Fighting for control, he pushed the instinct to emerge aside.

"Fluffy!"

The sound of a hand striking cheek vibrated through the room. Then came Claudette's cry of pain. Roaring with rage, he stopped the battle with concealment and allowed the transformation to take place. Prickles started in his gut, spreading like wild fire to his extremities. A feeling of elasticity passed over him as his muscle and bone popped and stretched into human form. Morphed, he gasped in labored pants, crouching on the floor.

Head lifted, he scanned the couple on the bed with his gaze. Claudette's eyes had rounded into huge blue saucers of horror. The assailant's hand muffled her scream.

"Shut up," the attacker said as he cuffed her on the side of the head with his free hand.

Snarling, he sprang forward, tackled the man and sent them both crumpling to the floor. Pain shot through his scalp as the goon yanked a fistful of hair and the force of the wrench turned him sideways. He lost his grip on the man and flipped onto his back, then spun onto the balls of his feet and squatted low.

The assailant jumped up and crossed the room, laughing hysterically. "You stupid fucker. I knew it was you. You are so predictable. Your hero complex is your own worst enemy."

He narrowed his gaze on the man. Darkness cloaked the room, not allowing much in the way of vision, but he was positive he'd never met him. "Who are you?"

"Don't you mean, what am I?" His outline disappeared, replaced by the small silhouette of a cat.

Impossible.

He took a deep inhale with his nose. Nothing. Not even the slightest hint of shifter scent in the air. What was this creature?

The cat jumped into an open window. The light from the street lamp radiated over his tabby coat. Memories of that horrid night which ruined his life rushed over him. The unknown body lying on the floor, pain ricocheting through his head as he was hit from behind, the fire engulfing the building, the glimpse of a fleeing calico alley cat as he fought for consciousness before the fire raged out of control.

Like a fist in the gut, the realization hit him. This cat had set him up.

With a growl, the feline jumped from the window into the tree beside the house and disappeared from view. He stared after him, but whipped around when Claudette moved from the bed.

Wide-eyed, she backed toward the door.

"Claudette, I can explain." He moved with slow steps toward her. She rushed to the corner, grabbed a bat and pointed it at him.

"Stay back!"

Halting, he held up his hands, hoping to keep her calm. "Claudette!"

The bat shook in her hands. "Where the hell is my cat?"

* * * *

A dream. Very vivid, but a dream. Had to be. How else could her adored cat evolve into a naked man? A well endowed man, by the little she could see in the darkness. Maybe the promise of sex with Roger had caused her deprived body to finally lose it, and she'd conjured up a fantasy man from one of her dreams in retaliation.

He stood in front of her, hands in the air.

"I'll ask again, where is my cat?"

"Claudette..."

"How the hell do you know my name?"

This was freaking surreal.

"If you'll listen for a moment, I'll explain." He lowered his hands.

She brought the bat back in a perfect batting pose. "No way. Put those puppies back up!"

"Okay, okay." The man raised his hands to his shoulders.

Shuffling to the left, she grabbed her robe, then backed to the bedroom door and flipped on the light. The brightness honored her with a vision that made her gasp.

Dear lord, he was perfect. His tall well-muscled body exuded sex. She wanted to run her hands along his washboard stomach, up to the rippling muscles of his chest and over his broad shoulders. Long, dark hair framed his strong, stubbled jaw. And his grim set lips gave him an aura of mystery. Moisture gathered between her legs. Eyes wide, she took in his long, thick aroused shaft, and her mouth parted.

"Claudette, I'm warning you, there is only so much I can take."

Desire-filled green eyes met hers. Fluffy's eyes. What? She snapped her mouth closed and motioned toward the coverlet on the bed. "How about covering yourself?"

As he grabbed the bedspread and draped it across himself, a wave a disappointment hit her as his fabulous body disappeared from view. She'd asked him to do it, but damn, she regretted it now.

"Explain yourself." Her grip relaxed on the bat. If he meant her any harm, he'd have done so by now. Besides, he'd just saved her life.

"Claudette. I'm Fluffy. By the way, we need to talk about your choice of names."

"You can't be Fluffy, you're a man. Fluffy's a cat." Though a stranger, he seemed familiar to her. His intense green stare unnerved her as Fluffy's had on countless occasions.

"If this is what it will take to prove to you I am who I say I am, then so be it."

Before her, his skin altered to a purplish hue. Black fur sprouted, coating his flesh. His face shrunk, elongating as whiskers budded from his cheeks. Shocked, she dropped the bat and covered her mouth with her hands. The striking man had shrunk into none other than her beloved pet.

Her last thought as she fainted was that magic does exist.

Chapter 4

Luca transformed back, rushed to Claudette and scooped her up against his chest. Pleasure pulsed through him, and he closed his eyes.

Finally.

Her smooth skin pressed alongside his was almost too much to bear. His fingers itched to caress her, this time with his hands, no fur or padded paws to hinder the sensation of Claudette.

Awareness of the room he stood in consumed him. The bed, a beacon, called him. He had to get out of here before he did something stupid, like mate her right here and now. Down the hallway he carried her and laid her on the couch. As he straightened, he raked a hand through his hair.

Surely, she would feel less threatened in here.

This was not how he'd envisioned coming out to Claudette. He'd rehearsed endless possibilities in his mind, but not one of the prospects included a burglar he'd inadvertently lured here.

He sat on the edge of the couch and smoothed her blond hair off her face. Cupping her hand, he brought it to his mouth. The warmth of her skin heated his lips, and he sighed in delight.

'One day' was finally here.

She moaned, her lids fluttering open. Crystal blue eyes rounded as she focused on him. She inhaled sharply, jerked her hand from his grasp and bolted upright.

"Claudette, I'm not going to hurt you."

She watched him warily. "Am I supposed to just trust you? A man who apparently hid himself from me for the last two months?"

Her words struck him as if she'd actually hit him. She had every right to be mad, but it didn't make it any easier to hear. "You're right, I've given you no reason to trust me, but I swear, I will not hurt you." Tension eased from his body as she relaxed, but disbelief still showed on her face. "Where would you like for me to start?"

"How about how the hell you can change into a cat?" Her eyes rounded in horror. "I can not believe I just asked that. A question like that should never come out of a person's mouth."

A smile tugged at his lips at her dismay. It was never easy for traditional humans to hear their world was not as simple as they viewed it. She needed to work through her emotions, accept the inevitable. "Why is that?"

"Because it doesn't exist. It's make-believe. Fantasy. I have to be dreaming and for some reason, my mind is refusing to wake up."

"You're not dreaming. If you were, would you be able to feel this?"

Before she could stop him, he grasped her face between his hands, capturing her lips with his own. Electric heat slammed through him, and he groaned. The kiss was far better than his dreams. He caressed her cheeks with his thumbs as he traced the outline of her bottom lip with his tongue.

A moan came from her. Parting her lips, she granted him entry. He plunged his tongue into her mouth, stroking the recesses. Heaven.

Now was not the time.

He slowly raised his head and gazed into her heavy-lidded eyes, smiling when she whispered, "Oh my."

"There's more from where that came from. But not right now."

Her cheeks flushed at his promise.

"Now that you're aware you're very much awake, what would you like to ask me?"

"What are you?"

Luca grimaced at how she phrased the question. He was as much a human as she, though with a little added bonus. "We are called shape-shifters."

"We?"

"There is an entire race of shifters out there, living among the world."

"Why are you hiding in my apartment?"

There would be no more lies between them. "I'm hiding from the cops for murder."

She gasped and kicked him squarely in the chest, sending him crashing to the floor with a thud.

* * * *

Claudette jumped off the couch and hit the floor running. A murderer had been living in her house for two months. Police. She had to call the police.

Fluffy cursed, his feet pounding after her. The bedroom door seemed so far away as she raced down the hallway. Mere inches from the threshold, a blow from behind sent her flying into the air. She screamed, landing on the wood floor with a smack. Kicking out blindly, she caught him in the gut. He grunted, and his hold on her relaxed.

Desperation gripped her throat. She belly-crawled forward and struggled out from under him. His strong fingers wrapped around her ankles. As he pulled back, she dug her nails into the wood. With a growl, he flipped her over and yanked until she straddled his thighs. The weight of his upper body trapped her underneath him. A shriek tore from her throat. Reaching out, she tried to claw his face, but he grabbed her wrists and pinned them to the ground above her head. She wiggled and squirmed, anything that might relinquish the hold he had on her.

"Be still."

Hurt shone in his eyes. She stopped struggling.

"If I wanted to kill you, don't you think I've had ample opportunity over the last two months?"

That made sense. She nodded.

“I’m going to release you. We’re going to go back to the living room to talk. No more dramatics. Okay? I’ve had my fill for the night.”

Again, she nodded. He released her and stood. Cool air replaced the heat of his body. She shivered at the loss of his warmth, and standing, watched his retreating form. He’d lost his wrap somewhere in the struggle. The light gleamed off his ass, so taut it gave the saying ‘you could bounce a quarter off it’ a whole new meaning. She followed him into the living room, and as she rounded the corner, he was wrapping himself in his blanket, covering that delectable butt. Damn.

“Sit.”

She hurried over to the couch and sat. A question came to her, and she opened her mouth to speak, only to snap it shut when it occurred to her that she didn’t know his name.

What in hell had possessed her to name a male cat Fluffy? The minute she’d called him by it, he should have bitten her.

He pierced her with that mesmerizing green gaze, interrupting her thoughts. “I was framed.”
“Framed?”

Fluffy stood beside the fireplace. Long lines of weariness etched his features, and she wanted to stroke them, ease the tension with her touch.

What? She shook her head in denial. Not thirty minutes before this man had been a cat—a freaking cat for God’s sake—and now, half an hour later, she longed to touch his face. What the hell was the matter with her? She forced her attention back on his words.

“I think I was at the wrong place at the wrong time.” He raked his hand through his chin length dark hair. “Like an idiot, I’d let my car run out of gas on the Interstate. It was late. I walked to a convenience store, filled my gas can and went inside to pay. The clerk was lying on the ground.” He crossed the room and stared down at the unlit fireplace. “I’ll never forget how I felt when I saw the body, Claudette. I just stood there, staring, unable to grasp what was happening.” He turned, and she gasped at his shattered expression.

“I can still see it so clearly. He was just inside the door, spread eagle on the floor, blood pooled around his head. The look on his face.” He shuddered. “I knelt beside him. There was so much blood. I had no idea what to do. Then someone hit me from behind and I blacked out. When I came to, the place was engulfed in flames.”

Revulsion, horror and pain all crossed his features. With each emotion she searched for any sign that he lied. If at any moment she thought he was full of crap, she would run back into that bedroom, lock the door and call the police. “Did you call the cops?”

He closed his eyes and nodded. “As soon as I made it outside. For the life of me, I can’t figure out why they believe a murderer would call 911, but the next thing I knew, I’d been handcuffed and arrested. I was so calm. Knew I hadn’t done anything wrong. Not one shred of worry, until the gun came back covered in my fingerprints. And then I found out the clerk had been shot and the bullet matched the gun.”

“What about the store surveillance? Wouldn’t it show what happened?”

He jerked away from the fireplace and paced the tiny area between the couch and loveseat. Tremors shook his fingers as he thrust them through his hair and laughed harshly.

"The damn thing burned in the fire. Any evidence that would have proven my innocence was destroyed."

"I take it you escaped by shifting."

"Damn right I did. I'm lucky to have this ability, or I would be one of those innocent people tried, convicted and locked away for years. An open and shut case. They had the gun, the body and the perpetrator."

He had a point, and she didn't blame him for using his ability. The idea of being locked away for a crime she didn't commit was terrifying. She'd been accused of shoplifting once. No matter how much she declared her innocence, no one believed her. Fluffy was lucky. At least he had the chance to prove his innocence.

The thought jolted her. How quickly she believed his words, yet she knew he was telling the truth. "What about being hit from behind? Didn't that lend evidence toward your innocence?"

A sardonic grin spread over his attractive face. "And there is the crux with this ability. Shifters heal exceedingly fast. By the time the cops arrived, it was a scratch on my head. You can't claim you were knocked unconscious with a mere scratch."

Fluffy crossed the room, and as he sat beside her, the couch cushions dipped. Elbows resting on his knees, fingers knotted together, he turned his penetrating gaze on her. Jesus, his eyes were phenomenal. Expressive and warm, hiding nothing from her, so deep she could get lost gazing in them. She gulped. Wayward thoughts! Wayward thoughts! Get back to the task on hand. Turning her head, she broke the contact. "What about the fire?"

Fluffy sighed, and when she glanced back, he now stared straight ahead. "Charged me with arson."

Her eyes widened. "Geez. How did they explain away that you called in the crime?"

"Murderer's remorse. They figured I didn't mean to kill the clerk, just rob him. Somehow I shot him, panicked and lit the place up to cover my ass. Then completely freaked out when I realized what I'd done. Claudette, I was so composed. I thought I had nothing to fear because I hadn't done anything. That calm sealed my fate."

Poor guy, he'd been to hell and back. At that moment, she silently swore to help him in any way possible. "Do you have any idea who did this to you?"

"I didn't have a clue. Until tonight."

She inhaled swiftly as understanding dawned. "The burglar. He turned into a cat, too." Oh my. So much for swearing to help him. She was already in over her head.

"I remember seeing that cat flee the scene."

"But why would he come looking for you? I mean, the cops already think it's you. So what does he have to worry about?"

“His scapegoat had escaped. A murderer can’t have loose ends running about the city. I’d search for me too. ”

She nodded.

“I think I was supposed to have died that night. And when I didn’t, I ruined the real killer’s plan. I’d already foiled his original plan by walking into the store.”

“What are you going to do?”

“Find that cat.”

They sat in silence as she digested the information. “How did he know where to find you?”

“The only thing I can imagine is, he saw me leave this house in human form but only saw Fluffy in the house. Plus, he’d have been able to smell a shifter’s presence.”

“Smell?”

“Shifters can smell other shifters. He has thrown me, though. When he was in here earlier, there wasn’t even the faintest scent of shifter in the room.”

“Is it possible he is something other than a shifter?”

He ran a hand over his face and pinched the bridge of his nose. “If so, I have no idea what kind of creature he is.”

Chapter 5

She believed him. Relief hit him and caused him to sway slightly on the couch. The alarm that had crossed her face as he'd confessed would haunt him for a long time. Fear wasn't an emotion he ever wanted to see reflected again in her eyes as she gazed at him.

Peering sideways, he watched her out of the corner of his eye. The pressure of her thigh rested against his. The bare knee exposed by the slit of her pink terry cloth robe called to him. To keep from reaching for the tempting flesh, he clenched a handful of the blanket wrapped around his waist.

Her expression grew thoughtful. "Is there anything else I need to know?"

"Actually, yes." He gave a low laugh.

Her eyes sparkled with curiosity. "What have I not been told?"

"My name. I'm sure as hell not going to let you continue calling me Fluffy."

She grimaced, color flooding her cheeks. "I apologize for the name. I really do."

Before he could stop himself, he reached over and squeezed the uncovered knee. "Make it up to me. Say my name. Luca."

The tip of her pink tongue snuck out to wet her lips, then her lips pursed as they spoke the two-syllable word. "Luca."

A primal urge to mate her right there overcame him. Without thinking, he bent forward, only to stop when she leaned back. Damn it, he had to get control of himself or he'd scare her off before they'd even begun.

Her gaze wandered over him, and he looked down. The thick down blanket was still wrapped around his waist. Definitely not ideal clothing for his current condition. Way too easy to just throw the blanket aside and carry out his desires. "I think we need to get me some clothes. I can't very well go around wrapped in a bedspread, now can I?"

"No, I guess not." A pink hue rose to her cheeks.

How transparent her thoughts were. Biting the inside of his lip, he struggled not to grin like a complete fool. "You would like me to, though, wouldn't you?" Playfully, he winked at her.

"I can't...can't believe you just asked me that." Pink cheeks deepened to a pretty shade of crimson. She shifted her gaze, looking anywhere but at him.

He wanted to continue the lighthearted flirting, but fear of pushing her farther than she was ready to go kept his mouth shut. With a sigh of regret, he let her off the hook. "Up for an adventure?"

She turned to him, an expression of disbelief drawing her arched brows together. "You're kidding? This hasn't already been an adventure?"

Laughter rumbled from his chest. "I meant, would you like to break into my apartment with me so I can grab some clothes? Now that I no longer have to remain a cat, I would like to get a few necessities."

"How did you leave this apartment if you don't have clothes?"

Pushing off the couch, he walked across the room, pulled back the crimson curtains hiding the bay window and lifted the seat of the window bench. A sharp gasp came from behind him.

"Oh my God! I didn't realize that opened."

"I know." He pulled out the clothes he'd hidden there.

"How did you know?"

"I opened it and found it empty." He laughed at her chagrined face. Damn, he loved her. "I figured if you ever discovered the storage space, you'd think the clothes were left by the last tenants."

"You had it all figured out, didn't you?"

"Not everything. I only have this. I never imagined I would be able to be Luca here, so I didn't see a need for more than a change of clothes."

"What makes you think you can stay here?"

It never crossed his mind she'd actually fight him on staying here. Hell, it was home to him, too, admittedly as a cat, but still his home. Though telling her that would be a fatal error in judgment. "There is no room for debate on this matter. The real killer is out there. He's already broken into your house once and he'll do it again. It will be over my dead body before any harm comes to your lovely one."

"Oh. Well, in that case, I change my mind. I have plans for that body of yours, so it better stay alive."

He reared back. Did he hear that correctly? Was she flirting? By the look of her wide eyes and open mouth, she was just as shocked as he.

"I meant...to say..."

"Exactly what you said." Striding to the couch, he pulled her to her feet and drew her tightly to his chest. He claimed her mouth in a gentle kiss. Lightly, he rubbed his lips against hers. "I'm not planning on dying, Claudette," he whispered. "There's too much left unfinished between us."

Confusion clouded her eyes. She had no clue how important she was to him. That he loved her and meant to spend the rest of his life worshipping her. It would be fun showing her what her position in his life meant. Smiling, he quickly kissed her lips, loosened his embrace and moved his hands to her hips. "Do you plan to go to my apartment in your robe?"

She jumped under his palms.

"Oh! Let me get changed." She pulled away from him and ran out of the room.

Aware that Claudette changing could be an ordeal, he dressed, then chose a magazine off the cream-colored ottoman and thumbed through the pages. Grumbles and complaints floated down the hallway.

Women! How hard was it to grab a pair of jeans and a shirt? Ready to go, he yelled, “Why don’t you wear that powder blue sweater? It looks wonderful on you.”

A crash came from the bedroom.

“Claudette, are you okay?” Walking toward the sound, he stopped cold at her furious stance.

“You bastard!” she shrieked.

* * * *

Frozen in anger, Claudette could only tremble. Wooden steps moved her down the hallway. The red haze of fury obscured her vision, causing Luca’s tall form to blur as she approached. Toe to toe with him, she slapped his face. His head swung to the left. Needle-like pain stung her palm and brought a rush of satisfaction.

Slowly, he turned shocked green eyes on her as he raised his hand and placed it against the red imprint that now marked his face. “What the hell was that for?”

“How dare you!”

“Jesus Christ, Claudette! What did I do?”

“You’ve been living in this house for two months. Two months, Luca. As a fucking cat. The entire time you were also human. Oh my God, the things I did in front of you...Damn it!”

Shaking, she planted both hands on his bare chest and shoved. As he fell backward and sprawled onto the floor, she spun on her heel, huffed her way back into the bedroom and slammed the door behind her.

He’d witnessed everything.

She threw herself onto the bed. Arms and legs crossed, she sat scowling at the door.

The knob turned, then rattled. She quirked an angry brow at the door. Did he really think she’d be stupid enough to keep it unlocked?

“Claudette, unlock the door.”

“Hell no!”

The door rattled harder. “Claudette! Open the damn door.”

“Go away.”

“It’s not as bad you think.”

She laughed harshly. “Let’s see, Luca. In the last hour I’ve found out the Twilight Zone is a real place, my adored cat is really a human man, and my every move has been watched for the last two months. I think I have the right to be livid. Now go away!”

A heavy groan echoed through the white door. The sound of his footsteps faded as he walked down the hall.

He didn’t try explaining himself very damn hard, now did he? To hell with him. Watch her for two months and then just say ‘fine’ when she said ‘leave’. Jackass.

She'd spilled her guts to that damn cat. Poured her freaking heart out about how lonely she was, how much it sucked to have men not notice her. How she'd never find him. The one she'd marry, have children with, grow old with. Mortification made her cheeks heat to an uncomfortable temperature.

Not only that, she'd done things that lonely people do. Wallowing in self-pity on more than one occasion, she'd come home with a half gallon of chocolate ice cream, sat on her couch and ate the entire thing in one sitting. Jesus, he must think her a disgusting pig. Really, who but lonely pathetic depressed people did that? She cringed. He'd probably only kissed and made eyes at her because he was scared to death what she might do if he rejected her.

Her anger deflated as quickly as it had risen.

She really couldn't blame him for not telling her. Who would want to deal with her on a daily basis anyway? He'd probably seen the lack of men at her door and knew to stay hidden. That *if nobody else wanted her then there must be something wrong with her* kind of self-preservation. She sighed. Looking at it from that viewpoint, his reveal to save her life had been pretty sweet of him. And here she was, pissed off because he'd kept a secret he'd every right to keep.

Flopping onto her stomach, she rested her chin on her palm. If she were honest with herself, she'd have to admit she liked him. Well, as much a person could like someone they'd only met an hour before.

He was also hot as hell, in a dark, mysterious, real manly sorta way. Nothing like pretty boy Roger. No, Luca was all male and, good Lord, could he kiss. Roger had kissed like he'd been lapping water from a bowl. Luca was mind-bogglingly exquisite at it. Slow, thorough and dominating. Shivering at the memory, she pushed off the bed. As much as she'd like to keep him, she should let Luca off the hook. He didn't really want to be here.

Opening the door, she hurried down the hall. "Luca?"

No response.

She walked into the living room. "Luca?"

Empty.

She stepped into the dining room. No.

Kitchen? No.

Glancing down the hall, the bathroom was empty, too.

"Luca?" she called one more time, to no avail.

Disappointment made her eyes burn with tears. He'd really left. Not only did he not try to explain himself, he'd taken the opportunity to get completely away from her. She had no one to blame but herself.

Sighing, she returned to the kitchen. Ice cream sounded like an excellent idea right about now. As her hand closed around the cold container in the freezer, a knock sounded from the front door. She scowled. Who could possibly be visiting after midnight?

She strode into the living room and yanked open the door.

“What...” Her voice trailed off as a huge bouquet of wildflowers greeted her. Luca’s head popped over the top with a cautious but warm smile.

“There have been numerous times over the last couple of months I’ve wanted to apologize for something I’d done. Tonight, I can. I’m sorry, Claudette. But let it be known, I have not regretted one moment of my time with you, and if I had to stay your beloved cat for all of eternity and never be Luca with you, I would have done so.”

Emotions overwhelmed her, and she burst into tears. The smile slid off his face, replaced by a deep frown. “Claudette, I didn’t mean to upset you more. I apologize.”

“How could I possibly be upset? No one’s has ever said sweeter words to me.” She covered her face with her hands and sobbed.

“Come here.” He wrapped his arms around her, and as he shushed into her ear, she leaned into his embrace. Was it possible to fall in love within hours? Stepping out of his embrace, she wiped the back of her fingers across her wet eyes, then took the beautiful bundle of flowers from him and stepped back into the kitchen. She opened the cabinet and grabbed a vase. When she straightened, Luca leaned against the doorframe, arms crossed over his chest. She’d been too shocked earlier to notice he’d changed into his clothes.

God almighty, he was a vision to be seen. The faded jeans he wore rode low on his hips and clung to the muscular thighs, his white tee strained against his chest and bulging biceps. Her mouth went dry. One hundred percent lickable. She wanted to charge him, knock him to the floor, mount him and ride like the wind.

“Does this mean you’ve forgiven me?” he asked with a teasing smile.

“For now.”

Laughing, he pushed off the frame and took the vase and flowers. She could only stare as one corner of his mouth tilted in a seductive grin while he leaned over to fill the vase with tap water. His long, strong fingers grasped the delicate glass. Fingers that could work magic on her. Oh, how she wanted them to. Sex with Luca promised to be a life-altering event.

He finished with the flowers and placed them on the window ledge above the sink. “Here?”

Throat too parched to allow words, she nodded. His gaze shifted to her lips. Instinctively, her tongue snuck out to wet them. Desire leapt in his eyes. The room seemed to shrink, overwhelmed by this man. Panic churned in her stomach. She shifted, slid around him and left the room.

Coward.

Chapter 6

With a frown, Luca watched Claudette leave the room. What had just happened? He followed her into the living room. In a frenzy, she moved around the tiny area, stacking magazines, brushing off the coffee table, replacing the remotes by the TV. Fighting a smile that he'd flustered her, he backed off. She wanted him, that he had no doubt. But she'd been through a lot in a very short amount of time and needed a little space to absorb it all.

As she folded the cream afghan, he asked, "Are you ready to go?"

She paused in mid-fold, bewilderment drawing her face into a scowl. "Now? Don't you want to wait until morning?"

"Daylight will only hinder our adventure. Do you have a large bag?"

"Yes. Why?"

"We'll need it."

"Again, why?"

"Fluffy has to have somewhere to hide."

She stared at him in confusion.

"Claudette, I can't go back to my apartment as Luca. I'd be asking to get arrested."

She closed her eyes and shook her head. "Of course you would. I'm sorry. I'm tired and it's taking longer than it should for my mind to understand simple conversation." She glanced down at herself and sighed, "I still need to change, so let me do that and I'll grab the bag."

She rushed from the room.

Giving in to the weariness which had worked its way into his bones, he slumped into an upholstered chair. Damn, he was dog-tired. With his fist, he rubbed gritty eyes. This really could wait until tomorrow night, but he wasn't looking forward to the awkward situation of where he'd sleep tonight. He'd be damned if he'd spend the night on the couch. She needed her space, but he'd only go so far to offer it. Relinquishing his place beside her in bed was one of the things he refused to give in on. But if they spent a few more hours in each other's company, nature would take its course, and they'd have to wind up sleeping together in totally different sense.

At least he still had that chance.

Earlier, when he had spotted her shaking body, he'd known he was in deep trouble. The fury vibrating from her had terrified him, positive he'd ruined any chance with Claudette.

A smile tilted the corners of his lips. When her small hands had planted in the middle of his chest and shoved, she'd surprised the hell out of him. Even more surprising, her strength. Not a meek little kitten, but a hellcat with long claws, definitely a formidable opponent in bed. As his thoughts treaded on dangerous ground, he shifted uncomfortably. How much longer would his good will last? He didn't just want her, he needed her. Now.

“Ready.”

Claudette appeared around the corner, duffle bag in hand, wearing the powder blue sweater he’d suggested. Smiling, he pushed off the chair, gave her quick directions to his apartment and instructed her to pack his clothes after he transformed.

“Pack your clothes?”

“You’ll see. I’m going to change back into Fluffy. Do you want to leave the room?”

“I’ve seen you transform twice now. I think I am okay to stay.”

He shrugged, pretending indifference to her decision. When in all truth, the thought of changing in front of her made him uncomfortable. Turning his back to Claudette, he grimaced. Suck it up and just do it. He threw his head back and rolled his shoulders. God, it shouldn’t be this hard. At least once a day he changed. But with Claudette watching, he felt like an awkward schoolboy trying to ask a girl on his first date.

To block out his surrounding, he closed his eyes. The first pops started as his bones compressed, his skin tingled as fur sprouted over his body. She gasped. No turning back. His clothes loosened as he shrank inside. The fabric fell heavily on top of his head. Opening his eyes, he groaned and used his head to burrow through the fabric. This part sucked. As his head popped out of the leg, light momentarily blinded him. She stared down at him, eyes round. For both of them to get used to this would take time.

When she did not move, he meowed and popped the duffle bag with his paw.

“Oh!” She shook her head, then retrieved the garments from the floor and stuffed them into the bag. He made himself comfortable on top of the clothes. The zipper closed, then everything went black.

The bag swung violently. Weightlessness made his stomach rise into his throat. Then the movement settled and he flopped to one side of the bag, the clothes falling over him. What in the hell?

This did not bode well for him.

As she jogged down the steps, he bounced around as if in a dryer cycle. A tuft of hair caught in the zipper, and he recoiled, howling. Damn, Claudette! There was a living creature in here.

When she unzipped the bag, he leapt out. The hair along his spine stood in attention.

“What?” Her eyes rounded with confusion.

With a disgusted growl, he dropped the matter and waited for her to start the car. He stood on his hind legs and watched out the window to make sure she didn’t get lost. The city outline blurred as she sped down the road.

They pulled in front of the complex, and he sighed. Piercing Claudette with a stare, he reluctantly climbed back in the bag. She must have comprehended his silent warning, because she was much gentler on the trek to his front door.

The sound of a key entering a lock made him purr in happiness. The moment she entered the apartment, she opened the bag. Pleased beyond words to be on solid ground, he immediately morphed. She turned around and gasped at him standing there, nude and smiling. As her gaze wandered over his body, his shaft rose and she quickly looked away. "Don't we need to be quick about this?"

Damn it, she was right, and it was difficult for his body to remember that. To occupy himself, he went into the master bedroom and opened his drawer. After pulling on a pair of black boxer briefs, he went to work loading the duffle bag with items he required.

When she entered the room, he paused. God, she was gorgeous. The beams of the full moon glinted off her pale hair. Desire slammed into him, and he straightened. Unaware of his attention, she trailed delicate fingers over his bed, longing shining in her eyes. His cock responded. Damn, but he wanted her to look at him like that.

* * * *

The soft bedspread invited her. How she wanted to climb up on that bed and open her arms to Luca. He wouldn't deny her. So why not do it? Just say 'come and get me' and let the inevitable begin.

Because he was all male. Yeah, she'd done the deed on more than a few occasions. But Luca was different. Even his kisses were unlike anything she'd ever experienced. Sex with him promised to be explosive. For *her*. What if she disappointed *him*?

Soft footsteps fell behind her, and she tensed. Perhaps she was about to find out. As he ran his fingers through her hair, he grazed her shoulder, causing goose bumps to scurry over her arms. He draped her hair over one shoulder, exposing the right side of her neck to the night's cool air. The warmth of lips below her ear heated her skin.

Strong arms circled her. The feel of his hand on her belly as he pressed her back against his chest sent flames shooting downward. His erection pressed into her bottom. Hard and ready. She wiggled closer, and he groaned.

"Damn, woman."

Before she had time to even think, her shirt had come up and over her head, her bra on the floor. Shocked, her hands flew to her chest to cover herself.

"Turn around, Claudette."

Slowly, she did as he commanded. When she faced him, he grabbed her wrists and pried her shield away. "Don't ever hide yourself from me. I take great pleasure in just looking at your magnificent body."

Desire raced through her blood at his words. Let him look, take his fill. Relaxing, she stood before him, breasts bared, stiffened nipples aching for his touch. A growl sounded from deep within Luca as he lowered his head and took one peak into his mouth. She grasped his head, arching back as he rolled, sucked and nipped. Each action fed the sensations coiling low in her belly, and she moaned.

He searched for the clasp of her jeans, unbuttoned them, and in one swift motion, pulled both her panties and jeans to the floor.

Seconds later, he swooped her up into his arms and laid her on the bed, stood and watched her. "Spread for me, love."

She swallowed. No way had she heard him correctly. Spread? And just let him look? Embarrassment heated her skin.

"Please, I want to see you, Claudette. And not like I have in the past. I want to see you wide, wet and waiting for me."

Okay, she had heard correctly. She spread her legs a fraction of an inch and froze. God, he wanted to see. Let him see. Don't be the disappointment you were worried about. Closing her eyes, she parted her legs wide. The air rushed over her mound, making her very conscious of what she'd done. At his sharp intake of breath, she peeked out one eye. Lust shone bright and potent on his face. Wetness flooded her core. She'd never imagined allowing a man see her like this could be erotic. But watching him devour her pussy with his eyes turned her on. When he reached out and circled her clit with one finger, she gasped, pivoting her hips closer to the touch. He graced her with one more caress before he removed his hand.

"What do you want, love?"

She stilled.

"Tell me."

How could she express what she yearned for? She just *needed*. "Please, Luca."

With a crooked grin, he lowered his head and ran his tongue over her swollen nub. His teeth grazed the clit. "God, you taste so good."

The words increased her ache to excruciating. "Please. Now. Please."

A satisfied masculine chuckle answered her cries. "As you wish."

Two long fingers slid into her and caressed her inner wall. The pressure of his tongue returned to her clit, with fast and purposeful flicks. The coil inside tightened and she grabbed a handful of Luca's hair. He moaned, and his finger thrusting became more intense.

"Luca!" She panted. God, she needed release. Now.

Lifting his head, he said, "Come for me, Claudette."

He'd barely brushed the clit with the tip of his tongue when the pressure burst into a spray of pleasure, encasing her entire body as she screamed. The intense explosion lulled into contentment and she drifted back to reality. Smiling, she stretched and sighed.

A low, seductive chuckle sounded from him. "Satisfied?"

"Oh, we are far from done. I won't be satisfied completely until I have you pounding into me."

* * * *

As his eyes widened, she pushed him until he lay flat, devouring with her gaze the exquisite man before her. Taut muscles defined his torso. A light dusting of dark hair trailed over his chest, into a fine line that disappeared beneath his boxer briefs. The thin cotton did nothing to conceal the massive bulge under the fabric. Her breath caught.

His muscles bunched as she glided her fingers over his stomach to the waistband of the briefs. She hooked her fingers into the elastic and slid the material down powerful thighs to defined calves, over his toes, and let it fall on the floor beside the bed. His erection twitched in anticipation.

Not in the mood for any more games, she grasped his cock in her hands and stroked him. He shuddered under her touch. Raising her head, she kissed the tip and licked away the salty bead gathered there, then sheathed the head, drawing her lips back over the end. Luca groaned as she laved the ridge with her tongue. Strong fingers entwined in her hair and massaged her scalp, encouraging her to take more of him.

“Please, Claudette!”

Her body throbbed, pleading for release. Enthrilled by the sounds of his pleasure, she took him completely into her mouth, moved up the length, rotating her tongue as she went. He grunted, only allowing her to perform this action for a matter of seconds before he lifted her away. Astonished, she voiced her protest.

Passion darkened his face as he came to his knees on the mattress. Anticipation curled low in her belly. He stepped off the bed, grabbed her waist and flipped her onto her stomach. Pulling at her hips, he urged her onto all fours. The head of his cock pressed against her pussy and she rubbed against him, encouraging him to drive forward.

“Say it, Claudette.”

“Luca!” She begged. Never one to voice her passion, she bit the inside of her lips to keep from shouting what she wanted.

“Say it! I want to hear it from your lips.”

Wanting him so bad, she didn’t argue. “Fuck me, Luca.”

He thrust into her, and she gasped as her body stretched to accept his size, then he pulled out. Fingers bit into her hips, propelling her back.

“Faster, Luca!”

He grunted in response, but did her bidding. Pounding into her, his controlled pants increased the tension gathering in her body. Each plunge pushed her closer to the edge.

“Harder!”

“You like it a little bit rough, don’t you?”

“Yes,” she screamed. One hand left her hip, sliding around her waist until he probed the folds between her legs and rubbed her aching clit in a repetitive motion. Her body exploded, an orgasm so intense she shrieked. As he hammered into her, the exquisite pressure rebuilt.

“Luca!”

“Scream for me again.”

She shuddered a third time, her climax tearing out her mouth and into the still night air. Twice more he thrust before yelling his own release. Hot come poured into her, wetting the inside of her thighs. He collapsed forward. The bulk of his weight forced her onto her belly and she enjoyed the feel of his body crushing her down.

After he withdrew, he bit her ass cheek and she yelped. Then he climbed on the bed and lay behind her.

She leaned into his embrace as he rained kisses along her shoulders.

“That was amazing,” he said.

An understatement. Earth shattering fit the experience more. She’d had sex before, but nothing compared to what he’d just done to her. Tingles resided in places she didn’t know could tingle, making her feel thoroughly sated for the first time in a long time. The arm wrapped around her waist tightened, drawing her back closer to his chest.

Muffled noises come from the living room. She lifted her head to listen. Cursing, Luca stiffened behind her. The warmth of his body disappeared. Flashlights blinded her and the sounds of cocking guns ricocheted in the room.

“Freeze,” came a voice, and shielding her eyes, she froze. Oh God. Cops. She moved to cover her exposed body.

“I said freeze.”

“Can’t I cover myself?”

“Sorry, ma’am, but we have no idea if you are hiding a gun in that bed. We got reports of screaming coming from this apartment, and considering this belongs to a suspected murderer, we came to check it out. What are you doing in here?”

She glanced around, trying to see where Luca had gone. A black cat lay curled up on a pillow, pretending to sleep.

Chapter 7

Luca's furry body shivered in rage. If the group of men surrounding Claudette weren't cops, he'd permit himself to emerge and beat the bloody shit out of them for refusing to let her cover herself.

He opened one eye and peered at the scene before him. Five policemen had their guns drawn and aimed at a naked Claudette. Though she squinted against the brightness of the flashlights, fear shadowed her face.

"Please allow me to cover myself." Propped up on one elbow, she used her free arm to cover her breasts and drew a leg up, hiding her lower body.

"Foster, find the little missy a shirt," one of the cops said.

Foster rummaged through the closet and grabbed a blue button-down dress shirt, then tossed it to Claudette. She thrust her arms into the sleeves and wrapped the fabric around her. His shirt swallowed her, the hem resting just above the knees. Tension eased out of his taut feline body. The material would conceal her from prying eyes.

"Stand, please."

She rose from the bed. Pretending her movements woke him, he stretched his front legs forward and flexed his paws. As he sank his claws into the soft pillow, he pictured the offending officer's face. With a wide yawn, he stood and hopped from the bed, pressed his frame against her calves.

"Is this your cat?"

"Yes, sir."

The cop who did all the talking cupped her elbow. "Let's take this to the living room."

He chased after them as the man led her out of the room.

"Have a seat, Miss..."

"Richards."

The officer in command pointed to the brown leather sofa, and she sank into the seat.

He leapt onto the couch and crawled onto her lap. Tremors passed through her fingers and into his back as she stroked him. Bumping his head into her hand, he hoped to express some kind of comfort.

Damn it to hell, she should not face this alone. Who was he kidding? She shouldn't be facing this at all.

"Miss Richard, I am Detective Cormic. I'm the head investigator for the Russell Bellevue murder case," the cop said. "Would you mind explaining to me how you and your cat have come to be inside a known murderer's home? Naked at that?"

The strokes ceased on his back.

Hurry! If she hesitated with her answer, they would know she was searching for an excuse. "I broke into the house."

Heart nearly stopped, he yelped his protest. Damnation, what the hell was she doing?

"And the screams?" Cormic's lips twisted in mock intrigue.

"Um...I lied earlier. The cat really isn't mine. When I got here, it rubbed against my legs and startled me."

Cormic rolled his eyes. "So, the cat that was yours, is suddenly not." He paused. "Miss Richards, I should remind you that you have the right to remain silent. In fact, I would suggest it."

Meowing in disapproval, he closed his eyes. Damn, what was she thinking? He might as well have stayed in human form. At least then he could have done the talking. At this point, she would be charged no matter what he'd done to prevent it.

As she stared at the detective, she lifted her chin.

He gently unsheathed his claws and tapped the skin of her thigh with a warning.

She jumped under his paw but lowered her chin. "The cat's not mine. I was thrown by your question and just answered 'yes'."

"You're a talkative little thing, aren't you?" Cormic moved closer to her. "Okay, I'll bite. The cat's not yours. Why did you break in?"

Don't do it, Claudette. You're digging yourself deeper.

"Look around. There's a bunch of nice stuff here to pawn. I'm broke and need the money."

Pulling up her bank account would prove that an utter lie. He growled in frustration. Damn it, woman.

The smug expression on Cormic's face irked the piss out of him and he craved to bite it off. She wasn't a liar. Too pure of heart, she couldn't tell a lie to save her life. He scoffed to himself. This being a prime example.

Cormic sat on the coffee table. Resting his elbow on his knees and steepling his fingers, he raised a brow in an arrogant expression. "So, how did you break in?"

"Key," she said with a confident nod.

If Cormic's brows lifted any further, they would merge with his hairline.

"You have a key?"

"No... there was a key lying under the doormat."

Fuck! Bowing his head, he lightly shook it from side to side. This was his fault. Her sleep deprived brain prevented her from thinking clearly.

The cop gave her an exasperated look. "Enough games, Miss Richards. Why are you here?"

"I just told you."

"Fine, have it your way. Foster, read Miss Richards her rights and handcuff her." Cormic hooked a thumb at her as he rose from the table.

As Foster moved forward, she stiffened. Luca hissed.

Foster grabbed her by the arm and hoisted her to her feet, brought her left arm around and snapped the handcuff on her wrist. "Miss Richards, you have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can be held against..."

He watched, helpless to do anything. Lord, how did it go so wrong? They'd just been making love and now this?

"What about the cat?"

"Since it's not your cat and we know it doesn't belong here, we'll call animal control to take it off our hands."

On all four legs, he arched his back and spit at the man. Over his dead body would he allow the pound to get their hands on him again. Hell, if they trapped him, dead would be exactly how he'd wind up. Escaping jail proved to be a piece of cake compared to the pound. When you can shrink into a cat, slipping through the bars is nothing. However, a gate the size of a box, with bars only wide enough to stick a paw through was a different matter all together. The one time he'd been captured by animal control, he'd almost been euthanized before he'd found a way out of the godforsaken place.

Shivers raked his body at the memory.

"Okay, I lied, it is my cat. Please don't send him to the pound. He's all I have."

Claudette's bottom lip trembled, unshed tears shone bright in her eyes.

His heart twisted from her worry. Standing on hind legs, he butted his head against her dangling fingers cuffed behind her.

She gasped a sob. Tears slid down her cheeks as she looked down at him.

He met her shining blue eyes and meowed once again. If she understood cat, she'd have heard him tell her he loved her.

"We'll leave the cat here for now," Cormic said.

Foster grabbed her by the upper arm and pushed her toward the door.

When the door closed, he ran to the window. The police loaded her into a patrol car on the street below. He morphed as the last patrolman drove away, sprinted to his room, dressed, packed his bag and left the house.

Once outside, he adjusted his baseball cap low over his eyes. Irony was a jokester he could deal without. Here he thought daylight would hinder this adventure, but right now, daylight would be an added asset. The visibility of his wanted face made this dangerous and wearing sunglasses at three in the morning would only draw attention to him.

He stayed in the shadows as much as possible. The cops had taken Claudette's purse with her, but thankfully, she'd tossed her car keys on the dining room table. Sidling up to the car, he thrust the key into the lock and opened the door, pausing only to throw the duffel bag in the backseat before hopping into her car and driving off.

Speeding was a definite no. He didn't need to get pulled over. Nevertheless, he found himself constantly pulling his foot off the gas to decrease his acceleration.

What felt like an eternity later, he parked the car across the street from the county jail. He surveyed his prey. This would not be easy. Escaping jail was one thing, breaking in, another.

He got out of the car, then jogged across the street and glanced around. Deserted. Stepping behind the bushes, he converted to Fluffy and dragged his fallen clothes further into the shrubs using his sharp teeth. Lord, he hoped they would still be here when he got back. With the luck of the night, some hooligan would find his jeans and make off with his stuff. If it happened, it happened.

As he passed each window, he jumped onto the red brick ledge, striving to catch a glimpse of Claudette. Not a trace of her in the ten rooms he inspected. On the eleventh try, he found success. On a metal chair in a stark room sat Claudette, being questioned by a detective, her hands still cuffed, but in front.

Luca dashed around the building, up the front stairs, and hid behind a gray cement ashtray. Time seemed to crawl by while he waited for someone to leave. Finally a young woman swept out the door and bounded down the stairs. He bolted through the opening and ducked under a chair.

Damn, it was bright. His black coat would stand out against the white walls.

Overhead, the watch camera swiveled from side to side. Not a single person occupied the area. The camera shifted to the left, and he darted down the hall to the fake plant in the corner.

He took it back. Daylight would have sucked. Thank God for nighttime. The graveyard shift was dead. Creeping down the hall, he hid behind different objects until he lay crouched under a side table before the room that held Claudette. Minutes ticked by. When the door opened, he tensed.

“Lynch, show Miss Richards to an empty cell.”

Lynch, or at least that’s who Luca assumed he was, rose from his desk and picked up a ring of keys, which jangled as he shifted through them one at a time, then decided on one, went into the interrogation room and escorted Claudette to the cell area.

The detective left, giving him the all clear to follow the policeman. He made it to the jail cells as Lynch slammed the bars closed. Her chin quavered as she rubbed her wrist where the cuffs had chafed.

As Lynch left, footsteps reverberating on the concrete walls, Luca debated revealing himself to Claudette but decided against it. Getting her hopes up would be foolish, and he might not prevail in this. He scurried back to Interrogation.

Settling under the table, Luca watched Lynch drink two cups of coffee and eat half a sandwich before he finally rose. In the middle of his desk sat a large ring of keys. Thank God! The camera swiveled from left to right. When it pivoted in the opposite direction, he jumped onto the table, grabbed them in his mouth and hopped to the floor. Damn they were heavy. He raced to the holding area, slipped through the bars and dropped his burden at Claudette’s feet as if it were a mouse.

“Luca!” she whispered, scooped him up and planted a kiss on his nose.

* * * *

Pressing her nose into his fur, she squeezed him tight. Happiness caused her to giggle like a school girl. The last few hours she'd spent terrified, wondering what had become of him.

He wiggled from her grasp.

"Fine, I'll get my ass moving," she whispered.

Hand shaking, she tried key after key until one slid into the slot and turned. The click of the lock sounded like a gunshot in the quiet hallway. She froze. When no one came to investigate, she gripped the bars in her fists and lightly pushed the door. Tension knotted her shoulders as she tried to keep the door from creaking. As soon as enough space opened, she slipped through. She glanced at the four other cells on the hallway. Two were empty. In the other two, the inmates slept. Careful to keep her footsteps silent, she made her way down the hall, in the opposite direction of the way the cop had brought her in.

A movement in the corner caught her attention. She looked up just as the surveillance camera leveled on her. *Crap!* She took off running. At any moment cops would flood the other end of the hallway. Luca went by her as she yanked open the door. She flew down the steps and passed an emergency exit door. Stumbling to a halt, she backtracked and slammed out the door. Alarms blasted around her. The sharp blare pierced through her brain as she ran, and she clasped her hands over her ears to muffle the deafening noise, fear squeezing her heart that bullets would fly past her head at any second.

Luca sprinted past her, stopped at a bush and meowed.

Spying his clothes, she gathered them and when he took off, charged after him. They ran for what seemed like forever while police sirens wailed in the background. Sweat poured into her eyes, making them sting. She tried to inhale, succeeding only in short gasps of breaths. *Damn it, she didn't run. Hell, she didn't even exercise. If they didn't stop soon, she was going to keel over from overexertion.*

They entered a dark alley and hid behind a large dumpster.

Lightheaded, she leaned against the wall, breathing deeply.

Before she knew it, Luca was beside her, reaching for her. She fell into his waiting arms and rested her head on his chest. *Safe. She was finally safe.*

He grasped her upper arms and gently pulled away, cupped her cheeks and kissed her forehead.

"Are you okay?" he whispered.

"I am now."

Smiling, he dropped his arms, took the clothes and dressed.

She wrapped her arms under her breasts and shivered. Tonight had been the longest night of her life, and things looked far from over. Exhaustion weighed heavily on her. The bags under her eyes felt like they hung to her knees. She needed sleep. Now. "Luca, I'm not sure how much farther I'm going to make it."

Concerned eyes turned to her and he nodded. "I have somewhere we can rest."

He stood, his fingers searching for hers until they enclosed her hand.

“We have to hurry. Sunrise is soon, and it will be more dangerous during the day.”

Sure enough, the first colors of day were breaking into the darkness. Shades of orange, red and yellow crept across the night sky.

He guided them through the city and into a wooded area.

Feet dragging from exhaustion, she opened her mouth to beg rest. Before she could voice her request, Luca stopped before a huge fallen oak, propped slightly off the ground by a boulder.

Pure conceit etched his features. With a grand gesture toward the tree, he said, “My lady.”

She looked at the tree and back at Luca. Smugness shone on his face. Was he joking? Facing him, she raised her brow in an unspoken question.

His amusement set her teeth on edge. Laughing at her cranky, sleep deprived self could cause him physical harm.

“Luca! Really. It’s a freaking tree stump.”

“Yes, but...” He swept open...leaves?

Wait a minute. She peered closer. The leaves were attached to a tan sort of fabric. Why, he was a genius. When looking at the tree, it appeared as if the season’s fallen leaves had settled around the old oak. No one would suspect they camouflaged a hidden space.

She stepped inside. There wasn’t much to see but an ugly green cot with a pillow and wool blanket, a few bottles of water and a couple packs of crackers. His smile stretched to a grin.

Lifting his shoulders, he said, “Before you found me and brought me in, I had to have somewhere to hide.” He paused. “Please, lie down and rest. I’ll keep watch.”

Not having to ask her twice, she sat on the cot but didn’t lie back. Instead she said, “Luca, please hold me.”

By his intent look, she wondered if he’d refuse her, but to her joy, he climbed in beside her and took her in his strong arms. She rested her head on his chest. The rhythmic beat of his heart thumped against her cheek. With a lazy finger, she traced the rippling muscles of his bicep as he stroked her hair and back, whispering lulling words into her ear.

Within minutes, sleep took her.

Chapter 8

Luca jerked awake, and the bark of the tree filled his vision. He blinked. Where in the hell was he? As Claudette snuggled closer into his chest, memories of the night before hit him and he tightened his arm around her. They were safe, at least for now.

He worked his way out from underneath her, rose from the cot and grabbed the green wool blanket, then tucked it around her body.

A growl came from his empty belly. He snatched a pack of crackers, and popped one in his mouth. Salt and peanut butter ambushed his taste buds as he chewed. One measly package would not fill him, but hopefully stave off the worst of his hunger pangs.

As he ate, he spaced around the tiny space. Sunset came soon, and they would venture back out. Until this issue was resolved, night would be their friend.

Somehow, within hours, everything had become very serious. Never in a million years would he have believed he and Claudette would be on the lam together. Now he wasn't only fighting for his freedom, but hers as well. If he were caught, she would be arrested as an accessory. Breaking her out of jail had ensured that.

He sat on the dirt floor beside the cot and covered his face with his hands, then raked his fingers through his hair. Head leaned back, he stared at the bark of the fallen oak. Tonight they would go in search of the killer. Once and for all, this would end.

Claudette shifted on the cot, and he met her blue gaze. "Did you sleep well, my love?"

Her sleepy smile twisted his gut. "Yes, thank you. Any idea what time it is?"

"No, but we won't be leaving until dark."

Her smile turned into a sly grin. "Well, what should we do to pass the time?"

"Oh, I don't know, perhaps a little of this." Leaning over, he kissed her. "Or this..." He caressed her breast. "Or maybe some of this." His fingers worked their way into her pants, probed her hidden folds.

"I think that's an excellent idea. Why don't you come here and join me?"

He moved to the lie on the cot, but she surprised him by rising. "What..."

"Lay down, Luca. It's my turn to ride you."

He obeyed. Desire shafted through him at the thought of her straddling his waist. Instantly uncomfortable, he opened the fly of his jeans.

As he lowered his pants, she smacked his fingers away.

"Uh-uh. You got to take my clothes off yesterday. Today I undress you." She grabbed the waist of his pants and pulled them off. Positioned at the end of the cot, she crawled up the length of him, paused, took the tip of his cock into her mouth and inched up his body, teasing his erection with her rose-tipped nipples.

He lifted his hand to cup her breast, but again, she slapped his hand away. “No touching.”

That wasn’t physically possible. If Claudette was making love to him, he would damn well touch.

As she pulled his shirt up his chest, she followed the exposed skin with her tongue, scraping her teeth lightly across his erect nipple. Need shot through him and he went to touch her hair.

She knocked his hands from her. “I’m not telling you again. No touching.”

Curious as to what she would do, he reached for a third time.

“You were warned.” She stood and unbuttoned the shirt of his she still wore. She slid it off her body. Nude, she bent over him. When she grabbed one of his wrists and tied it with one of the long sleeves of his shirt, shock and pleasure rocketed through him.

“Claudette...”

“Not a word. If you don’t listen, you pay the consequences.” She grabbed his other wrist, lifted it over his head and tied it down, then, hands on hips, looked him over, satisfaction pursing her soft, pink lips.

On the cot again, she straddled his midsection, pushed his shirt up and rested it over his head.

He shook his head to dislodge the fabric covering his eyes, but without the use of his hands, was unsuccessful. Unable to see, he could only feel. Her nails softly scratching the surface of his chest, the wetness of her pussy on his abdomen, oh God, and her mouth enveloping his cock. The inside of her mouth was heaven, just the right amount of suction and friction to drive him crazy with passion. Her small fingers grasped him, pumping as her mouth sucked.

“Claudette, please...” he yelled through the fabric.

A delicious naughty chuckle answered him. Her weight shifted, and then disappeared. He could not detect her presence anywhere on the cot, and struggled to see past the fabric. Then cool hands pressed against his heated chest, the insides of her thighs brushed his hips. He strained forward, cursing the restraints, wanting nothing more than to grab her hips and pull her down on him.

Her wet center grazed the tip of his cock and then backed away. The minx was teasing him. He’d remember that for later. Again she rubbed her clit against him. He ground his teeth in frustration. At this rate he’d last only seconds before he came. Finally, she eased herself onto him. Her sigh of pleasure caused him to fist his hands.

She began rocking against him, her nails slightly scraping his stomach with each slow motion, causing his heart to pound against his chest.

Pure exquisite torture. She created an arousal so fierce, he felt his insides would burst. He needed her to ride him. Hard.

“Please.” He groaned.

“What do you want, Luca?”

The little hellcat had turned the tables on him. Last night he’d made her beg, tonight she’d make him. “Ride me, baby. Hard and fast.”

She increased her speed. The harder she slid down on his cock, the more her breathing came in short, sharp gasps. Visions of her, head thrown back, hair cascading down her back, breasts jiggling as she rode him poured through his mind and pushed him over the edge. Groaning in blissful agony, he exploded inside her.

She moved on him a couple more times before her pussy tightened around him and her screams of pleasure rang in his ears. Collapsed on top of him, she panted, her hair brushing his sides.

“Release me, minx.”

“Oh, I don’t know. I kinda like you like this.”

“Release me now and I’ll be generous.”

* * * *

This could be fun. Claudette pushed to a sitting position. Tugging one of the knots, she freed one of his wrists.

He shoved the shirt off his forehead. His green eyes held a dangerous glint. Had she taken it too far? With reluctance, she undid the other wrist. He flipped her onto her back and loomed over her.

“Naughty Claudette.”

She swallowed. Yes, she’d pushed him too far, but not in anger. No, he wanted revenge—delicious revenge. Her body tingled in response to the awareness. He forced her arms overhead and tied her in the same fashion she’d done him.

“You use cruel and unusual punishment. I must teach you a lesson about playing with fire.”

He didn’t cover her eyes, but lowered his head and captured a nipple in his mouth. Electric sensation radiated from her aching peak, traveling to the heart of her. She strained, yearning to thrust her fingers into his wavy, thick hair. Cruel and unusual punishment was right.

He placed his hands on her knees, then pushed her legs apart.

“Last night, I took you from behind. Do you remember, Claudette? The feel of me as I slammed into you?”

She gulped. No one had ever talked to her like that. Nodding, she stared at him. The dark, dangerous and determined expression increased the building pressure between her legs.

“Do you want to know what I am going to do to you now?”

“Yes.”

“I’m going to fuck you, Claudette, like you have never been fucked. You are going to experience something you’ll never experience again.”

What did he mean? Was he going somewhere? Before she could voice her question, he claimed her mouth. Concerns vanished as his tongue tangled with hers. His kiss turned hungry and demanding, his fingers probed the cleft between her thighs, coming to rest on her throbbing clit. Savage strokes caused her to peak, but as she reached the edge of ecstasy, he stopped the motion.

Muscles clenched with unreleased passion, she whimpered in protest.

He continued to make demands of her mouth, seductive plunges as their tongues danced.

Straining against her restraints, she ached to grab him by the back of the head and hold him captive against her lips.

Lost in the magic of his kiss when he pinched her tender, stiff nipples, she writhed in barely contained desire.

“Oh God.” She moaned. His every touch, grasp and caress became torture, inflamed her skin until she feared she’d be reduced to ashes. Frustration and pleasure blended together, and tears gathered in her eyes. “Luca!”

“Not yet, my love. You’re not ready.”

Was he kidding? Her body screamed for release. Stretched tauter than a rubber band, she’d snap if immediate release did not follow his maddening torment.

His fingers entered her pussy, his thumb pressed against her clit. He thrust with his fingers as his thumb moved back and forth across the rigid bead. Spiraling up, she teetered on the edge of climax when he pulled from her a second time.

A shriek of frustration passed her lips. “Damn it, Luca!”

“Almost there, love.”

Almost where? If she didn’t climax soon, she’d die. The tip of his cock pressed against her tight center. He rolled her nipple between his fingers, wrenching a scream from her throat.

“You’re ready.” With that, he plunged inside her, lifted her hips into his hand, driving harder and faster. The muscles of his arms bulged in his exertion, his powerful thighs rubbed the insides of hers with each thrust. As he gave a harsh groan, his hot juices filled her.

Then he pulled out, and she moaned her objection. Stunned he’d leave her unsatisfied, she jerked in surprise as his fingers found and circled her clit. He shifted his head between her thighs and flicked the sensitive bud once with his wet tongue. The start of her orgasm peaked instantaneously. As she arched upward, his teeth sank into the flesh of her inner thigh. Warmth spread through her, exploding in her belly and burned through her limbs. Tears choked her throat and her body tensed in a rigid posture. Oh God, she needed release now.

His teeth pierced her other thigh.

Violent spasms shook her body. She bucked against him then screamed in a blinding, blood-rushing climax. With one last fierce convulsion, shards of pleasure vibrated into her womb. As she collapsed, tears spilled from her eyes.

She blinked and Luca’s blurry image cleared. Pure, possessive arrogance etched every line of his face.

“What did you just do to me?” That was no ordinary orgasm.

“Claudette, my love, you’ve just been mated.”

Chapter 9

His thumbs lightly traced the bite imprints. Patterns that now marked her linked his soul to hers for all of eternity. If she were to die before him, he'd spend the rest of his days waiting for death so he could rejoin her in the hereafter.

Leaning over her, he loosened the bonds.

"What do you mean, I've just been mated?" She lifted up on her elbows, staring at him.

"You're mine, Claudette."

She held up her hand. "Wait. What?"

"You belong to me. No one else." He rubbed her inner thigh. "These mark you as mine."

Eyes wide, she shifted her gaze to her spread legs where two bruises marred her skin. "Did you say I was marked as yours?"

"Yes."

She gasped in what he swore was outrage.

"What the hell, Luca? Don't you think you should have talked to me first! Jesus Christ." She sat up and shoved him.

He tumbled off the back of the cot, landing hard on his shoulder. Grimacing, he sat upright, rubbing at the pain. Okay, so she wasn't too happy about it. Shifters didn't talk about marking their mates, they just did it.

"What does this mean?"

"Calm down, Claudette. It really only affects me. I've linked my soul to yours."

She blinked at him, her face devoid of any emotion. Perhaps outraged was correct.

"These marks connect me to you, you are not connected to me. From this day forth, I live for you."

Tension seemed to ease out her body. "It doesn't affect me. My soul isn't linked to yours. I can still live my life for me."

Pain speared through him at her words. He hadn't expected her to jump for joy, but to worry so quickly if she was eternally linked to him caused his stomach to knot.

"Yes. You can still live your life for you." He averted his eyes, tears burning the back of them. Claudette was the one and he'd do it again, even knowing she didn't want the same link.

"Why, Luca? Why would you do this?"

Blinking, he turned, meeting her gaze head on. "Isn't it obvious? I love you, Claudette."

Eyes bulged, her hand came to rest on her chest, mouth gaped open.

She was so cute speechless. If he didn't hurt so bad inside, he'd have smiled. But forcing his mouth to lift at the corners felt impossible. Her gaze shifted past his shoulders and she froze.

"Luca!" she screamed as he whirled around.

Pain burst behind his eyelids and he fell to his knees, cupping his head in his hands. Blood oozed into his eyes.

“Time to die, bitch!”

The words sounded distorted. He lifted his head. The killer aimed his gun at Claudette, who cringed on the cot. As if in slow motion, the gun fired.

“No!” He threw his body in front of her. The bullet slammed into his chest, searing a path through him. He crashed against the cot, sprawled across Claudette. Heat spread through his chest and he clutched the wound. Vaguely, he heard her scream his name before darkness claimed him.

* * * *

No! Hands shaking, she grabbed Luca.

“Luca! Oh God, please, no.”

“Pity, I wanted him to watch you die.”

Her gaze snapped to other man. Anger seethed as she slipped from beneath Luca. “Bastard!”

With a shriek, she launched herself at the killer and took him to the ground. As she straddled the surprised intruder, the air from his lungs whooshed into her face, and she gagged on the foul stench. The killer grabbed her wrists. She yanked against his grip, freeing herself. Then like a cat protecting her territory, she clawed the bastard’s face, ripping four perfect scratch marks down each cheek. He screamed, flailing against her. His hand flew up, catching her in the chin. A bitter metallic taste flooded her mouth as she bit down on her lips. Reaching behind her, she punched the man in the balls.

The gun slipped from the intruder’s hands and clattered to the floor as he curled into the fetal position, whimpering.

Claudette scrambled after the gun, grabbed the cool metal, whirled to her back and aimed the gun forward. The room was empty. The flap of the cover waved in the breeze.

Adrenaline rushed through her body. Every limb shook as she rose to her feet. She inhaled sharply and released the breath in a slow exhale, then she glanced outside.

Nothing.

As the flap fell back into place, she knelt beside Luca and laid the gun on the floor. The gray pallor to his skin caused her heart to catch in fear. She pressed her fingers against his neck. A faint beating pumped against her fingertips. Tears burned her eyes, and she breathed a sigh of relief.

Where should she start? Blood flowed from his scalp to pool behind his head. For now, she dismissed the head wound. The bullet and where it entered took precedence over anything else; as she probed along his chest thick red liquid coated her fingers. Finally, she found the wound high on his shoulder. Relief hit her hard and she almost collapsed.

“Luca.”

She tapped his cheek twice. “Luca, please.”

His head slumped to the side.

“Come back to me.” Her voice broke over the words as grief gripped her throat.

Clueless as to how they'd come here or how far from civilization they were, she had no idea what to do. If she got lost, she would be of no use to him.

Unwilling to just sit there and watch him die, she hoisted his heavy frame, then arranged him on the cot so he lay more comfortably. She snatched the blanket and ripped it into small pieces, grabbed a water bottle and saturated the cloth. Gently, she wiped at the caked blood on his head.

So much blood on his chest. She reached for a new piece of cloth then poured a bit of water on his skin. With meticulous care, she cleaned the blood from his upper body, taking extreme caution when she came to his shoulder. Though the injury still looked ugly, she could see it heal before her eyes. The black powder-singed edges of his flesh slowly mended together. At this rate, it should be healed before nightfall.

That knowledge did nothing to comfort her. If the wound was healing, why hadn't he awakened? She sat beside him, holding his hand and wiping the tears away as they slid down her cheeks.

The need to feel him against her made her lift his head and cradle him to her breast. Softly, she rocked him and placed kisses on his forehead. She murmured loving words to him even after her throat had gone dry and her voice rasped with each word.

"Claude..." He groaned as he grasped her forearm with a warm hand.

Jerking her head up, she sobbed in relief and hugged his head closer to her. "Luca?"

He moaned in response, head moving from side to side.

"Please open your eyes, my love."

Sparkling green eyes snapped open.

She laughed in relief and pressed a gentle kiss on his lips. "Thank God!"

"Are you okay?" He looked around frantically as he struggled to sit up, but gasped in pain and grabbed his shoulder.

"I'm fine. Please lay down before you reopen the wound. It hasn't healed completely."

"I left you alone with him! Dear God, what happened?" He grabbed her arms, hands shaking. "Did he hurt you?"

She ran her palm down his cheek to soothe the panicked expression. "I'm fine. He didn't harm me. In fact, I think I probably hurt him."

"What?"

"After you were shot, I kinda flipped a little and tackled the bastard. I wrestled the gun away from him and when I turned around, he'd run like a coward."

What little color Luca had left in his face drained, leaving him a scary deathlike shade of white.

"Claudette, he could have killed you! Don't ever do anything that foolish again."

She blinked at the reprimand. "What was I supposed to do? Sit there and let him shoot me?" As soon as the words escaped, she bit her tongue, knowing fear for her drove his reaction.

“You’re right. I have these terrible images of what could’ve happened while I lay here unable to help,” he said and raked a hand through his hair.

“You saved my life. If you hadn’t jumped in front of that bullet, I would be dead.”

At her words, he shivered.

She took him into her arms. “Because of you, I live. Thank you.”

Confusion fogged her brain when pain shattered his gaze.

Chapter 10

Thank you. Not I love you. Not I want to be your mate forever. Thank you.

Anguish compressed his heart and he knew he was slowly dying. His hands shook as he pushed out of her embrace. When he stood, bewilderment clouded her sweet face, and he turned his back. Without looking at her, he said, "I need to step outside for a moment. I won't be far."

He shoved the fabric aside and strode a short distance away. Tilting his head back, he gazed at the starry sky. In the background, crickets chirped their winsome song. The noise grated on his nerves, and he stopped short of hurling a stone to stop the infernal racket. Fucking crickets! What the hell did they have to be so damn happy about?

"Shut up!"

Silence.

Much better.

Lowering his head, he surveyed the woods. This latest attack increased the urgency to find this shifter and eliminate him. Next time, he might not beat the bullet.

Claudette. What was he to do with her?

If he gave her time, she'd come to him. Or at least, he hoped she would. Yes, she feared for his life. Probably would have cried if the killer had succeeded in a fatal shot. But it sure as hell did not make her suddenly love him or want to be with him.

Thank you. He flinched as the words ricocheted through his mind. Unable to cope with the heartache any longer, he swung out and slammed his knuckles into the closest tree. The sound of snapping bone reached his ears. He threw his head back and exhaled a gust of air.

Flexing his fingers, he popped the broken bones into place, smiling as sharp needle pricks cut into his hand.

Tension eased from his body. More calm and relaxed, he turned and made his way back to the hideout. Time to get on the road.

Before stepping into their hideout, he glanced at his hand to check the damage and sighed in disgust. No pain and only the slightest of bruises marred his skin. Damn it, why couldn't a gunshot wound heal that quickly? That one wound would be sore for days.

Pulling aside the cover, he met Claudette's worried blue gaze. "Ready?"

"Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," he lied. "We really need to get going." The words sounded abrupt to his own ears, and he cringed slightly at his actions.

Her eyes widened with hurt. Lowering her gaze, she strode past him.

Ass! He wanted her to love him, and taking his foul mood out on her would not do the trick. "I'm sorry. I'm in a bit of pain and it's causing me to be a little short-tempered."

“I understand.” But she refused to look at him.

He sighed. Life had gone from wonderful to complete shit since making her his mate. Wasn't it supposed to be the other way around? He grabbed her hand and pulled her behind him as they made their way out of the woods.

They walked in silence, the tension between them so thick, it suffocated him. At his wits' end, he whirled around and yanked her against him. Ignoring her gasp of surprise, he wrapped his arm around her waist and claimed her lips. The warmth of her mouth melted away his pain and anger, replacing the emotions with need. He lifted his head and stared into her passion filled eyes. With one last chaste kiss, he released everything but her hand and resumed walking.

A short time later, she tugged on his fingers. Stopping, he turned and looked at her, lifting his brow in silent question.

“This is embarrassing, but I really have to go to the bathroom,” she whispered.

He grimaced. The park was not the greatest place for them to stop. They were still a ways from town and unfortunately, by the way Claudette shifted about, waiting was out of the question.

A gazebo stood to their left. Perfect. She could go behind it and have a little privacy.

“Come.” He gently pulled her hands.

She didn't budge.

He looked over his shoulder. “What?”

“You stay here.”

“Not going to happen.”

“Please.” Her hopping became more frantic.

Groaning, he relented, and she hurried behind the building. He paced as he waited for her return. A minute turned into two, then four. Apprehension shimmied through him.

“Claudette?” he whispered harshly. Nothing. His gut twisted in fear. He ran around the corner and froze in his tracks.

In the process of buttoning her jeans, her head snapped up. “Luca! Damn it!

“What the hell was taking so long?”

“You call taking a few minutes to pee outside too long?”

“Damn it. Don't make light of this. There is a killer nearby that wants us dead.” Rising anger made his words more forceful than he'd intended.

“Fine. Next time I'll whistle while I pee.” Her small hands collided with his chest and shoved him out of the way.

He stumbled as she stalked up the path. Regaining his balance, he threw his hands up in the air and groaned in frustration. Now they were fighting again.

* * * *

Anger propelled her forward as she sped down the path. If she didn't get away from the irritating man for a few minutes, she was likely to do him physical damage. Ever since he'd mated her, confusion had become her constant companion. The ritual had done nothing but show her that Luca was an ass. One minute, sweet and loving, the next, cold and angry. Not one iota of love had come from the wretched man since he woke on that cot.

And *she'd* almost told him she loved him. But he'd grown distant and pushed her aside like she meant nothing to him. Maybe the blow to his head had caused him to forget that he loved her. Hell, maybe his sudden brush with death made him regret what he'd done. Could he undo the mating? Had he already?

That was what had taken her so long to pee. She'd been straining to see the marks in the dark. And failed. Her eyes had burned with tears when she'd realized she had no inkling if she was still his mate. When Luca had come sprinting around the corner, she'd almost died from sheer mortification. Thank God she'd been in the process of fastening her jeans.

She stopped and glanced over her shoulder. Luca lagged about fifty paces behind her and made no move to quicken his steps. Fisting her hands, she whirled and stalked up the hill.

Men! They were nothing but huge pains in the ass. Why did women put up with them? Life had been pretty damn simple with just her and her beloved Fluffy. Enter Luca and life had become chaos. Burglars who turned into cats. Handcuffed and arrested for the first time ever. Not to mention shot at, and her life saved. Twice. Really, what was it about this man that caused such a disturbance in her usually dull life?

Luca shouted her name but she refused to pay him any attention.

A solid mass slammed into her side, taking her to the ground. A sickening snap filled the air. Excruciating waves of burning pain flowed up and down her arm. She whimpered as she stared straight ahead, blinking in shock. Before she had time to comprehend what had happened, hands grabbed her and threw her over a shoulder. Her body jostled from side to side as the ground rushed by. With each bump, sharp needle-like pricks ran the length of her arm.

"Claudette!" Luca's shouts echoed through the park.

She opened her mouth to scream, but nothing emerged. Stunned at her inability to form sound, she struggled to get out of the man's hands. Kicking and flailing, she tried to connect with anything that would cause the man to lose his balance.

Something hard and cold pressed against her calf. A clicking sounded before intense shocks radiated through her, immobilizing her muscles. Paralyzed with pain, she could do nothing but allow the torture to happen. Finally, he relented and she slumped over his shoulder in a daze.

"Not such a hellion now, are you, bitch? I fucked up last time. I won't do it again."

Though she heard the words, she was unable to respond. Stars danced in front of her eyes and her head pounded from the current that had passed through her.

All motion stopped, and he dropped her to the ground. With no strength to break her fall, she landed hard, striking her head on the side of the wooden swing set. Pain exploded behind her eyes, causing her to cry out. Rough hands forced her to sit and he balanced her against a post. She moaned in agony as he yanked her injured arm down by her side. White dots swam before her vision. She shook her head and blinked. In seconds, she was tied. Waves of blackness crashed around her. Unable to stay adrift, she sank into the darkness.

Chapter 11

Why wasn't she screaming? Fear lodged in his throat at her silence. The entire park had an eerie calm to it. His body shook.

Luca, you can't lose it.

He forced himself to concentrate on what needed to be done while he transformed into Fluffy. Moving with stealth, he made his way to the shadows.

"Here kitty, kitty," the killer called.

Luca growled. Arrogant bastard. If he wanted to play cat and mouse, he'd be happy to oblige. Crouching low, he stalked through the bushes.

"Don't you want to know where your lady is?"

Tension made his muscles rigid, but he didn't rise to the bait.

"I'll give you a little hint about what I've already done to her."

Dear God, he'd harmed her. Terror kept him motionless. The man took something from his pocket and held it in the air. A gun? No, it couldn't be. There had been no shots. Maybe he'd used a silencer. His stomach rebelled. Gagging, he almost lost the contents of his belly at the thought she already lay dead.

A repetitive clicking came from the device, a line of blue electric current flashed in the darkness. Jesus Christ, he'd used a stun gun on her. She must have been in agony, terrified. He swallowed hard.

The fucker would die.

Tonight.

Ignoring the instinct to attack, he prowled through the darkness, desperate to find her and see for himself she was alive.

Moments later, he came to a clearing illuminated by the light of a streetlamp and saw Claudette tied to the wood play fort. Chin slumped against her chest, her hair hid her face from his view. He wanted to yowl in frustration. The asshole knew what he was doing this time, using her to fish him out. He searched for any way to get to her in the shadows. God damn it! The only way for him to free her was to show himself.

Look at me baby, come on, lift your head and show me you're okay.

Not the slightest of twitches came from her still form. His heart felt as if a vise compressed it, his breathing came in shorts spurts. She was so still he couldn't even see if her chest rose and fell.

Come on.

Nothing.

Incapable to stop himself, he sprinted forward. Gunshots cracked in the distance and the dirt in front of him puffed up like a waft of smoke as each bullet entered the earth.

Her head jerked at the sound, and relief hit him with such force, his legs weakened for a moment. Retracing his steps, he sprinted for cover.

The killer stepped out of the bushes and strode toward Claudette. Luca crouched low, keeping to the darkness.

“Come out, come out, wherever you are.”

Blue sparks came from the stun gun. Before he had time to blink, the killer thrust the instrument of torture into Claudette’s side. Her body bucked and twitched, face twisted in agony.

A cold chill settled over him.

Fuck Fluffy.

He transformed with a roar and rushed toward her. “Mother fucker, I’ll kill you!”

The man straightened, lifted his arm and pointed the gun at him.

Skidding to a halt, he faced the other man. The beat of his heart pounded his ears.

The killer swung the gun, aimed it at Claudette. “Don’t come any closer.”

“Leave her out of this.”

Malice filled the responding laugh. “She’ll die, just as you will. The only thing I’ll allow you to dictate is who’ll die first. Will you watch her take her last breath, or have her watch you take yours?”

The image his words invoked caused him to stiffen. “Who are you?”

The killer pointed the gun toward the sky and studied him.

Unease settled in the pit of his stomach.

The deranged psycho started pacing in front of Claudette, halted, and shrugged.

“What would it hurt to tell you. Your death was not in my plans of course. You made that decision by interfering.” His steps became more erratic.

“Why can’t I smell you?”

“I knew that question would come from you. My father asked the same thing. A mutant, he called me.”

The man’s agitation seemed to grow the more he talked. He started waving the gun around.

“Half breed.” The man tensed. “I ain’t no fucking half breed.” He pointed the gun to the sky and shot.

Luca jumped.

The man turned a wild look on him. “The bastard had to die.” A hysterical laugh split the night air. “He didn’t even recognize his own son when I walked into the store. It was so fucking simple. Sweet justice.” His eyes bulged and his face turned bright red. “Where’s your shifter ability now, mother fucker? Not so high and mighty with a bullet between your eyes, are you?”

The killer turned his back.

Go. Now. He crept closer to Claudette.

“Then you had to show up and complicate it.” The man whirled, aimed the gun at his chest. “Now you die.”

He morphed the moment the gun went off, leapt into the air and landed squarely into the man's chest. The psycho stumbled back, yelling in surprise. The swing caught him behind the knees. His eyes widened in shock as he tumbled backward. An appalling sound of cracking bone echoed throughout the dark park.

Transforming back, he looked down at the awkward angle of the man's twisted neck. His eyes were open, but no life remained.

Sirens blared in the distance. He raced to Claudette, lifted her head, and scanned the damage the psycho had inflicted. His stomach twisted at the sight of her bloodied face. "Claudette."

Her head slumped back.

"Please, baby."

Tears slid down his face. She was breathing, but for how long? Her breaths were short, shallow. Terror of losing her squeezed his throat.

At the sound of pounding footsteps, he morphed into Fluffy.

Gravel crunching under their steps, the cops ran into the clearing, stopped and surveyed the area.

The detective stood with his hands on his hips, then his eyes widened as his gaze landed on Claudette. "Dear god! It's Miss Richards."

The cops surrounded Claudette, shooing him to the side. Resentment built inside him. One of the cops pressed the walkie-talkie attached to his shoulder and called for an ambulance.

"Sir, I think you'll want to see this," one of the cops said.

The detective stood and followed.

"Well, what do we have here?" The cop knelt on the ground, reached into his pocket, pulled out a pair of latex gloves and put them on. While rummaging around the body, he found the stun gun.

"Foster! Check Miss Richards for stun gun burns." Detective Cormic stood and glanced around. "Bost and Bradshaw, comb the area. I have a feeling Luca Doyle is somewhere close by."

The two men ran off and disappeared around the bushes. Paramedics sprinted into the area, untied Claudette and laid her flat on the ground. Pieces of the conversation drifted to him. He circled the tightly packed group of paramedics surrounding Claudette but couldn't get a glimpse of her.

"Her arm is broken. I'll need a splint."

Broken? What had the psycho done to her before he arrived? He was so fucking stupid. He should have never let her walk ahead of him. His job was to keep her safe. If he'd been doing that correctly, the killer wouldn't have gotten his hands on her. He cursed himself for failing her.

"Luca." Just the barest of whispers, but he heard it.

Jerking his head up, he stared at the fortress of backs. One shuffled to the side, and his stomach twisted. Pain-filled blue eyes met his gaze. Light-headed from relief, he had to sit.

"Miss Richards. Can you hear me?"

She turned her head away, directing her gaze toward the medic.

“Can you tell us what happened?”

Steps quick and determined, he made his way back to his clothes. Everything would come to an end tonight.

* * * *

The world buzzed. Faces loomed above her, their mouths moving but no sounds emerged. The people before her swam in and out of focus. Only one thing stayed locked in her mind—vibrant green eyes. He was alive.

The paramedics lifted her onto a stretcher. Her arms fell limply to her sides and every jarring bounce as they rolled her to the waiting ambulance sent pain into her shoulder. She searched for Luca but didn't see him anywhere.

“Luca,” she whispered again.

A distorted voice came from above. “We’re looking for him, Miss Richards.”

The inside of the ambulance filled her view. The bright lights shocked her, and she closed her eyes against the harshness.

“We’ve found him.” Heart pounding, Claudette opened her eyes and lifted her head. Luca stood underneath a tree, surrounded by cops, fully clothed, handcuffed and watching her. Even with his hair in his face, the reassuring smile he offered her helped her relax.

“Luca!” she called, but the doors of the ambulance had already closed.

The poking and prodding began the moment the siren started. She became more alert with each jab of pain, then they nudged her arm. Burning spread throughout her limb. Clenching her teeth, she hissed against the sensation.

“Sorry, ma’am.”

Fingers pulled at her eyelids, opening them. A pinpoint light burned the back of her eyes. She flinched and tried to turn away. Why wouldn't they just leave her alone?

“Miss Richards, can you tell me how many fingers I’m holding up?”

A hand swayed before her. Two. No Four. No two. Definitely two.

“Two,” she mumbled.

“Very good!”

A cool cloth pressed against her forehead, and she grimaced as he cleansed the area.

“Nasty gash you have there, Miss Richards. You’ll need stitches.”

“Luca.”

“They found him. He’ll never hurt you again.”

Blinking in confusion at the paramedic, she said, “Luca saved me.”

The paramedic stopped his ministrations and studied her.

“He saved me,” she repeated.

The medic nodded. “You will definitely have to talk to the cops. You do know that Luca Doyle is a suspected killer.”

“He’s innocent, other man...real killer.” Disturbed, she pushed away their hands.

“Calm down, Miss Richards, everything will get straightened out.” A needle prick caused a twinge of pain in her arm. She glanced down.

The medic injected a cloudy substance into her veins. “A little something to calm you, is all. We can’t have you hurting yourself.”

She stared at the metal ceiling. What were they doing to him? Her vision blurred and eyelids lowered. She forced them open, only to have them heavily close again. With no strength left to fight, she succumbed to the drug’s effects.

Chapter 12

Luca paced from one end of the tiny cell to the other. The temptation to transform and go to Claudette overwhelmed him but he resisted.

If she hadn't lifted her head and looked at him, he doubted he'd be in this cell right now, but she had and his worries were soothed. Once he got out of here he would hold her in his arms, kiss every inch of her and heal all the wounds her beautiful body had endured.

The clanging of a closing door echoed throughout the holding area. Footsteps tapped on the polished cement floor, and as Detective Cormic approached the cell, he leaned against the bars.

"Seems you were busy tonight, Mr. Doyle."

What did he mean? "If you call trying to save my girlfriend from certain death busy, then yes, I was busy."

"Your girlfriend, you say. Interesting. You do know she was arrested last night for breaking into your home."

"She didn't break in."

"We figured that." His tone dripped with sarcasm like a man talking to a simpleton.

Not sure where this conversation was going, Luca stared at him. "She's not my accomplice."

"We know."

Thank God. Even if his innocence was never proven, Claudette would stay out of jail.

"Tell me, Mr. Doyle, what does it feel like to be suspected of a crime you didn't commit?"

It took a moment for the meaning of the words to penetrate his mind. When they did, he reared back in confusion. Had he really heard that correctly? He could only stare and blink.

The detective reached into his pocket and pulled out a ring of keys. As he sifted through them, one key at a time, he said, "We ran a history on that body. Cody Bellevue. Long history of mental illness. The guy you were suspected of killing turned out to be his father, Russell Bellevue. Seemed they'd been estranged for years. The mother told us her son hated his father, had even threatened to kill him on more than one occasion."

The detective held up a key, swiveling it around. His cold brown gaze met his and with a sigh of resignation, he slid the key into the lock and opened the door. "Anyway, you're free to go."

He stepped out of the cell.

"Collect your things from the front and get the fuck out of here."

Not needing to be told twice, he strode down the hall and out the heavy metal door, stopping only to get his belongings before he hailed a cab and headed for the hospital.

He was free. Free to love, marry, and have children with Claudette, if she'd have him.

The cab stopped in front of the hospital. After throwing a wad of cash at the driver, he sprinted inside, halting only long enough to learn Claudette's whereabouts. He took the elevator to the fifth floor, and then approached her room.

The door stood ajar, and he peered in. Claudette was sleeping on the inclined bed. A bandage rested on the left side of her forehead, her arm lay in a sling, a plaster cast wrapped around it. The most beautiful woman in the world.

Tip-toeing into the room, he sat in the recliner in the corner and watched her sleep. His gut clenched, guilt gnawing at him. He was the reason she lay here, broken. If she'd have him, he'd spend every waking minute making up to her.

* * * *

A nurse entered the room and checked the IV next to the bed. She turned, jumping when she saw him.

Hand to her chest, she whispered, "Sorry, I wasn't aware she had a visitor."

"What is her prognosis?"

"I'm sorry, I can't divulge that information."

"Can you at least tell me she will be okay?"

Sympathy filled the woman's eyes. "I'm sorry, I can't." She opened the door and stepped into the corridor. "Betty, please get Miss Richard's discharge papers ready," she called to someone at the nurse's station.

Gratitude made him let out a loud breath. The nurse looked at him, winked, then left.

He turned his attention back to the bed and Claudette's open eyes snared him. A tiny smile pulled her lips upward. When she lifted her hand and offered it to him, he rose. Grasping her delicate hand in his, he brought it to his lips. She tugged on his arm, and he climbed into the small hospital bed with her. Claudette nuzzled closer to his side, and he kissed the top of her head. "Sleep, my love."

A few minutes later, her even breathing indicated she was asleep. He squeezed her against him, his heart aching with love. At peace at last, he relaxed and slept.

* * * *

Four days later, Claudette lay in her four-poster bed, grumbling curses at Luca. If the man did not let her out of this bed sometime today, she'd kill him. He'd been treating her like a china doll ever since she'd been released from the hospital, allowed her only to leave the bed to use the bathroom and she was damn lucky she got that.

Luca entered the room, carrying a tray of food. A pretty red carnation jutted out of a glass vase beside the plate. Another damn flower. She stifled a groan. The apologizing had to stop. She couldn't take much more.

Yet he refused to talk to her about anything. Any time the conversation turned serious, he left the room. But he had no problem smothering her in apologies and going completely out of his way to please her. A puppet. Nothing more.

Over and over again, she'd asked him to stop, even went as far as throwing one of the flowers in his face. And now, yet another request for her forgiveness.

Grovel. Grovel. Grovel. She might have wallowed in the glory of his attentions a little longer if she actually got something out of it, but no! Not one touch or caress. Hell, she'd take a grope from him at this point. No sweet words, no endearments. Just a servant, here to please her and it bored the hell out of her. She wanted her man back.

He placed the tray across her lap, lifted the flower from the vase and offered it to her. "For your forgiveness," he said as she mouthed the words. Disgusted, she stuck out her tongue. Desperate times called for desperate measures.

Threading her fingers together, she placed them on her lap and looked into his eyes. "Luca, we need to talk."

A muscle in his jaw jumped, his shoulders tensing as they had the last four days. This time, however, she had the ultimate weapon to make it happen.

"Sure. Let me grab a soda real quick."

Different excuse every day. If he made it out that blasted door, he wouldn't be back for hours. Squelching the urge to kick her feet in frustration, she waited till he almost reached the bedroom door. "Luca, this isn't working. I thought it could, but it's not."

He froze. Guilt at lying stabbed her, but she pushed it away. "I think its best we part ways now before emotions become too involved."

Then she waited, hoping beyond hope she'd finally driven him to his limits.

Rigid, he faced her. His stricken expression felt like a slap in her face. God, she hoped he'd forgive her cruelty. But she saw no other way to make him listen.

"Is that what you really want?"

Her heartbeat stuttered. That had not been the answer she'd expected. Her Luca would have said 'forget it'. Where was the man she'd fallen in love with?

Forcing herself to continue with the deception, she said, "Yes."

His expression hardened. "As you wish."

Turning, he strode out the door.

She sat, gaping at the now empty room. He'd left. Fuck! Tossing aside the covers, she rose from the bed just as he stalked back through the door. Relief made her eyes water. She hadn't been wrong about him.

"Can you not forgive me, Claudette? Do you blame me so much for what happened that you can't get past it?"

She exhaled. Finally, they were talking. "How many times over the last four days have I told you there is nothing to forgive?"

"I brought this on you."

"Luca, I love you. I can't handle all of this coddling. It's too much. I just want my Luca back." He'd grown very still. "You love me?"

"Did you doubt that?" She stifled the shocked laugh that came to her lips.

"You never told me."

"Of course I did." Hadn't she? She gasped. Good God, the one time she'd intended to say it, he'd grown distant and she had kept the words to herself.

She crossed the room and took his hands between hers. "I love you. I want to be mated to you and no other."

His body trembled against her. "You want to mate me?"

"I want us together in the hereafter."

His strong arms enveloped her. She wrapped her arms around his neck as his lips met hers with a fierce urgency.

Pulling back, she said, "Show me how to make you mine, forever."

Green eyes flamed with desire. "Are you sure? Once you do this Claudette, there is no going back."

"I've never been more positive of anything in my life."

A grin full of pleasure and happiness split his lips, and he reached for her hands. "Come, let me show you."

Anticipation fluttered in her chest as he lead her forward and gently pushed her onto the bed. When he climbed beside her, the mattress dipped underneath her.

He pressed his lips to hers, his tongue lightly stroking the inside of her mouth. Sighing, she caressed his arm with her good hand.

He broke the kiss and stared into her eyes. "This is all a matter of timing, my love. But timed perfectly, we will both feel the connection take place."

"Will it be as intense as last time?"

A smile of amusement pursed his lips. "Unfortunately no, but you will feel different."

"How is it done?"

His hand crept up her body and lightly teased her nipple. Shivers of pleasure raced through her.

"By biting my shoulder."

Her brows drew together. "That's all?"

Bent forward, she bit his shoulder, and then pulled back.

"I love that you're so eager to make me yours, but it's not that simple. I'll tell you when," he said, chuckling.

He ducked his head and reclaimed her lips. His gentle, drugging kisses inflamed her as he pushed her backward. Laughing against his lips, she lay back against the mattress. He shifted to her side and broke the kiss. Love shone in his eyes as he stroked her long hair.

“I love you, Claudette.”

Happiness exploded inside her. “I love you too.”

Cupping the back of her head, he lazily rubbed her cheek with his thumb. She pressed her face into his roaming hand, loving the feel of his calloused palm caressing her skin.

He removed his hand and pulled his shirt over his head. Tanned muscles leapt out at her. With her fingers, she traced the steely contours of his chest, enjoying the way his muscles jumped under the light pressure.

A warm hand ran down the length of her arm. Then another light kiss, and he palmed her breasts through her nightgown. As quickly as he, she shed her clothing, excited to feel his bare hands caress her flesh.

She tugged him forward and grazed her breasts against his torso. The feel of her sensitive nipples rubbing against the smooth plains of his chest made her gasp. Luca sucked in a breath. Smiling at his reaction, she continued the motion. The tension in him increased with each delicious swipe.

“Enough,” he said and rolled her beneath him. With his tongue, he circled the rigid nipple.

She closed her eyes and relished the sensations he stirred in her. A pressure built at the apex of her thighs, causing her to wiggle under his brilliant hands.

Then his touch vanished.

Her eyes popped open. Luca stood beside the bed, unbuttoning his pants with jerky motions, his arousal evident by the bulge that protruded forward. Nude, he returned to her. He captured her lips. On a soft sigh, she parted them and flicked her tongue against his. Then he moved atop her, pressing her into the mattress with his weight. Balanced on his forearms on either side of her head, he relieved some of the heaviness as he inserted his knee between her legs.

Adjusting her position, she spread wider to accept him. His cock nudged her center. He lifted his head and stared into her eyes. The depth of emotions there made her heart still. He loved her completely and was not afraid to let her know.

Never breaking the intense gaze, he eased inside her. Happiness, need, contentment and love all battled for position, and caused her breaths to come in pants. Staring into his green eyes, she knew she’d never regret this decision. He was the one.

Slow, rhythmic movements began as they rocked together. Tension rose inside her as he took his sweet time with each filling thrust. She writhed beneath him as she gently scored the skin of his shoulders. Nuzzling her nose into the curvature of his neck, she inhaled the manly scent of Luca.

Eyes closed, jaw tightened with almost unconstrained control, he increased his tempo.

In response to his frantic pace, her body tightened and she moaned. Lifting her hips, she met each powerful plunge. Ripples of ecstasy flooded through her and became a blast of splendid sensation. Arching her body, she screamed.

Her climax seemed to push him into his own release. Tensed, he shuddered against her. “Now! Claudette.”

She sank her teeth in the fleshy part of his shoulder and he convulsed. Fragments of heat pulsed inside her, spreading fire which increased her internal temperature to an uncomfortable level. She moaned, certain she was about to be reduced to cinders from the sweltering waves that coursed through her body.

With one last jerk, Luca dropped against her. The hot spell faded, leaving serenity in its wake.

Tears burned her eyes, and she blinked them away. She understood the essence of mating now. His spirit had fused with hers, frolicking in happy harmony. She felt every emotion he experienced, every breath he took. A connection so profoundly deep, that if one side were ever severed, the other would cease to exist until the day they died. He completed her, made her whole. A peace settled in her body, easing the restlessness which had raged in her soul.

Joy filled her, and she grinned. She would spend the rest of eternity with this man.

And what a love story she'd have to tell their grandchildren one day.

About Esmerelda Bishop

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Three years ago, Esmerelda Bishop put pen to paper. Years of consuming romance novel after romance novel led her to a future she'd never anticipated. Writing. And she hasn't looked back since.

She lives in North Carolina with her husband and four-year-old twins. To learn more about Esmerelda Bishop, visit her at: <http://esmereldabishop.com>

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