



The Challenge

Serena Shay

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Blurb

Marina Jamison is a mystery. As a half-breed shapeshifter, she lives on the fringe of were-jaguar society. Though her love for pride leader Bastian LaRue is forbidden, she finds herself tied to him by a bond stronger than their individual wills, a psychic link born from their one-night stand. When her secret is revealed, she is scorned and excluded. Neither Bastian nor the pride can accept a half-breed queen.

Chapter One

The jaguar rose to his haunches and leaned against the hundred-year-old oak. He was the color of midnight and more lethal than any other predator found in these woods. Curved claws dug into the bark as leg muscles popped and pulled, lengthening to appear human. His spine cracked, widened, and elongated, allowing the man to stand straight and tall.

Fur rippled, disappearing into the pores from which it had come, leaving lightly tanned skin in its wake. The tucked-in waist of a large cat stretched into the ripped abs of a well-toned man. Shoulders widened, forward-bending joints swelled and broke, becoming back-bending elbows. Fingers pushed from paws, reshaping into human hands, while sharpened claws remained embedded in the base of the tree.

Small pointed ears slid into place at the side of his head. Teeth shrank and the muzzle retracted and separated, becoming a human nose and mouth. Last to change were his eyes; oblong slits became dark pupils surrounded by a sea of green and white.

Bastian shivered, the transformation from cat to human leaving him shaky. Thick foliage sheltered him for the few minutes he needed to calm and re-dress in the clothes left for him by his fellow enforcer.

Public nudity was the biggest problem—no, strike that—the second biggest problem with shapeshifting anywhere other than pride land. Humans coming across a full-grown jaguar in the north woods of Minnesota topped the list.

Yet, here Bastian stood, breaking his own rules, senses on overdrive, sweaty from the chase and the quick change back to human form. All because of one young were-cat.

Flashing lights directed him to the casino entrance. The beeps, whirrs and jangles of one-armed bandits scraped against his already frayed nerves.

“Bast, you in the door yet?” Gunner sounded like he was standing right next to him thanks to the tiny bud resting in Bastian's ear canal.

“I'm here, but the next person to get in my way gets eaten.”

“Umm, make sure she's plump and sassy. You can take one end and I'll take the other. It can be our reward for taking down this pot-smoking asswipe.”

“Heh heh.” Leave it to Gun to pull him back from his nasty mood.

Leading a pride of shapeshifting jaguars was a lonely job. Good friends helped quell the loneliness as did keeping busy. An occasional threesome helped fill the time as well, but a mate would be even better. Problem was, he had yet to meet his.

“How the fuck did this kid make it all the way to the casino with buckshot lining his hindquarters, Gunner?”

“Dumb luck.”

“Yeah, well, looks like Ganja Boy's just ran out; northwest corner, closest to the hotel—stumbling out of the head.”

“I see him, but you're still closest. Think you can make the capture without him going ballistic?” The static reply emanated from Bastian's earbud.

“That sounds suspiciously like a challenge, my friend. Watch and learn, grasshopper, watch and learn.”

Bastian edged his way forward through the throng of people. Gentle nudges helped

clear the way. The closer he got to his prey, the faster Dope-head seemed to move, as if he knew he wasn't alone.

"Shit." The boy's quick glance back said it all.

For someone shot in the ass, Bastian's prey moved with surprising speed. While most injuries could heal during a shift, there was always residual tenderness. Apparently not much of a problem for this guy.

Bastian took off after the runner, pushing through the crowds. Choruses of "hey" and "asshole" sounded around him. He would not lose this kid. The grief he'd get from the other enforcers if he did was more than he could take.

Not giving two squats about the people he was running down, Ganja Boy barreled forward into the casino lounge. Overturned tables slid onto the dance floor, knocking over several cars in the human train.

Arms and legs flailed as Bastian's prey neglected to take into consideration the consequences of knocking over twenty or more people. The drunken, sweaty, human-smelling dancers kicked and punched at the rude boy who ruined their fun.

It amused Bastian to watch the little dumb shit get his ass kicked by a bunch of humans, but it was in his best interest to get the stoned were-cat up and out of a public venue before he lost control.

Human stench choked Bastian as he pulled them, one after another, off his prey. For as spring fresh as they tried to make themselves smell, humans failed miserably at the task.

The smell of marijuana drifted up to him. Yeah, his prey was still down there. Shit, and apparently still carrying. Real Mensa material here. Rather than ditching the proof and claiming stupidity, he hung on to it and ran. Did he figure he'd toke up again when he got away?

Bastian reached into the mess of bodies and pulled the boy out. The rest of the enforcers slid into the bar behind him, waiting to take custody of the youth.

"Check his pockets when you take him out of here." He handed the boy over. "Should have flushed it, son."

Young cats like the boy were typical in the pride. Jonesing on testosterone and adrenaline, they needed an outlet for the excess energy. Drug use made things worse. Now, as pride leader, Bastian had to devise a suitable punishment. This was definitely the worst part of his job.

"Gun, I'll..." The smell of sunshine and sex rolled him. Sounds dimmed and lights flashed brighter. His stomach hit the floor with his body soon to follow if he didn't do something quickly.

"Bast, you okay? You're looking pale, dude."

"Yeah." No, he wasn't all right. His freaking knees were weak. "Uh, Gun, I'll need you to smooth things over with the casino manager, 'kay?" At least one body part didn't share the absurd weakness of his knees—he was half-hard from the delicious smell of a woman made only for him.

"Sure, no sweat, I'll play nice to the casino manager. You sure you're okay?"

"Yes." His response came with a bit more gravel than he'd hoped, but all he could focus on was the smell and getting the other male far away from what was his.

"Solid. I'm out." Thankfully, the enforcer had paid enough attention to his leader to know when it was time to go. They couldn't afford to have a go at it here in a public

venue.

There was another cat in the pile and she belonged to him. Hell, he'd found his mate at the bottom of a mass of smelly humans, in a noisy casino and miles from pride land? Amazing.

In a flurry of action, he dug into the remaining humans piled before him, moving them and their scents away from the smell of his woman.

"Please. Get. Off. Me." The husky voice finished the job started by her scent. His cock stretched to full length and swelled fiercely against the zipper of his jeans. If he weren't careful, he'd be a eunuch before he was a mate. Not a happy thought.

Auburn hair, tangled from the recent struggle, came into view as the last human in the pile fell away. Olive green eyes sparkled as he offered her his hand. A shockwave of sexual heat raged from his balls to his head. She wasn't classically beautiful, but her pinchable cheeks and real womanly curves spoke of her earthiness. This was the kind of woman able to take a man of his size and cushion him in her femininity; wrap him in her scent and take his breath away only to give it back with her kiss.

"Thank you." The tips of her fingers barely touched his, but the spark shot clear to his toes and out the top of his head.

Mine.

Sunshine, sex and human scents flooded his system. The closer he pulled her to him, the greater the smell. The sunshine warmed him. The sex thrilled him, but the human chilled him. Where did the human smell come from? Could she be...?

"May I have my hand back?"

"No." Nope, she was his mate. The human smell must have rubbed off on her as she lay beneath the crush of bodies. A snarl rumbled out of him. All those humans touching her brought his cat close to the surface. He pulled her closer, scanning the area for other males, growling under his breath. Warning everyone not to touch her unless they had a death wish.

"Excuse me?" Her struggle made him aware of how tightly he'd been holding her and how exquisite she felt in his arms. Smooth skin, fair enough to flush a deep red from the spankings he would definitely be giving her. Or so he hoped.

"Have sex with me." The smell of sex blossomed around him. She was interested. Damn, she was something with her eyes now almost black and lips pouty.

"What?"

"Come home with me," he whispered next to her ear. "And let me fuck you."

*

"Okay..."

Marina Jamison stood mesmerized by the beautiful sea-green eyes she was sure were looking into her very soul.

Wait. Did she really say okay to a night of sex with a stranger? Oh geez, could she be a bigger slut? Yeah, probably.

She recognized the incredible creature in front of her. He was 6'3" of sinfully delicious, shapeshifting, one-night stand material. Even better, he was a full-blown alpha male to boot. He was exactly what she was looking for.

"Um, what's your name and where do you live exactly?" *Good try at civility, but you still sound slutty.*

"Bastian LaRue and I live about twenty miles west of here on forty acres of the

prettiest land you've ever seen." He moved in closer, leaning his solid chest towards her and whispered, "It's out of the way—private. Perfect for playing. You still game?"

Her head nodded of its own volition. She'd heard rumors about what went on in the woods encompassed by pride land. In hushed tones the female shifters spoke of marathon sex and multiple orgasms, whips and chains; even whispers of multiple partners was news, as sought after as the newest Prada bag. The thought of pleasure, taken to such an intense level, had her on edge.

She'd also heard whispered allegations of the viciousness with which the pride leader dealt with problems. Once, an abusive male had disappeared after a visit from the pride leader. There were no goodbyes, no raging at the pride and its leader, just *gone*, as if he'd never existed. What might he do to a half-breed who dipped her toes in the full-blood pool?

And yet she moved on with him, striving to find a sense of calm as they found the exit. His hand settled on her lower back, firm in its direction. His gait spoke of authority, leadership, a definite alpha.

"Which way?" The demand in his voice sent electric currents skittering through her veins. She glanced his way, meeting eyes, which promised her the thrill of a lifetime.

"T—th—erhm—over here." Calm turned into anticipatory shakes as they drew closer to her car. Her mouthy inner critic split itself in two—a devil and an angel rode her with the pros and cons of hopping in the sack with any stranger, but more so about sleeping with one who was also a full-blooded shapeshifter.

Bastian LaRue was the type of man who'd filled her dreams. Spotting the elusive creature in a crowd was surprisingly easy. While they looked human at first glance, they were not. Taller and brawnier than the average human, they moved with more grace and stealth than their human counterparts did. Shifters were more.

"Keys?" He held out his hand.

This man was more—to the infinity. From behind the open halves of his silk shirt, a hard body enticed her with strength and safety. Mid-length black hair called to her fingers, taunting them to grip the perfect hanks while vivid green eyes promised long hours of sexual satisfaction. However, his musky male scent drew her the most. It rolled over her like a lover's touch, gentle and knowing, but designed to leave her breathless. He would star heavily in future fantasies. Oh yeah, me-time was getting a completely new face.

She gave him her keys, but nevertheless hesitated.

"Are you going to get in?" His voice, low and growling, drew a wet heat from her core.

"I don't know," she whispered. "I've never done this before." Nor, as a half-breed, had she ever been given the opportunity to have sex with a full-blood. Shoot, her unusual family unit guaranteed that she'd never be welcomed into a pride. Now, here she was soon to engage in illicit acts with one of the finest specimens of shifter she'd ever seen.

Things were looking up.

Bastian stepped closer, and her back warmed from the heat pulsing off him. Long fingers brushed the sides of her breasts, drawing the nipples to rigid points. "There's a first time for everything."

Oh yes, there was. Tonight she would climb into her car and willingly go wherever he wanted to take her. She'd allow herself to revel in the pure passion of sex with a full-

blooded shifter, setting aside what would come next. Tomorrow was soon enough to find a nice, boring human and live a nice, boring life.

This was her chance to find out if there was more to sex than the lackluster orgasms found with human partners. For years she'd wondered if there more to it than the grunts and groans, the ooh babies and the repetitive pounding which never seemed to get her close to the elusive orgasm.

Fine hair at the back of her neck stood on end as he moved closer. Shivers raced to her toes as he nuzzled the side of her neck and breathed deeply. His rumble tingled at the base of her neck and vibrated along her spine until it reached the already aching flesh between her thighs. From the erotically charged sound, she knew the growl was no mere request—it was a summons.

A summons she could not pass up.

Chapter Two

Betty Boop, the squeaky flirt, embraced the well-worn seats of Marina's Honda Civic in an oooh baby, look at me sorta way. The cartoon character's sexpot act helped to bolster her flagging courage, every bit of which she needed now—in spades.

Deep growls and hooded glances coming from the perfect example of an alpha male in the driver's seat promised untold pleasures, sex with an edge and orgasms at their finest. He played her body without a single touch, keeping her wet and ready for anything. The twenty-minute drive from the casino to his home sped by in a blur of sexual need.

From the car window, she could see he was right about the beauty and the privacy of the area. Tall trees lined the dirt driveway, ensconcing them in a dimly lit tunnel. Moonlight glanced off leaves weaving together a myriad of greens. Lights and darks, even mottled overgrowth surrounded the car, blanketing them in nature at its finest.

As the car drew to a halt and Bastian got out, she wondered again if she was making a mistake. Yes, she wanted to know the wildness of sex with this side of her physiology, but at what cost? Did she dare risk the loss of her anonymity? She'd hidden for so long behind her talent that it was hard to put herself out there for sex alone.

"We're here." His hand reached out, palm up, ready to assist her from the car. He left her breathless with his considerate gesture. How many men these days opened car doors? A symphony of nature met her as she rose from the car. Water lapping onto the shore and a fresh pine bouquet filled her with a wild yearning. She could run here, be free here. Maybe she could be more, here.

They moved along the dock towards a giant gazebo outlined with twinkle lights. Silky netting hung suggestively around a raised pedestal in the center of the room, a bed hidden within its depths. They were alone, and the incredible man at her back demanded her full attention.

"Shh, pretty kitty." Bastian wound himself around her, calming the shakes racking her body. When had those started? "There's probably a minimum of a hundred things I could call you." His tongue dragged lightly over the whorls of her ear. "But do you know what I would like?"

She tingled as pictures raced through her head. Her body sprawled over the hood of the car, the warm metal teasing her breasts as he pounded into her from behind.

"Wha—what?"

"Your name, darlin', what do I call you when I demand your release?"

A rush of warmth dampened her panties. *Anna, fanna, banana, anything you want, just don't stop.*

Could she be brazen? The secret dirty little girl in her wanted to say those exact words. This was a one-night stand after all, why did they have to exchange names? On the other hand, a bigger part of her wanted this sexy man to know her name, to call her by it as he fucked her.

Warm hands eased beneath her shirt and across her stomach before heading north to free her breasts from their confines.

"You still with me?" He nibbled at the skin behind her ear before kissing a trail

along the tightly strung tendon to her shoulder. Arousal pushed her head back against his shoulder as she sought a closer contact with the fingers alternately tugging and pinching her nipples, sending bolts of pleasure straight to her core. She lifted her chin, readying her lips for his.

Her voice was a dream-sodden whisper only a shifter could hear, even in this quiet place. “Yes.”

His lips pressed softly against hers, sipping at her mouth with a gentle and teasing motion. Each pull resulted in a matching tug at her nipples. He ran his tongue along the seam of her mouth, nipping at the lower lip, demanding entrance.

On a sigh, she opened to him and eased her tongue out; their playful duel quickly became a bid for dominance. With a tilt of his head, he filled her mouth, forcing her tongue into submission. Like a starving man, he ate at her lips, his kiss taking so much from her, giving so much more. Yet, strangely, it was still not enough.

Marina dug her trimmed nails into his forearms when he started to pull away. She murmured her displeasure, hoping to stop his hands from leaving her breasts. It was much too soon for the delicious torment to end. The slide, pinch and roll of his fingers left her nipples wonderfully sore and her body begging for more.

Nimble digits slid down her stomach to the front of her jeans, popping the snap and lowering the zipper. Her breath caught as night air blew inside the windowless building to brush over newly exposed skin.

“Bastian.”

“Yep, that’s me.” Their hands, one large, the other smaller and delicate, with fingers entwined slid past her jeans, fully encompassing her mound. Wet folds parted to allow gentle circles around her clit.

“Now ... who.” Pinpricks of pleasure darted through her body, “are” homing in on her sensitive nipples. “you?”

Small fireworks were already going off behind her eyes, one more circle, one more...

“*Mari—Mari!*” she screamed. The sudden removal of both hands from the pleasurable warmth between her thighs brought tears to her eyes and a broken whisper of unintelligible words moving past her lips. Marina wanted to beg him not to stop, to give her hand back and finish what he started. Frickin’-A she needed to come.

“Perfect,” he whispered. “Time to get you out of these clothes, *Mari*. I want to taste you.”

She wondered vaguely as she came back from her almost climax if she’d ever been in control of this situation. Probably not. What power she thought she had become his the moment he’d found her in the casino tonight. Did his dominance; his aura or whatever you wanted to call it turn her on?

Oh yeah, it did.

In fact, it turned her on, over, up, down and all the way around. Twice. Given the pride's intense hatred of half-breeds, Marina knew tonight would be her only opportunity to immerse herself in illicit activities with an alpha. For one night, she would take what pleasure she could and cherish it as her own secret memory. Marina turned, needing to touch him, only to be denied the pleasure of removing his clothes. The body recently covered was now naked. Her fingers itched to run through the nest of hair covering his perfectly sculpted chest. Each bump on his fully ripped abs begged for her tongue.

Washed out blue jeans had concealed an incredibly generous, and now freed, cock. Her mouth watered at the sight. A plum-like head reached skyward, nestling into the well of his bellybutton. The flesh was nearly as thick as her wrist the closer it got to his body. She wondered briefly if she could accommodate something this large.

Her skin warmed everywhere Bastian's firm hands touched. Supple denim slid down her legs in time with his slow descent. He lifted each foot in turn pulling the jeans free from her body. She couldn't take any more. Not the soft lips and sharp teeth kissing and nibbling their way back up her legs. Nor the promising look in his eyes as his fingers twisted in the string of her panties and pulled. The wisp of silk, sopping wet from their previous play, followed the jeans to the floor. Her near peak earlier left her shaky, but when he leaned in close and blew a gentle stream of air over her hot, moist mound she nearly crumbled.

He gripped her ass, controlling her physically as much as the possessive growl rumbling at the back of his throat did mentally. She was his to play with, his to rule. Only he could give her the orgasm she desperately wanted, only him...

Marina tensed. Where had those thoughts come from? Geez, she barely knew him; he was supposed to be nothing more than a one-time thing, not her master. Why did the thought of it turn her on?

His silken tongue flicked repeatedly against her clit, driving her closer to the edge of insanity. If the torment continued much longer, she would beg for the release waiting to explode around her.

"Bastian..." She panted.

"Not yet, Mari," he mumbled against her. "Don't come yet, sweetheart." His tongue moved lower to lap the cream gathering at her opening. Would they get to the full on sex before she did something foolish like swallowing her tongue? Could she endure the eye-rolling, back-bending, and toe-curling experience she hoped he could provide without begging? Considering the effect his teasing had on her thus far, what were the odds she'd survive the full focus of his attention?

"Please, Bastian, please, I—I need to come." Shoot, so much for not begging.

"No." His mouth moved back up and sucked at the sensitive nub, treating it to a little nip of his teeth. "I'll tell you when to come."

He set her down, leaving her strung tighter than any guitar string. As he stood, he grabbed the hem of her tank and pulled it over her head, throwing it on the growing pile.

"Up on the bed, Mari," he growled. "I want to see you on your hands and knees. Now!"

*

Her descent was slow, arousing. Bastian watched as her beautiful ass lifted, the lips of her pussy stretched, allowing thick juices to weep and glisten on the soft bare flesh. The smell of her sex, her need, aroused him further. Before the night was over, he'd fill her with pleasure and create a connection from which neither could escape.

Running his hands over her cheeks and up her back, Bastian reached around and cupped her breasts. His thumb and finger surrounded the hardened nipples, pinching lightly, tugging until she moaned. He released them and moved his hands down the front of her body, stopping at her mound. With the tips of his fingers, he eased her labia apart and set his hard cock on top of her clit, moving slowly, bringing her closer and closer to climax all the while reminding her not to come.

“Bastian,” she whimpered as he settled the large purple head of his cock at her opening. “Please...” With measured strokes, Bastian slowly worked his way inside her, stopping only when he’d filled her fully. His head swam with the need to pound into her, to drive deeply and pull out slowly, gliding over her secret spot with his every withdrawal. Giving her a chance to acclimate to his size was killing him.

“Please what, Mari?”

“Move, please move,” she said

“Like this?” he asked pulling his cock almost out of her before he slid it slowly back home.

“No,” she whimpered.

“Or like this?” he said, pulling back out and driving himself home, reaching all the way to her womb.

“Bastian!” she screamed, dropping her upper body lower, providing him a different angle for harder driving.

He grasped her hips and fucked her, making her pussy his with every stroke. One hand on her upper back held her down while he continued to drive into her deeper and deeper. The urge to come rose swiftly from his balls as he focused on every moan and pant he pulled from her lips. He leaned forward and found her neck with his teeth, biting down hard enough to let her know once again who was in control.

“Bastian? Please!” she wailed

By the swelling of his cock, Bastian knew he was at the end of his tether. He let go of her neck and whispered into her ear. “Come now, Mari. Come for me now.”

The cool rush of her release coated him. The sight of her on all fours screaming as she milked his cock sent him over the edge. His muscles grew taut while the pressure built. Every stroke sent a tingle of pleasure from the head of his dick to his balls. His scrotum tightened and released, and his cum coated her feminine channel. With each throb, a small piece of his soul joined with hers.

Relief poured into him along with the tentative touch of her thoughts caressing his mind. The lush creature spread beneath him was content, happy, and eager if not a bit possessive. Her emotions filled him with hope. Never had he felt so complete. She made him whole. Over the next week, as their connection solidified, he’d work to make her feel the same. By the time her body and mind was ready for the mating mark, this beautiful cat would know she was his, and that he’d kill anyone who tried to take her from him.

Still inside, he hardened again at the thought of defending her, keeping her safe, sated and happy. He wouldn’t release her. Not with the intriguing things they could still share. Now would be an excellent time to show her how intriguing those things could be.

Grasping her hips, he rolled until she rode him, his thick cock seated deeply inside her. Faced away, his finger slid lightly down her spine, tracing each bump lower until he reached the smooth crease of her ass. Her slightly angled position on his lap and widened legs allowed him a glimpse at forbidden land. Easing his finger down he grazed over the little bud, pushing lightly to test its tightness.

From beneath her he whispered, “Relax, Mari. Relax and enjoy.”

*

Deep down she was superbly proud of herself as she watched him sleep. She’d worn him out. She herself was ready to drop, but before such a luxury could happen, she needed to get far away from Bastian. The long hours of lovemaking had taken a toll on

her talent. No longer did she carry the scent of a full-blooded were-cat. Now she smelled human. The morning-after awkwardness would take on an entirely new face should he wake and realize his play partner had been just *slightly* higher up on the food chain than a human.

Sensations bombarded her with their intensity. Fury warred with arousal, searching for an outlet. A quick glance at her watch told her hours had passed since she'd first arrived. Hours in which she'd spent on her back, on her knees, standing and even riding one incredible pinnacle after another. How could she still be aroused? More so, why did it feel like all the aroused people in the world were knocking around inside her?

Had she'd known this man would be dangerous to her well-being, she might have waited for the next alpha to cross her path. To love him would be easy, though the broken heart could kill her.

Marina took one last look at the man who had changed her world before leaving the haven they'd created inside the gazebo. She would regret this decision for years to come. Unfortunately, she had no choice. Half-breeds never had a choice. They were not welcomed by full-bloods, nor were they allowed in any pride. He'd accepted her as a full-blood only because she'd hidden her scent.

She was several miles down the road, clothes on, in the car they'd brought from the casino, when she heard the pained cry of a cat. Agony, too great to be hers alone, tore at her chest. Tears ran down her face as she wished the cry was for her.

Chapter Three

“Son of a ... mother freaking ... OUCH!”

Marina tore her bare thighs from the leather interior of the 1965 convertible Mustang. Despite the deepening dusk, it was still unbearably hot and humid. With a bend to make a contortionist cry, she reached over the gearshift into the passenger's seat to grab her work smock.

“Goddamn Minnesota weather,” she mumbled, stuffing the smock under her abused legs. “One day it's colder than a witch's titty, the next you're blistering your butt on the car seat.”

Breathe. “It's only a little redness. Shoot, red is good. Maybe it will give the men at the Elk some ideas,” How long had it been since she had gotten off to something other than her trusty vibrator? Exulted in the erotic sting of a hand on her ass? The idea of a tremendously dominant male bending her over and spanking her started a tingle between her thighs. Marina's hand slid under the barely-there mini; fingers skimming over her pussy, full, warm and wet as always. Panties were a thing of the past, too costly to replace and irritating against her aroused body. A quick dip of her finger between the plump flesh guarding the small excited clit brought her hips rocketing off the seat.

Two years had passed since the unexplained increase in her libido had thrown her life into a sexual free-for-all. She had suspicions as to the cause of her condition, but no way to prove it without admitting to her family that she'd partaken of a secret lust-filled rendezvous. And wouldn't *that* have been a fun discussion to have with her pride-hating mother? “So, mom, I just spent ten hours with an intensely alpha were-cat, doing things that turned my body inside out as well as some things I think might be illegal in several states, but now I have a problem.” Yeah, that would go over well. The pride had not been friendly to her mother when she'd fallen in love with Marina's human father. Things had worsened when she also mated with a pride beta. A triad relationship worked for her parents, but the problems with full-bloods, unwilling to change, left her mother bitter. Enough so that she refused to pass on her shifter culture to her daughters.

The week following that night had been a nightmare for Marina. Fever and nausea were her constant companions. Fear of an unplanned event sent her to the drugstore on a regular basis even though she knew it took longer than a week to verify a pregnancy. Had her night with Bastian changed her physically as it had emotionally?

When the sickness finally subsided, she'd thought the worst was over until her days and nights became filled with an awareness of others engaged in sexual activity in all its wondrous forms. Images of couples, groups, and singles, some in human form, others in jaguar form danced in front of her eyes ... the arousal of so many rode her. Where were they coming from, and who were they? Beyond the nameless masses, dreams of Bastian and the wicked things they'd done in the bed by the lake taunted her. She'd wake to find herself writhing against the sheets, his name falling from her lips, begging him to fill her anywhere he wanted with his incredible cock. As the pain of the unrelenting arousal tightened its grip, the truth mocked her. She'd left him.

Now she was destined to spend every night the same way she had for the last two years, masturbating, hoping each release would be the last.

It never was, though.

Marina always ended up back in the same place, burning for his touch and hurriedly searching for the privacy to engage in the furious release she needed to get on with her day. Sometimes, she was lucky enough to be at home. Other times she'd resort to standing in a nasty public restroom, disgusted and on the edge of tears, but unable to do anything other than get herself off. Tonight, she'd pulled off into a side road, anchored her spiked knee-high leather boots with shiny silver buckles and chains to the dashboard of the car and let the insanity begin. How she'd not broken the vents or her heels during one of her many hurried sessions behind the wheel was a mystery.

Grief bubbled up from the deepest of wells. The reality of her situation left her exhausted.

She cupped her sex and pressed down on the top of her mound. Slick cream trickled from her pussy as she used her palm to increase the pressure on her pelvis.

"Umm..."

Marina worked two fingers high up inside and moved her thumb over the clit, the circular motion effectively pushing her toward the edge. She prayed the release would be enough this time. If not, she'd have to go back to the Elk and effectively rip away another small piece of herself.

The Blue Elk was a strip club catering to human males looking for anonymous sex. She'd been there enough in the last six months to know she could have her pick of any one of the men there. They would have a drink, exchange names, real or fake, it made no difference, then on to a night of frenzied fucking.

By morning, the man would be gone. Ripped condom wrappers would cover the bed, and her self-esteem would be in the toilet, but always the need remained.

Physical release with anonymous human males always paled to the emotional release she needed. The emotional release she knew one full-blooded, alpha male, jaguar shifter could provide with just the flick of his tongue or the smack of his palm.

Beads of sweat popped out on her brow as she caressed her clit, moving faster while her fingers moved deeper, searching out the secret flesh inside. Marina reached into her past for the inspiration she needed to spiral into the bright rainbow-colored release she was searching for...

Bastian.

Sweat poured from her body as the smell of sex permeated the car. A quiet ping coming from the vents told her she had finally broken something. But who cared? This close she'd take the car apart and not give a flying fig.

"Pleeeeeease," the unheard plea fell from her lips.

I'm baaaaaack... I'm baaaaaaaack in the...

"No!" Her cell phone screamed out the old school Aerosmith tune snapping her back from the edge of release with the same painful smart of an overstretched rubber band against bare skin.

Marina grabbed the phone from the drink holder in her car and checked the caller ID. Not recognizing the number, she considered not answering it, but it was Saturday night and her sister was out on another date with a human, a situation teeming with trouble.

"What?!"

"Rina, it's me," her sister whispered. "I—I—I need help."

Breathing deeply, Marina pulled her heels out of the car's vents and sat upright in the

car. “What’s wrong, LeAnn?” She winced as her overworked pussy hit the seat, sending flares of arousal straight to her womb. Even with her sister on the phone, she was having a hard time tracking the conversation. Cripes, she was pathetic.

“Sorry, what did you say?”

“I hurt Billy. Bad.” She sniffed.

“*What?*” Panic set in. Marina tried to take a deep breath only to find she was physically unable to breathe around the heart lodged in her throat. She couldn’t do this. Not again.

The last time this happened, LeAnn’s date was with the mayor’s son in a small town, miles away. She claimed he’d come on too strong, forced her into an uncomfortable situation. In the end, the boy ended up in the hospital, and LeAnn had nary a scratch on her. Of course, there were questions, and rumors ran rampant through the small town.

How could such a delicate creature like LeAnn hurt a full-grown man? Did she have help? Why would she want to hurt such a sweet boy? Where exactly had those scratches on his back come from, and didn’t they look like claw marks? The last two questions had no answer, no believable ones anyway.

Thankfully, the boy had recovered. Although not before she and LeAnn became *persona non grata* and been forced to sneak away in the dead of night, taking with them only what they could carry in the Mustang, which wasn’t much.

The only saving grace had come from the mayor’s son being too embarrassed to admit to being beaten up by a girl. He made up some half-assed story about three guys showing up to help “the crazy bitch.” Amazingly, his recollection of the event was holding off two big bruisers before a third sucker punched him. Talk about being a legend in your own mind.

“I—I know, I promised not to beat up any more dates. But it was only our first date and Billy was coming on way too strong.”

Marina shook her head. Somehow, LeAnn’s dates always got out of hand. She shouldn’t be surprised, considering her sister was a 5’9” blond, full-blood jaguar goddess. Marina loved her sister, but she did need to focus her attentions on finding a male shapeshifter mate who could handle her strength.

She’d never understood why LeAnn was opposed to the idea. Male shifters were amazing creatures. Marina’s nipples hardened at the thought of their bodies, lean and strong. Some had shoulders wider than doorjambs. Others sported eight tight, rolling abs rather than six. Rock hard thighs and incredible speed were traits shapeshifting males shared with their animal brethren. The added benefit for the females? Thrusts were deeper, harder. And their staying power? Oy. They also looked killer in a nice pair of washed out jeans, and you could bounce quarters off their butts.

“Damn it!” This was not helping her libido problem tonight.

Marina had spent her youth dreaming of finding a mate, prayed for the same opportunities LeAnn had, but ultimately, her human blood stood in the way of her dreams. Her sister had something Marina never would: a choice.

LeAnn’s father had been a full-blooded shifter, their mother’s true mate, while Marina’s dad was their mother’s first love. Shifter instinct was to find their physical mates. Unfortunately, the mate may or may not be the person you love, merely the person you cannot be without.

“Where are you, LeAnn?”

“I’m at the Den.”

Those four words sent Marina’s overheated body into its very own ice age. How could LeAnn be at the Den with a human? It wasn’t possible. Not only would her date’s ego be hurt by trying to measure up to the alpha gods inhabiting the place, but there would be no way the alphas would leave LeAnn in the hands of a human.

The non-pride community viewed the Den as the county biker bar, which catered to leather-wearing, motorcycle-riding, alpha *men* drinking and carousing for women. The reality of the situation was these were leather-wearing, motorcycle-riding, alpha *shapeshifting* men, which made things a whole lot more dangerous.

“Are you okay?” Marina started the car and put it into gear.

“I’m fine. Billy ditched me a mile away, so I came here,” LeAnn said, the bitter laugh barely scratching the surface. “Maybe I should go back out front and check out some of the alphas you keep telling me to look for.”

Marina’s stomach twisted at the thought. *Now she decides to take advice; shoot, maybe she’ll call when one of those gorgeous men offers to take her home as well.* “It’s an idea, LeAnn. They would be better equipped to handle your strength than a human.” Marina gripped the steering wheel tightly hoping her voice wasn’t betraying her envy.

“Maybe,” LeAnn whispered.

“Listen, I’m about fifteen minutes from you. Meet me outside. I should be able to hold down my scent long enough to pick you up. Okay?”

“I’ll be waiting. You know, I wish you could just be yourself.”

Me too. Marina sighed. “Please, don’t.”

“But Rina, maybe...”

“No, you know why I have to do this. Half-breeds are not welcome at the Den.”

“I know. I wish...”

“Wish all you want, LeAnn, but you know I can’t be there. I’m too weak, too human and my half-breed ability scares them to death.”

“It’s not fair.”

“Life’s...”

“Not fair, I know, Rina.”

“I’ll be there soon.” Marina closed her phone, cutting off her sister before she verbalized any more wishes. It was always the same for LeAnn, wishing they could both be full-bloods and therefore safe.

Half-breeds were the redheaded stepchildren within their group; the few times she had run into a full-blood shifter she’d been grateful for her unique ability. Being half-human enabled her to control her scents when need be. She had been working on it lately as a defense mechanism. They could sniff around her and would not smell anything other than a jaguar scent. It worked well enough to keep her safe in the short term, but she’d never tried it for long periods.

The loud crack and sudden pull of the steering wheel forced Marina’s attention back to the road. Steering the car to the side of the asphalt, she jumped out to confirm what she already knew to be true.

Some professional-level cursing released a bit of the irritation sitting on her shoulders as she stomped to the back of the car and popped the trunk. It required brute force to haul the spare from its cozy bed, but once out she was able to roll it over to the sadly sagging tire. Another trip to the trunk produced a tire iron and jack.

“Ok, girl, you can do this. Jack the car up, loosen the lug nuts.” *Ignore the throb between your legs.* “Flat off, spare on, lug nuts tight.” *Bend at the waist and squeeze your thighs together to provide some relief.* “Car down and wa-la you’re done.”

Not blessed with the night vision of a jaguar, she needed a couple of false starts with the jack before she finally found the right spot to raise the tire off the ground. Marina lined up the tire iron with the lug nuts, repeating the long ago learned saying silently, righty tighty, lefty loosy. She leaned her body into it, hoping the extra weight would make them give a little, but they still wouldn’t budge.

Marina screamed, loud and long, her frustration finally getting the best of her. She didn’t have the strength to break the nuts free. Nor did she have time to call and wait for a tow truck. Her full-blooded shifting sister wouldn’t stop dating humans, some weird turn of events had changed her into a sex-starved nymphomaniac, and she was fucking horny all the time. Even now, all she could think about was getting off!

“Fuck!” she cried, hurling the tire iron into the woods. Turning her attention to the car, she kicked at the flat, screaming more vulgarities at it until the loud creak snapped her out of the useless temper tantrum. What was she thinking, kicking at the jack holding her car precariously in the air, and on a slope no less?

“No more.” Marina planted her ass along the side of the road. Done, she’d sit here until the freaking arousal went away. *Screw it! Screw it all!*

Breathe. Think. Make good decisions. Follow the words of advice she’d given LeAnn in the past.

OK, she couldn’t fix the tire by herself. Triple A? Yeah, right, as soon as she won the lottery. Her only option left: a nighttime run through the woods until she got to the Den. Great. Taking off at a slightly better pace than a human does, she couldn’t help but wish she could shift into jaguar form like LeAnn. For whatever reason, Marina had never been able. Other half-breeds could, but not her. The closest she’d ever come to making the change was during a particularly bad menstrual cycle. She thought for sure it was going to happen, only to find when she came to later she was still in her clothes with nary a tear to be found and still not changed.

As she dodged tree limbs, Marina hoped her sister would be able to remove the lug nuts and they could go home where they were safe, but first she had to get into the bar without anyone catching her scent. Especially not one of the big badass alpha males.

Chapter Four

Bastian was hiding. He knew it. Rick knew it. Everyone in the whole damn bar knew it. The leader of his people was hiding, skulking around the woods behind the bar like some over-grown, scared-of-his-own-shadow house cat.

He dreaded the thought of going back into The Den and enduring more harassment from Rick, his friend and advisor, about finding a mate. Especially since he already had one, or almost had one.

Mari. Her name slithered through his brain, sending his pleasure receptors into overdrive. Too bad the connection from his brain to his dick had fizzled out years before. It would be nice to sport something other than the worthless appendage between his legs.

Though his dick had gone south, his connection with Mari stayed strong. Every day her arousal, need and frustration ate at him. Grief filled the darkness. He still kicked himself for falling asleep that night before he'd made sure she would stay. In just a week, he'd have been able to finish the mating ritual and she would be with him right now. Mates were inseparable. They could locate each other, no matter where they were.

Sounds of revelry inside the bar spilled out every time the doors opened. Males growled, females screamed and sighed as their counterparts chased and caught them. Games of chase turned to fucking games for the lucky participants, a pastime he wanted to share with Mari.

The other part of his soul was out there somewhere, without his protection, facing who knows what while he faced other alphas challenging him to stupid stunts. Bubble brigades, females willing to do anything for an alpha, crawling on him, offering themselves to him for nothing more than a little slap and tickle.

Whoever said it was good to be the king, in his case pride leader, was either a liar or severely fucked-up in the head. There was nothing good about the crap he'd been putting up with lately.

"Bastian..."

"Hiding is usually a good indicator of one's wish for privacy, right?"

"Well, yes, but we need to discuss this." Rick was an uptight rule follower, but he was also a good friend.

"You always have something we need to discuss." Bastian moved quietly towards the fallen tree ahead.

"Walking away won't make it go away," said Rick. "None of the males are mating; they haven't in quite some time. Hell, some of the betas aren't having sex anymore. That's not good, bud."

Bastian stuck his hands into the pocket of his jeans and looked at the sky. "What would you like me to do about it?"

"You are the pride's leader..."

"*Really?*" Snarky oozing past his lips. "What do you know, little old me, leader of the pride."

As a young leader, he'd taken the responsibility for bringing the pride to northern Minnesota. The woods were still abundant enough to make for good running and hunting grounds, and the privacy was phenomenal. While not the typical spot to find a jaguar, it

had greatly reduced the risk of exposure because no human expected to find a jaguar somewhere this cold. They'd found not only a safe haven, but also a home.

"No need to be obnoxious," said Rick. "I'm just saying perhaps this lack of mating trend has something to do with *you* still being single."

"That doesn't make sense. I mean you expect me to believe my not having a mate,"—*one you know about anyway*—"has decreased the libido of all of the males in the pride?"

"Well, you have to admit in the years since you turned thirty the numbers of couples connecting has gone down."

"Rick, I'm a man. I don't hold that kind of power."

"Technically, you are more than a man. You are a shapeshifter with the blood of a powerful jaguar. Who knows what mystical forces guide us? We can change into jaguars at will, Bastian, so why is it hard to believe your scent or some mystical power is causing the decline in mating?"

"Too fucking thin, man."

"Maybe or maybe not." Rick sighed. "But do you have a better idea?"

Bastian kicked the fallen tree with heel of his boot. Of course he didn't. Hell, Rick was probably spot on in his assessment, but Bastian wouldn't tell him as much. Maybe it was time to man up and step down. Shit, he was proving to be damn worthless to the pride without his mate. All he did any more was find ways to be alone and wallow in self-pity.

"Poke around the archives and see if anything like this has happened before, okay? Only keep this quiet, huh? Talk of erectile dysfunction among the alphas would not be real good for my health, know what I mean?"

Rick laughed halfheartedly, "What dysfunction?"

"Good, now get out of here, I need to run."

"No problem," said Rick, walking back to the bar. "I wonder what unattached females are here tonight."

Until a few weeks ago, Bastian's life had been his own. He had privacy, respect and freedom. Now, he had harassment, stupid stunts and bubble brigades. Geez, talk about your shiver producers.

The official end had come last week on the night of his birthday bash. The unofficial end started two years ago. Twenty-four months ago. Seven hundred and thirty days ago. One year, eleven months, twenty-nine days and one perfect night ago.

Not like he was counting.

Now here he was, thirty-five, unmated, unmated and utterly miserable, but the other alphas had decided it was past time for him to start looking for a mate. Wanting to quickly squash any talk of mating, Bastian had thrown out the tidbit about how jaguars in the wild did not mate for life, only fucked for procreation, before moving on to the next willing female. Considering the hoots and hollers his statement garnered he figured he was off the hook for the time being. There would be no recreational or procreation fucking for him, but he kept that piece of information to himself. What the pride didn't know wouldn't hurt Bastian.

Unfortunately, Rick reminded the pride that while their animal brethren did not mate for life, shifters did. Then began the none too subtle game called hook up the leader, or, from Bastian's point of view, keep, keep, keep away.

Every willing female crawled out of the woodwork, and every alpha somehow found a long lost sister. His life had turned into “The Bachelor” and he didn’t want to play. Worse yet were the alphas without a sister. They thought it was a good time to make a play for his position by calling him out. He was tired of the crap.

He needed to get out of his head for a while, and a good hard run through the woods was the way to do it. He kicked off his boots, shrugged out of the calf-length leather duster, grabbed the bottom of the black turtleneck underneath and pulled it over his head. His long flaccid cock freed from its button-fly cage, he pushed the jeans down his legs, only to kick them aside. There were no shorts to deal with since he always went commando.

Side to side he stretched his neck, letting go of the tension, then flexed his hands and reached inside himself to find the switch. Some triggered the change with their anger, others with cool, levelheaded will power, but for a lucky few, it came through passion. He was one of the few. Shifting from a passionate place was like an out-of-control orgasm. His back arched forward forcing him to all fours. A tail erupted from his body, burning its way through his lower spine. Usually, an added benefit to a change was a rock-hard erection. Only now, his dick remained soft.

Once his tail finished, the muscles in his limbs bulged and popped into place while his fingers and toes molded into paws, claws shooting from the tips.

His head was the last to change. As the sensations of the change converged in his brain, he was flooded with a pain so exquisite he threw his head back and screamed. The sound lowered, quickly changing to a growling roar as his vocal cords lengthened and a snout pushed out from his face. Sharp teeth exploded into his mouth and his ears moved to the top of his now feline head. His sea green eyes were the only remnants of his human appearance.

Bastian panted, waiting for the shift to finish. Arousal was nothing but a memory. As the effects of the change cleared, he raised his head, drawing the scent of campfires and wet grass into his lungs. The animal form heightened his senses, giving him sharper vision, crisper sounds and more intense smells. He could find the lake from miles away, the nearby river buzzed with insect life, and a strong breeze could trigger sensory overload.

From inside the bar, testosterone oozed out of alpha males like perfume and the females, in heat, smelled like sex. Had he been a lesser alpha, the erotic aroma would have him charging in and mounting the first female he found.

Fortunately, his mind was still clear, his thoughts still human and, even as the animal begged to hunt its prey and fuck indiscriminately, he always retained control. Less than a handful of alpha males had this ability and none of the beta males or females maintained their humanity as jaguars.

For this reason, the forty acres the pride owned behind The Den was designated a safe zone. They’d installed special sensors to keep members, in animal form, from straying. Shifting and running were limited to late night, after the humans climbed safely into their nice warm beds.

Head lowered, Bastian took off in the direction of the lake. Giving into the urge to run brought his speed to just short of breakneck. Branches and small bushes brushed against his flank, pine needles blanketing the forest floor barely crunched under his light touch.

He'd been a good leader all these years, taking care of the members, keeping them as safe as he could in a world which knew nothing about them. Sure, there were rumors about his techniques, many of them lies, but they worked to protect those who needed it most. Problem was, in the last two years the loss of his mate had turned his world into a bland, pale comparison of what it used to be. He'd become an absent leader, not what the pride needed. It was time to step down. The freedom would give him time to find his mate, no matter how long it took.

As the lake appeared ahead, he slowed. Leaves rustled around him, drawing his attention to the scents nearby: pine trees, lilac blooms and ... *sex*? Bastian was stunned to smell a female. One whose scent reminded him of another; a woman he had been without for far too long...

Stopped cold by the overwhelming need to find the female, Bastian was surprised to find his animal fighting to take control. This had never happened before. He was always in control, never the other way around. Circling the area, he caught the trail about a half-mile north. Nose to the ground, he followed it back towards the bar. Bastian reached the spot he had left his clothes and shifted back into human form. Quickly dressing, he stormed to the back door of the bar.

Only once before had the scent of a female compelled him. Could, after all the months he'd searched, this be...? He couldn't even say her name. He was on fire. If it wasn't his mate, he was liable to go crazy, but if he walked into this bar and found her with another alpha ... somebody would die.

*

Rick closed the manila folder and leaned back in his chair. "Note to self, get these files on the computer." He rubbed his eyes. The past hour had taken him back over 200 years of pride history. He'd found not one notation about mating problems, but five.

Five separate problems with alphas losing the ability to become erect. A bone deep shudder snaked through his body, raising his fine hairs. Reading this was giving him a major case of the he-bees. His skin crawled and his balls were threatening to slide back inside his body from the thought of a permanently limp cock. He didn't partake of sex as indiscriminately as other alphas in the pride, but when a sweet piece crossed his path, he sure as shootin' wanted to be able to get it up.

He looked back at the files. Three of the cases showed alphas had blamed their inability to rise to the challenge on the women. The women in question eventually mated the impotent alphas and there was never any follow up to tell him if the problem had resolved itself or not.

Years later, another alpha appeared to have gone not only limp, but crazy as well. This time the alpha was the pride leader. The solution was to put down the male. Crazy? Yeah he could see going crazy from lack of sex, but crazy enough for death? Ouch.

From the notes kept on how they killed this shifter, Rick was grateful to live in a civilized time. With intricate detail, they'd written the gruesome procedure and filed it away for future use. A trio of enforcers stood around the crazed leader. Gold tipped whips flayed the skin, causing immense bleeding and weakening him.

Nearly every human he'd come across assumed silver would kill their kind. All hail the nonsense gleaned from stupid old monster movies. Gold was the weapon of choice to accomplish the feat. All shapeshifters were extremely allergic to the stuff; its use would slow the healing time for any wounds inflicted whether in jaguar form or human form.

Once the enforcers had whipped the leader into submission, they staked him to the ground with solid gold stakes, and hacked off his head.

A shudder ran through him; talk about a picture he'd like to scrub from his brain.

A side note to this was the final file. Far more interesting than the one before it, as this was a file for a female. Past leaders had never been overly concerned with the females of the pride. They were there for the males' enjoyment and procreation, nothing else.

So, a file *specifically* for a female from 150 years ago? Yeah, it was weird.

Apparently, this female had died at exactly the same time as the crazy alpha and the manner of her death was suspicious. She formed weeping wounds matching the leader's, for no apparent reason, and she stopped breathing at the same time of the beheading. From the written accounts, the pride freaked. They burned both the bodies and added a file for the female, presumably as a warning of some kind. At the very bottom of the file was a note that said simply, *once they died, erections returned*.

What the hell was going on here?

The smell of a warm female hit Rick with all of the subtlety of a sledgehammer on glass. A glance into the hallway afforded him a look at the most stunning woman he'd seen in his thirty-some years. She was perfect. Everything he liked in a lover. She was tall, blond and smelled like sex. He eyed her tight black dress and take-me-now spiked heels. His need to get closer to her, to touch her, to smell her, overwhelmed his common sense. Instead of getting the new information to his pride leader, he was devising ways to devour her.

Rick rose from his chair and moved to the door. He prowled towards her, trying to keep the hunting instinct at bay, not wanting to scare his prey. Once he was a few steps from her, the captivating creature raised her eyes from the cell phone. He smelled her fear and watched her muscles tense.

She was going to run.

He watched as his kitten tried to avoid capture by looking for a way out, but there was no escaping him. This woman would be going home with him tonight; he would make sure of it.

"Nice kitty." he said as he brushed the hair back from her face. "What's your name, beautiful?"

"Le—LeAnn," she said

"LeAnn. I like it." he said sliding his hand to the back of her neck. "What do I need to do to get you to purr, kitten?"

"Wha—What?" she said

Rick moved in closer. "Don't be nervous. I want to make you purr for me." He moved her backward until she was leaning against the wall. "Do I need to run my hand through your gorgeous blond hair? Or maybe I need to tilt your head back and leave soft, wet kisses on your delicate throat."

She caved and relaxed into his grip. Her body turned soft and pliant, yet her soft pink lips quivered. Did she still fear him, or was it something else? When her eyes closed, keeping him from watching the blue orbs as he kissed her, the cat pacing inside screamed for release. He needed acknowledgement. He needed to dominate. "Open your eyes, LeAnn; I want you to see who's kissing you."

Her eyes opened, allowing him to see the thrill of the unknown pass in front of them.

What a wonderful lover she would be, with the body of a siren, but the look of innocence. He was going to enjoy showing her his ropes.

Rick laced his fingers through her hair and tugged her head back. Trying not to scare her, he placed soft butterfly kisses, the kind meant to torment, to tease, against the line of her jaw and down the soft satin of her skin. Sweet moans erupted from deep in her throat. Always one to press an advantage, he stepped closer, eliminating any air movement between them before moving to her lips, drawing her into a full-on, lip-to-lip kiss. Running his tongue along the seam of her mouth, he exerted the smallest bit of pressure. The parting of her soft lips was his reward. Before she changed her mind, he slid his tongue into her open mouth, fucking it with the same diligence he'd use on her pussy. Slow and steady wins the race.

Inquisitive fingers circled his wrist. Beaded nipples dug into his chest as she worked her body closer to his. Rick slid his free hand south to settle on the gentle curve of her ass. God, she was soft. Even through her clothes his fingers dug into her flesh, easing her forward, so the ridge of his hardened cock burrowed against her sweet warmth. The hurried movement of her hips tugged at his control. What started as a kiss, a passionate kiss, was quickly becoming the hottest dry hump he'd ever had. He needed to stop this before he scared her away.

She whimpered as he drew away from her lips. A bewildered look nearly broke him. "What's wrong, kitten? Have you never been passionately kissed before?"

"Not ... not like that," she said. "You took away my will."

Rick moved his lips to the shell of her ear and whispered, "Then I did it just right." A shudder raced through her body at his words; yes, he had done it just the way they both wanted.

So as not to overwhelm her, Rick stepped back, but continued to hold onto her arms. "Kitten, come ride with me."

"*What?*"

He laughed as he grasped her chin between his fingers. "Don't panic, LeAnn, I only want you to take a ride on my Harley. It's right outside. Sound good?"

"O—Okay..."

Chapter Five

Marina knelt, making her body as small as possible. Tall grass surrounded the tree, providing an unobstructed view of the bar's front door, and judging by the fiery itch around her ankles, poison ivy. She watched, waited, and scratched hoping for a sudden infusion of barflies to increase her odds of sneaking in unseen.

LeAnn was a gentle soul who wore her fear on her sleeve for the entire world to see. When her gorgeous packaging entered the mix, the combination frequently caused her problems. She needed a man to protect her. Marina had pestered her sister on several occasions to find a nice, quiet alpha for a mate. Maybe a firefighter or doctor, someone honorable, a man who would take care of her. A beta male would be the right temperament for her sister, but there was no way a beta could protect her from the hard-core males prowling inside those four walls.

The Den of Iniquity, fondly known as The Den to the locals, was not the place she wanted her sweet sister to meet an alpha. Rumors abounded of what went on here. Marina was all for consensual sex games, but she knew LeAnn was ill prepared to handle groups of men touching, pinching and spanking her.

Hardened nipples chafed against her bra, damp from her recent run. Her core throbbed in warning. Her lack of release from earlier was going to become a problem soon.

Marina took a deep breath and tried to relax. She needed to focus. If she was going to enter the bar without being marked as half-human, she needed to find the control to mask her human scent.

As a child, desperate to hide the fact she was not fully shapeshifter and to explain the reason for her ability to change scents, she'd created within herself an imaginary switch. At first it was merely a comfort; she used the lever as a child would use a security blanket or a teddy bear. If she pretended to be a full-blooded shifter, no one would be able to smell her human scent.

When puberty struck, the switch had become so real to her; it took on a life of its own. No longer a simple comfort, now the toggle had become a working symbol of her life. In the on position, she was both human and shifter. In the off position, she was a full-blooded alpha female. A female who took no shit, kicked ass, and never took names; she wore leather and silk with the same assuredness as a uniform and a badge. This Marina was afraid of nothing and looked out for number one. Her simple childhood comfort now allowed her to suppress her scent, thus tricking full-bloods into thinking she was one of them.

Bikers dressed in leathers and flouting the law with their lack of headgear roared up and parked Harleys in front of the bar. Two cars screeching to a halt near her hiding spot closely followed them. The occupants spilled forth laughing and carrying on.

Whistles and catcalls from a group of seemingly prepubescent males followed a voluptuous girl across the street. "Shake it and bake it, babe."

"You dork, that doesn't make any sense."

"Sure it does. You shake it," said the dork in question with a shimmy of his scrawny shoulders for effect. "And I'll bake it." He finished, humping the air like a dog on the

make.

Marina made her way to the parked cars. She moved with calm determination and discreetly positioned herself between the groups. The men in front would think she was with the fun seekers and they would think she was with the lawbreakers. She was as good as invisible.

As the customers in line were ushered into the bar, Marina moved along with them; slipping into the bar like a ghost. She moved along the shadows, looking for LeAnn.

Each table, strategically placed in the darkened corners, allowed for a semi-private atmosphere where couples and several triads partook in delights of the flesh. A long curved bar outlined one end of the dance floor while across the room a large dais sat atop a raised stage. To the left of the stage a hallway led to the back; Marina guessed she'd find her sister there.

She moved gracefully across the room, weaving between couples, exuding an air of confidence which spoke of her right to be there. Halfway across the dance floor, she was surprised to see LeAnn holding the hand of a delectable-looking male.

Tall and blond, his body looked like Ra, the sun god himself, had kissed it. Together they were perfection, blond beauty, Cinderella and Prince Charming. These two would make extraordinary children together, but who was he and where did LeAnn think she was going? Surely, she wouldn't leave with him and not tell her. Would she walk out the door with a stranger? Shoot, she might.

Marina dodged dancing couples, brushed against alphas and stepped on people's toes in her mad rush to reach LeAnn before she got to the door. Inches away from reaching her goal a large hand took possession of her ass. Behind her, a sweaty alpha with bad teeth gave her the once over.

She whipped her body around and hissed at the offending male. The loud crack of her hand against his was startling, but effective in removing the offending appendage. A look of disbelief on the male's face was alarming. She prayed she could maintain the suppression of her human scent. She wanted to get to LeAnn and get her out of here, not have a run in with an alpha male.

With a quick turn, Marina reached for her sister, catching hold of the back of her shirt. "LeAnn!"

"Rina? Oh, I didn't call you back. I'm sorry, but I'm going to take a ride on..." she giggled. "Oh my."

"LeAnn?" Marina was stunned. Since when did her sister giggle? "What's wrong?"

Marina hadn't seen LeAnn like this in a very long time. She looked feisty, happy and aroused. Where was the sister who'd left for her date with a look of resignation on her face? She watched her sister gaze at the sun god.

"Nothing is wrong, Rina. Everything is all right. I'm going to take a little ride on his bike; I'll be home later."

"*What!* Oh no, you can't ride off with a strange man. Cripes, he's an alpha to boot..." Marina said. "Please, come home with me now."

LeAnn leaned in and kissed her on the cheek. "Don't wait up." She hurried out the front door.

"*Are you kidding me?*" Before she could go after them, a firm arm snaked its way around her waist and lifted her off the floor. "Whoa!"

The stench of stale beer and cigarettes forced her to hold her breath.

“When you decided to growl and slap an alpha, you broke the rules here at The Den, Princess.” He licked her cheek from chin to eye. “The rule is, what an alpha says goes or you will be punished.”

Marina fought to remain calm. This situation called for level-headedness and an unruffled demeanor. Unfortunately, she sucked at both. “Well, lucky for me you didn’t say anything, dipshit. Ass-grabbing is an action, not verbal communication. Put me down. Now!”

“Nuh uh ... you know what I meant.” He said as he started walking to the stage.

Marina squirmed, but her captor was incredibly strong. “You idiot,” she screamed. “How could I know what you meant? Do I *look* like I can read minds?”

She continued to push at the strong arms holding her, kicking her legs in any direction hoping to make contact with any sensitive point on his body. Her heel connected with his shin, but his only response was to grunt and squeeze her tighter.

Fear turned to panic when they reached the raised dais. The small podium had a steel bar suspended from the ceiling and leather cuffs hanging from the center. Knowing exactly what the bar’s function was, Marina fought the nasty-breathed alpha in earnest. Any of her free body parts, legs, head, and hands began to flail around seeking for a way to debilitate him enough to make her escape. Bondage with someone you trust was one thing, but in a room full of strangers, alpha males to boot, well ... no freaking way!

“Fight all you want, Princess, it makes the bidders hornier,” said the big brute.

When the alpha reached the steel bar and brought the cuffs to her wrists, Marina fought with renewed energy. She screamed every vulgarity she could string together, but in spite of it all, he’d caught her. The falling of the tumblers drove home the enormity of her trouble.

“Hold on to the bar, Princess, or this will hurt more than it has to.”

The truth in those words became crystal-clear as she rose unwillingly to her tiptoes, her shoulders protesting the treatment. She reached for the bar, grabbing hold before he pulled her off her feet.

Marina was out of her league.

She was stronger than the average human, but if she freed herself, covering her human scent was impossible while fighting her way out of the room full of alpha jags. Screwed was her middle name. Her only alternative was to bide her time and see what they had in store for her.

A piercing whistle got the crowd’s attention, but sent an unpleasant shudder down her back. Searching the sea of faces, hoping to find a kind stranger to help her, was useless. The room stank with drunken males, looking to have a good time. The beta males lucky enough to make it into the bar kept to the shadows, females clung to arms, and one was on the floor hugging the leg of an alpha. There was no help in this room.

“Hey, shut the fuck up!” the nasty brute hollered.

“You shut up, Hoss,” said several of the alphas, while others moaned and tossed beer bottles at the disgusting boar swinging her around.

“Now, I’m putting this hot little number up for auction and guys, she is a handful. She comes in here dressed for sex, but when I try to give her what she’s begging for, she had the nerve to hiss at me and smack my hand away from this hot, tight, little...” He spun her around and cupped her butt to make his point. “...ass.”

She listened to the wolf whistles and depraved comments as she hung there, her skirt

riding up, flashing a soft curve of flesh.

“I think she needs a good spanking. So I’m opening up the floor for all of you dill-holes to bid on who gets the honor.” His words seeped into her brain.

How could this be happening?

“If the bid gets high enough, I might be inclined to let the winner check out her tits as well.” He spun her back around to face the group. “They look pretty nice all pushed up under her tank top. Wonder what they will look like freed.”

Marina lowered her head. She was in pain and unable to break free of the restraints. It wouldn’t be long before they all became aware of her human side. What would happen to her then?

*

Cold fear sprinkled with anger slammed into Bastian through the connection to Mari as he stepped through the back door of the bar. Something was happening in the front room. From the smell, there were many turned on alphas and one very scared ... *human?* How could that be? He couldn’t see anyone letting a human into the bar. He didn’t care one way or another if humans came in, but unfortunately, their fragile bodies would be in danger from the alphas congregating here on a nightly basis. These men were aggressive and did not share what they thought of as theirs, especially women.

The scent he’d been tracking bloomed as he moved towards the main room. She was here, the connection was strong, but her scent was fading. Was she leaving?

The sight of a stunning redhead on stage attached to the steel suspension bar stopped him dead in his tracks. With her head bowed, he couldn’t see her face, but her incredible body and the vaguely human scent had his pulse racing. He *knew* her. Fear raced through him. Fuck, he knew her. Hope nearly buckled his knees. *Please, please don’t let me kill the son of a bitch touching my mate.*

“T and A are good, Hoss, but seriously, I’ve got that right next to me here on the floor,” another alpha bellowed. “I’m going to need a bit more enticement to give you my hard earned money.”

“Bid high enough, Terrence, and maybe I’ll have her treat you to a blow job. Sound good. Now who’ll start the bidding?”

At Hoss’ words, Bastian watched her head rise, disgust unmistakable as it skittered down their connection. His roar stopped the room cold. Every person in the place turned to look at him; many backed up and moved out of his way. Hoss, too stupid to be afraid, stood with a big dumb grin on his face. Bearing down on the man who was trying to auction off his mate, Bastian’s forearm and hand rippled. Short black fur slid from his pores while muscle popped beneath the skin. His fingers fused together to become a paw. Razor sharp claws slid into place. He reached out and swiped Hoss across the chest. The impact sent him flying off the platform onto the bar floor.

“Never touch her again.” The menace in Bastian’s voice was clear. “She is off limits to you, to all of you.”

He turned to face the woman held by the steel bar, ripped the pins from the cuffs and pulled her to him. “Mari,” he whispered.

The look on his mate’s face had him seeing red. Frustration tinged with fear blazed in her eyes; the role of captive was clearly not a common occurrence in her life. The moron currently holding the ragged edges of his chest together was lucky he still lived. Had Mari’s cheeks been tear-stained, there would have been no holding Bastian back.

Bastian lifted her into his arms and tucked her face into his shoulder as he moved towards the front door. “It’s okay, love, I’ve got you.”

In the parking lot, he headed to his big, black Harley. He set her on the back, put a helmet on her head and climbed in front. Kick-starting the Hog released a small bit of his anger, but not enough. With any luck, the wind in his hair would disperse more before they got back to his place. He pulled her arms around him and took off for home. The sooner they got there, the sooner he’d find out why she ran from him years ago and if she still had the power to turn him inside out.

Chapter Six

Marina shook, but not from the motorcycle rumbling between her legs. Her concentration had fled the moment Hoss locked her into the leather cuffs. The vile male who'd touched her only minutes before made her skin crawl. Fear from the narrow escape still choked her with its intensity. She'd never placed herself in such a precarious position before.

Given her no-holds-barred approach to life, she should be ecstatic. Curled against her rescuer's back, flying down the road on his Harley, should have soothed her, relaxed her, yet it didn't. The feel of his body mixed with the knowledge of the confrontation to come left her nervous, jittery ... *stimulated*.

The dips and grooves of perfectly sculpted muscles rippled beneath her flattened palm. An incredible pair of pecs, rock solid and smooth, led to mile-wide shoulders. They were broad enough to provide shelter while strong enough to let her know he was in charge.

If she had the nerve to move her other hand lower she'd be re-introduced to a cock as thick as her wrist and long enough to satisfy her many times over. Sweat, having nothing to do with the outside temperature, slid between her breasts. Her nipples stood at attention.

She was in trouble.

Something changed her two years ago. Their first night together had been out of control. He'd dominated her, spanked her, and brought her release after erotic release. Somewhere amidst the orgasms, she'd formed a connection. She could sense his emotions. Her body tingled with sensations that were not her own, but his. Impressions of ownership flowed into her, marking her as his, and in the end what had she done? Rather than running, as any sane woman over her head would, she'd reveled in the attention and begged for more.

Only when he'd fallen into a much-needed sleep had she hobbled away, sick with the knowledge that her one-night stand had gone drastically wrong. Two things became clear as she'd left the warmth and safety of his arms: one, a single night of sex with Bastian had ruined her for any other man, human or shifter, and two, she'd become strangely attached to him.

Thankfully, the bike's rumbling pipes covered the sob slipping past the barrier of her lips. No doubt about it, she was in trouble.

Marina tightened her hold as the bike shot onto a familiar dirt drive leading to his cabin. Thighs wide, her bare flesh nestled the top of his ass and the vibration of the bike drove her arousal higher. How typical of her to be both afraid and aroused at the same time.

Bastian pulled into the garage and killed the motorcycle's engine. He climbed from the bike and turned; with a quick flick of his wrist, he released the snap before pulling the helmet from her head.

Her heart stopped as she got a clear view of the incredible man in front of her. Two years hadn't changed him significantly, a bit older, more seasoned; still sexy as hell. He now wore black hair in a military buzz cut yet defied convention by growing it longer on

top. His face formed an angular shape with lips full and kissable. As perfect as the parts of him happened to be, his eyes held her. Still a startling green, so green they glowed. She'd always found it difficult to look away from him. How did he get away with such a difference while among humans?

He moved close as Marina slid back on the bike's seat, bracing her body against the sissy bar. She tired quickly from using every ounce of ability to cover her human scent. When he leaned into her neck she stiffened; his nostrils flared as he took her scent into his lungs. Sharp teeth snapped inside her head. A jaguar, with familiar green eyes, paced and growled with a ferocity that intrigued. What could he smell?

"What's his name, Mari?"

Marina sucked in her breath, "What are you talking about, Bastian?"

Pulling back, Bastian looked into her eyes before quietly repeating his question, "What's his name?" he said with a firmer voice. "What is the name of the fucking human I'm going to kill for marking you, Mari?"

"K—kill?" She said looking into his glowing green eyes. "Bastian, no one has marked me."

Disbelief from the man facing her hammered across the connection.

"Only because you snuck out on me, Mari. You left before taking my mark." His voice lowered. "Not to worry, though. I am going to correct my error as soon as the human has been found and you have been suitably punished for leaving me the way you did."

The purr in his voice shook her. Arousal poured over her through their bond. Thighs, damp with excitement, clenched at his threats. She'd readily take whatever punishment he could dish out.

"Umm, tangy," he said as his nostrils flared. "Which excites you more, me marking you or the punishment?"

Her throat constricted; she should tell him to stop, to drive her home, to get out of her head, except she wanted her body to sing as it had before. She would get on her knees and beg for such a pleasure.

How would he punish her? A time out? Corporal punishment? Geez, the idea of a punishment shouldn't be turning her on this much. The thought of him holding her down and spanking her brought a tingle to her cheeks.

Impatiently, Marina pulled her leg over the seat. She turned to face him while the sissy bar kept her steady. Bastian knelt, his hands wrapped around her ankles and slowly moved up her calves. He left gentle kisses on her knees before his hands continued their journey to her thighs. She panted heavily by the time he breached the hem of her skirt.

"Bastian, please, don't tease me."

He leaned in, grabbed the snap on her denim mini with his teeth and tugged.

From the floor, he smiled at her. "I don't tease, Mari," he said with a gleam in his eye. "As soon as I get this skirt off you, I'm going to bend you over this bike and spank you until you apologize for sneaking away from me."

Air rushed from her lungs with the force of a freight train.

"Then, I'm going to love you, over and over again. I need to make up for lost time." His voice was so low her nipples beaded at the promise of the painful pleasure.

If the flare of his nostrils was any indication, the juice accumulating between the bare lips of her pussy gave him an excellent idea as to what he did to her. "Sinful," he

said. "The tangy, sweet smell of you, Mari, promises me a night of wicked abandon."

She melted, right there on his bike, becoming a mass of simpering female. "How can you do this to me?" she asked.

"Do what, Mari?" he said. "Make you hot? Wet?"

"Weak. How can you make me so weak?"

Bastian stood; pulled her to her feet before spinning her around to face the bike. The clickity-clack of his butterfly knife opening sent shivers along her spine. Certainly, he wouldn't save her at the bar only to bring her here to kill her. Not wanting to feel the cold bite of metal, Marina tried to move away, only to have a large arm wrap around her waist.

"Don't move, Mari."

With her shirt taut, he used the serrated edge of the knife to rip the material right down the middle of her back. The thud of the knife embedding itself into the wall pulled a gasp from her lips. Bastian pulled the tank top away from her body, dropping it to the floor, leaving her clad in only a silk demi-bra. He drew the cups down to rest beneath her breasts, pushing them up and out.

Strong hands smoothed across her abdomen to her skirt. He eased the zipper down, slowly pushing the offending material past her hips, letting it slide down her legs to hit the floor. With a palm between her shoulder blades, he pushed Marina across the seat of the bike, settling his cock firmly between her cheeks.

Bastian's upper body covered her back while he murmured into her ear. "The woman I remember, kneeling, ass in the air with her hot little pussy taking me to the hilt, begging me for more, was in no way weak."

Marina's eyes rolled back as his teeth seized the scruff of her neck. With a deep guttural growl, he announced his ownership of her.

"*Oh...*," she cried.

Soft kisses soothed the sting of his bite. His lips followed the length of her spine. Gentle swirls of his tongue brought goose bumps to her skin as his attentions moved south. Marina's nipples pressed into the leather seat of the bike, stiff, aching to be touched. Her legs shook with anticipation.

Smack.

His large hand fell with significant force. Her breath caught in her throat as tears shot to her eyes. Relief mixed with expectation welled inside her. She begged silently for the pleasure/pain of cheeks burning with satisfaction.

Bastian caressed her ass. "Such soft skin," he said. "It reddens nicely from my touch."

Smack.

Harder than the one before, his next strike pulled a heated gasp from her lips. Slowly increasing the force of his blows, he teased her with what was to come. She closed her eyes and focused on the swelling of her sex. Warm and wet, her lips ached for his touch.

Smack. Smack. Smack.

The next three blows, he delivered with more force than the first; with each connection, her body tingled, readying for his invasion. Desire permeated the air. Marina bit her lip to keep from begging him for more.

"Do you know what it does to me to see this flesh painted a pretty red from my hand?" His voice vibrated the skin behind her ear.

Marina moaned when the stiff length of his shaft slid between the lips of her sex. She

embraced the triumph pulsing from him and let it ride her into another rise.

Somewhere along the line, he'd freed himself from the restraining pants and she'd missed it. She willed him to move closer to her exceedingly aroused clit, yet he stayed motionless.

Smack.

"Fuck," she cried

"We'll get there soon enough." He chuckled. "But first, you have something to say to me, Mari."

She looked over her shoulder and wiggled her ass, pleasuring herself on his rigid length. "Please fuck me?"

Smack. Smack

With a swift intake of air, she arched her back as her core clenched. Her climax sped closer.

"Wrong words, sweetheart," he said, nudging her entrance with the head of his cock. "Try again."

To apologize would mean an end to the exquisite pleasure of the spanking, although it would also bring her the relief for which she desperately ached.

"Fuck me now, or *get off*." Bating him into play ratcheted her desire to new levels. Need curled in the pit of her stomach. Would her bratty behavior gain her more spankings, or would he punish her by stopping?

A cold sweat rolled over her skin. *Please don't let him stop.*

"My, what a naughty kitty," he growled. "What should I do now?"

She'd come too far to turn tail and run. With a look back at him, she wiggled again and winked.

"Apparently." *Smack.* "Your ass." *Smack.* "Is not." *Smack.* "Red." *Smack.* "Enough." He punctuated each statement with a blow meant to leave her breathless. Her skin, now red-hot and sensitive to the touch made her giddy, euphoric even. She was moments from release.

"Now, let's try again," he said. "What do you have to say to me?"

"I'm a naughty, naughty..."

"Wrong answer, Mari." His final blow fell directly between her legs, covering her swollen sex.

She arched off the bike seat, a silent scream falling from her lips. There was no safety from the blazing ecstasy of the climax flowing through her. Warmth spread across her taut muscles. Muted noise followed her plummet into a pleasure-filled stupor. Somewhere close a whispered apology sounded, repeatedly, begging to be accepted.

"I'm sorry, so-so-so sorry."

"Shush..." His hand wrapped securely at her throat, holding her still. His thumb smoothed over her wildly beating pulse while the green-eyed jag in her head wrapped himself around her, his touch soothing. "What are you sorry for, love?"

"Sneaking out."

He pressed her back to the bike seat, "Good girl," he said sliding his cock into her.

Marina moaned at the invasion. Her body greedily drew in as much of his length as it could get. Having been far too long since she'd taken a man of such a generous size between her legs, she reveled in the pleasure. She'd been positive Bastian would never fill her again, yet here she was grinding herself on his rock solid length as he slammed

into her.

“Yes,” she cried. “Harder.”

He drove into her heat until she could no longer breathe. When the stars exploded behind her eyes, she followed them letting her body do the same. She came vigorously around his cock, the rhythmic spasms pulling her into a void where the sound of her heartbeat throbbed repeatedly. Bastian’s hands kept her from sliding to the floor as he fucked his way to completion.

Stroke after stroke, his cock moved inside her until he swelled; his final thrust triggering his release. He filled her with his semen as he roared out her name.

When Bastian pulled free of her throbbing pussy, he stood her up slowly, maintaining his hold on her to keep her standing. His breath was ragged and warm on her neck. Barely able to keep her eyes open, Marina relaxed against the solid wall of chest enjoying the soft slide of his fingers as they ran between her breasts. The repetitive motion worked to slow her breathing. A sense of rightness enveloped her followed by a crushing fear. She’d loved him, yet she knew he’d never accept her mixed breeding. Back in his arms, she knew leaving this time would be next to impossible.

After pushing his still semi-erect shaft back into his pants, Bastian threw her over his shoulder. Upside down, she watched him pull the butterfly knife from the wall. The clicky-clack of it closing spoke of finality. He would never let her leave.

Her broken heart screamed its desperate need to get away. She loved him too much to bear seeing the look on his face when he figured out her secret. Better he be angry with her rather than disappointed or worse yet, disgusted.

*

Alicia wandered through the crowded bar fuming at her inability to find her mate. Okay, technically, she and Bastian weren’t mated and, technically, she’d never dated, talked to or engaged in wildly erotic sex with him, yet none of those things mattered. She would become high queen of the pride.

Now if she could only find her sexy dream mate, the stupid simpering males here at The Den tonight would quit bugging her. Too many griped about some southern issue, as if she truly cared; they lived in the deep woods of northern Minnesota where you froze your ass off all winter long. This winter though, she would be snuggled close to the hottest alpha in the pride.

Something in the air tonight fired her up. Her blood burned, her skin tingled; it was as if she’d start to shift except nothing came of it. She needed a man in the worst way, but the only man worthy of her could not be found.

Movement at the front door caught Alicia’s eye. Rick Taylor, Bastian’s friend and advisor strode into the bar. Next to Bastian, he was the second best catch at the bar, tall and fair with a drool-worthy body. Per the rumors, he knew his way around a woman’s body. Guess tonight was his lucky night.

Alicia worked her way around dancing couples, heading in the direction of her prey. Halfway to the door, she caught sight of the blond princess Rick tugged behind him towards the back rooms. Well, this was a pisser; he looked to be already engaged for the evening. She continued to follow Rick; perhaps he could be convinced to fuck her rather than Blondie. Maybe they could all play. From everything she’d heard concerning Rick, from the few cats he’d taken to his bed, he was a machine. Rough and ready, able to go for hours on end requiring few breaks, definitely what she needed tonight to ease this

need.

She moved quietly into the hallway behind Rick and this evening's entertainment. Somehow, she didn't see the blonde satisfying his dominant nature too readily. At the sound of the Princess's voice, she moved into the shadows of the heavy draperies.

"I—I need to call my sister," she stammered

"This way, kitten," he said. "There's a phone in the office..."

Blech, Kitten. Alicia thought, making her way along the hallway wall. *How cute...*

Rick looked back at his conquest. "What's the rush about calling your sister, LeAnn?" he asked. "Do I frighten you?"

Oh please, tell me he isn't going to use such an outdated come on. Sheesh, the only thing that could make this worse is if she ... giggles, yep there it is, worse.

"Noooo, I don't want Marina to come here."

He pressed her to the wall. "Intriguing. Is there a reason you don't want her to show up here? Afraid she might try to steal me away from you?"

Hardly. That's my job, hot stuff.

Princess Kitten pushed him away, "N—no, I need to talk to her, let her know I'm okay."

His arms imprisoned her. "Now, why don't I believe you?"

Cause she's hiding something, duh. For an alpha, he's incredibly slow.

"LeAnn, look at me. What's going on? What are you not telling me?"

As the princess started to spill her guts, the door to the men's room swung open and out stormed an exceptionally pissed-off Hoss. This guy's breath was worse than the rancid dumpster sitting out back.

"Rick! Where is that dickwad you call a friend?" Hoss bellowed. "Look what the fuckhead did to me." He yanked up his shirt to show off a nasty set of claw marks, quickly healing but still red and painful-looking.

In a protective manner, Rick stepped in front of his kitten. "What did you do to your pride leader?"

"Nothing, man, I tried to teach this sweet piece a lesson for slapping me." Hoss sputtered. "Before I could finish, Bastian stormed across the floor like a feral animal, scratching the shit out of me before pulling his 'Mari' off the swing. He looked ready to kill, man."

"Rina?" LeAnn whimpered, sliding down the wall. "No—no—no."

Bastian is with another woman. He can't be, damn it, he's mine!

Hoss opened the back door. "I'm outta here, man. Bad mojo here tonight. No one's fucking, everyone's fighting, and the bitches are horned up, but none of the alphas can take care of them."

Why the fuck is Bastian with another woman? Alicia harnessed the building anger. *Who's this Mari anyway?*

Rick knelt next to the weeping woman. "LeAnn, honey what's wrong?"

"Mari's my sister, Rick," she sniffled, "and Bastian is the pride leader."

"Yeah, but, your sister could do worse than attract the pride leader."

No shit she could do worse, however, this Mari person has my pride leader and I won't share him!

LeAnn hung her head. "He'll kill her."

Good, he'll save me the trouble.

“That’s not Bastian’s way, kitten. He may love her to death, but I’m guessing she’ll probably enjoy it.”

Love her to death, oh, I think not! Once Alicia was done with the sex machine, she was going to kill the whore macking on her mate. *Great, now Miss Kitty is leaking. Suck it up, crybaby, and get over it.*

“Mari is half human. Odds are she is dead already.”

No fucking way. Her mate was with a half-breed right now? Well, this just keeps getting better and better. What could she do with this tidbit? Alicia needed to think...

Chapter Seven

Damn it! Bastian fumed inwardly as he carried Mari across the yard. He was in trouble. Not your ordinary type of trouble either. No, this kind of trouble came packaged in a 5'5" to-die-for-body, sporting dark red hair and the clearest green eyes he'd ever been privileged enough to fall into. This trouble had the ability to drop him to his knees with her soft-spoken words and whispered pleas.

He took the steps two at a time up to the front door. Balanced precariously across his shoulder, his fiery cat grunted with every bounce. As he dug the keys from his pocket, she taunted him at least six new ways to disparage both his mother and his origins. Impressive.

His mate was definitely a handful. She'd provided him a night of the most mind-bending sex he'd enjoyed to date only to bolt without a goodbye or a thank you for the multiple orgasms.

Normally he'd be grateful if the women he fucked were gone by the morning; it saved him the morning-after crap. When Mari bailed, though, he'd been lost and at odds. Their newly imprinted bond had tugged at his emotions.

Now, a whirlwind of feminine sensations bombarded him. Tender nipples rubbed against his shirt. An arousal with the intensity of a small tornado brought tears to his eyes.

For two years, he'd wondered what could be wrong with him.

The desire to prowl, looking for a plaything for the night, had disappeared. The touch of a woman had left him uninspired. He'd doubted his sexual prowess along with his effectiveness as pride leader. If those losses weren't bad enough, next the ability to fuck had vanished, along with it a large part of his self-esteem. What kind of leader couldn't perform? What kind of man couldn't take care of a woman? More importantly, when he found her again, how would he satisfy the one female whose presence made him whole in a way he'd never been before?

Days had dragged by in a hazy shade of gray, one the same as the other. Need, arousal and frequent release beat at him through the connection to his mate. The idea of his woman seeking pleasure from another, while making him feel every touch, ate at him. His link to Mari proved useless in finding her, as all he could sense were emotions.

Rage became a constant companion.

In the beginning, drinking became the escape of choice. Nights of utter drunkenness filled the sexless void, providing an easy blame for the lifeless appendage between his legs. When drinking ceased to ease the embarrassment, he took to late night runs. Hour upon hour of punishing runs left him exhausted enough to crawl into the bed he now thought of as hers. The scent of her hair, her sex, would encompass him and seep into his pores, allowing him to remember what it was like to feel ten feet tall—to be hers. There'd been something missing from his life. Apparently, the spitfire he carried into the house was the key.

No one knew of his problem. Shame kept his lips firmly closed even knowing others were going through the same thing. He found it hard to fathom his predicament could cause their problems. If he were indeed the reason for the dysfunction, it would seem

that, since he again batted with the big boys, the issue should no longer exist.

He hoped.

He made his way through the kitchen into the hallway leading to his room and tossed Mari on the cotton-covered mattress of his king-size bed. Her lush breasts bounced as she landed. Those pert pink nipples begged to be in his mouth, rolled across his tongue until she pleaded for more.

“Please,” she whispered. “Let me leave.”

Bastian leaned closer, grabbing her chin with his fingers. “Leave?” He pulled her face closer to his. “I don’t think so. We’re not done here yet.”

Marina jerked her chin from his hands. She tugged at the cups of her bra and righted the material, keeping the sight of her nipples from him. “What more do you want from me?”

What did he want from her? Was she serious? He wanted it all, of course. He wanted his mate. Tied to him in body, mind and soul, he’d accept nothing less.

He jumped on the end of bed, watching her scoot backwards, trepidation glowing in her eyes. Need pulsed at her core, and his cock matched the rhythm, deeply embedded in their connection. “I *want* two years worth of the heart pounding, skin torching, and mind blowing sex we enjoyed that first night.” He crawled closer. “I want to ride you until I wring every last orgasm from your body.” Closer still. “I want to hold you while you rest, and then I want to start again.” He slid his body over hers pushing her into the pillows. “And if you keep covering yourself with that bra, I will cut it off your body the same way I did the shirt.”

Arousal flared in Mari’s eyes. Tingles skittered across their bond to harden not just her nipples, but his as well. Between the spanking and her response to his dominant nature, he knew his cat enjoyed playing hard, but how rough did she like it? He leaned into the curve of her neck, turned his head and ran his tongue over her pulse. He worked his way to her ear, leaving small nips along the way.

“I’m going to take you again,” he said before closing his mouth around her ear lobe. “I’m going to bind you to me, again, but *this* time it will be fully.” He nibbled hard enough to pull a yip from her pouty red lips.

Mari ground her hips into his newly reawakened arousal. *Damn*, it was good to be back in the game. He’d been surprised and very pleased that his first time in two years beat the three-second rule. He’d hate to leave his mate disappointed and unsatisfied.

He kissed every inch of her throat and chest, breathing in her essence before heading back to the other ear, whispering, “I know you enjoyed the spanking, but what else do you like?”

“I—I don’t know.”

“Liar.” Leaning back, he looked at her nearly naked body, flushed with arousal. “Do you like to be held down, or restrained in some way?”

“*Bastian*.” Small quakes swirled just under his skin. The closer they became, their bond strengthened...

“I’ll take that as a yes, you like to be bound.” With his finger, he drew a line between her breasts until he reached her bra clasp. A pinch of his finger and thumb made quick work of the material. “Close your eyes, Mari.”

Nervousness flared in her beautiful green eyes. Her arousal flooded his system.

“Trust me, mate, I could never harm you. I want only to pleasure you, pleasure us

both.”

Her body relaxed, softening beneath him. His fingers drew gently over her eyes, commanding them to shut. “Imagine your bra wrapped around your wrists, the silk tightening, and its bite painful yet something you need. The binding is an extension of me, my hands holding your arms tightly over your head, keeping you bound.”

A sigh escaped her full lips at his words, her nervousness turning to need. The beaded nipples called to him, captivated him. His release in the garage provided the control he needed to please his mate. “Raise your arms, sweetheart, and tell me what should I do to your delectable body?”

She moved her tightly clasped hands and eased her legs wide. “My breasts,” she whispered.

“They are quite lovely. Firm, plentiful and by the looks of those perky tips, hungry. What should I do to them?”

A wisp of air slid from her lips. “Touch them, please.”

Bastian leaned forward. He trailed a finger around the dusky areola of one breast, careful not to touch the tip. “Like this?”

Repeatedly, he moved a single finger around her breasts, first one side, and then the other. Never once touching her nipples no matter how much she arched, begging for the contact.

“M—my nipples,” she wheezed.

“What about your nipples, Mari? What do you want me to do with them?” Bastian moved his mouth closer to her chest. Close enough for his hot breath to roll softly across the puckered tips. “Suck them? Pinch them? Blow on them?”

Her skin flush with color; her nipples hardened. “Yes...”

“Like this?” He ran the tip of his tongue around the areola of one breast, keeping away from the ripe, swollen nipple.

Pinpricks of pleasure stabbed at the small discs on his chest.

“Or like this?” He ran his flattened tongue over the engorged nipple.

For every teasing torture he inflicted upon her nipples, he felt the sensation in kind. It drove him crazy. He’d never dreamed the mating bond could be this intense.

“*Bastiaaaan...*” Her moans set fire to his already hot blood. The softly puffed “eh” at the end of his name shot a bolt of electricity straight to his balls, snuggling them close to his body, readying for release.

His lips grazed the tip of her nipple. “How about this?” He sucked the firm tip slowly into his mouth, creating suction strong enough to pull a gasp from between her lips and the nipple further into his mouth. His tongue lashed across the tip several times before he released the small nub with an audible pop.

She writhed beneath him, arching her hips in search of any part of him to ease the fire he’d created. Rather than put the fire out, he moved, licking small designs onto her skin as he worked his way to her core. Lick after lick brought him closer to her smooth mound.

Anchoring her hips to the bed, he held her immobile; leaning close he blew across her engorged clit.

“Bastian...” she cried, reaching for his head.

“Stop! Put your hands back above your head, mate, you are not to move those,” he said. “Unless of course you’re looking to be punished?”

He watched as Mari settled back into position. She said nothing, understanding his question was completely rhetorical.

“Good girl. Now, tell me, love, why did you run two years ago and more importantly why do you smell of human?”

*

Flames licked her body, hitting all the right spots. Every swirl of his tongue, every tightened grip on her hips, every word spoken in his dominant voice turned her body inside out; burning it out of control. Her body hung on the edge of another release, this one promising to be as good as the last until he doused her with the ice-cold water of the two questions she could never answer for him.

Tears filled her eyes, threatening to tumble free. “Let me up.” She hated crying, especially in front of someone. “*Now!*”

Bastian laughed, puffs of air blew lightly over her mound. Marina’s traitorous body creamed at the feel of his breath between her folds. “Nope.” He leaned forward to run his tongue through her slit. “You haven’t answered my questions.”

Marina closed her eyes, took a deep breath and curled her fingers into the comforter. “So, you’re going to tease me until I tell you ... what, exactly?”

“I want to know why you left without saying anything.”

“Isn’t that what you wanted, a—a quick...” The blatant lie refusing to pass her lips fully, she waved her hand hoping he’d fill in the blanks. “Then me gone?”

His voice became lethally soft. “When did I give you the impression all I wanted from you was a *quick fuck*?”

She grimaced as the words left his mouth. Quick did not adequately describe their night together. He’d taken such care at bringing her to heights she’d never known before. With every stroke, he’d loved her and bound her to him, only she wasn’t able to accept the gift for what it was.

“Let me leave, please? I’ll call a cab from the bait shop; you won’t have to do anything to help me...”

“*Silence!*”

Marina flinched as Bastian rolled off her and climbed from the bed. Though they’d only been together a few times, Marina knew he would never hurt her or hit her with anything other than pleasure. Bastian was her mate. There was a pull between them; a need to be together and it ate at her soul the last time she ran.

“Christ, Mari, if you won’t answer that question at least tell me why you smell like a human.”

He paced back and forth across the room, proudly naked with his hands behind his head, elbows to the sides. His erection stretched to meet his bellybutton; clearly, the anger and frustration swirling inside of him were not enough to diminish his arousal.

Her eyes dropped to the mattress unable to look at him any longer. She knew her eyes would betray her; they were a link to her soul, a soul she’d given him long ago. “I—I don’t know what to tell you.”

“The truth, sweetheart, there’s nothing hard about...” He inhaled sharply as the phone rang. “Fuck, hold on.”

Every inch of Marina’s body throbbed as she watched him stalk to the phone. She needed this man. Loved him, inexplicably from the moment she first caught his eye.

“*What?*” he bellowed.

Maybe if she told him about her split nature? Told him she was half-shifter, half-human. They were mates; could that be enough to sway the current pack leader to allow them to be together?

“Yeah, Rick, she’s here with me...”

She’d heard enough of the stories concerning the pride leader to know what a monster he could be. He’d killed plenty of disobedient pride members. The act of mating with a half-breed went way past disobedience.

“Of course I haven’t killed her.” The look he threw her way sent shivers down her spine. “Yet.”

He still waited for answers and sadly, the ones she had to give would not go over well.

“What do you mean every male?”

There was no way he could mate with a half-breed and live. She refused to see Bastian harmed because of her situation.

“Shit, who called this meeting?”

Her split nature made it impossible for them to be together.

“We’ll be right there.”

She needed to figure out how to get away.

Bastian slammed the phone back into its cradle. “Get dressed.” He threw a t-shirt and sweat pants her way. “Looks like you were saved by the bell, for now.”

Marina watched as he stepped into his jeans, pulling them up to cover her view of his awe-inspiring ass. “Are you going to let me leave?”

“Leave?” He laughed as he pulled a shirt over his head. “Not a chance. You still haven’t answered my questions.”

“But...”

His final words effectively ripped out what was left of her heart. “Odds are good, beautiful, that I’ll never be done with you.”

She would be the cause of her mate’s death and she didn’t know how to stop it.

Chapter Eight

The breeze whistling off the lake carried with it the cry of a loon, calling for its mate. Bastian laid his aching head, at least one of them, on the cool glass separating his living room from the night beyond. The plaintive cry, followed by the ready response of its mate, soothed his soul. He wondered, not for the first time, if the life of the beautiful waterfowl was easier.

Honestly, how could every pride male become impotent at the same time? If this was some far-reaching pride problem, wouldn't all of the males been afflicted? Judging by the throbbing ache pressing against his zipper, there was at least one spared.

Soft footsteps alerted him to her presence. Mari, quiet in her human form, would command attention as a jaguar. With her auburn hair and golden highlights, she would look spectacular.

"I'm ready."

Bastian curled his fingers until the knuckles cracked. What secret lay behind her beautiful green-eyed gaze? Could she be married? A cold sweat rolled over him at the thought. It would explain the human smell, but it would be a death sentence for the other male, and killing her human husband would not endear him to her.

"Fine," he grumbled. "Let's go. I don't have time for this right now."

"Is something wrong?"

"What isn't wrong would be a better question." Frustration burned its way through his body. "I have a large group of impotent alpha males congregating at the bar wanting answers, my second is calling mysterious meetings, and my mate smells human. To distract me further, you won't tell me why, compounding the urge to kill whoever put their smell on you."

Her fear swamped him. Was he really so fearsome that she would have cause to be afraid of her mate?

"I could make it easier by leaving now."

Bastian pulled her to his chest. "You're not leaving me again."

"But..."

"No." His tone was gentle, meant to soothe. She had nothing to fear from him. She was his life; somehow, he'd make her see that.

"It would make things easier for you."

"No." He set her down and faced her towards the door.

"I'm just trying to help."

"Well, stop *helping*, mate," The playful swat to her behind turned quickly into a serious grope, leaving him harder than ever. "You are not leaving. Now haul your ass to the garage."

She led the way. Covered by his sweats and t-shirt, she captivated him, body and soul. He needed to solve of the mystery surrounding her before he did something foolish.

He needed to focus.

Cryptic calls from his closest advisor inquiring as to Mari's health and middle of the night meetings initiated by his uppity second-in-command required his total attention. His position as pride leader meant absolute control was his, meeting requests came from his

lips, and the state of his mate's health was his business and no one else's. Granted he'd been about to give up his leadership, but with Mari back, he was complete and more than ready to be in charge again.

He ushered her into the garage, grabbed the helmet off the back of the bike and started to set it on her head.

"Do I need to wear that?" Her death grip on his wrists surprised him.

Intrigued by her reluctance, he shrugged the helmet under his arm. "Yes, you absolutely need to wear it. If I have to ditch this bike for any reason you need to be protected."

"It's uncomfortable and stifling inside there."

With a gentle touch, he tilted her chin until she met his eyes. The thought of anything happening to her made him want to bay at the moon and cats don't bay. "I know we heal quickly from injury, but a head wound is still a head wound, shifter or not. Put on the helmet, sweetheart, so you don't worry me to death."

"Fine."

Carefully, he lowered the helmet onto her head and closed the snap. "Thank you."

"Whatever." She mumbled like a sulky teenager from behind the visor. The grin she pulled from him felt good, right. It had been too long since he'd last grinned at anything.

Bastian threw a leg over the hog and kick started the monster. He could start it with the switch, but doing it the old-fashioned way satisfied his dominant nature. Once the Harley rumbled, he offered his hand, pulling her onto the bike behind him. Her arms secured around his waist, he backed the motorcycle from the garage and headed to the bar.

This meeting screamed of problems. A bunch of unruly, sexually frustrated alpha males lurked at the bar looking to the pride leader for answers. Answers he plainly did not have. There appeared to be a growing problem with Turk as well. It wasn't typical for his second-in-command to call middle of the night meetings with the whole pride without telling him first. Rick's call concerned him more, though. How could he think Mari would be in any danger? Hell, he'd rather take himself apart, piece by piece, rather than injure her. If Rick was concerned, though, could someone else be trying to hurt her? Did it have something to do with why she left?

"Fuck!" One problem at a time.

The sudden tensing at his back surprised him. Had he bellowed loudly enough into the oncoming wind for her to hear? If his current frustration scared her, just wait until she realized her mate was the pride leader. Yelling sometimes went with the job. The few times they'd been together, he'd never mentioned leading a pride. Best not to scare her off right away. She needed time to get to know him, time to see that the things they said about him were mostly untrue.

Rumors flew about the viciousness with which he handled the pride. Funny thing, most of the stories about his mean streak and unruly nature were false. He'd only ruled with an iron fist on a few occasions. If an alpha got out of hand with a woman, jaguar or human, he had no problem meting out extreme justice. It was unacceptable to abuse or disrespect a woman. As the leader, he dealt with offenders in the swiftest manner possible. Every single pride male knew this; therefore, the rule had rarely been broken.

The pride needed an introduction to Mari. She'd take his mark once this impotence problem was resolved and he discovered her secret. His mark would make her a powerful

woman within this pride; better everyone knew the truth and soon. If the erectile dysfunction problem did have something to do with his not having a mate, perhaps he should make things public tonight.

Bastian parked the bike in front of the bar and climbed off. Mari shocked him by scurrying off the other side of the bike, wrenching the helmet from her head and dropping it to the ground.

“W—what are we doing here?”

The blood drained from her face at such a rate he wondered if she might faint. What was going on? “I told you back at the house,” he said, hoping he sounded soothing. “A meeting has been called and we need to be here.”

“No, I—I can’t go in there, I’m sorry, you’ll have to do this without me.” She turned to leave. “I—I’m going home.”

A red haze clouded his vision; did she think he wouldn’t or *couldn’t* protect her? Was her mistaken assumption why she thought to walk away from him—again?

Son. Of. A. Bitch.

Did she honestly think he’d let her leave him without a backward glance? Could he truly mean nothing to her? If it were the case, they had a long road ahead of them.

Shitkickers pounded into the dirt as he made his way around the bike. He grabbed her trim waist and hauled her into his arms. “If you try to walk away from me again, I will take you home and flog your ass until sitting is nothing but a memory. Do you understand me?”

She tensed before fighting in earnest, beating at his arms, kicking at his legs and throwing every part of herself into the battle. “I’m not going in there.”

Pulled close, her wide-eyed look told him she now took him seriously. “You are going in there,” he growled at her, “and you will stand by my side, as my mate should, and the whole time you will project an aura of calm and strength.” He set her back on her feet and turned to go into the bar. “Don’t fail me, Mari.”

Please don’t fail me...

*

Hatred burned through Alicia’s blood as she watched her mate touch the half-breed whore. The need to pace, scream and hit something overwhelmed her, but to move now would give her away. How disgusting to think of her mate touching something unclean.

Soon, though, it wouldn’t matter.

Alicia had started the ball rolling. Tonight the pride would learn some interesting things concerning their leader’s newest plaything. Once they knew her secret, she’d be gone. Full bloods did not associate with anyone lesser, human or half-breed. With the tramp gone, the door would be wide open for her. *Queen of the pride, here she comes.* Alicia smiled as she made her way into the club; tonight would prove to be quite enjoyable. The only thing better would be killing the bitch herself.

*

Bastian took note of the pissed-off alphas milling around the entrance inside the bar. Ready to burst at the seams, the bar looked several bodies past its occupancy limit. Clearly every male in the pride had showed up for this impromptu meeting, alpha and beta alike. A sense of wrongness assailed him. Sniffs and snarls surrounded them.

With a hand around Mari’s wrist, he pulled her close; his body language screamed ownership. Ballsy members of the pride stood nose to nose with him, eyes short of the

defiant level. A growl deep in his throat warned the males to step down. Not once since he'd become pride leader had he been so blatantly defied. He'd always retained total control of the pride, even in the worst of times.

Like a bulldozer, he pushed several of the males aside as he maneuvered to the back of the bar where he could see Rick and Turk standing. Without waiting for him to ascend to the top of the stage, Turk started to speak.

"Well, mighty nice of you to pull yourself away from such a tasty piece there, Bastian, to grace us with your presence."

Turk asserted his dominance, looking for a shot at the role of pride leader. The disrespectful tone in his second's voice set off a blaze in Bastian's gut. How could things have deteriorated this fast?

"Turk, when it's your time to make a play for leader, do something more than talking down to me." Bastian climbed the stairs, his reluctant female in tow. "At least I could respect you a little bit." Face to face with Turk, he was pleased to see the alpha flinch. "Why was I dragged to the bar at this time of night?"

"*What?*" False concern oozed from Turk's voice. "Don't tell me our leader has no clue that every pride male has lost the ability to get it up."

The fingernails embedded in the fleshy part of his palm told him Mari had just realized whom he was. The withdrawal of her hand hit him like a knife to the chest. Loss sliced through him. Her wheezy "No" nearly sent him to his knees. When he turned, his beautiful, hard-hitting mate curled over in what looked very much like pain.

"Mari..."

"Surely your adviser there would have informed you of the problem we're facing, considering you caused it." Turk's sneer set off the loosely held anger bubbling up from Bastian's chest.

Bastian moved to stand nose to nose with the other male. "How exactly could I have caused impotence in a pride full of shifters?" His growl brought forth an equally nasty growl from his second-in-command.

"Sir!" Rick forced his way between the two alphas. "I'd hoped to talk to you privately before it got to this point, but you've been unavailable." Rick eyed Mari barely standing at Bastian's back. "It appears this is not a new problem. The same thing happened 150 years ago when a previous pride leader refused to pick a mate."

"Well, this can easily be resolved." All eyes focused on the female Bastian pulled to the middle of the stage. "I've found my mate." The Den went silent at his statement, except for the shrill cry coming from the back of the room.

"See here's the problem, oh great pride leader," Turk said. "Your mate is a half-breed, therefore not an acceptable mate for any full-blooded shifter, let alone our leader."

He'd hit Turk before the jaguar could raise his arms in defense. Bastian's muzzle erupted from his face. Sharp teeth closed around the errant jag's neck working their way through his skin for a taste of blood. His pulse pounded behind his eyes; the throbbing pushed him to kill the bastard who offended his mate.

"Bastian!"

The distress in Mari's voice and the cold nothingness radiating through their connection reached past the killing haze. From his locked position around Turk's neck, he saw her eyes filled with sadness, or was it resignation?

"Please, don't do this."

He immediately granted her request; denying her nothing except the freedom to leave him. Her freedom would mean his death. He released Turk's neck and changed back into his human form, before facing his mate to hear her deny Turk's accusation.

"How interesting. Our pride leader had no idea his new toy is half human." Turk addressed the group, holding the bleeding gash marks on either side of his throat. "All you have to do is smell her to know she is not pure."

A broken cry pulled Bastian around. Rick held a distraught female against his chest, whispering what might have been words of comfort. The sea of alphas stared intensely at Mari, expecting her to do or say something.

All Bastian could do was watch the fear fill Mari's face as Turk circled her. Why wasn't she defending herself, telling him they were wrong and she was full-blooded, offering to demonstrate her shifting ability? Why wasn't he defending her?

The truth rolled him like a rogue wave. She said and demonstrated nothing, because she *was* half-human.

Deep down he'd known she was not pure. Bastian had known acceptance in this world, by these people or as his mate, was not possible.

Self-preservation or plain dog-headedness had kept him in denial. Now, the pride rubbed the truth in his face.

He watched, from a faraway place where time distorted, as Turk issued the words he should have been uttering. Words certain to drive his mate away. "Half-breeds are not welcome in the pride, nor are they welcome in the vicinity of pride land." Turk continued to circle Mari. "Per our laws, you will be banished from northern Minnesota. You have one day to pack and leave." Bastian's second stopped and looked into her eyes. "If you are not gone by then, a posse will be sent to kill you."

"Nooooo!" The blond caged by Rick's embrace let loose with a wail several octaves outside the norm before slumping into a fit of tears.

"Bastian?" Mari's gaze hit him hard. Would she beg for understanding, caring, and love? Did she hope he would throw caution to the wind and help her?

He searched for the words to make this right, struggled through the haze to take her pain away. His mind raced, seeking for a simple answer to a complex problem. Ultimately, he did nothing as he watched her face collapse in disappointment.

Worse than the disappointment was the utter abandonment coursing through their bond.

Two enforcers, cops of the pride, stepped close; each wrapped a hand around her arm and tugged. She tumbled backwards off the stage ending up a heap on the sticky floor. Subjugating her further, the bruisers grabbed her arms and dragged her to the front doors. A path opened for the trio. Alphas and betas alike cheered as they pulled her by and tossed her from the bar like yesterday's rubbish.

"Now, pride leader," Turk said. "Pick an acceptable mate or step down."

When had he lost control of this meeting? Logically he knew; emotionally, he could barely process the whole scene. Mere minutes were all it'd taken to rip his mate away and leave him a broken mass. A painful band clenched around his middle, his control slipped and the jaguar broke through. Bastian hissed and howled as his tail grew, claws erupted as his paws hit the floor. A muzzle pushed from his face and sharpened teeth filled his mouth. The last sounds his now sensitive hearing picked up were the gasps of females and the shuffling of feet as he raced into the darkened night.

Chapter Nine

Marina watched while pride enforcers scrubbed their hands, as if to rid themselves of her half-breed germs. “You can’t catch it, ya know,” she snapped.

Geez, if only her touch could cause them pain... Yeah, a deep, blinding pain surrounding their balls, agonizing to the touch and painful enough to double them over crying for their mommies. A ghost of a smile crossed her face; yep, unbearable pain would be perfect right now.

Muscle boys One and Two stood at the door; mirror images, with arms crossed, legs wide and twin looks of disgust burning through her. “Take off, half-breed.” Clearly, they didn’t think tossing her into the dirt was enough of a hint for her to leave.

She rose from the ground. Head held high, she brushed dirt off of her seat, grateful Bastian’s overly large sweatpants had stayed on during her slide across the bar room floor. Banished. Shoot, who knew there was something more mortifying than being outed as a half-breed wearing a pair of men’s sweats in front of a roomful of the most gorgeous people ever.

The air left her lungs in a slow painful wheeze. She bent at the waist, placing her hands on the fronts of her suddenly weak thighs to keep from falling. Hyperventilation was a real possibility here. Crazy laughter sounded around her. Wait, scratch that. It was coming from her. Heck, why shouldn’t it be coming from her? She’d had sex with Bastian, not only a sexy alpha, but according to legend, a vicious killer, and the pride leader. Fear rose from her stomach, forcing its way into her throat. She would not puke in front of these blowhards. She would not. From this moment forward, she’d push fear deep, keeping it hidden. There would be no tears for the man she loved, her mate, the legend of those horror stories. No one would see her pain or her amazement at still being alive. Who cared, if the center of her universe had discarded her, left her alone, something he’d promised not to do. She may not flourish without him, but she’d live, damn it.

Marina weighed her options. She’d arrived at the bar on the back of Bastian’s motorcycle. Somehow, she doubted he would be inclined to give her a lift back to her car. Nervous laughter squeaked out.

On to plan B. Since she’d left her phone, wallet and car keys back at the broken down car, a taxi was out of the question. Her car seemed to be the best bet, only it sat several miles back with a flat to boot. At least it was in the same direction as her house. Glancing at the night sky, she thanked sweet Mother Nature for the full moon. Nighttime in the woods meant no streetlights, few homes and many tall shadowy trees. Without the moon, the area would be beyond black. She was in for a long walk.

Headed back the way she’d come earlier this evening, she let her mind wander to Bastian and his promises. No one would hurt her, he said. She was his mate. He’d sworn they’d never be apart again. His silence tonight, when she’d needed it the least, showed him for the liar he was. She meant no more to him than some quick sex.

A moment in time. The same thing she’d been looking for—at first.

A cold ice pick drove its way through her heart, shattering it in too many pieces. Where had it come from? Afraid to look down, already knowing what she’d see, she

raised her hand to lay it gently against her breast. No cold. No jagged edges. No warm fluid soaking her clothes. She was unharmed, but in no way complete. The truth of the matter was, she'd been a willing participant in the sex. He took no advantage since she had freely offered. She'd put herself in this situation when she'd allowed her heart to become involved.

She'd known from the very beginning, though she never let herself admit it, that the intense thoughts and feelings inside were somehow associated with her one night stand. While the whole of the connection was overwhelming, bits and pieces of Bastian shone through. He missed her. Agonized over her safety. Questioned himself over a loss and wondered if he was still up to leading.

Gads, if she'd stopped and thought things out clearly, if the arousal hadn't been so overpowering maybe she could have figured out what to do long before now.

"Damn hearts anyway. They cause ya nothing but trouble!" Though she said it, she could never believe it. She loved Bastian as only a mate can, fully and without reserve. Walking away was killing her. If she looked down, she was sure to see pieces of her heart lined up like breadcrumbs leading him—to her.

"Geez, girly, give it up already." Marina shivered as she moved along the darkened road. Though she loved him, he would never be her haven. His arms would never hold her securely in their midst. He would never be there, holding the world at bay. Rather he lied and made painful promises of being her mate. He was crueler than the stories she'd heard, all put together.

And she was a great big sucker.

The back of her neck tingled; she wondered if they'd already sent someone to watch her, perhaps kill her anyway, not giving her a chance to leave. She peeked into the woods from the corner of her eye, hoping to see or rather not see anything stalking her. Unless it was her sister, coming to her rescue for a change. What a novel idea that was, LeAnn, the cause of all of Marina's problems coming to save the day ... *right*. So maybe it wasn't fair to blame her sister for everything, but dang it, why did things all go right for LeAnn? She was beautiful, sought after in the pride's social circles and from the looks of things, well on her way to mating with the gorgeous alpha at her back. LeAnn had it all, did it all, but was, as usual, not here for Marina. Much the same as it had been their entire lives.

Her pace increased to a slow jog, a dumb thing to do if she had a jaguar tailing her. She'd be inciting the animal's hunting instinct, but it made her feel safer. The faster she got to the car, the better off she would be. If she needed to, she'd lock herself in for the night and flag down help the next morning.

She would love to confront Bastian, to tell him what a jerk he was, somehow make him regret his silence. She might not be a full-blooded shifter, but she was a good woman.

The tingle on the back of Marina's neck intensified, pulling her from her reverie. She looked side to side as she ran, not seeing anything, though confident someone watched her from the woods.

Marina stopped; dropped her hands to her knees while pulling a deep breath into her lungs, "Who's there?" she called. "I'm following your instructions, please leave me alone."

Her car loomed ahead, a haven in the night. Only a few more yards and she would be safe. Adrenaline burned through her system. Marina moved with a sudden burst of speed,

one she'd never had before, straight to the driver's side door, knowing she'd left it unlocked. The rustle of leaves confirmed her suspicions. Grabbing at the handle, she pulled it open and threw herself inside; slamming the door, she threw the locks seconds before the jaguar flung its body onto her car.

The tormented scream of the large cat sliced into her soul. Marina watched it jump to the hood of her car. The large male looked at her through eyes she knew only too well. This beautiful black jaguar with the same violently green eyes of the man she loved stared at her through the glass. Why was he here? To torment her some more, scare her into leaving, or was he here to kill her? His eyes reflected pain, a yawning sadness, but not murder. Marina touched the window where his snout rested in what she hoped to be an unspoken plea of forgiveness.

She swiped at her eyes. *No tears, don't cry, please not yet.* Her silent plea went unanswered as tears slid down her face. Bastian licked at her palm through the window before he jumped to the ground. He looked once more to the car; his scream sent lightning flashing through her body before he took off into the trees.

*

Bastian woke, naked, in human form and twenty paces from the back door to The Den. As the previous night came back to him, he wanted nothing more than to curl into a ball and die. He'd let them take his mate away. What kind of leader allowed such a thing to happen? *What kind of man?*

Marina was half-human. It made sense now, the human scent, her fear of coming into the bar; she knew they would figure out her secret. The shocker in all this was that he should have figured it out, could have figured it out if he'd been thinking with the head on his shoulders rather than the one at the end of his dick.

Twelve feet away he spied the shredded remains of his clothes and put on what was left of them. Shifting while still clothed always did a number on the threads. The previous night came back to him little by little. As he watched her being pulled from the bar by two large alphas all he could think was he should be doing something, but didn't know what. His feet stayed rooted to the ground, his lips frozen, unmoving. The urge to shift overwhelmed him.

He'd barely held it together.

After Turk leveled the demand/threat to find an acceptable mate, Bastian gave into the call of his animal and found his escape in the form of a jaguar. He ran long and hard through the woods, searching for the oblivion he'd never been able to find as a human.

Marina's scent flourished three miles from the bar. She moved with smooth determined steps. The jaguar nature inside her was strong. It called to its mate; it called to him. Yet, she walked away; each step a lash to his heart.

Belly to the ground he tracked her. He watched from the dark of the forest as she made her way to the car. Several times in the last few feet, she'd looked around. Her senses appeared acute enough to identify a threat, to know someone followed her. Her only mistake had been running. If he'd been anyone else, running would have brought on an attack.

His stomach turned at the thought of her dead on some back road only a few miles from him. Would her death be his death as well? Many of the mated couples he knew said the same thing—they would die with their mate. One could not continue without the other.

He knew exactly what they meant. When he jumped on the hood of her car, he'd watched her reach for him, only to cry as he moved away. Her pain seeped into his bones. There was no doubt in his mind; he would die without her.

As Bastian made his way back into the bar intent on finding Rick for some answers, Alicia, his second-in-command's sister, waylaid him.

This cat was mean. From the tips of her ears to the claws on her toes, she could out hiss any feline, natural or shifter. Not only did she sound feral, but also her claws could cut deep. He'd always made a point to veer widely when she came near. Unfortunately, this time there was no getting around her.

Bastian knew she'd set her sights on becoming the queen of the pride. There were too many rumors going around alluding to Alicia being the reason none of the other females got dates with him. Crazy as the rumor was, considering he'd never once dated, fucked or even spent extended periods with the she-cat. But the idea of it worked for him. He'd used the rumor to hide his problem. Better, the females of the pride assumed he was busy with a single woman rather than find out the truth. Unfortunately, when the truth came out, and it would, Alicia would be the one hurt. He'd hate to be in the damage path when she found out how permanently she and every other female were out of the running for Queen. He had a mate; now he needed to get her back.

"Hi ya, sugar, long time no see."

"Alicia..."

"Wait, sugar." She grabbed his arm as he tried to move past. "I wanted to talk to you."

"What is it, Alicia?" He tried, unsuccessfully, to keep the exasperation out of his voice. "I'm a little busy here. Could you make it quick?"

"Well, I'll try. The thing is, considering what happened last night, I wanted to remind you I come from a fully blooded shifter family and I think we could be good together." Alicia batted her eyes, continuing with what he guessed was a preplanned speech. "I know how to get the job done, would make a great queen, plus I'm fantastically kinky." She leaned into him. "I do anything, no questions asked."

Bastian forced his stomach back to where it belonged. The thought of doing anything remotely kinky, hell, anything at all with her, left him with a severe case of the willies.

"*Rick!*" Bastian bellowed, never taking his eyes off Alicia. "Wow, Alicia, your incredibly inappropriate offer has shriveled my dick."

The shocked look on her face along with the gasp escaping her lips was comical. Did she honestly think he would move on to the next female when just last night he'd introduced Mari to the pride as his mate? Apparently, his lack of a response made a bigger impression than he realized.

"*Rick!*" Where was he? The man never left; he was here night and day taking care of, well, everything.

"You—you ASS!!" she gasped. "How dare you speak to me... I'm the female you need as your mate and you have the nerve to say shit like... Arrgg ... to me?"

He turned toward the sputtering cat. "Alicia, listen well. You will never be my mate. I already have one."

Alicia leaned into him, breathing deeply, drawing his scent into her lungs. "Aside from sex, you don't smell of your little half-breed, which means you are still up for grabs. You know, should things come down to a challenge."

“There won’t be a challenge,” he said firmly. “I’m finishing this today. Now pull those claws back, bitch, and walk away. *Rick!*”

“This isn’t over, Bastian.”

“This was over before it started!” He moved further into the club. “*Ri...*”

“You bellowed?” Rick stepped from the spare room they kept for illicit moments in which privacy was necessary. Barefoot, wearing half-zipped jeans and no shirt, the normally calm alpha’s body language currently screamed possessiveness. Behind him, the stunning blond from last night with Mari’s eyes peeked out. What relationship did this woman share with his mate?

“Did you know Marina was half human?”

Bastian watched Rick place himself in front of the woman. “Yeah, I did.”

“Then why the fuck did I find out about it before a room full of pissed-off alphas?” Bastian roared

“I only learned she was part human a few hours prior to the meeting,” Rick calmly informed him.

“I still don’t get why it took you this long to let me know what was going on.”

“Excuse me, dickhead...”

“What about your cell phone, Rick? You could have reached out and touched someone!”

“I could have, but I didn’t. Who knew Turk would call a meeting so fast? Besides, I do have a personal life.”

“Well, fancy fucking that. You finally get a personal life and I lose my mate!” Bastian turned and slammed his hand into the wall repeatedly as he screamed. With a final growl, he laid his pounding head on the wall. For the first time in several minutes, he felt the throbbing in his hands. This was why he hated throwing fits. Not only did he hurt for days, he looked incredibly foolish to boot. “I suppose your personal time revolves around the blond bombshell hiding behind you.”

“Leave LeAnn out of this.”

Bastian laughed. “How can I, Rick? She is, if I’m not mistaken, the only one who knows where my mate would go.”

“That may be, but I will not allow you to frighten her, and right now you are pretty damn frightful!”

“I’m fucking frightful cause they took my mate away,” he hollered, his voice rising with every word.

“Why didn’t you say something last night? Why stay silent when you could have stopped this from happening?”

“I don’t know,” Bastian growled. “I was shocked.”

“Shocked?” Rick’s incredulous stare cut him down in size. “Dude, that is a puss bag answer.”

His jaguar gnawed at the restraints shackling him as he continued. “Damn, Rick, help me find her.”

“Why?” His friend’s glare burned through him.

Why? Well hell, what could he say? That he loved her. That she’s his mate. That she makes him whole. “I think she is the answer to the problem the pride is having, or we together are the answer.”

“Screw the pride. Go play in the woods some more—at least *there* you can be

honest.”

“Fuck off!” No way was he taking this from his supposed friend. “I *am* being honest.”

“Sure you are.” The sneer in the other cat’s voice irritated. “If I help you find her, think she’d help me out with this sister fantasy I read about the other d—ugh.”

“MINE!” Bastian leapt. The cat had finally broken the restraints inside his head. It didn’t matter in the slightest that hitting Rick was like barreling headlong into a tank, he wanted to rip into him, needed to silence him. “I will fucking kill you if you go anywhere near my mate!”

“Why?” This time the question came not from his friend, but from the beautiful female watching it all from a safe distance away. Somewhere during his tantrums, Rick had moved her to safety, as a good alpha should, as Bastian should have with Mari. Yet, here he stood still not admitting to the truth.

“Because I love her.”

“ ’Bout damn time you admitted to it, bud,” the hoarse whisper sounded from the end of his fist. “Mind if I have my throat back?”

“Shit, sorry.” Bastian pulled back and looked again at the soft female moving closer.

“W—what do you want to know?” she asked.

“How are you related to my mate?”

“Rina is my sister.”

“Sisters?” Bastian leaned into the woman in front of him, breathing deeply at her neck. “How can that be?”

The growl at his side left no doubt as to his friend’s thoughts on Bastian’s nearness to this woman.

“Our mother mated with both a shifter and a human.”

Of course, it made sense. Raised in an unbiased household, Mari would have had the benefit of a home where love proved stronger than law. Then he’d come along, possessive, dominant, threatening to keep her no matter what only to throw her away when their laws reared their ugly heads. He had a lot to make right.

As gently as he could, Bastian asked, “Where does Mari live?”

“We live in Merrifield,” she whispered. “We rent a trailer on County Road Two.”

Careful not to scare her, Bastian took hold of her hands and gave them a gentle squeeze. “I do love your sister, with all my heart, and will never hurt her. I promise.”

“Are you going after her?” Rick asked.

“Yeah, but first I’m going to have a wee chat with Turk. Apparently I need to remind him of who runs the show around here.”

*

Alicia fumed with an unnatural hate for the half-breed her mate wanted over her.

No! Bastian was hers, and she was this pride’s next queen. Not some damn half-breed!

Tonight she would put together a posse of female shifters to hunt for the human Bastian wanted and kill her. Surely, she could entice some of the weaker females of the pride into chasing and killing the half-breed. The promise of a challenge to win Bastian would do the trick. Once the human was dead, she would fight and beat the posse members at the challenge. Bastian would be hers, but more importantly, she would be queen.

The time for politeness was at an end. Now was the time to win. Once she got the posse together, she would go to Bastian and tell him how it would be. His plaything was dead unless he mated with her. He would cave. If he loved this human as he claimed he would do anything to save her, even this.

Would she call off the posse? Not on your life. Little Miss Half-breed needed to die; Alicia wouldn't risk Bastian changing his mind. So bye, bye breed.

Chapter Ten

“...Three days?” Marina eyed the portly mechanic across the counter.

“Yep.”

“To fix a tire?” She raised an eyebrow.

“Yep.”

“Do you say anything besides, yep?”

“Nope.”

Marina dropped her head to the counter. Three days to fix a flat. Only in a small town would something like this be possible. Of course, as fate would have it, a lug bolt or something had broken off when the tow truck driver tried to loosen the lug nuts. Now she was stuck in a town a stone’s throw away from those who’d banned her.

“What if you put the tire back on and leave the lug nut off the broken bolt thingy?” she asked. “Could you have it done faster that way?”

“Sure I could,” he said, before spitting a wad of tobacco into the spittoon. “But I won’t.”

“Why not?”

“Well, honey, because it would be too dangerous for you to drive missing a bolt.”

Marina’s knuckles cracked as she looked at the mechanic, wishing she had it in her to be nasty to men such as him. “What if I want to take my chances with it, could you slap it together, bill me and let me be on my way?”

“Sweetheart,” grease monkey sneered. “If I did and some *thang* happened to yaw, well, it would be my fault and you’d be able to sue me.”

“I’ll sign something absolving you of any wrong doing; if I do, I can’t come back and...”

“No! Now, girly, we are gonna fix it nice and proper like. You’ll have it back in three days.”

She watched as he walked back into the garage where they held her car hostage. First, she was a honey, next a sweetheart and finally a girly. At times like this, she wished she could change; she’d make her hand into a paw with claws long enough to put this blockhead out of his misery.

What exactly would she do now? She had one day to leave town and no drivable vehicle. She could have it towed to a different garage, but that would cost her money she needed to run. Unless she didn’t run.

Sunshine beat down outside the garage windows, taunting her with the beauty of the day. Maybe some breakfast would get her back on track.

Her head hurt and her eyes burned from lack of sleep combined with periodic crying jags. The horrifying events of last night took her from an extreme pleasure to utter dejection. One moment she was in Bastian’s arms reaching sexual heights she could attain only with him; the next, banishment and a disgusting slide across the barroom floor.

Determined to stay under the radar, Marina walked head down the short distance to the café. She’d learned long ago that the best way to go unnoticed was to be there physically, but blend. Don’t draw attention to yourself. Move at a normal speed, don’t

speak more than is expected, don't meet another's eye; most importantly don't cower. It's easy to overlook the quiet ones.

Through the windows, she noted there were only a few people seated inside. Marina slipped in and grabbed the closest seat to the door. The café smelled of bacon and eggs, scalding coffee with a light scent of shifter. The minimal smell told her this was not a full-blood. More than likely it was another like her. She glanced around looking for the half-breed in question. Not recognizing anyone, she looked at the menu and waited for the server to take her order.

Marina grabbed the cell from her purse and set it on the table. She stared at it, hoping it would offer up the answers to her problems. She had a day to leave town, a car held hostage for three days and a startling realization: almost twelve hours had passed since she'd last found sexual release. It'd been two years since she'd been able to go more than a couple of hours. Now, she was eleven hours and forty-five minutes since the last time.

Of course, since she was thinking about it, the need to cum began to rear its ugly head. The itch high inside that never fully subsided without something long and thick rubbed against it started to hum. But so far, arousal was not overwhelming her. Thankfully, sweet Mother Nature must have decided to ease up on her as the unrelenting bond to her mate was subdued.

Could it have something to do with Bastian, or was there something different in the shifter gene pool? She'd never heard anything mentioned, but maybe it was something related only to her mixed blood. Whatever the explanation, she hoped the peace and quiet would continue, so she could figure out what to do without the mind clutter accompanying her sexual need.

She wanted to talk to her sister to make sure LeAnn was okay, to find out if she'd given away her secret, and to say goodbye. With a cleansing breath, she grabbed the phone to dial her number.

"Hello."

"LeAnn? Why are you whispering? Is everything okay?"

"Oh, Rina, I was worried," LeAnn sobbed. "Where are you?"

Marina sighed. "Somewhere safe for now, but, how did they find out about me? Did you tell anyone?"

The quiet on the other end of the line told her all she needed to know. "Why, LeAnn?"

"I—I didn't mean too." LeAnn continued to weep. "It's just, well, when Rick and I got back to the bar, everyone went on about how the pride leader lost it when some new redhead was being auctioned off. He was so mad he ripped the redhead right off the platform and carried her from the bar over his shoulder, after slicing the other alpha darn near all the way though."

"So you thought it would be a good idea to tell them about me?"

"N—no, it wasn't like that, I only told Rick; he—he made me when he saw how distraught I was. But, it's okay..."

"How is it okay? I've been banished," she whispered.

"I talked to Bastian..."

"Please don't tell me you told him where we live."

More silence.

"*LeAnn*," Marina shouted. "Are you trying to get me killed?"

“No, he loves you. He wants to find you to, to save you.”

“Or kill me...” LeAnn’s safety depended on the amount of distance Marina could put between them; it was definitely time to part ways. Rick appeared to care for her sister, so at least for now she should be safe. “Listen; take care of yourself, okay? If things end with Rick, get away as soon as possible.”

“No! Please don’t go,” her sister begged. “Bastian does love you.”

“His silence while they dragged me from the bar and threw me out the door showed everyone how *much* he loves me.”

“He was in shock, Rina. You have to...”

“Bye, LeAnn, I love you.” The click of the cell phone cut off her sister’s reply.

Marina was right to leave this way. She loved Bastian—that would never change—only now, how could she trust him?

Moments later a plate of food appeared before her, bringing with it the smell of shifter. One glance at her server told Marina where the scent had come from. “I’m sorry, I didn’t order this.” She said motioning to the food. “I’m still waiting to place my order.”

Not meeting her eye, the porcelain-skinned young woman said under her breath, “Eat fast and then run.”

“Excuse me?”

With a sigh, the server raised her kohl-enhanced eyes, compassion swirling in their depths. “A posse has been formed and sent after you. Whoever sent them is not playing by the rules. Neither the leader nor his second-in-command approved it. This is a free-formed gang out to gain something by killing you.”

Who was this woman? Her makeup was typical Goth, heavy black on top of deathly white. Dressed in black from her head to the tips of her heavily buckled combat boots, her accessories looked to come from *Spikes R Us*. Her yards of inky black hair were pulled back into a braided ponytail, and the whole get up looked more like a costume than something she was comfortable wearing.

Marina fidgeted in her chair. “I’m sorry; you must have me confused with someone else.”

The server leaned close and whispered in her ear. “You reek of our pride leader, you’re practically hugging the front door and you’re trying awfully hard to not be seen.”

“I—I’m?”

“I’ve survived in the fringes long enough to recognize the signs,” she continued as she rose. “Five women came here less than an hour ago. They got a call, joked about killing some half-breed for the chance to win the pride leader in a challenge, then left.”

Marina searched her memory banks for something called a challenge in connection with the pride, but found nothing. “What exactly is a challenge?”

Shuffling her feet, the server looked quickly around the café. “A challenge is a fight among any female in the pride who wants a chance to mate with the pride leader.”

Marina looked into the server’s eyes. “Any female?”

The upward tip of the server’s lips gave her a smidge of hope, “Any female tough enough to bring down some of the other full-blooded females of the pride. Now eat. Meal’s on the house.”

Marina dug in, feeling marginally better with her situation.

“By the way,” Goth girl whispered. “Good luck.”

Marina slammed her meal down quickly, wondering where she’d go with no car and

very little money.

Her best bet was to stay under the radar for a while. Did she dare go to Bastian? Could she trust him? He might not have sent the posse, but he sure as hell hadn't done anything to help her back at the bar.

*

Bastian didn't bother knocking on Turk's door. With a booted foot and a well-aimed blow, the door flew inward. A startled Turk jumped from the recliner and started to shift.

"Don't change!" Bastian thundered. "We need to get a few things straight and unless you plan to challenge me for leadership, don't you fucking change."

"Maybe it's time for new leadership, Bastian."

Bastian raised his arms. "If you think that, bring it on. Just make sure you know you can take me or be ready to die ... your choice."

For a moment, Turk looked as if he might go for it, stepping down at the last minute. "What do you want?"

"Where did you get your info about my mate?"

"You mean the half-breed?" Turk scoffed.

With an aggressive move, Bastian pinned Turk to the wall, "Watch your mouth—you're disparaging my mate. Disrespect her again and I will kill you. Now where did you get your info?"

"I told him, sweets," the syrupy sweet voice behind him sneered. "And before you kill me, think about this. There is currently a posse of females after the little slut. Without me to call it off, she's dead."

Bastian's stomach fell as he turned toward the only person who could be vile enough to do this. Alicia stood; hand on her hip, t-shirt plastered to her chest, looking incredibly self-satisfied.

"Now, Bastian, here is what I want. You'll forget the half-breed and mate with me. I will be your queen. We will have to put on a show of a challenge for the current posse since I promised one, but none of them are stronger than me so it won't be a problem."

"Bitch." He seethed.

"Yes, I am, but I'm a bitch who always gets what she wants."

"What's to stop me from killing you right now, Alicia, and going to get Mari?"

"Nothing," she said. "If you can find her before the posse does. Remember though, they have a lead on you."

"But they don't have her yet..."

"Well, let's see, shall we?" Dialing, she switched to speakerphone. "Lottie, have you found the half-breed yet?"

"Yep, tracked her to the mall. We need to get her into a private area to kill her."

"Good, let me know when it's done." Alicia hung up the phone and looked at Bastian. "What do you think? Can you make it into town before they catch and kill her?"

"Call them off, Alicia."

"And?"

"Call them off, and I will mate with you with conditions. Mari will not be hurt. She'll leave town, unharmed, and she will be free to live her life as she sees fit. No more posses after her."

"Hum..."

"Alicia!" Turk said. "Don't toy with the pride leader. You're getting your way. Be

gracious and agree Mari will not die.”

“Oh, fine, she can live only if she stays out of town. One foot inside my territory and I will kill her.”

Bastian nodded his understanding, “Call off the posse ... now.”

Alicia pulled the phone from her pocket and hit redial. “Lottie, stand down; let the half-breed go.”

She snapped the phone shut, “Better?” Sauntering towards him, she leaned in to massage his limp dick. “Why don’t we take this pony for a trial run tonight?” she whispered.

He didn’t trust her. Never would he trust this horror show with the life of the woman he loved. Mari was his true mate. He would do whatever it took to keep her safe, even if it meant kowtowing to this bitch until he could find her.

Bastian ground his flaccid member into her hand. “Thing is, Alicia, this pony has come up lame. Guess he too has been inflicted with a case of impotence, mate.”

The furious look in her eyes was worth the beating his pride was taking, but if he intended to save Mari, he needed help and he needed it now.

Turning his back on this family of worthless bullies, he strode from the house; hit the speed dial on his phone, calling the one man he trusted. “Rick, we need to find Mari, fast.”

*

“Tell me she’s dead!” Alicia screamed into the phone, her voice getting louder with every word. “Tell me you found her, tore out her eyes, ripped off her limbs and threw her worthless, half-breed carcass into the Mississippi!”

Bastian was stupid; he honestly believed she’d called off the posse back there. Moron. No way would some half-breed take her place as queen to this pride. There was also no way she would risk letting the half-breed leave town only to traipse back anytime she wanted. No, she needed to die and these stupid females needed to find her.

“We’ve tracked her to the Blue Elk bar here in town, but she was smart enough to go inside. We’re working on getting her out back right now where we can dump her into the river and let the current take her.”

Alicia sighed. “Call me when it’s done. And Lottie, if anyone asks, you escorted her out of town and watched as she drove away, you got me?”

“Yes, Alicia.”

She closed her phone and smiled with grim satisfaction. Those two words were all she ever wanted to hear coming from the worthless masses. *Yes, Alicia* was music to the ears.

*

Since leaving the café Marina had ducked into busy shopping malls, snuck through local tourist traps before ending up here at the Blue Elk, local strip joint/cat house. Her focus—stay one step ahead of the female shifters set on ending her too-short life with their wickedly sharp claws.

Out of breath, her gasps remained soundless beneath the strains of the classic rock screaming from speakers strategically placed around the bar. Strobe lights gave the place a slow-motion quality adding to the protective feel she got from squatting behind the vinyl-covered booth. Behind her several human men sat watching as lithe female bodies straddled poles, swung tassels while accepting tips inside their tiny g-strings.

She needed to lose the posse on her tail, only she didn't have the same strength or speed as full-bloods; she was also a less desirable commodity in their world.

Keeping low, she leaned from behind the booth, eyes darting around the room spotting two pursuers among at least sixty humans. Her nervous giggle fought its way to the surface. If the sixty humans had any idea two of the people occupying this room could change into a jaguar, there would be chaos. Now, imagine what the knowledge of a pride of nearly three hundred living in their back yard would do. A good night's sleep is probably not at the top of the list.

She kept to the shadows, moving carefully around the room, keeping the two shifters in her line of sight. Her only chance was to flood the room with her smell. Confuse them long enough to get outside. If she could get to the river, the water would cover her scent, letting her slip away undetected. She hoped.

The bitches sent to find her stopped at the center of the room, noses raised in the air with looks of confusion on their faces. Her plan was working, at least for now. The back door of the club stood to her left, away from the view of the dippity-duo. Unnoticed, she slipped from the club, sucked in some fresh air while moving to the riverbank. With such a steep drop, the climb down would be dangerous, but it was her only choice.

"Going somewhere, breed?" The voice sounded from the dark around her.

She drew to a halt a few steps from the river, her plan to escape foiled, leaving her standing one against three. She'd confused the two inside, but now she needed to figure out what to do with the other three. Could she stall them long enough to find a safe way into the river?

"You must have the wrong person, ladies. I'm just getting some air," she said, putting on her best stripper air. "It's a little stuffy in there trying to please the boys, if you know what I mean."

The group laughed as the leader spoke, "You must make a real killing," she smirked. "Pleasing them in your oversized sweats and man's t-shirt."

"I do fine." Inching closer to the river.

"Well, obviously not fine enough," said the short, pudgy woman on her right, "If the real shifters of the pride are going to be challenging each other for your mate later on today at The Den."

"Way ter go, Bobby Jean, tell her all of our secrets why don't yaw," said the behemoth to her left.

"Shut fucking up, the both of you," the obvious leader growled. "We're here to kill her quickly, not talk her to death."

The leader slumped forward, bowing at the middle as her spine cracked and elongated.

The other two pack members took the recent change of their leader as a hint to begin the change themselves. Marina needed a plan, one with a quick exit and no pain. There was nothing around her to use as a weapon, and the bar was too loud to call for help. She was stuck; behind her, a sheer drop into the Mississippi, before her stood three full-blooded jaguars.

As the jaguars advanced on her, she backed up slowly until she reached the edge of the embankment. The twenty-foot drop wouldn't kill her, maybe, but the three cats in front of her would.

She steeled her nerves and moved to the edge of the river. "Sorry, ladies, I'd rather

take my chances with the current.”

Chapter Eleven

“Crikes.” Marina dragged her battered body from the river. “Next time, rethink the jump into the river. Fighting three female jaguars might have hurt less.” Thankfully, she was still alive, only slightly beat up.

The river’s current appeared to have carried her miles from town, away from her car and her home. While technically outside of the city limits, per the pride’s instructions, her life was back inside them. Her desires had become frighteningly clear during her graceless bodysurfing trek down the mighty Missisip.

She loved Bastian.

Loved him more than she feared whatever consequences came from staying. If LeAnn was right about Bastian loving her, Marina belonged here, with her mate, working this out. Not running with her invisible tail between her legs.

Marina grappled with the loose rocks and dirt along the riverbank. Falls and cuts would not stop her from making her way back to the highway though the night was cold and her wet clothes offered no protection.

She needed help.

Marina followed the highway towards town, walking backward to watch the road for passing cars. Hitchhiking wasn’t her preferred method of travel, but she needed to get back into town fast. Running with her river-battered body proved more than she could handle right now.

The shimmer of lights was a welcome sight. Between the wet clothes outlining her body, putting her extremely cold nipples on display, and the universal hitchhiker’s sign, she prayed the vehicle would stop. A beater of a truck pulled to the side of the road, slowing to a stop.

Farmer Joe leered between slurps on his toothpick. “Goin’ into town eh?”

“Just past town, actually.” She was determined to ignore the seriously disgusting come-hither look filling the farmer’s weepy eye. “Mind if I catch a ride?”

“Well, fer sure, I’m goin’ that way. Climb into the back and give a tap to the roof when you be wantin’ out, alrighty.”

“Thanks,” she mumbled, walking to the back of the truck wondering what weapons, if any, Farmer Joe might be packing. She’d need whatever advantage she could find if she intended to win this challenge. She stopped before climbing into the back, eyeing her travel companions warily. “Great, chickens.”

*

Alicia watched from the back door of the bar as the group gathered outside. The females intending to take part in this challenge showed off for one another. What a bunch of fucking mules they were. How funny, this group of females truly believed they possessed the strength to fight her for the right to be queen. Ha, most of them came purely to mate with Bastian.

“Painted, poofed and prissy bimbos.” She laughed. Maybe her first law as queen would be to boot the three p’s.

“Wow, it’s been a while since I’ve heard you laugh. What’s the joke?”

“Turk.” It was hard to believe they came from the same womb. He was soft, not at

all dependable, and a giant pain in the ass. “Don’t you have something to do? Like, oh I don’t know, get this challenge started?”

“What’s the hurry?”

“*What’s the...*” Alicia bit back the explicit words begging for release. “Moron! You *do* remember our plan, right?”

Normally, when the pride leader decided to take a mate he bit her and fucked her before presenting her to the group as the next queen, and it was a done deal. A challenge took place when the leader couldn’t find a mate or didn’t care who he mated. Sometimes, the leader called a Challenge if he wanted more than one female as a mate. This last one rarely occurred as mating involved more than sex or ruling. Mating combined the souls. Mated couples became so close that they could feel what the other felt, they lived together and died alongside the other. They became one.

This challenge, however, was different. The wheels had been set in motion by the slip of a sister’s tongue with Bastian unknowingly presenting his half-breed whore to the pride as his mate. Alicia had handed her brother a plan. Turk was second-in-command to Bastian, a right won at the defeat of the prior second, yet they’d never gotten along. Turk wanted to rule; she wanted Bastian as well as the prestige of being queen.

Her plan mixed both of their desires. Discredit Bastian, remove the half-breed threat, and win the challenge for Bastian. She would keep him busy, and Turk would run the pride. Everybody wins.

“I remember, don’t get your panties in a twist. I’m still trying to decide which of these lovelies I’ll be comforting when this is all over. What do think of the redhead?”

Honestly, did all men spend as much time in their pants as this one did? Maybe her second change would be to put herself in charge. She would however, give him props for good taste.

“Ti-na,” she said hitting each syllable. “Good choice, soft, smooth and she tastes like a dreamsicle, orange and cream, yum.”

“Geez, Alicia, TMI.”

“Problem is, Turk; you’re too much man for her.” The look on her brother’s face was perfect. Disgust, irritation and awe all rolled into one. Her preferences should be no surprise to Turk. She’d always been open about her desires. Sex was sex, be it with man, woman and occasionally both. The real juice for her though was the power exchange.

She loved to control her partners. Men and women came to her seeking the release she offered. Blindfolds, hoods and whips were her tools; the human body, her canvas. She could get a woman off with a few complicated strokes while a naughty whisper always produced a boner in the men.

Except with Bastian.

The impotence thing had been unexpected. Clearly, the night of the meeting, everyone could tell the leader had recently come from a fuck fest with his whore. The smell of sex on their skin, the possessiveness of their gazes and the tousled hair were all dead giveaways. What could have changed between then and now? How could he not be able to get it up?

She needed to shelve worry, though, at least for now. She had a challenge to win and a mate to take. They’d be mates once he bit her, and he’d have no trouble spiking the post, as her daddy so quaintly put it.

“Are you ready for this?” her brother asked.

With an exasperated sigh, she looked at him. "I'll take care of my part. You worry about doing yours when this is over."

"My part is covered. But make damn sure to fix the impotence, Alicia." He leaned into her. "Or I'll kill you myself."

Alicia watched him walk away and seriously considered changing the plan once Bastian was hers. She didn't need the shit Turk dished out. There were other males she could make second-in-command, males she could better control. She'd give it some thought.

"Alicia."

Great, the posse's back. They'd better have some good news, and hopefully pictures. Bloody, skin ripped, bones gnawed on pictures of a prissy little half-breed miss. Talk about a way to make the day better.

"Lottie. Is the matter taken care of?"

"Yes. And no."

Judging by the extra-large step Lottie and her crew took back, Alicia figured the fury coursing through her veins must have been showing on her face. "What do you mean, yes and no?"

"The half-breed jumped into the river rather than fighting us."

Crap, she never should have left something this important to a group of morons. It was a simple job, gang up on one lone half-breed and kill her. "Did you see her dead body?"

"It was a twenty-foot drop, Alicia, into freezing water."

Whiner. "I'll take that as a no."

"There is no way she could have survived the jump." Alicia watched as the leader grappled for help from her gang. "Right, go ahead, tell her. Pam? Donna?"

"Lottie, you better hope she's dead. 'Cause if the half-breed comes back, I will take it out of your hide and trust me, I'll make it hurt."

She would have preferred to have the mangled body dropped at her feet, proof the half-breed was indeed dead, not half-assed assurances claiming the spot she jumped from was high enough to kill her. Dead or not, her body would be taken downstream by now. Hopefully, never to return.

Alicia stepped through the back door of the bar. Pride members gathered into a circle with Bastian, Rick and Turk standing above on the raised platform. She pushed her way into the group. A path opened as people saw her. It wasn't a secret; she *was* the short list of females strong enough to win this challenge.

The females of the group who were not a part of the challenge diverted their eyes to show respect, while the females gutsy enough to try to take her hissed and growled.

When she reached the center of the circle, the crowd quieted.

Turk stepped forward, and his voice rose. "The challenge has begun. Our leader needs a mate. Who will take on the role?"

Alicia's scream reverberated against the walls of the bar. "Bastian is mine." She hissed. "Which one of you bitches wants to take me on?"

Expecting the riot, the crowd moved outward as eight females made their way into the middle. Fewer than expected, yet it would be a long evening. Alicia circled around her opponents; she looked for the weak link to get rid of first. All she had to do was engage someone. The remaining participants would wait until a winner was decided on

before the next opponent would enter the circle, starting the dance again.

Alicia spied a green female amid the group and pulled her to the center of the circle. She quickly delivered a blow to the jaw, dropping her immediately. As she fell, Pam, the first of the posse bitches, jumped into the fray.

Little more of a threat than the green female before her, Alicia placated the cat. They rounded one another, hissing and swatting at the air. Pammy had a chick-fight air about her—all hair pulling and name-calling.

“I’m taking you down, beyotch. So you better get used to calling me Queen Pam.”

Not at all surprised by Pam’s sudden lurch forward, Alicia caught both oncoming wrists and used the cat’s momentum to swing her around and into the wooden post supporting the raised platform.

The unexpected move sent her opponent’s head back into the hard wood, rendering her unconscious. Pam, the obnoxious chick-fighting queen, slid to the ground.

Alicia’s moment of victory was just that, a moment, while she watched the hard packed dirt rise to meet her. The next combatant rode her to the ground, face planting her with enough force to break her nose. A metallic taint covered her tongue while gobs of gunk choked her.

“My turn.”

Lottie. Alicia should have known she would pull such a cheap shot.

The hand at the back of her head pushed it forward to the ground, rubbing the bloody dirt further into her battered face. Idiotic giggling offended her ears, but provided a chance to better position her arms and legs for a counter attack. Oh, this cunt was going to hurt before this was over. Reaching around, she gripped Lottie’s thigh and pushed.

“Nooooo!” An eardrum breaker of a scream spewed forth from the newly pinned cat.

Legs curled around Alicia’s waist, locking her to the angry fighter. They rolled several more times, back to front, each taking a hefty dose of abuse.

“Fuck!” *Time to end this.* Alicia dug deep into her reserves and pulled into a squat. She’d never get vertical with Lottie on her back, but she made it damn close before helping gravity to do its thing.

They landed in a cloud of dirt, breath escaping in a matched set of “oofs.”

Lottie’s arms and legs fell away. A cracking sound turned into a pained scream. Alicia rose to watch the defeated cat drag herself away. The oddly turned leg confirmed what she suspected; the posse leader suffered either a dislocated or a broken hip. Shifting would be a bitch, but it would also heal the injury.

As she turned to face her next challenger, human nails, filed to a point, came precariously close to leaving their mark on Alicia’s face. “Fuck, bitch, you got close with that one.”

A left took Alicia by surprise, cranking her head to the side. Her cheek split, splattering blood across her opponent's face. “Son of a…” Mouthing off to this cat clearly had not been a good idea. Moonlight glinted off metal surrounding Hard Body’s hand. Damn, brass knuckles hurt.

Miz H’s knee caught Alicia in the gut, bending her forward, leaving her open for the elbow to the back. Out of breath, Alicia toppled to the ground.

“Surprise.” The petite beauty stood over her, triumph glimmering in her eyes.

“Who’s the *bitch* now?”

Blow after blow from biker boots landed against Alicia's stomach, driving more air

from her lungs. Light-headedness overtook her, stars danced in front of her eyes. Shit, she was losing, fucking losing to a blond honey she would have normally fucked and beat into orgasm. Yet here she was, on the ground waiting for the final blow all because of a small piece of metal. She'd lose Bastian, her queenhood and fucking face. She'd never entertained this as an option. All of the scenarios she'd run through her head showed her as the clear winner—never, ever was she the loser.

“No!” She mouthed, heard by no one but herself. Fury at her own stupidity burned through her blood. Adrenaline shot to her limbs, allowing for the speed and strength to grab the assaulting foot and stopping the abuse to her mid-section.

Alicia kicked out, catching the fiery cat in the stomach with her faux Oakley, military issue boots. In the split second it took the air to escape the lungs of her opponent, Alicia was on her riding her to the ground. Rage mixed with fear to drive her forward. She would not, could not lose. Each precisely aimed blow bled out her anger. Fists pummeled Miz. Hard Body's lips leaving them swollen and bloody rather than pouty and painted. The crunchy sound of jaw bones separating satisfied the mean-assed bitch slithering beneath Alicia's skin.

“Pwease stogh,” the impassioned plea was barely loud enough to be heard.

Her fury turned to arousal. The beating she'd given the girl stroked a place of control deep inside. The power screamed inside her, begging to finish this, through either violence or sex. Alicia grabbed the female's hair and pulled back. Her neck stretched to a slight angle allowing Alicia to lean in and breathe deeply. “Next time we're in this position,” she whispered. “I'm going to make you come. I'll make you beg for it.”

Alicia rose and stepped away, shoving the prone girl away with her boot.

“Next!”

The remaining women looked at each other. Wondering, Alicia was sure, who would be the next to take on the beast. She allowed a slight smile to flit across her bloody face. Even as bashed and beaten as she was, none of the remaining women dared step forward.

This challenge was over.

“What, no one feeling adventurous?” Alicia taunted. “Come on, you pussies, someone step up, or end this and crown me queen!”

Angry cries rent the air. Power flowed through her veins, tightening her nipples to aching points. Pleasure negated the searing burn of lacerations and the grating catch of broken ribs. She'd won. These were her people now. Hers to control. To fuck. She owned them.

Alicia circled the women still standing. She enjoyed the subservient gesture each made in not looking her in eye. Too bad none of them was on their knees; a little genuflecting would go a long way in her book. Giddiness bubbled up in her chest, and the unfamiliar emotion threatened to explode from her lips.

She'd done it. She was queen.

*

Bastian was sick. Honest to God, thought he might embarrass himself by puking on his own shoes, sick. Crazy had won this challenge and he was the prize. He'd fooled himself into believing Mari would be found, but she wasn't and now he was to be shackled to a maniacal kook.

A shrill whistle broke the oppressive quiet of night.

“Hey!” Mari's low, melted chocolate voice rubbed against the fur below the surface

of Bastian's skin. "My turn."

A growl rumbled low in his chest as he looked at his true mate, standing outside the circle of shifters. The scrapes on her arms, the tattered clothes spoke to the plight her last day had been. She'd pulled the long auburn hair back away from her face into a ponytail, showing cheeks smudged with dirt. The swollen lip and black eye looked a lot like she'd been on the receiving end of a beating. He would kill the person who put them there with no hesitation.

The group of females currently circling Alicia moved away. There could be no mistaking the inherent alpha quality in Mari's voice. She'd arrived, and she meant business. Bastian went instantly hard. Never had a woman put him into such a state this quickly. There was no way she wasn't his mate.

Mari moved through the crowd. A gun hung loosely at her side. She stopped once she was nose to nose with Alicia. Nostrils flared, a look of disgust blazing in her eyes. "Color me adventurous, bitch."

Air kisses flew in Alicia's direction, visibly firing her up to volcanic proportions. She was ready to blow, and his mate was directly in the damage path.

Bastian's lips thinned, nose flared, his glare slaying the woman currently growling at his mate. "No! Turk, handle your sister before I kill her."

"Remember your place here, Bastian." Turk's sneer was markedly close to the surface. "You brought this on yourself. I'll be happy to finish it."

Fury overrode wisdom. Only the fear of what might happen to his mate kept him in control. "No matter the outcome, Turk, when this is through, you will be gone." Bastian looked at the man next to him with eyes he knew must be glowing. "Run or I will take you apart, piece by piece."

Tension between the two leaders ratcheted higher. One look at Turk told Bastian his death threat had hit the right nerve. Ashen grey was definitely Turk's color.

Though Turk cleared his throat, his voice wavered. "Guns are not allowed in a challenge, nor are half-breeds."

Mari's gaze never left her nemesis as she threw the gun to the ground. Her willingness to part with the advantage twisted his guts. A large male guard stepped beside the pair to retrieve it.

"You were told to leave town, yet you're still here—" Turk said.

"Barely," she interrupted.

"*What?*" Turk barked.

"Listen, someone sent a posse to kill me prior to the deadline, but as you can see it didn't take. I think it was *her*." The unpleasantness in the last word was clear enough not to be mistaken. "Now, fair is fair. I should get my shot, unless she's scared..."

Alicia screamed, and her skin rippled as if she was going to change. "*Alicia!*" Bastian roared. "There will be no shifting amidst this challenge."

Bastian waited until Alicia's skin settled against her bones to continue. "If you won't give Mari a chance, kindly step aside and I'll crown my new queen."

He didn't dare turn his gaze to Mari. Already, he could barely keep it together at the thought of her going toe to toe with a full-blood. The danger she was in didn't sit well with him. He needed to protect his mate, cherish her, not allow her to be hurt in any way, yet there she stood in obvious pain.

Willing to die for him.

And he loved her. Oh hell, he loved her. He fought to stand on knees turned to watery globs of nothing. Love, who'da thunk it? Yes, the idea of a posse going after Mari scared the bejeezus out of him, but in all honesty, it wasn't until this moment when he realized the full extent of his love.

Okay, pride leader, keep it together here. Little girl giddiness not appropriate when The Bride of Chucky down there is trying to kill your mate. Strong, mean, absolute—all qualities a leader should project.

Alicia smiled smugly. "The half-breed can try to take me, but remember, Bastian, you could have stopped the slow death I'm going to put this cunt through."

Her words hit Bastian like a sucker punch to the gut. The woman he loved faced a fight to the death with a strong, full-blooded female, while he stood still as a statue, unsure of what to do. If he jumped in now, he would rip out Alicia's throat, effectively costing him the pride. No member would trust or follow a leader who went back on his word. On the other hand, if he allowed this to continue, he could lose his mate to a female he could never form a true mating with. The males would continue to be impotent until they started killing one another from frustration, obliterating the pride.

His only option: get in, grab Mari and run. If they left the north woods quickly, buried themselves in a large city for a while, their odds of living greatly improved. Turk would take over the pride, Bastian would have his mate and the impotence would be nothing but a bad memory. Overall, it was a win-win situation. No role was more important to him right now more than being Mari's mate. He loved her, needed her, and refused to live without her.

Before he had time to throw himself into the melee, Turk and the guards must have sensed his intent to leave. One minute his hand gripped the railing ready to leap; the next hands wrapped around his legs and arms, his neck was caught in a lock from behind and then, they pulled him down. Grunts and groans filled his ears as an oppressive weight pressed on his back, forcing the air from his lungs.

Through the mash of bodies on top of him, he could see Alicia leap at Mari. Everything happened in slow motion. Mari reached to him, screaming his name. Alicia slammed a shoulder into Mari's gut, knocking her to the ground.

Bastian watched as Alicia moved towards Mari. On her hands and knees, obviously hurting, she allowed Alicia to pull her up by the hair. Mari wavered on her feet. To Bastian, she looked seconds away from collapsing, and Alicia had only hit her once.

He growled, fought anew to reach his mate. Called out her name. The alphas holding him showed no intention of releasing him quite yet.

With Mari's head bent, her eyes averted, Bastian couldn't read her. Could she have given up?

"Well, you're finally doing the right thing and showing me the respect I deserve. You should all be kneeling to me," Alicia screamed, whirling around to face the crowd.

With quickness he didn't know she possessed, Mari flung herself at an opponent who'd made the biggest mistake ever by turning her back on a fight without knowing for sure it was over.

*

Who was that masked man—or woman—in her case? Marina was lost inside her body. Somewhere between the sight of Bastian immobilized beneath a group of shifters, and the bitch in front of her spouting off about subservience of her people, something else

took over. She was stronger, angrier, and ready to rip the head off the she-cat she'd just taken to the ground. Her hand slid into Alicia's hair, stopping only when she'd reached her scalp and wound a hank around her fingers. The ease with which she pulled Alicia's head back shocked her.

The unexpected elbow to her side was a surprise. She rolled off her opponent, ending in a crouch waiting to spring into her next attack.

"He's mine, half-breed. Just because you got one good hit in does not mean you can take me." The bitch preened. How soon would it be before she started to lick herself?

"If that were true, Alicia, it would be your name on his lips." No way could that be her voice. Lower and gravelly, yet still female. She could feel a hiss rising from her diaphragm, searching for escape.

"He let you be dragged across a dirty floor and be tossed away. He doesn't want you."

The roar from beneath the pile of squirming males spoke volumes about how wrong she was.

"That was a mistake on his part, one I'm sure he will make up to me ... *repeatedly*."

They moved around each other looking for an opening, the drop of an arm, a misstep, anything to gain the upper hand. Marina had ceased to wonder at the beast controlling her. This warm and knowledgeable creature sharing her skin had to be her jaguar, the part of her she'd never before been able to access. Fear at the possible loss of her mate had pulled the beautiful cat into the forefront of her mind. She knew what needed to be done, and Marina was at her disposal.

The opportunity for success came unexpectedly. Alicia's egotistical personality led her to drop her arms. She spread her hands in a "what are you waiting for" gesture. "I haven't got all day, sweet thing; I have a mate to take. Bring it."

Marina knew Alicia wasn't at all worried about losing to a half-breed, but she also didn't recognize she was now fighting a woman whose cat had taken control. Marina leapt with a furious scream, further startling her prey and knocking her to the ground once again. This time however, she rained down blow after blow on the she-cat's face, splitting her lip, abusing her already broken nose. Her cat preened at the mess she'd made of Alicia. Already her face was swelling. Her jaw, once so hard and cruel, now looked weak and crooked. Teeth littered the ground as blood ran down the bitch's face. Adrenaline poured into Marina's veins, keeping the cat in control, but she was weakening. The fall into the river was coming back to her, with its numerous hits and gashes against the rocky slope. She had to finish this—now.

Rising to her feet, she landed a final blow of her foot to her rival's side, cracking several ribs in the process, before kicking her away like yesterday's trash. "Bastian is mine, Alicia. Don't ever forget that and never will any of us be subservient to you!" She spat on the ground near the broken and battered she-cat.

Marina's strength was gone, her jag gradually sliding to the background of her mind searching for a place to heal. But she had one last thing to do.

Marina looked around. "Any of the rest of you bitches want a go at me?"

*

Her question set off a maelstrom of fear racing through Bastian's body; the alphas on top of him, surprised by Mari's move slackened, allowing him to throw the group aside.

Mari couldn't take another beating. He threw himself over the railing and stalked his

mate, a wrathful expression on his face. The rest of the pride stepped back. The sight that greeted him was astounding. Every one of the challengers knelt in front of Mari, heads bent in a show of submission. He faced his mate proudly; astounded by her strength and self-possession, even a bit shocked she was still on her feet. Not only was she his true mate, but she was fit to be the queen his pride so desperately needed.

“*This* is my mate! Anyone who finds this a problem is free to leave. If you go, you will not be welcomed back.”

Bastian watched as the remaining men and women around him began to kneel. They were paying homage to their queen; welcoming her to the pride.

He looked at the hellion bleeding in the dirt, “Get her out of here, Rick, I’ll deal with her later.”

Bastian swung his mate into his arms.

Chapter Twelve

She was cold. Her jaw ached and someone needed to turn off the flipping telegraph. Were telegraphs used anymore? Why was she so confused? She could hear Bastian calling her name off in the distance, telling her how much he loved her, but was he here and if so, where was he? So cold. Was she covered in ice? Ah, the blessed darkness...

Swollen lips held back the groan growing inside of Marina. The overhead lights pricked at her eyes, forcing her lids closed as tears streaked her cheeks. Her overused muscles burned with every tiny movement. She lay curled into the softest blanket, wondering who had won last night. Whispered voices by the door reassured her. She still lived. The pain in her head, however, gave her cause to wish it otherwise.

“Doc says she’s going to be okay.”

“She better be.” The low growl started a happy tingle at her toes. “Or you’ll be fighting Turk for control of the pride. I’ll die without her, Rick.”

“Then we need to do whatever it takes to get her back into fighting shape, ‘cuz I have to tell you, from what I’ve heard the last couple days, this pride cannot function without you or your mate.”

“Come again?” Bastian said

“Seems your kitten made quite an impression on the pride when she stood up to Alicia and kicked her ass at the challenge.” Rick laughed. “When you threatened to banish anyone who didn’t acknowledge Mari as their queen, well, you inspired the pride. They knelt at her feet, Bastian; they believe your love for her will resolve the E.D. problem we’ve got going on.”

“I should have protected her from the beginning. I could have saved her the pain...”

“Stop beating yourself up. How could you have known the outcome? Chances were pretty good she, as a half-breed, would never have been accepted if she didn’t prove herself to them.”

“That half-breed shit stops now. They are jaguars and belong in the pride, protected as we all are. Consider that my first post-mated law, or almost-mated law.”

Marina’s body warmed at his statement. Maybe LeAnn was right and Bastian really did love her.

“Hell, Bastian, you haven’t mated her yet? I can smell you all over her, so I’m guessing the connection’s there already. Thank goodness, it hasn’t been over a week yet.”

The stillness of the room was oppressive. Since she faced the wall, there was no way of finding out what was going on between the two males.

“Bastian ... it hasn’t been over a week, right?”

“Two years.” Bastian admitted in such a low voice, she wasn’t sure she heard him correctly.

“Two years? ... Fuck!”

“Yeah, that pretty much sums it up.”

“Sorry, man, but hell, do you know how tortured she must have been?”

“Tortured? What the...”

“Course it’s starting to make sense now...”

“Rick.” Frustration tinged her mate’s voice.

“I mean ... like a sponge ... damn.”

“*Rick.*”

“That must have been what was missing in the files ... length of time.”

“Stop hem-hawing, Rick,” Marina grumbled as she rolled over and shifted into a semi-reclined position. “If you have something to say, spit it out.”

“Welcome back, my queen.” Respect shone in Rick’s eyes.

“Mari, love, don’t move. You need to heal.”

“I’m fine, Bastian. Now shut up.” She eyed the handsome devil across the room. Never let it be said LeAnn didn’t have taste. “As for you, what do you mean, sponge ... time ... and torture?”

Rick cleared his throat and blushed. Whatever he had to tell them was likely to create at least one more red cheek. Hers.

“I went through several hundred years worth of files looking for the cause of our pride's impotence problem and came across one instance of a full pride losing the, well, ‘ability’. The pride leader and his supposed mate went crazy and had to be put down.”

“*Put down?*” What kind of bloodthirsty monsters were they?

“Yeah, that threw me, too. I suspect they must have formed a connection, but held off on mating. Once a week passed the problems would have started.”

“What exactly *is* this connection?” She looked to Bastian for an answer.

“Christ, Bastian. You bonded with her, but didn’t tell her squat about what to expect before letting her go? I should kick your ass just out of principle.”

“I didn’t *let* her go, ass hat, that was an accident and...”

“Boys, enough!” Both her mate and the blond encyclopedia at the door looked properly chastised. “What is it, Bastian?”

“A connection or bond, usually mental and emotional, is created the first time mates make love. My semen generates the bond. Ours started the night in the gazebo. Had you not left, I would have given you the mating mark. As mates, the bond would have enhanced our physical and emotional relationship.”

“Would have enhanced?” She looked back and forth between both males. “Won’t it still?”

“Yes, but before I wouldn’t have felt you fucking scores of men that I now need to hunt and kill.”

“Scores?” A painful laugh ripped from her chest at his words. “You—you jerk! At least you only had to feel it. I had to see you, hear you and feel you. I knew there was some kink in your jeans, but dang, you could have warned me.”

A growl reverberated around the room—a warning.

She knew it, but couldn’t stop. “As for those scores of partners, well, think again. Most of the time it was just me and the fantasy of one perfect night.”

*

“Ah hell, Mari. All that arousal was coming from you alone?” Torture was minor to the non-stop stimulation he wrongly assumed was his mate with other men. “The intensity was painful.”

The glare she shot him had “dumbshit” written all over it.

“Actually, the intensity was probably coming from more than just Marina.”

“Watch it, Rick.” He’d hate to rip out his friend’s throat, but he was straying too damn close to an insult for Bastian’s comfort.

“Sorry, I don’t mean to offend, just hear me out. The thing about the connection that you forget to mention is that for normal couples it works unobtrusively, but as pride leader, you have a connection to the whole of the pride. It’s a link you probably no longer recognize, but your mate would feel it, in spades. Without the mating mark to keep the bond between the two of you, Marina’s been subjected to all of the thoughts, feelings and emotions of the whole pride. I would hazard a guess here, but I think she may have been acting like a sponge, sucking up all of the pride’s arousal, creating a vacuum which caused the pride-wide erectile dysfunction.”

Bastian gazed at his chalky-pale mate, praying she wouldn’t pass out.

“*The whole pride?*” Her words were nothing more than a whisper. “As in every member? I was aroused to the tune of three-hundred-plus jaguars?”

He was such an ass to put this beautiful creature through something like this. Through torture. Shit.

“Mari...” Dropping to his knees, forgetting for once his role as pride leader, forgetting that one of his members stood watching his actions, not worrying that his mate would see him as weak, Bastian laid his head in her lap. “I’m so sorry.”

“Shhh...” Her fingers eased into his hair, and the tips smoothed over his scalp.

Nothing mattered more than her forgiveness. Her gentle touch slipped down his cheek and rested on his chin. She lifted his eyes to hers, but rather than hate or pity, he saw spunk. A fiery assurance that grabbed him by the balls and made him sit up and take notice.

“Get up, Bastian. *My* mate does not cower or beg.” She leaned into him, nuzzling her lips to his ear. “Unless, of course, Mistress Mari should come a-calling.”

His booming laugh surprised not only the other two occupants of the room, but himself included.

“You, Rick, thanks for the info and you saw nothing. Right?” He should have known his mate would be this feisty.

“Right, nothing but a healing queen.” The snicker in Rick’s voice came through loud and clear.

“Good. Now, Rick, get out.”

Chapter Thirteen

Bastian's chuckle rolled over her like warm water as he moved closer. "Are you going to be this bossy all of the time, mate?"

Marina kept her back to him, smiling as the door clicked softly shut. "What if I am?"

"Well then, I expect I'll be introducing you to the leather mighty soon."

Though her muscles ached deeply, she warmed at the thought. The way his hand struck her with gentle determination, she marveled at the thought of him handling a flogger.

"That's a pretty big assumption," she said. "What makes you think I'm going to let someone without the decency to stand up for his supposed mate beat my ass with a bunch of dangling leather bits?"

The bed seesawed as his body surrounded her undulating form.

"First," he whispered into her ear. "The word *beat* used in any context to my loving of your body will be removed from your vocabulary, effective immediately."

"Wha..."

"Second, I was wrong to not stand up for you."

Could she be hearing him correctly? Did the bloodthirsty leader of this pride admit to being wrong?

Marina turned her head enough to stare into Bastian's eyes. "No, you weren't," she said quietly. "Rick was right. I needed to prove myself to your pride or they never would have respected your half-breed mate."

With a tip of his eyebrow and a slight flare of his nostrils, he leaned closer. "You are my mate. Not my half-breed anything. I was wrong not to protect you, no matter what the situation."

Marina sighed and moved her gaze to his chin. "That's easy to say, Bastian, but I'm still not a full shifter. I'm only half as strong as a full-blooded and..."

His body tensed above her. "And what, Mari?"

She'd come this far, so she had to see it through. She silently prayed he would still want her when she finished. "I've never shifted."

Bastian lifted her chin bringing her eyes back to his, "I love you," he said. "Ability to shift or not, I love you, *mate*."

"But..."

His lips covered hers, gently cutting off her protest. Her mind went blank to anything more than his tongue sliding lightly across her puffy lips.

"There will never be another for me, Mari," he whispered. "Where you go, I go. From now until forever."

Marina saw the truth of those words glowing in his eyes. They burned into her soul. He was her mate. Half-breed or full-blood, they were meant to be together; who was she to fight the truth?

Tears slid down her cheeks as "Thank God" slipped past her lips. "I love you too, Bastian. Forever."

Bastian laughed, "Damn good thing you feel that way, because I'll be marking you tonight, and I'm far happier knowing you won't hate me come morning."

Marina dragged his body closer to hers. "I could never hate you."

"Even after all the pain I put you through?"

"The blame is not all yours to take, Bastian. I ran that night. Fear sent me away from you. If I'd stayed, maybe we could have worked out things then, rather than suffering for the last two years."

His lips were soft as he eased them onto hers. The gentle teasing of his tongue soothed, yet made her want more. Marina yearned to suck his plump bottom lip between hers, worry it with her teeth until she pulled the delicious, warm growl from his throat. If only her painful lips would be so accommodating.

"No more fear, beautiful." He kissed her chin gently. "Only love." There was none of the dominating alpha in his touch, more a connecting of souls. She reveled in this side of Bastian, though she hoped the control-wielding cat wasn't gone forever. As much as she loved his tenderness, she still needed the hard press of his body pushing her into the mattress.

Sharp canines nibbled their way to the tops of her breasts. Marina moaned, and her legs scissored, pushing at the blanket keeping his hard muscles and equally hard cock from imprinting themselves on her softer body.

With a snarl, she pushed at the fluffy down monstrosity keeping her mate away. "You could help me with this..."

Bastian's laugh sucked the air from her lungs. The promise of sex spilled wordlessly from his lips. "I could, but I'd miss the fun of your struggle," he said, finding his way beneath the covers, settling himself between her legs and slowly rubbing his cock across her clit.

She raised tender arms above her head crossing the wrists and lifting her shoulders from the bed. "Tie me up, and I promise to struggle even more."

"You are such a naughty kitty, Mari." He kissed his way down her chest until he reached the nipple straining to make its acquaintance with his mouth.

Warm suction mixed with the tongue-lashing the rigid peak received proved an exquisite combo. He left one nipple wet and aching while he kissed his way to the other.

His tongue circled the areola of the other breast, never quite touching the nipple. The teasing brought her focus solely to one breast. "St—stop teasing and suck on it already!"

His chuckle rolled across her sensitive peak. "A bit impatient, aren't we?" he said as he pinched the other nipple between this thumb and finger.

"Bastian!"

"Like that, huh? How do you feel about this?" He pinched harder before lowering his mouth to the begging nub. Rather than gently licking, it as he had the other, he shocked her by catching the peak between his teeth.

Her body surged at the intense pleasure the sudden pain gave. "*Please...*" Not sure if she urged him to stop or continue, she only knew the pleasure/pain raised her clit to a small hard point craving a release.

Warm lips made their way down her body, stopping briefly to allow the tip of his tongue to tease her indented flesh. Her stomach quickened as he slowly rimmed the outer edge of the small hole at its center.

The path from her navel to her bare mound proved to be full of tiny nerve endings, each exploding as he worked his way down to the top of her slit. His hands moved to the top of her thighs, holding her still while he settled his thumbs on pressure points covering

her mound she'd never known existed. His firm message intensified the tightening inside her. The steady stream of warm air he blew over her clit brought her closer and closer.

"Baby, you smell sweet," he said. "I need to taste you before I lose my mind."

Bastian lifted her legs and set them atop his shoulders, gripping her hips with his palms. When he lowered his head, his tongue slipped into her glistening heat.

She dug her heels into his back, levering her clit closer to his face. "Please, I'm too close..." she cried

"Ummm, yes you are, but you need to wait, Mari. Don't come yet, kitten." With his thumb, Bastian pulled the moist lube from her pussy and moved it to her anus. He gently pushed at the ring of nerves until his thumb slid to the first knuckle.

Marina tensed. Her heart pounded with the feeling of his thumb penetrating her rear. "*Bastian...*"

"Relax, Mari, you'll love this. I need you to trust me." He said as he eased his thumb further, stopping only to let her adjust.

Liquid pooled between her thighs as Bastian moved his thumb the rest of the way. He placed his mouth at the opening of her sex and eased his tongue into her tight depths, searching for the soft bundle of nerves barely inside.

Marina wondered if she would die before he stopped. Could this be the mark? She'd assumed the connecting of mates would be a bite, not this delicious push/pull of sensation from the tongue and thumb combo, but she'd never talked to a truly mated pair. Her mother wouldn't talk about it, and LeAnn had never mated.

Thought became impossible as she flew closer to the edge. Tension ratcheted inside her, heat coursed through her, blood flowed, drowning all sound except for Bastian's growl and her own desperate plea. "Bastian, please..." She needed his approval to let go.

"Come for me, Mari." His voice lowered, deeper than she'd ever heard it, slurred as though he'd filled it with more than her. The sharp pain to her inner thigh, frightening and unexpected, pulled a surprised squeal past her lips that quickly turned into cries of pleasure.

A wave of pure light rushed over her. Liquid heat burned through her body, raising the small hairs, throbbing at her erogenous zones until her climax erupted from her mouth in a primal scream as she convulsed in rhythmic and overwhelming spasms. The pinnacle lasted longer than any other she'd had to date. She'd not finished the first climax before the second and third rolled through her. The pure light turned into a rainbow of colors blinding her with their brightness.

As she floated from peak to peak, she could hear Bastian encouraging her to come, praising her when she did. With the final climax, a fire raged through her body blazing away a touch of humanity, replacing it with a feline grace. Deadly sharp claws scratched at her insides searching for a way to break the restraints holding her. Was she shifting?

Coarse fur prickled under her skin, holding in the warmth from the fire consuming her insides. Knots formed throughout her muscles. Each one relaxed and contracted trying to take on a new shape. Bones cracked but never moved.

Bastian's voice cut through the fire and overwhelming pain. "Stay with me, Mari, you're going to be okay."

She doubted she'd ever be okay again. Her mind sought a refuge from the pain. Freedom from the fear. She needed something, anything to take her mind off the battle raging inside her body.

Her legs, still draped over his shoulders, allowed his every stroke to be deep and piercing. He rode her like a man possessed. His touch pulled her back from the edge and into the arms of her love. Bones firmed while muscles relaxed, the knots untied. The itch of fur rolled itself into a ball and burrowed into her center. The need to change forms lessened, and the pain turned to pleasure. She closed in on yet another orgasm, only this time she intended to take her mate into the light with her.

Bastian's eyes closed, his jaw tightened. Chest and arms flexed while his cock grew impossibly larger until he threw his head back growling out his release. He drove his seed high inside, filling her with not only his love, but also all manner of possibilities.

*

Her laugh woke him, but it was not a sound a man wanted to hear soon after he'd done his best to satisfy his mate.

"The thigh, huh? Well that explains why my mom refused to talk about the mating process. Here I thought you'd nibble a bit on my neck."

"No, kitten, a true mate's mark is always made on the thigh." He chuckled.

The faraway look in her face scared him, though he knew its cause. Her jaguar had fought hard for freedom during the marking process, coming damn close to throwing his mate into her first shift. From the effort Mari exhibited in her struggle for control, he knew she wasn't ready for the change. The day would come for Mari to embrace her cat in all its beauty, but today was not that day. He snuggled her to him, loving the weight of her in his arms, and grateful he'd be the one to share with her a completely new world.

"Bastian?" The worried wobble in her voice amused him.

"Umm," he mumbled into her hair.

"Did I shift while we were making love?"

Bastian pulled her close; tucking her head beneath his chin, one arm curled possessively around her head, fingers combing through the deep red strands. The other hand tangled with hers, palm-to-palm, comfortable. "Do you think you shifted?"

"I honestly don't know. At one point I was sure I'd turned into a pretzel, doughy curves and all, but obviously..." She shrugged her shoulders, rubbing her still hard nipples along his side.

"You didn't." Bastian tugged at her hand pulling her up to straddle him. "Come here."

"What?" Her sadness evident as she settled in.

"You didn't shift today, but it won't be long before you do." The look she shot him said more than words ever could. Disbelief and frustration warred in her eyes. "Whatever you take from me in this mating, Mari, has started you on the path." His fingers followed lightly along the center of her body moving nearer to her hot, wet folds. "Everything you need to shift is inside you. Trust your instinct and enjoy the path there."

"I trust you, Bastian." She notched the full, round head of his erection tightly to her. "And if this path includes more of what we just did, well, call me Dorothy, my sexy lion."

The slow glide upwards into her tight depths nearly unmanned him. She rode him with an expertise that left him breathless, descending slowly, gripping him with tightened muscles and rising up with just the right angle. Moist lips massaged the sensitive head of his cock before moving down again for a deeper stroke. Her hands rested at his waist; fingers and thumbs plucking and twisting his nipples as she encouraged him with gentle

whimpers and the occasional “fuuuuck...” moaned in her low, sexy voice.

The symphony of male and female shifters filled the night sky.

“I think we’ve made the pride happy.” She laughed, grinding out the desired rhythm against his groin. “I’ll bet by next spring we see a number of new kittens.”

Bastian slid his hand to her belly and looked into her eyes. “Let’s hope so,” he said before sending his own cry into the night.

The End

About the Author:

Serena Shay lives in the north with her super supportive hubby, beautiful daughter and two sweet doxie pups. She began writing at an early age, creating stories out of love for the idea and characters as a hobby. But when the mountain of post-it notes toppled over Serena decided to take her passion for writing more seriously. With encouragement from her family, she decided to take her writing from hobby to career and submitted her work.

As an erotic paranormal romance writer, she creates worlds and characters with a bit of edge, a little danger and a whole lot of sexy.

Visit Serena on the web at www.serenashay.com or stop by her MySpace page at www.myspace.com/serenashay

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