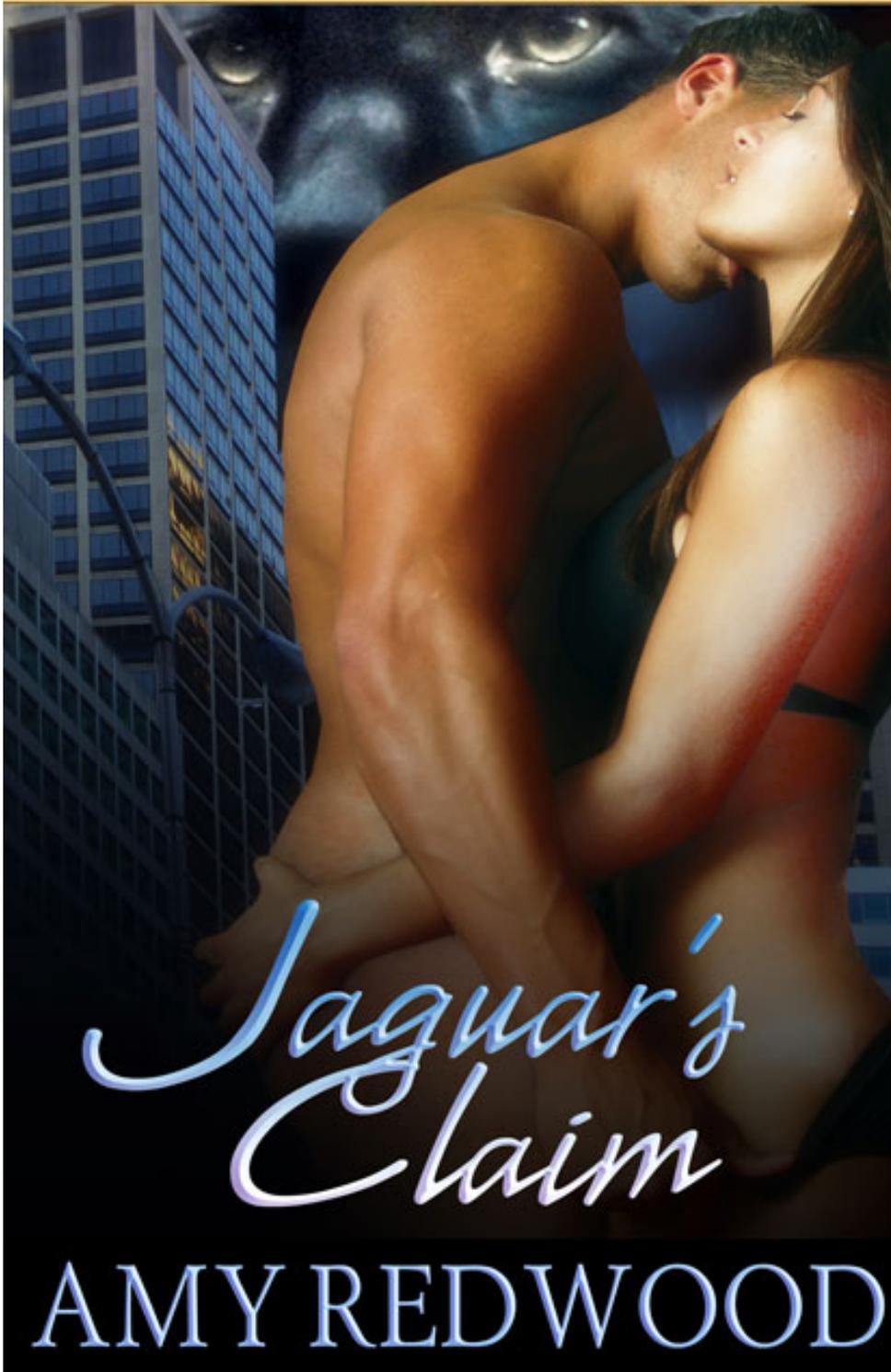


ELLORA'S CAVE TWILIGHT



*Jaguar's
Claim*

AMY REDWOOD

Jaguar's Claim

Amy Redwood

A groom in lust, an unwilling bride, one night of dominance both won't forget.

Tanesha did the sensible thing when her Brazilian family arranged a marriage of convenience to another jaguar shifter. She made a run for it. Now living a cushy life as a call girl in Manhattan, she lost her virginity and her desire to have a lifelong mate in the same second. Up until the crashing stock market robs her of all her savings. Broke, she considers returning to Brazil.

Danilo, bitterly scorned when his virgin bride escaped from under his nose, is none too pleased to hear of her plans to return to Brazil. Gone is his desire to marry, even if a promise given still binds him. Seeking her out, he brings one million dollars, a leather cat-o'-nine whip, and the heated determination to settle a score.

And on her knees—the smacking sound of leather against her bare skin—Tanesha fights against surrendering to the carnal attraction toward the shifter she once scorned.

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Jaguar's Claim

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JAGUAR'S CLAIM

Amy Redwood

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Prologue

Danilo Tavares paced up and down the rooms in his home, reflecting on how long he'd waited to claim his feline mate. A dozen years. After a decade in the States, he'd flown into Brazil at sunrise this morning. He didn't care to wait a single minute longer. He'd never had a trace of doubt that she was the one for him, even if their families had arranged their joining.

Wondering what took so long, he stopped in front of the window. Nothing but lush green met his eyes—and an entirely da Silva-free driveway. It shouldn't take longer than an hour to drive her to his house. She was more than an hour late. With each passing second, his instinct told him something was wrong. He retreated from the window, blaming his nervousness on wedding jitters.

He had no reason to be tense. Someone had told him she still wore the pendant he'd made for her years ago. He'd been just a kid when he bought a piece of raw, pure black onyx from a jungle witch. He'd started to carve the stone, and had cut himself, bled, and cursed for days, but he'd never given up until a small black jaguar emerged out of the onyx.

He hadn't been allowed to give his gift to her personally. But as if there was a bond between them, he'd known the moment it touched her skin. He couldn't wait to see the pendant resting between her naked breasts.

He drew in a deep breath, imagining how they would get to know each other. As a virgin, she wouldn't be experienced. He'd woo her gently. It wouldn't be easy restraining himself, yet he would insist on pleasuring her. Using only his hands and tongue, he'd make her wet with lust. He wanted to feel her heartbeat, breathe in her scent, and hear her screams of satisfaction.

Only when she asked – no, *begged* – him to join her, only then would he thrust into her and make her truly his. Given time, they would explore darker pleasures.

He jumped slightly when the door opened. Instead of his future mate, her grandmother strode into the room.

“Well,” Danilo said, “where is she?”

“We’ve searched everywhere. She’s gone.”

“What do you mean with *gone*?”

“Her younger sister confirmed it. She ran for it. I fear she won’t come back.”

“She ran away from me?” His entire body went cold as he realized the full meaning. His love, his mate, had rejected him. His instinct urged him to shift and hunt her down. Hunt her down and claim her against her will. “Tanesha,” he whispered, sadness battling with his thirst for revenge. If he ever found her, he wouldn’t be gentle.

Chapter One

Five years later

“It’s time to get my broke ass out of Manhattan.” Tanesha da Silva placed a steaming cup of coffee on the table and folded herself down on the loveseat. “Careful, it’s very hot,” Tanesha added as a warning, but it was too late. Her best friend Serena had burned her fingers on the hot cup and was shaking her fingers cool. “Sorry, darling,” Tanesha said.

Serena snapped her fingers over her coffee. The steam vanished. “I still don’t get it. Why leave?”

“I’ve fucked every male in this goddamn city. There’s no one left.”

Serena laughed. “Don’t brag, sweetie.”

Tanesha closed her eyes, savoring the smell of freshly ground coffee beans clinging to the air. Since she’d arrived in New York City five years ago, Serena had been her moral support. Tanesha swallowed the rising sigh in her throat. “Cream and sugar?” She pointed to Serena’s coffee.

Serena picked up her cup and took a sip. “I prefer it strong and black.”

“Are we still talking coffee?” Tanesha gave her a wink. As far as she knew, Serena led a nunlike life.

Serena pursed her lips. “If I had known I’d find you in such good spirits, I wouldn’t have stopped by to keep you company.” Serena shot her a calculating look. “You look much better than I thought you would.”

Tanesha swallowed a lump in her throat and only managed a noncommittal sound. She didn’t feel good at all, but put on a brave face and ate her last supper, breakfast style. She’d laid out the table with her best china, silverware, and an array of delicacies. It was her last breakfast in Manhattan, and it had better be perfect. “I’m so glad you

stopped by one more time," Tanesha said quietly. "But let's not be dull. Another cup?" Tanesha jumped up and headed for the kitchen. "The beans are from Emilio's. Pure Brazilian, freshly ground." *And I can't afford shopping at Emilio's anymore.*

"Pure Brazilian?" Serena smirked. "Like you. What a coincidence."

Tanesha rolled her eyes, pouring fresh coffee into their cups. "Yeah, honey." Tanesha gave Serena an exaggerated smoldering look. "But I'm even more expensive."

Serena's mouth quirked in amusement. "I've always wondered why the guys pay you. They never figured out that you used them, you sex kitten."

"Don't you 'kitty' me." Tanesha sank her teeth into a crescent pastry, which she had topped with blueberry preserves. "I'm worth every dollar."

"Then why leave?" Serena asked. "Why not start fresh?"

Tanesha shrugged, loving the crisp blueberry flavor on her tongue that mingled deliciously with the buttery pastry. Of course she could start fresh, start over. It wasn't as if she hadn't pondered the idea herself. She'd worked hard to get into her gorgeous apartment at the Upper West Side. Well, not *entirely* true. Her job had never been hard work, but more of a recreational workout.

"I've gambled it all," Tanesha said, inwardly cursing for the hundredth time. Damn her broker, damn the stock market, but most of all, damn her stupid streak to take unnecessary risks. She could have tripled her investments as she'd done before, but this time she hadn't. "I've lost everything." By the end of December, she had to get her ass out of her beautiful home. Tanesha dipped her finger into the porcelain bowl full of whipped cream. With a deep sigh, she licked the soft cream off her finger. "At the moment, I simply feel defeated."

"That's why you packed your bags to head back to the cradle of your birth?"

"Maybe I'm over Manhattan," Tanesha said. "It's time for me to move on." Although, returning to her grandmother in Brazil wouldn't be a step forward, it would be a step back. "Ah, Serena, I'll miss you." Misery gathered at the back of her throat,

and she wished she could take her words back. If Serena hugged her, she would cry like a baby.

Serena snapped her Kate Spade handbag open and started to pile its contents onto the sofa. "I've made you a farewell gift. If I find it, that is," she muttered under her breath.

Tanesha smiled, watching how she pulled herbs and small, dried animal parts out of her designer bag, glad that Serena wasn't the kind to get overly emotional.

"I know it's here somewhere." Serena fully emptied the bag on the floor.

"Take your time. My plane leaves in about nine hours."

The phone ringing drowned Serena's irritated response. Tanesha hoisted herself out of the deep leather loveseat and grabbed her cordless phone.

"Hi, it's me, who's there?"

"Tanesha da Silva?"

Tanesha raised one eyebrow. Nice, deep male voice, but unfamiliar, *and* it was her private line. "Who's asking?"

"I have to see you," he said, ignoring her question. "I'll send a driver."

Tanesha opened her mouth, closed it again, and decided to stay polite instead of telling him to fuck off. "I fear there's a misunderstanding."

"No, there's no misunderstanding," he answered, his tone dipping even lower, sending a shiver over her skin.

Tanesha breathed out slowly, gazing to Serena, who held a bracelet of black and golden interwoven string between her fingertips. She covered the phone with her hand. "A friendship bracelet," she mouthed to Serena. "How sweet of you."

"Are you still there?"

Tanesha focused again on the guy at the other end of the phone. "'Course I am." He really had a nice voice. "What's it about?" she asked for the sake of listening to his voice a bit longer, even though the conversation was clearly pointless.

"Something I'd prefer to tell you in person."

Yeah, right. "Nope, this isn't working for me." She hung up and returned the phone to the docking station.

"Who was it?" Serena asked. "You look odd."

"Forget it. It's not important." Tanesha reached out, took the bracelet out of Serena's hands, and examined it. "Pretty."

"Much more than *pretty*," Serena answered, clearly insulted. "I worked all day yesterday to come up with the right spell. Wait until you wear it."

"You won't hex me, I hope?"

Serena rolled her eyes whilst chanting under her breath and knotted the bracelet tight around Tanesha's wrist.

"I like the colors, but what am I supposed to feel, it's—" Tanesha closed her mouth as a slight tingling sensation ran from her wrist along her arm, rapidly covering her entire body. Pleasant. Like a body rub that never ended. A feeling as if she'd stepped into the perfect spring day spread through her stomach, replacing the sadness that had rested there. "Amazing," Tanesha said, now ready to tap dance out of her home, smiling.

"It's only to tide you over," Serena said. "You won't feel homesick. It'll lift your mood for a couple of days, maybe a week, and then the charm will slowly fade."

"I need all the mood lifting I can get. I'll be stuck for hours in the cramped economy class. I can't afford a first-class ticket. I don't happen to have an extra ten grand lying around," Tanesha said, but instead of feeling blue, she felt chipper. She laughed. "What am I saying? I couldn't even afford the economy seat. My grams sent me the ticket." She leaned forward and gave Serena a quick hug. "Thank you so much."

"Do you have someone to get you to the airport? One of your guys?"

"Are you kidding me? This would be something a boyfriend would do." Tanesha shook her head, laughing. "They paid me so they don't have to do these things."

Serena sighed, a wistful expression on her face. "I wish there was a nice warlock who I could order in for a night of shamelessness and then send away with a slap on his ass. But no, they are all so *complicated*."

Tanesha smiled, the moment perfect to give Serena her own farewell gift. "There's something I have—"

"Sometimes," Serena interrupted, "I contemplated asking you if you wanted to share some of your workload. Do you think that would have worked?"

"Serena, you're a witch. There's not one yielding bone in your body. Of course, some of them would have enjoyed seeing you on your knees." Tanesha covered her mouth, hiding her smile as an angry expression flashed through Serena's eyes.

"I'd never kneel in front of a man," Serena said, her voice icy, a smell of ozone in the air. "He can kneel in front of me though."

Tanesha reached out and patted Serena's knee. "See, this is why you'd make a poor call girl. You would take some kinks too personal."

"It *is* personal."

"No, not really," Tanesha said, licking her lips. "It's just sex. They paid me so they could have it their way, without me wanting anything in return." Tanesha laughed, having fond memories of most of her assignments. It had always been a win-win situation. She liked sex. Males liked to pay her too much for it. "Besides, I could have said no at any time. Though, they were all by nature the most luscious creatures."

"Oh gods, I'm jealous," Serena said, sighing.

Tanesha shrugged. "Don't overestimate it. They weren't hugely interested in giving me pleasure, and they weren't wildly creative in their wishes." Yet, she'd climaxed with most of them anyway. Something turned her on if ordered to suck cock before she was bent over and fucked hard. And she better stopped thinking about it, or she'd end up with embarrassingly wet panties. Her pussy clenched, reminding her that she hadn't had sex in the last three months.

She'd been very selective about who she met once or twice per month—and only human guys. She chewed on her lower lip. Thankfully, she'd never come across a sick wacko. In her human body, she was as defenseless as any other girl. But in the back of her mind, she knew she could shift and rip apart any attacker. It gave her peace of mind, but it was also a constant worry. Not once in the last five years had she felt the urge to shift. *And maybe I don't know how to do shift anymore?*

"Anyway," Tanesha said, "it's in the past. I gave up my line of work three months ago. So far, I don't regret this decision."

"Why should you," Serena said. "People change jobs all the time."

Tanesha nodded. "I'll have enough time to figure out what I want now." She couldn't put a finger on it, but she felt burned-out. For a long time, she hadn't felt any sense of purpose or direction in her life. She knew what she did *not* want, but what she wanted wasn't as clear as it used to be.

"What are you going to do when you're back with your family? You'll be bored out of your mind."

"Maybe, maybe not. Call me stupid, but I have this dream of starting my own coffee shop in Brazil, something small, nothing fancy." Tanesha felt her heart beat in her throat. It was the first time she'd told anyone about this idea, and she fully expected that Serena would burst out laughing.

But Serena only gave her a surprised look. "That sounds like a wonderful idea. Go for it."

"I think I will." *If I win in the lottery*, she thought, and a laugh escaped her lips. *God, I'm hopeless.* She'd arrived in New York with nothing, and she left it with nothing. In a sense, it was the perfect circle. She'd thought she'd proven to herself that she led a successful and independent life, but after a while even the wealth she'd surrounded herself with had failed to bring her true happiness. She was not only over Manhattan but over her extravagant lifestyle. Brazil promised another fresh start, simpler and

cleaner this time, and the prospect lifted her spirits. It also terrified her in no small amount.

"I'm looking forward to seeing my sister," Tanesha said. "She gave birth recently, and I'm finally off the hook." She had always known she'd go back someday, but that this day had finally come still astounded her.

"What hook?"

"Well," Tanesha said, dipping her finger into the whipped cream and licking it clean. "The reason I came here five years ago was because my dear grams tried to turn me into a breeding machine. It's all so primitive." Tanesha inhaled sharply and balled her hands. Even after five years, her grandmother's scheme still enraged her. "She waited until the last minute to tell me her plans to join me with some shifter from another family. Apparently, everyone knew this was about to happen, everyone but me."

"Join?" Serena asked, a frown in her face. "As in marry?"

"Yes," Tanesha answered, not caring to explain the fine difference between human marriage and the ceremony of two feline shifters forming a bond. Marriage was a close enough explanation for Serena to grasp the idea. "She kept on jabbering about legacy and fulfilling promises and filling the world with felines. I swear my grandmother is worse than a dog breeder," Tanesha said, feeling the horror even after five years.

"That's barbaric," Serena said. "What century does your grandmother live in?"

"On the day I was supposed to meet him, I ran for it. I only told my sister so she wouldn't worry. I kept in touch with her without telling her where I was, but my grandmother didn't speak to me for two years."

"Who was the scorned groom?"

Tanesha shook her head. "No idea, and I don't care to know. Hell will freeze over before I'll fuck a guy my grams picks for me."

Serena laughed. "No wonder you've never told me what happened. Guess you wanted to forget and move on?"

"I never told anyone. I was so embarrassed."

"And why are you off the hook? Maybe your grandmother is waiting until you come back before she whips out another bachelor."

"Told you, my sister gave birth, providing her with the next feline shifter generation. I spoke with my grandmother last month, and she was very civilized. She mailed me the cutest baby pics. I'm officially off duty and free as a kitten in spring." Tanesha put her finger again into the whipped cream and slowly licked it off, when she noticed Serena's amused glance. "Sorry," Tanesha said, hastily removing the bowl from the table. "Excuse my table manners."

"Meow," Serena said. "Guess it's the cat in you."

"God, I hope not." Tanesha bit her lip. In the last five years, she'd done everything to distance herself from her inner animal. "I rather like my two legs, thank you."

"Really?" Serena asked mockingly. "Then why are you always wearing that thing around your neck?"

Tanesha closed her hand around the pendant hanging between her breasts. It hung from a slim silver chain around her neck. "Isn't it beautiful?" She rubbed her finger over the smooth texture of the carved black onyx. "Even if I could, I wouldn't take it off."

Serena stepped closer. "For someone who prefers her two legs, you flaunt this symbol very openly. It's a jaguar, isn't it?"

Tanesha nodded. "My mother gave it to me when I was eight, just before she died. I literally can't take it off."

Serena's eyes narrowed as she lifted her hands to make a pulling gesture. The pendant didn't move an inch. Frowning, Serena tried again.

"Hey," Tanesha called, mildly amused. "Hands off!"

"Sorry, I realize that was rather rude. This thing really *is* stuck on you," Serena said, lowering her hands.

"Told you, it's impossible to take it off. Don't know why, and I stopped wondering long ago. It's simply a part of me."

"Family heirloom most likely," Serena said thoughtfully. "Binding it this close to you is old and strong magic."

"I don't remember it properly, but my mom told me it would protect me, give me strength and more power. She also said it represents my future."

"Your future?" Serena repeated. "She shouldn't have said that to you. It sounds like she knew what your future holds. That's not possible. Even the most gifted seers only catch glimpses—"

"You forget I was only eight," Tanesha said, cutting Serena's lecture short. "My mom also told me that someday my mate will find me like my dad found her," Tanesha said, remembering her parents, who had been so madly in love. They had died in an airplane crash. Everyone had whispered that it had been a blessing they'd died together, because if one had survived the other would have died slowly of a broken heart. "I think she only wanted to tell her eldest daughter a silly bedtime story." Tanesha looked up, only to find Serena giving her a thoughtful stare.

"What?" Tanesha asked. "You don't honestly believe in rubbish such as *soul mates*?"

"I've seen stranger things happen."

"Get out! You'd think I'd have come across my soul mate in the last five years. God knows, I've met enough guys. Soul mate is a phrase my grams would use to get more grandkids. Makes me ill."

Serena laughed. "Have it your way, then."

Tanesha stopped playing with the pendant and hid it under her shirt. "I haven't thanked you enough that you'll dissolve my household for me. When I leave tonight, I

want to turn around and have a last look at my life as it was. If I'd cleared out my apartment it would feel like leaving behind an empty shell."

"I'll store some pieces for you at my place. The rest I'll sell and then wire the money into your account," Serena said. "If you'd only bought your apartment instead of renting, you wouldn't have any trouble staying."

"When I thought of it, it was too late. The prices had skyrocketed. Now I can't even pay the rent. The signs are all clear. I'm out of luck, out of money, and I haven't had sex for three months. It's time for me to leave." A wave of comfort ran over her skin, the bracelet warming against her. Without Serena's gift, she would be howling like her sister's baby.

The doorbell rang.

For a moment her thoughts drifted to the guy who'd called and demanded to see her. Surely he wouldn't just drop by?

Chapter Two

The doorbell rang again.

“Who the hell is that?” Tanesha said under her breath, heading to open the door, not really expecting an answer.

“An old man in a livery,” Serena answered in a distant voice, as if in thought, then snapped out of it. “Sorry, shouldn’t have said that.”

“Witch,” Tanesha mumbled, as always slightly creeped out by Serena’s abilities. When Tanesha opened the door, it came as no surprise that a man in dark-blue uniform waited on her doorstep.

“Miss da Silva?”

“Yep, that’s me.”

“Then this is for you. I’ll wait here for your answer.”

Tanesha took the white envelope out of his hands and closed the door. She tore the envelope open, took out the card, and read over the few handwritten sentences. The words were formed with sharp, edgy letters. Angry, she thought, the words looked *angry*. The content, however, didn’t make sense at all.

Serena had followed her to the door, snatched the card out of her hands, and read under her breath. “Someone wants you to pop by and discuss some important matters?” Serena flipped the card over. “No name?” Serena returned the card. “Well, I have to say your social life is fascinating. Who’s it from?”

“Don’t know,” Tanesha said, even though she had a good idea who’d sent her the invite. Surely it was the same guy who’d called her earlier. Voice and handwriting matched perfectly.

“Are you going?”

"I've got to catch my plane tonight. No time for adventure." If her flight wasn't at eight, she'd be sorely tempted to meet the man whose dark voice sent shivers down her spine and whose letters looked like he'd whipped them on the paper.

"I've told you before, but I'll tell you again," Serena said. "I can give you enough to get you through the next year with money to spare."

"And I said thanks, but no thanks. I might not be happy to leave, but I will not chicken out. Brazil it is. I'm also giddy to see my sister. I miss her. We didn't talk often on the phone, and I always had to tiptoe around the subject of how I earned my income."

"What's wrong with dabbling in the stock market?" Serena asked, genuinely puzzled, and Tanesha loved her for that.

"I was referring to the way I *earned* the money to be able to play with the stock market. I fear my grandmother would have a heart attack if she ever found out the things I've done."

"She's that uptight?"

"We are *da Silva*," Tanesha said, imitating her grandmother's brittle voice. "Well, there's that myth our ancestors were the very first feline shifters. My grams is very proud of that myth. She thinks every *da Silva* is divinely superior."

Serena smiled. "I don't know about superior, but you *are* divine. No wonder men want to stroke between your *ears* until you purr."

"What a wicked thing to say, but I've never met a man who tickled me that well. Hang on," Tanesha said, holding up her hand. "I almost forgot. I've got a farewell gift for you too." She went to the kitchen and took her little black book from the counter. "Here you go." She pressed a business card into Serena's hands. "Gabriel's phone number. You don't need to call, though, because—"

"You know Gabriel?" Serena interrupted, her eyes wide.

"He'll pick you up tonight for a not so blind date."

"He will?" Serena's cheeks turned a faint pink.

Tanesha grinned, feeling that she'd done a good deed. Gabriel was a good friend, who also happened to be mouthwatering hot, and she'd always suspected that Serena lusted after him. "You'll have to bring him to his knees alone. I can't help you there," Tanesha said, and to her utter amazement, Serena's face turned bright red.

"I believe the livery man is still outside your door," Serena said, snapping her bag open and flipping the card inside.

Tanesha scribbled a *Not Interested* on the card and opened the front door. "Bye," she said after she'd pressed the card into the messenger's hand and closed the door in his face.

When she returned to Serena, the still-rosy-glowing witch wrapped her into a quick embrace. "Sorry, hon, I'm not one for long, dramatic goodbyes." She strode to the door and turned around once more. "Besides, I have a feeling you'll be back."

"Who knows," Tanesha answered. "But you better have fun tonight." Serena was in for a treat. From what she'd heard, Gabriel was literally a wizard in bed.

Tanesha returned to the kitchen after Serena left. She took a spoon from the drawer and grabbed the whipped cream out of the fridge. The first spoonful slid blissfully cool down her throat when the phone rang. She eyed it wearily, wondering if it was who she thought it was. After the fourth ring, she picked up.

"What?"

"You declined my invitation."

"Oh," she said, a mixture of annoyance and excitement tingling down her spine. She sat down on her loveseat and pulled up her legs. "It's my mysterious stalker." She'd like to know how the hell he found out her private phone line. Or her address for that matter.

"Why did you decline?"

"What do you want?"

"I'll tell you once you're sitting in front of me."

"I don't have time for you."

"Trust me," he said, and she found his deep voice seductively addictive, "there's nothing more important for you than seeing me."

The way you say it, I almost believe you. His tone went straight between her legs. She jumped up and paced around the room, unable to sit still. "Well, in fact there is something more important," she answered, irritated to react so strongly to him. "I'm leaving New York today. You'll have to find entertainment somewhere else."

"You're flying to Brazil *today*?"

She blinked. "How the hell do you know where I'm heading?"

Silence greeted her at the other end of the line, and she started to think he'd hung up when he said, "I need to see you."

"You need to see me? You do not know me!" She realized she'd yelled into the phone. Why was she so worked up? Must be his calm, deep voice that rubbed her the wrong way.

"I'll give you ten grand to see me today."

She let herself fall onto her loveseat again. "Ten grand to see you?" she asked carefully, mentally converting the money into a first-class ticket for the next available flight. And then into the first payment toward her own coffee shop. She sat up straight. "Just to see you? That's all?"

"Yes, Tanesha, just to see me."

A shiver flickered over her skin. He had a strangely alluring way of saying her name. "What's your name?" she asked, her last reservations slowly gliding away.

"Call me Dan," he said. "What about my offer?"

Yeah, what about it? She spooned another healthy portion of sweet cream into her mouth, thinking hard. Maybe that's exactly what she needed—a last adventure before she left for good. The money sounded great, no doubt. But the man behind the offer

sounded even better – sincere and very, very male. And the prospect of a sweaty night between the sheets sealed the deal. Because whatever he'd said about just *seeing* her, she knew better. Why else call her?

“Umm, maybe I'll have time to meet you after all, Dan.” She didn't doubt for a single second that he wouldn't keep his end of the deal.

“I thought so,” he snapped. “My driver will pick you up at six.” He hung up.

Tanesha licked thoughtfully along her bottom lip as three months of zero sex kicked into her blood. She actually looked forward to meeting her mystery guy. If he was as sexy as his voice, she would be paying *him* for one night.

* * * * *

Danilo Tavares hung up the phone, resisted hurling it across the room. He wouldn't allow his anger to take over. After five years of wondering where Tanesha had run to hide, after turning over every stone to find her, her grandmother had called him three weeks ago to tell him her location, unnecessarily reminding him of his promise. A promise given too long ago.

One he'd like to undo.

His inner beast stirred, unpleasant memories rising to the surface. Five years ago, he'd paced around his house in Brazil, waiting for Tanesha to arrive. Not unlike today, but with the fine difference that he'd wanted to claim Tanesha as his feline mate.

The day of Tanesha's betrayal hit his mind, and the same rage he'd felt spread through his stomach. He'd waited for her, his heart in his hands, ready to fall down to his knees to proclaim his love, take her as his bride. He balled his hands, trying to banish the memory by sheer force of will, but it wasn't working. If he ever found her, he had promised himself he wouldn't be gentle.

And today, he'd found her.

Instead of seeking Tanesha out immediately, he'd thought it wiser to find out what she'd done in the last years. The notes he got back from his informants had been eye-opening.

He knew where she went out to eat, whom she met for lunch, where she did her shopping. Innocent activities, nothing that would raise eyebrows. Apart from the fact that she spread her legs for anyone with enough money. And now she was broke.

He had pictures too, in sealed white envelopes. He'd never opened a single one, not wanting to cloud his first impression. Of course, he was familiar with the most basic description of her appearance—tall, brown eyes, long black hair. A paw-like birthmark on her shoulder, as every family member of the da Silva had.

A growl shot out of his mouth, unbidden. He stopped pacing around his apartment, willing himself to calm down. His heart was beating hard against his rib cage. He'd planned to resolve the issue calmly and quickly. So far, his plan wasn't working.

And *again*, he waited for Tanesha to arrive at his doorstep.

He closed his eyes in exasperation. He was convinced that living in Manhattan, a city full of dirt, concrete and noise, had robbed her of her feline grace, her innate power. He imagined her as a stray cat gone soft from too much sugar and fat. She sure as hell wasn't his mate. And all he had to ensure was that she never set foot in Brazil.

Chapter Three

At six o'clock sharp, a dark limousine stopped in front of Tanesha's brownstone. It wasn't the first time she had been picked up by a chauffeur and driven to a discreet location. She'd never agreed to meet a guy in her home, much less invite one to her own bed. Her apartment had always been her private heaven.

She'd dressed carefully in a silk blouse and a short skirt—an outfit that screamed *fuck me* in an expensive and tasteful way. For her shoes, she'd picked her favorite pair of Manolos. If her mystery guy didn't stare at her tits under the blouse, he wasn't straight.

The winter breeze blew uncomfortably under her skirt as she walked down the stairs to the waiting limousine. She slid into the backseat, glad the driver had turned on the heater. She should have dressed warmer, but she wouldn't spend much time outside. She noticed they were heading west to the more exclusive addresses. So far so good. After another twenty minutes, the driver pulled up in front of an understated apartment building.

"Which floor?" she asked, looking into the brightly lit entrance where a concierge sat reading *The New York Times*.

The chauffeur turned 'round to face her. "Penthouse."

She nodded, not waiting for the driver to open the door.

"Tanesha da Silva," she said to the concierge when she'd reached his desk. "The guy living in the penthouse awaits me."

"What's the name of the guy in the penthouse?" he asked, folding his paper.

"Dan."

"Surname?"

She waved her hand, exasperated. "Dan whatever. Only one penthouse in the building, I'm sure."

The concierge sighed and picked up the phone. "Sir, sorry for the disturbance, but I have a Tanesha da—" He closed his mouth, listening. "Of course, I'll tell her."

She'd already strode toward the elevators when the concierge put his hand on her shoulder. "I'm sorry, Miss, but I'll have to ask you to leave."

"Leave?" She stared at the concierge's apologetic face. "But he wants to see me. What did he say?"

"He said I should call the police if you refuse to leave."

"He said *what*?" She shook her head, searching for a sensible explanation. "Was that all he said?"

"No, that wasn't all." The concierge frowned. "He said you can jump."

"Jump?" she repeated dumbfounded. "He said *jump*?"

"I'm sorry, but this part I didn't understand myself."

"You and me, pal, you and me." She strode from the building, kicking the entrance door open with her foot. By now, she had no chance whatsoever of catching her plane. "Penthouse... Am I supposed to fly up or what?" She slid inside the limousine. "I'm in no mood to play games. Please," she said, addressing the chauffeur, "drive me back to my place."

Instead of putting the car into gear, he reached into the glove compartment and took out a white envelope. "For you."

"Another one?" Tanesha took the card from the envelope, read, and read it again in case she'd misunderstood. He'd raised his offer to see him to one hundred thousand dollars. Almost like confetti, a dozen hundred-dollar bills came fluttering out the envelope. She held the bills in her hand, anger brewing deep inside her gut. What the *fuck*?

“Okay,” she said, tugging at her skirt. “So, let’s recap. I’ll definitely find him in the penthouse?”

The chauffeur nodded.

She shot another look into the well-lit entrance hall. Theoretically, she could bite through the concierge’s throat and then take the elevator, but that would be a bloody mess.

Besides, he wanted her to jump. *Jump*. He had to be kidding. She could think of only one alternative to reach him without using the front entrance. She didn’t have to like it though. Then another thought hit her, turning her insides cold. She could count the number of people in Manhattan who knew that she was feline on one hand.

Now there was one person more.

If the money hadn’t done the trick, now he had her complete attention. She slid out of the limousine, clutching the bills in her hand, shivering against the cold. The winter air tugged at her blouse, pressing the silk against her skin. She glanced up and down the street and then up into the sky. Her mystery guy would have a rooftop terrace; all surrounding buildings were approximately the same height.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck,” she said, walking away from well-lit entrance, her teeth chattering against the severe cold. *Jump*. He wasn’t kidding. He was deadly serious. When she passed a group of bums, shivering as she did in the cold wind, she dumped the bills in their collecting can.

With each step, fury settled deeper into her bones. It was one thing to arrange a date with her, and another to hold money like a carrot under her nose. Last time she checked, she wasn’t a rabbit.

The last building on the block had what she was looking for – a fire escape.

She slipped out of her Manolos and grasped the bottom rung of the ladder. She swung herself up and looked down at her shoes, which stood forlorn on the ground like a pair of exotic birds. God, he better have her money ready and waiting for her, she might just shove it down his throat. But not before she got a few answers...

Barefoot, she climbed up and stepped onto the first landing, the metal mesh icy under her soles. Cursing under her breath, she stopped for a moment and examined the palms of her hands—they hurt like hell. The rusty handrails had cut into her skin. “Damn,” she muttered, and continued to climb until she found a half-open window and pushed it open. She landed softly on the balls of her feet as she jumped inside, and then made her way up to the rooftop terrace, taking a flight of stairs.

Careful not to step onto broken glass, she advanced closer to the edge of the terrace, which was missing a handrail. Five buildings in front of her, five fucking *jumps* in front of her, was his apartment building. She could even see his terrace now, lit with lanterns. When she glanced down to the street, she hastily took a step back. If she dropped from this height, she’d be dead.

Why would he want her dead?

She brushed through her hair and cursed as she understood his true motive. He not only wanted her to jump through hoops for him.

He wanted her to arrive naked at his doorstep.

So much for discussing important matters... Well, he just had to give her some spare clothes, she wasn’t picky. Slowly, she slipped out of her skirt and folded it into a neat square. She opened the buttons on her blouse, shrugged out of it, and placed it on top of her skirt. Shifting would do terrible damage to a silk blouse. After she’d heard him out, she’d come back to find her clothes unwrinkled and more importantly, fully intact.

A gust of wind hit her, bringing up chills on her arms. She unhooked her bra, slipped out of her panties, and perched both pieces on top of her blouse. She wasn’t overly bothered by people seeing her by chance. New Yorkers were used to stranger sights than a buck-naked woman on a roof. *Even though this woman is freezing her tits off.* The air bit into her bare skin as if it had teeth.

With shaking fingers, she tried to open the bracelet around her wrist. She deeply regretted having to take it off, but otherwise she would destroy it while shifting. When

the knot came undone, coldness spread through her heart. She put the bracelet into her bag. Maybe it would still work when she returned to collect her items from the roof.

She wrapped her hand around the carved black jaguar resting between her breasts. Her pendant was the only item she could always wear; it stayed around her neck, undamaged.

Five years... She licked her suddenly dry mouth, trying to wipe her mind from thoughts and doubt. *I'm feline. It doesn't matter how long I haven't shifted. I carry it in me.*

"Hope he's worth it," she said, mentally wrapping the part inside her that was human smaller and smaller, like folding silk, smaller and smaller, allowing her feral side to spread wider and deeper, allowing skin to change and bones to shift. A deep growl shot from her throat as she opened her eyes.

Without thinking, she jumped.

* * * * *

Danilo paced through the rooms of his apartment. He'd talked on the phone to the concierge more than five minutes ago. Where was she?

The phone rang again. *The concierge.*

He picked up. "Is she still in the lobby?"

"Who?"

Danilo blinked, thrown for a moment to hear Leon's voice instead of the concierge's. Impatience rose in him. What if Tanesha arrived while he was on the phone? "Forget it. Why do you call? I thought we discussed everything this morning? It's done. Go and celebrate. Get drunk or whatever. You're the boss now."

Leon laughed. "And believe me, I'm grateful. But now, after the dust has settled and you signed all the papers, I'd like to know why you did it."

"You know what," Danilo said, "we'll talk after you've run the business for ten years." He hung up.

He'd finally given his younger and considerably more competitive brother his wish. Complete control of the family business. From now on, Leon was the CEO of the Tavares Empire—real estate, hotels and casinos. Without a doubt, his younger brother felt drunk with power right now.

Danilo knew the feeling. He'd invented it. During the last five years, he'd worked harder, longer and more scrupulous than ever before—to numb the pain of losing Tanesha. But he'd reached a breaking point. After he'd taken care of Tanesha, he'd return to Brazil to lead a quieter life. Once, he'd wished he would do so with her at his side, but he didn't delude himself anymore.

He would give her enough money to stay put in the States, and he could forget that he ever promised to marry her, could forget that she even existed. A stab of loneliness grabbed his heart. He ground his teeth, pushing the feeling from his mind. There was no love for him—that much he'd learned by now.

He checked the time. What took her so long? If she hadn't figured out how to get to him, she was too slow, mentally and physically. Because she wouldn't turn down his offer, this much he knew about her.

He dismissed the sudden notion that he'd pushed her too far. Closing his eyes, he tried not to think of what he'd do if she fell to her death. The urge to stop her gripped his insides. If he hurried, he might be able to find her in time to prevent her from leaping from house to house. He moved toward the roof terrace when the doors leading outside slid open with a soft hiss.

He took a step back when she all but stormed inside, a few bright autumn leaves blowing inside the room along with her. She met his gaze, her entire body radiating pissed-off-ness—her hands curled to fists, a slight tremor in her legs. With a flick of her head, she shook her long hair away from her face, her dark eyes gleaming.

"You bastard," she said, lifting her chin. "I almost died. Spit out what you want from me before I change my mind and kill you on the spot."

Tension twisted in his muscles, but her words made him smile, involuntarily. Her voice was soft and deep, like black silk come alive. He cocked his head, leisurely checking her out from head to toe. Her chin raised, she met his gaze boldly. He took in the fullness of her breasts, the soft curve of her hips, and the triangle of trimmed hair between her legs – and found her imperfect.

“Kill me?” He spread his arms. “Go on then, I’ll take up a fight against a naked woman any day.” His words had the desired effect – storm clouds gathered in her eyes, but she bit her lip, refraining from a reply. She wasn’t as tall as he’d thought, her breasts fuller than he preferred, and her belly not flat but rounded. She looked, well, too womanly. Definitely not his type, even though her black hair flew beautifully over her shoulders, contrasting with her pale skin in a way that made him think of wood and snow – she even smelled cold. His gaze fell on the pendant between her breasts. He bit back a growl, restraining himself from ripping it off her neck.

When he gazed back into her face, he found her wide mouth with its parted lips nothing short of delicious, the fury in her eyes a challenge. And if there ever was something that he loved, then it was a good fight. Tanesha was lusciously fuckable. He hadn’t planned it, but his cock grew hard for her, the urge to take her suddenly overwhelming.

Chapter Four

Fear and rage still beat like a drum in Tanesha's chest.

When she'd landed on the last roof, it hadn't been as neatly as the ones before, but she'd clambered for a hold, balancing on the edge, and for a second she'd thought she wouldn't make it. Instantly, she'd shifted back, dragging herself onto the stone terrace, glad to be back in her human body and with solid ground under her feet. Under no circumstance would she leave the building using the same route.

Opening the sliding glass door, her gaze had fallen on the man standing in the middle of the room. Any doubts that she might have walked into the wrong apartment vanished. The sight of him had assured her she'd found the man with a voice like dark velvet.

Her heart had stopped for a moment, and then raced. Palms sweaty, nerves on fire, she'd given her anger free rein. And he had *smiled* at her.

An irritable wish to appease him spread through her as his dark gaze slid over her. "Go on then, I'll take up a fight against a naked woman any day," he said.

She narrowed her eyes and squared her shoulders, not feeling an ounce of embarrassment that she was naked. He only wore a pair of loose linen pants, no shoes, no shirt. The effect his bare chest had on her was astounding. His lean, muscled body called out to her, tempting her to find out if so much male perfection was true. She frowned, unsure why he held so much appeal for her. *One would believe I've never seen half-naked men before.*

His dark hair was long enough to twirl her fingers in, pull him close, and taste his mouth. When she met his gaze, she took a deep breath. He looked wild and untamed, unlike the over-groomed specimens prowling Manhattan's streets. Hot damn. She

needed to get her cool back, yet the thought of going down on him sent jolts of pleasure through her core.

Then she remembered that because of him she'd almost died. He played with her, and, well, she wouldn't let him win. She shut the terrace door behind her and moved closer to him, looking up because he was taller by a head. "I want my money, I want some clothes, and I want to know why the fuck it is so important for you to see me," she said, her words cutting through the silence.

His eyebrows rose. "Of course, your money." He walked to a desk at the far end of the room. When he came back, he held a thick envelope.

"Thanks," she said, holding out her hand, ready to throw it back in his face.

"Here." He threw the envelope to her feet. "Bend over and pick it up."

She hesitated, her breath caught in her throat. She looked to the floor where the white envelope contrasted against the dark of the hardwood floors.

"Something wrong?" He moved toward the terrace and opened the doors again. "Surely you know how to bend over."

His velvety voice came from behind her, so quiet she almost couldn't hear him. A shiver worked its way over body, and her breathing sped up. She wanted to turn around and tell him to cut the crap, but she didn't. Slowly, she bent to pick up the envelope, his gaze a lick of heat against her spine. "I want clothes," she said, brushing her hair away from her face when she straightened. She turned to him, aware that her breasts showed hard, taut nipples. "Or are you enjoying yourself too much?" She raised her hand to slap the money envelope in his face, but he grasped around her wrist.

He smiled, forcing her hand away from his face, his gaze resting on her chest. "Are *you* enjoying yourself?"

"Not really," she said, gritting her teeth, letting the envelope drop to the floor. Her breasts ached for his touch, and judging from the expression in his eyes, he knew. She wanted him to say *bend over* once more in that dark voice of his, but he only looked at her, his slightly slanted eyes taking in every inch of her body. Cat's eyes, she thought

then dismissed the notion. She wrapped her arms around herself. "It's cold. Close the door."

"How can you feel cold?" With a sweeping motion, he opened the doors wider, letting in a breeze of air. He came toward her and placed a hand between her breasts, his palm covering her pendant. "You are feline. Can you not feel the heat inside you?"

Warmth shot through her at his touch, prickling over her skin in bursts of fire. She stared at him as his touch raced through her body and settled between her legs. Her pussy clenched, and she closed her eyes, getting wet for him. If she was hot suddenly, it had nothing to do with being feline and everything with his touch on her skin. When she opened her eyes, she found him staring at her with something close to longing. She covered his hand with her own. "You seem to know a lot about me."

He moved away so fast, as if she'd touched him with hot iron. Only then did she notice how badly her hands shook. She watched him step outside onto the terrace. "Damn, I'm not going out there again," she mumbled, taking in her surroundings. The living room was huge and included an open kitchen and a stocked bar. Concealed ceiling lights illuminated only sparsely, but something was off... He had no plants, paintings, books or magazines. No decoration. The black leather sofas looked unused as did the appliances in the kitchen. She had the impression she was inside a luxurious but impersonal hotel suite.

She swiveled around when she heard bottles clink behind her. She hadn't even noticed that he'd entered the room again, but he stood with his back to her at the bar.

"You don't live here, do you?"

"No, I don't." He came to her and gave her a glass with amber liquid. "I'm not often here, but when I absolutely have to, I prefer to stay at my own place."

She took a sip. "So, let's cut to the chase. What do you want?" she asked, the whiskey still burning in her throat.

"Sit," he said, gesturing with his glass toward the sofa.

"I'd rather stand."

He sat, his gaze never leaving her. "I want to see you against the black of the leather. Do I have to offer money first?"

She narrowed her eyes, walked toward him, and sat on the sofa opposite him, the leather cool yet soft on her skin as she tugged up her legs and made herself more comfortable. "You have exactly ten seconds to explain yourself. Then I'm out of here."

He cocked his head. "You'll stay as long as I want you to."

"Only five seconds left."

"You'll never, ever return to Brazil."

She blinked, thrown off balance by his words. "Why?"

"If you return to Brazil, you'll find yourself in the same situation as when you left five years ago."

She stared at him, shaking her head. "Listen, I don't know why you know so much about me, but what you say is impossible."

"I want you to stay in Manhattan." He took a sip from his whiskey. "And I want the pendant." His gaze settled between her breasts. "It's mine."

"What!" She closed her hand around the carved jaguar. "It's not yours." Rage spread through her at the thought of losing the pendant. "I wouldn't have thought about leaving New York in the first place, but if you have to know, I'm completely broke."

"I'll give you money."

She sighed. Something about him made him irresistible, but he was crazy. It was a shame. He was the hottest lunatic she'd ever come across, and nothing he did or said made any sense at all. "Why in all hell would you want to give me money so I can stay in Manhattan?"

"One million," he said, "no questions asked. You'll never see me again nor will I see you."

She laughed. "You're kidding."

"Do you accept?"

Okay, so he was not kidding. "What's in it for you?"

"None of your business," he said. "I've already arranged for the money to be deposited into your account."

She opened her mouth to ask him how he knew her account information, but on second thought, it was unimportant. He just knew, as he knew so many other things. She realized that she missed something, but couldn't figure out what it was. "I can't accept this money."

"Why wouldn't you accept my money?" he said, turning to her. "I think you're used to being bought, whore."

She sucked in her breath, hearing his harsh words. He deliberately tried to shame her, tried to humiliate her. It didn't work, but it was just her luck. For one reason or another, he hated her guts while she wanted to jump his bones. "Why give me money if you don't get anything in return?"

"I'll get the pendant."

"It's not for sale."

"Not even for one million?"

"Not for ten, not for one hundred. I won't part with it for any amount of money."

"I find that hard to believe."

Her gaze flew over his body, her fingers itching to get her hands on him. Not even his hostility turned her off, which wasn't a healthy response on her part, but she couldn't help it.

One million... Enough to stay, enough to buy her apartment, enough to open a dozen coffee shops, enough to send money to her sister in Brazil. She had no idea why he did what he did, but she didn't doubt for a second his offer wasn't genuine. The anger in his eyes was barely concealed, but every now and then he looked at her differently. He was good at hiding his lust, but not well enough for her not to notice.

Her gaze dipped away from his muscled torso down to his lap, but couldn't see if she aroused him by sitting naked in front of him. "Ask me to spend the night with you," she said quietly, the thought of his strong hands holding her while anger blazed out his dark eyes kicked her libido into overdrive.

"I'm not interested."

A haunted look in his eyes made her pause a second. She stood up, walked around the table separating them, and slipped onto his lap. She placed her hands on his shoulders, feeling his erection through his pants. *He likes me well enough, although he isn't happy about it.*

"You are interested." She moved closer, straddling him, rubbing her pussy against the hard ridge of his cock. She smiled, trailing her fingers through the dusting of dark hair on his chest. His nipples hardened under her fingertips. "Offer me one million for getting you off."

"I don't have to pay women to do that, I assure you."

Yes, I have no doubt about that. She would do it for the sheer pleasure of touching him too. "If you want me to accept your money, you'll have to." She ground her hips against him. Up close he looked even better, and from what she could feel through his pants, he was well equipped to make her come hard and fast. A quick, angry fuck. Exactly what she wanted – no, what she needed. Then he could go to hell for all she cared.

His hands grasped around her hips and stilled her movement. "If I agree, I won't allow you to back out. You'll be mine."

She laughed. "Whatever you want. I'm all yours," she said, gazing into his dark eyes, seeing a smile creeping into his face, making her wonder if she'd just made a pact with the devil. "Only for one night though," she added hastily. Heaven forbid he confused her sex offer for romantic feelings.

"Done," he said, his voice rough. "Kiss me to seal the deal."

Chapter Five

Tanesha leaned into him, her nipples brushing against his chest. She closed her eyes as her lips found his. She slipped her tongue inside his mouth, tasting him. She sighed, deepening the kiss. His hands sank into her hair, pulling her closer for a few seconds, and then he yanked her away from him. She bit on her lip to prevent herself from crying out loud. He rose, pushing her off his lap. "Stand up," he said. "Now." He strode away from her and stopped in front of the open terrace.

Her heart beating in her throat, she rose from the floor. "What the fuck was that about?" She moved toward him, staring at his broad back, pondering if she should sink her claws into his spine. Instead, she placed her hand on his shoulder, feeling the heat of his skin under her fingertips when he turned around to face her. God, he was a feast for the eyes. "What do you like?" She took his hand and placed it between her legs. She rubbed against his hand, letting him feel her wetness. She groaned as he slipped a finger inside her pussy. "How do you want me?"

"I want you on your knees." He gave her a hard push and, caught off balance, she fell.

She swallowed a flare of anger. When she met his eyes, she bit down a moan, lust shooting through her body. She'd wanted an angry fuck, and it seemed she was going to get one. Why complain?

"Kneel, Tanesha."

She breathed out slowly. If only she didn't have the impression that she was being punished... Well, she'd asked him what he liked. Besides, she could stand up anytime. She came up on her knees, sure that she'd have bruises later from the wooden floor.

"Fold your hands behind your back."

She straightened her posture, pushing out her breasts, and folded her hands at the small of her back. A gust of wind hit her from the open terrace, pebbling her breasts. Her neck prickled as he stepped behind her, and she couldn't shake a certain sense of danger. His hand brushed over her ass, and then slipped between her thighs. He spread her knees wider apart.

Her kneecaps hurt and the winter air bit into her flesh. Still, she shivered for other reasons than the cold. He brushed his hand over her folds, his fingers dipping inside her, smoothing her building wetness over her clit. Her eyes fluttered shut and she pushed harder against his skilled fingers, searching for a stronger touch, her pussy throbbing under his slow strokes. Her breathing grew ragged as he stroked harder. *Yes, just a little more...* Her hips jerked when he stepped away from her, and she groaned in frustration.

"Don't move," he said over his shoulder, leaving the room. "Don't even think about touching yourself."

I wouldn't think it if you would fuck me properly. She moaned as she touched herself, her fingers slowly circling her slick clit.

"If you come, I'll make you regret it."

She laughed breathlessly. "How would you do—" Her heart jumped at the sight of the cat-o'-nine whip in his hand. Her fingers on her clit froze to a stop. The whip didn't look playful but very solid with its braided leather strands and knotted ends. "Hell no," she said, voice breaking, her heart leaping into her throat.

"What's a little pain for a million bucks?" he asked, his eyes sparkling, leather strands gliding through his hands.

"Sex," she said. "I offered sex." She didn't fear pain, but she didn't like the subtext. If he truly thought she would submit to him, he was out of his fucking mind.

"Whatever I want," he said quietly. "You'll do whatever I want from you."

"I do not see that working." She was glad her voice sounded poised because she sure didn't feel confident anymore.

"I didn't ask your opinion." He stood in front of her, his feet shoulder's width apart, his hand strong around the whip's handle. "I'll do whatever I want with you. That's a promise."

"If you touch me with this whip, I'll make you sorry you did," she said, acutely aware that she still knelt, looking up at him. And for the life of her, she couldn't bring herself to rise. She craved for him to give her orders with his dark, smooth voice. She blinked, trying to sort out her feelings, but the sight of his erect cock straining against his pants was a terrible distraction. Her breathing came too hard, and she feared he could see the lust in her face all too plainly.

He stepped closer, raising his hand holding the whip. "You're mine. You belong to me." He trailed the braids over her chest, the leather brushing against her nipples.

"I belong to no one but me," she said, her voice shaking because he tantalized her breasts with the whip and she hated loving it.

"Not tonight," he said, and she looked up at him, his smile sending chills along her back.

The whip in his hands shouldn't make her want him more, but it did. "You do know that I'm able to rip out your throat, don't you?"

His smile grew wider. "You don't look that wild to me," he said as he moved behind her. "You're weak." She held her breath as he trailed the leather strands along her spine. "Nothing more than a tame, fat house cat."

The low growl barely escaped her tight lips. "You're wrong," she pressed through her teeth. Something in his tone made her furious. He obviously deemed himself stronger than her, which meant he could shift into something of equal strength. Not a wolf though. He wasn't like the werewolves who had crossed her path in their human form. He wasn't a vamp either, and she didn't sense the odd magical aura she'd felt around wizards. Another kind of shifter...a rather uncomfortable suspicion rose inside her, but she wasn't ready to explore the idea.

“My pretty cat,” he said, and the softest of slaps landed on her back, a soft tickle on her flesh. “Not too bad, is it?” He traced the strands down her back and slapped her ass softly.

“Stop playing around,” she said, exasperated.

“You’re too impatient.” Another slap landed on her buttocks, the leather a mere whisper against her skin. “Should I stop?”

“Go on,” she said, biting down a giggle. He couldn’t hurt a fly with these soft slaps. “I actually don’t mind, it’s—” She sucked in her breath. He slapped the whip across her ass. Hard. “Don’t do that again.” Other lovers had made her flinch with pain, being too rough between the sheets. Love bites, scratches, she’d never minded. All of them had backpedaled at her softest complaint. Without a trace of doubt, she knew he wouldn’t be that considerate. Anger fueled her body, yet her breath came faster when he stroked his hand over the skin where the leather had hit her flesh.

“I will do it again,” he said, his voice close to her ear, and another slap landed on her ass, not as hard, but fresh pain flared over her skin. “I’ll also make you so wet you’ll beg me to fuck you.” She moaned when he slipped his hand between her thighs. “So wet,” he said, thrusting his finger into her pussy, stroking her insides. Pleasure shot from her core through her body, mixing with the pain she still felt from his hard slap. “Say it, Tanesha,” he whispered against her ear, his voice hoarse. “Beg me to fuck you.”

“I don’t beg, ever.” Her pussy clenched around his finger. She bit on her tongue or she’d give in to his hypnotic dark voice and beg him to fuck her, to do it hard. If he hurt her again, the game was over.

She groaned as he stepped away from her, his fingers leaving her throbbing pussy. “You’re right,” he said, trailing the leather strands up her spine again. “No need to rush.”

She reached around as the strands trailed up her arm. Closing her hand around the braids, she yanked the whip out of his hands. She threw it across the room where it

clattered to the floor. She didn't know what she'd expected, but not to hear his soft laugh.

"You'll not do that again. Fold your hands on your back."

"You'll not hit me."

"You're mine for the night. I'll do as I please." He walked across the room and picked up the whip. "I *bought* you, kitty." He stood before her, the whip dangling carelessly in his hand. "You're allowed to scream though."

"I'll only scream with frustration." The braided strands kissed her thighs, a gentle touch of leather against her sensitive skin, sending a shot of arousal straight between her legs, making her shut her eyes with delight. *Damn*. Despite her wish, he managed to arouse her with his whip, more than she'd have thought possible.

A soft flick landed across her chest, the strands hitting her nipples. The sensation blazed through her body and she couldn't bite back a gasp. *More please*. But she'd rather bite her tongue off than tell him. When she opened her eyes, he looked at her. "Lick your lips again," he said quietly, his gaze glued to her mouth.

"What?" She hadn't noticed that she'd licked her lip. He had noticed though. Interesting. From all the things he'd done with her, from the look on his face it turned him on the most when she enjoyed herself.

True, he has me on my knees, but who's in charge here? She smiled, convinced that she'd figured him out when he said, "Lick your lips," and a hard slap landed on her ass, making her wince.

"You hit me one more time and I'll rip your head off." She pressed her lips together, her insides shifting, her inner beast growling.

He whipped the leather strands over her body, his touch gentle and luring, and she fought against the pleasure of the hard leather against her skin. After a moment, she let her eyes flutter shut, the leather stroking a lullaby into her skin, replacing anger with lust.

"I like your mouth," he whispered close to her ear. "I want you to wet your lips for me."

"Make me." She looked up at him, every nerve in her body begging for his attention, and moaned when he flicked the leather across her breasts, the strands hitting her nipples perfectly. The mix of pain and pleasure made her pussy clench with the need to be filled. She imagined the hard leather caressing her clit and how it would feel to have his mouth follow suit. She traced her tongue across her lower lip, making it glisten with moisture, keeping her gaze on his face. "Let me lick your cock."

"I wouldn't last a minute fucking your mouth." His gaze caressed her, but he didn't use the whip. He'd worked her body into a sharp awareness, but did nothing to quench her lust. His gaze on her naked skin only piled up more heat, and just when she hoped he would flick the leather over her sensitive nipples again, he tossed the whip aside.

Ah, damn.

He stepped behind her, close enough to feel the heat coming from his body. He sank his hands into her hair, his fingers combing through her strands, smoothing them out. It felt so good, so gentle, she gave a small sigh.

He brushed her hair over her right shoulder, covering her right breast and leaving her right shoulder blade bare. "It really is shaped like a paw print," he said, tracing his finger over her skin.

"Runs in the family," she answered after a moment. His fingers against her birthmark were strangely intimate. "Don't touch it."

"Okay." His lips touched her shoulder, his tongue tracing over her skin.

"Don't," she whispered, but everything he did only made her want him more. "Don't stop." She wanted to turn around and end the agony he'd created in her body. She needed his body against her, his cock inside her, and she was ready to beg for it. When she turned, his hands clasped hard around her shoulders.

"Don't move." He closed his hands around her neck, his fingers grasping the chain holding the pendant. "This doesn't belong to you."

"Is that so?" She tried to rise, but he pressed on her shoulders, keeping her on her knees.

"I made it, but I don't want you to have it anymore," he said, sinking to his knees behind her, his body pressing against her backside. "You ran away."

She froze, repeating his words in her head, over and over. "It was you," she said, hoping desperately to be wrong, "you were the one they picked for me."

He was silent for a moment. "When I was thirteen, my family and yours agreed to join us. A perfect match. I believed it when they told me you were my mate, and that someday, when you were old enough, we would be joined. You're from the purest feline bloodline, but your family is as proud as they are poor. My family, however, is not. I promised to take you, even made this pendant for you to wear, to show you I'd wait for you."

"No," she shook her head. "I don't believe you. My parents would never have...sold me like that."

"Your parents were joined the same way. Didn't you know?"

She laughed, a sound that sounded too hollow even to her ears. "Never. They loved each other. Doesn't happen when you force two felines together."

"Do you know what my first thought was when I heard you'd left me?" His deep voice was calm, but she detected anger ringing underneath it.

"I don't care," she said. "Nobody ever asked me if I wanted you."

"But I wanted you. A feline virgin, a da Silva, mine for the taking. When you ran away, I wanted to kill you," he said matter-of-factly. "Of course, I'm pretty sure that was only my inner animal thinking."

"I didn't leave you," she said, her heart beating in her throat. "I didn't know you. How could I want someone I haven't even met before?"

"You don't have any issues fucking strangers now."

“Very true. And that’s my own decision. Not one my grandmother makes for me.” She laughed. “Yes, I was a virgin all right when I ran away. Believe me, I lost my virginity pretty fast after I arrived here.” She sucked in her breath as he squeezed her nipple hard, making her crave more of his rough touch. “And just so you know, I enjoyed every second of it.”

“Strange,” he said, his voice hoarse, “you make me angry.” He wrapped his hand around her hair and pulled her head back, exposing her throat. “Maybe I have to kill you after all.” He wrapped his arms around her and pressed into her back. His warm breath brushed the side of her neck and she closed her eyes, fighting against her urge to shift. His cock pressed against her ass as his teeth sank into her neck, nibbling at her skin, not strong enough to draw blood, but enough to make her squirm.

“No,” she said, trying to stand up, but he didn’t let her. “If you don’t move away from me, you’ll regret it.” Instinct told her to whirl around and defend herself.

A deep rumble from his chest vibrated against her back, his laughter confirming her suspicion that he made her uncomfortable on purpose. “You said you’d do what I want, and I want you on your knees for the rest of the night.”

“This game is over.” He wasn’t looking for pleasure; he had the twisted need for revenge.

“Not until I’m finished with you.” He grasped the chain holding the pendant around her neck. “I won’t fuck you while you’re wearing that.”

Her heart stopped when he slipped the chain over her head. The sudden loss of the pendant between her breast sent tears into her eyes, and she blinked to clear her sight. “If you return to Brazil,” he said, “I’ll have to honor that foolish promise I made when I was young. I’m glad your grandmother gave me notice you were about to return to your family. So, I had time to stop you.”

The shock of losing the pendant still raced through her body. If he was able to take it off, the only explanation was that his words were true. Her parents had sold her. Her grandmother tried to do it again. And he bought himself freedom by giving her money

to stay as far away from him as possible. Tears pricked her eyes, but she didn't want to break down in front of him. She had to get away. "Let me go. I want to leave."

"We have a deal."

"I've changed my mind." She closed her eyes, tapping into her power, feeling it like a surge behind her breastbone when he pushed her to the floor, breaking her concentration.

"Much too late for that." He held her down, his cock pressing against her ass. "Besides, you don't want to change your mind." He stroked his thumb over her spine and settled his mouth against her neck, teeth digging into her skin. She gasped, too close was the sensation that she was about to be attacked. Too close was his gesture to a neck bite. A bite to kill.

"I'm stronger than you are," she said, almost believing herself, but she'd never met a male feline shifter before. Not one who wasn't family. The thought alone made her shiver, made her wish desperately that he was someone she could allow herself to indulge in.

"There is not a thing in the world," he said, spreading her legs with his knees, "that would stop me from taking you tonight."

She couldn't move, couldn't even crawl away from under him. She fought, but he was too strong, his body pressing her into the floor while he shoved his pants down. He ground against her ass, making her insane with anger and even more lust. "You smell good," he said, his hard cock slipping between her thighs. "You smell like you want to get fucked real hard." He moved against her, his cock sliding over her wet pussy. She moaned as his hot shaft stroked over her folds. "Say it. Beg."

She wanted him to fuck her while the hardwood floor pressed against her breasts, but she wouldn't beg. He stroked his cock over her clit. She caught her breath, heat rising in her insides. She spread her legs wider as the thick head of his cock pushed against her pussy. Just when she thought he would thrust inside, a hard slap landed on her ass. He'd spanked her with his flat hand. "Beg, Tanesha."

Pain and lust and humiliation seared through her body, so intertwined she couldn't separate her feelings anymore. When he spanked her again, she cried out, her body wound so tight she craved for him to release her, craved for his cock to make her come. "Please," she whispered, swallowing her pride, "fuck me."

She moaned as he slid over her, covering her with the full length of his body, his weight pressing her into the hard floor. "No, I won't," he whispered against her skin. "But I'll have you begging for it for the rest of the night."

A whimper escaped from her mouth. She closed her eyes, realizing that he played with her like a cat with its prey. Fury rose in her in a sharp heat wave. She twisted under him, shifting, welcoming the raw power of her feline body.

She'd rip out his throat.

Chapter Six

He jumped away at the first sign of her shifting under him. He wasn't so stupid as to delude himself that she would *not* go for his throat.

Breathing fast, her golden eyes fixed on his face, the jaguar circled him. She didn't look tame but feral and very, very pissed off. He'd pushed her into shifting. She probably hated his guts now.

Dominating her was maybe not the smartest move, but he couldn't help it. He wanted her total submission. But felines weren't made for submission. Even though she'd throbbed under his hands, and the smell of her arousal alone could almost make him come. He wanted to play with her, fight with her, lick her, fuck her and love her all at once, and then over and over again.

Carefully, he stretched out his hand. His gesture was greeted by a growl and an angry swish of her tail. She paced around him, her gaze never leaving his face. "Come to me," he whispered, knowing she'd understand him, but once shifted, another part of the brain took over, more primal. Situations where the human mind called for caution, the jaguar's instinct only called for action. If her instinct called for his blood that's what she'd go for.

She came closer, closer, closer until he could place his hand on her head and stroke along her back. "You're beautiful," he coaxed, curling his fingers deeper into her silky fur. "You're mine." She circled him, the dark patterns on her golden coat mesmerizing, and then she jumped.

The blow of her attack made him stumble and he found himself flat on his back with her snarling over him. He fought for his breath, amazed at her strength. She'd been so weak before, so frail, as if she didn't know how to summon her powers and her strength into her human body.

He stroked his hands along her sides, hearing her growl with an underlying purr. The purr grew louder as he continued to stroke her, the feel of her under his hands so good, he laughed. "You're mine." He would never let her run away again, but he realized she might not let him have a say in the matter.

Tanesha was beyond terrified. She had every intention to snap him in two. And while one part of her urged her to fight him, another urged her to crouch low at his feet, waiting for him to stroke through her coat. She couldn't detect a single trace of fear from him. How sure was this bastard of himself? Arrogant male.

And then he'd spoke, his beautiful deep voice calling to her. Before she knew it, she'd closed the distance between them and found herself rubbing her head against his thigh. His fingers stroked along her back, and she crouched low, the vibration of a purr running through her belly.

Then he laid under her, defenseless, still no fear in his eyes.

Instead of killing him, she licked his face.

Something in her wanted to die at her display of affection while another wanted to celebrate. A tremor shook her as she battled with herself. In the second she opened her jaw to sink her teeth into his throat, he pushed her off. She tumbled away, sensing the new smell in the air as he shifted.

If she'd been in her human body, she'd have screamed. So, she only jumped backward as the jaguar came toward her on silent paws, green eyes glittering, the coat a deep, deep black, jaws strong enough to snap her neck in one bite. In his feline form, he was as stunning as he was fearsome. She met his green gaze, smelled his male scent, and dashed toward the roof.

She took the first jump without thinking, trying to put as much distance between herself and him. One look into his green eyes and she'd known she'd have to get away. She recognized a lost fight when she saw one.

She landed on the last roof, already seeing her pile of clothes, and started to shift when a powerful blow swiped her off balance. Mid-shift, she crashed against the house

wall, and a scream tore from her throat when she found herself back in her human body. Her weak, completely useless human body. The big cat was on top of her quicker than she had time to defend herself. He growled, a low sound vibrating in the air. She closed her eyes, trying to shift to better defend herself.

"Damn," she cursed, realizing that fear screwed up her concentration. If he still intended to have his revenge and kill her, she couldn't stop him. A tremor started to spread through her entire body, and she ground hard on her teeth, trying to control her nerves, but the fear that he would sink his teeth into her jugular wouldn't go away. She kept her eyes shut as his warm breath skimmed over her body, tickling her neck.

It didn't feel all that bad.

Squinting open one eye, she met his calm green gaze. "Shift back," she whispered, adding a silent *please* to it. She sank her hands into his black coat, her palms turning slick with sweat. Working her fingers through his coat, muscles started moving and stretching under her hands, his body twisting in itself. She watched him shift, forcing herself to observe what non-shifters called a stomach-turning process. But she just recognized their likeness, the beauty of his nature; they were the same. Two of a kind.

Amazed at the speed with which he shifted, she met his dark gaze, void of any trace of animal. Grasping for words, drowning in his stare, she closed her eyes when he lowered his head, and waited for his kiss.

"Caught you," he whispered against her lips.

Her breath hitched when he licked across her throat, and he palmed her breast as if trying to feel her heartbeat. Her nipples hardened under his mouth, the lick of his tongue. Kissing down her stomach, moving between her legs, he licked the inside of her thigh.

"Spread your legs," he said, running his palm down her thighs, forcing her to bare herself to him completely.

Sucking in a breath, she grew tense in anticipation of his next touch.

He flicked his tongue against her clit. She balled her hands, a moan slipping from her mouth. His hard breathing reached her ears, spiking her own lust. He licked over her pussy, thrust his tongue inside her, making her catch her breath. Funneling her fingers through his hair, she writhed on the ground as he gave her pussy lick after lick from the bottom up to her clit.

“Oh fuck,” she whispered, fighting the pleasure he inflicted so easily on her body and mind, but her muscles coiled tight, her orgasm one touch of his probing tongue away. His powerful body moved under her hands, and when he licked her again, she bucked against him, her climax so hard and fast, she screamed. Her breathing still too fast, she was yanked upright.

He pulled her against him. “This was fun.”

“Fun,” she echoed weakly, her legs still trembling, and fear made a rapid comeback. He touched her soul in a way no one ever had. It was like a piece clicked into place, filling a space that’d been empty.

It scared the hell out of her.

“Let me go,” she whispered, “please.” She stepped away from him, thankful that he let her. She slipped hastily into her skirt and threw on her blouse while he watched wordlessly. When she picked up her bag, he moved toward her. She held up her hand. “Don’t stop me.”

“Don’t run away, Tanesha,” he said, his gaze pleading. “We can talk—”

“Not now.” She swallowed, her throat too dry. The sight of him naked, his cock erect against his flat stomach, sent new heat into her body. She bit her lip hard to hold back a moan. If anything, she felt even greater need to have him inside her than before. She heard him whisper her name and her heart cramped. “No.” She shook her head. “It’s too much...”

Everything about him made her seriously unbalanced. As if she were on a ship during a storm and caught off balance by a freak wave. The intense feelings she had for him left her nauseated. She fled down the fire escape and tripped over her feet.

Hanging on with one hand, she crashed against the rusty ladder, tearing her blouse on a nail.

Swallowing a shout of pain, she felt the metal scrape over her shoulder blade. Her grasp around the ladder loosened and she fell to the ground. The impact drove the breath from her lungs. When she straightened, she took a second to thank whatever god was listening that she hadn't broken any bones, and slipped into her shoes then ran to the street to hail a cab.

When one stopped with screeching tires—hailing cabs wearing an unbuttoned blouse and no bra seemed to work well—she hauled herself into the backseat. While she gave the grinning driver directions, she buttoned her blouse. She opened her bag and took out her cell phone. She hit the speed dial, trying to reach Serena. She needed someone to talk to, a friendly ear. Also, she thought, pulling out the bracelet from her bag, she wanted the charm back on her wrist, because no amount of alcohol would quench the feeling that she ran away from the best thing she'd ever come across in her life.

She shook her head. No, she was silly, her hormones talking. He couldn't be her mate. That was utterly and completely ridiculous.

As the driver drove at breakneck speed through the streets of Manhattan, she pondered that even if he was her, *oh God*, mate, she didn't want him. Why would a woman want to have only one man in her life? For forever and ever? She shuddered, realizing that she probably had worse commitment issues than a promiscuous male. She was feline. By nature a loner. She loved her solitude. Worst of all, she could have had him five years ago...

What if she stayed with him only to realize that she wanted more and then some, every day and every week and months and years? She hung her head, drawing in a deep breath. "Stop," she yelled as the driver shot past her address. She threw him a twenty—her last—and jumped out of the cab. With long strides, she stormed toward

the brownstone, looking forward to the peace and quiet in her apartment. And hot milk with lots of cream.

She stopped short. He'd given her a million dollars. She had enough to stay. But she broke the deal by running away from him. He'd given her a perfect orgasm without receiving anything in return. So, technically, the money didn't belong to her. And even if it did, she didn't want it. She gritted her teeth, wondering what was worse—going back and finding out that she could indeed not live without him, or refusing to acknowledge the possibility that he could be her true mate. Right. She'd stick her head into sand and return every cent of his stupid money.

She'd stay in New York. With or without money, she'd find a way to survive. If he didn't want her in Brazil, fine. She jumped up the stairs to her apartment. She punched Serena's name again on her cell. She *needed* that charm fixed. Her call was unanswered, and she snapped her cell shut as she pushed open the door to her apartment.

"Whoa!" She stopped short, staring at the naked couple in front of her, torn between exasperation and amusement. "Hi, Gabriel, Serena," Tanesha said. "Am I interrupting?"

Serena gave a shriek, pushing Gabriel away from her. He'd been kneeling, his head buried between her thighs. Gabriel straightened, not as bothered as Serena but clearly annoyed. "You know where to find me," he said to Serena and waved his hand. Tanesha blinked against the sudden darkness surrounding her, and she stretched out her hand, waiting for him to lift the spell. When her vision returned, she found an agitated Serena sitting fully dressed on her couch, but Gabriel was gone. Serena rose, her cheeks still red, if from Gabriel's attention or from embarrassment at being caught in the act, Tanesha didn't know.

"I'm so sorry, Tanesha. I thought you were on your flight. When things got heated on my date with Gabriel, we couldn't decide where..." She sighed. "You know, we are most powerful in our own homes. Neither he nor I were ready to meet each other in a

place where the other is stronger. So, I thought your place...you know...neutral ground, the power equal..."

Tanesha drew in a deep breath. "Yes, sounds totally reasonable. You both don't trust each other but are quite happy to fuck each other's brains out. Very sensible." Tanesha bit on her lip to keep from laughing. "But on my Italian leather loveseat? I'll never be able to use it again."

Serena's eyes widened, her gaze drawn to the sofa. "Oh, I'm so—"

"I was kidding."

"Oh," Serena said, still looking flustered.

"I'm sorry I interrupted," Tanesha said. "Truly, I am."

"Oh gods, I'm sorry you interrupted too," Serena said, a smile creeping into her face. "The things he could do with his tongue..." She fanned herself.

Gabriel was...well, nice. Anyone paled compared to— *Damn*. She had to get over the notion that there was only one male for her. Tanesha struck out her hand, in her palm the braided bracelet. "Can you fix that for me? I need a pick-me-up."

Serena shook her head as if trying to clear it, making Tanesha guess that she was still occupied with thoughts about Gabriel's skills. "Whatever happened to you?" Serena asked finally. "Why aren't you on your way to Brazil?"

Tanesha folded down on her loveseat, which was still warm from the heat of the two lovebirds. "Long story," Tanesha said, stretching out her wrist, relieved when Serena knotted the bracelet around her wrist whilst chanting under her breath.

"As good as new," Serena said, sitting down next to her on the sofa. "Did you fall down?" Serena touched her shoulder through the torn blouse. "That looks like it hurt."

"It's nothing," Tanesha said, the scratches at her shoulder just a distant throb. She stared at the bracelet, feeling absolutely nothing. "It's not working."

"Impossible," Serena answered, giving her a sharp look.

Tanesha shook her hand, the bracelet snug against her skin. Nothing. Instead, she felt even more miserable and tears stung her eyes. "I need it to work," Tanesha said, a sob caught in her throat. "I need to get over him." A tear rolled down her cheek. Tanesha lifted her hand and caught the drop on her fingertip. "I never cry," she said as a new tear rolled down her face.

"Oh," Serena said. "You're in love."

"I'm not!" Tanesha yelled as more tears rolled down her cheeks.

Cursing, Serena untied the bracelet from her wrist. The moment the string was off her skin, Tanesha stopped crying. "What the heck did you do to me?" she asked, directing her anger toward the witch. "What did you do?"

"What I did?" Serena asked calmly. "I gave you a charmed bracelet to help against homesickness." Serena moved into the kitchen, opened the fridge, and took out Tanesha's last bottle of wine. She opened drawer after drawer. "Where is the bottle opener?" She sighed, and then waved her finger over the bottle. The cork bounced off the ceiling. Serena poured wine into two glasses and carried them back to the sofa. "It's a charm to help you *detach*," Serena said and took a sip. "Good stuff."

"Three hundred a bottle," Tanesha said with a lump in her throat, taking her glass. Getting drunk looked positively inviting. "I *want* detachment. I want it bad."

"No, you don't," Serena answered, "and that's exactly why the charm backfired on you. What you want is *attachment*. Judging from your reaction, you want it bad."

"No, I don't want to be attached to him."

"What the hell happened?"

"You remember the invite?" Tanesha turned toward Serena. "The guy who wanted to see me?" Tanesha asked, and when Serena nodded, she said, "I went to him and —"

"Oh my," Serena whispered and held her hand up, her gaze distant, her brows drawn together. "Someone tall, dark and extremely handsome paces around in front of your house."

Tanesha swallowed, a chill running up her spine. "Don't leave." Emotions rushed over her so fast she had no time to study any of them.

"Who is he?"

My mate. "He's the guy I was supposed to marry five years ago. The guy I ran away from."

"Wow," Serena said with a laugh in her voice. "Talk about bad decisions."

"He gave me a million bucks for one night with him. Well, no, he didn't. He gave me money so I can stay in Manhattan because he hates me. I offered sex and... I don't know what happened, but it's not about sex anymore. He still hates me though." The thought brought tears to her eyes again, much to her dismay.

"You're kidding me," Serena said, her laughter abruptly dying. "I don't want to keep you."

"No, you don't understand," Tanesha said, grasping Serena by the elbow. "What if I fall for him?"

Serena shook her head. "You've already fallen for him," she said. "And honestly, from the vibes I get from him, he's not someone I want to cross when it comes to you."

"You don't want to help me?"

"No, you've to get him on his knees without my help." Serena laughed.

Tanesha squirmed on the sofa. "He isn't the type who gets on his knees."

"Luckily, Gabriel is. And that's where I'm going now."

"You're going to him?" Tanesha said, shocked. "What about the balance of power and whatnot?"

Serena shrugged. "He's worth the risk. Besides, I'm unable to *not* go to him."

"That's your hormones talking," Tanesha said sullenly. "You're just dick whipped." *And maybe that's just what I am too.*

"Might be, but I think there's more between us. And if I don't give it a try, I'll never find out, will I?"

Tanesha closed her eyes, admitting that sexual chemistry was one thing, but he was making her soul sing too. "Ah, get out of here already," Tanesha said, feeling bad for trying to discourage Serena from seeing Gabriel. "I'm sorry, Serena. You're right of course. I'm just completely fucked up."

Serena nodded. "I know. The reason is still outside your house."

"He took my pendant, took it off my chest without a struggle. I miss it so much. And I miss him."

"Then why the hell are you still talking to me? He's the one for you. Don't fight it."

"He hates me."

Serena lifted her eyebrow. "Tanesha, he came after you. What else do you want?"

Tanesha nodded, allowing herself the warm, fuzzy feeling in her stomach. *He's the one. He's mine.* The warm sensation dipped lower, hitting her core. "You wouldn't believe what he can do with a whip," Tanesha said as another burst of heat flickered over her skin. Her nipples tightened at the memory of him flicking leather over her breasts.

Serena shot a look outside the window. "Well, sorry, it doesn't seem like he brought a whip with him," Serena said, smiling. "Really, Tanesha, this is way too much detail."

"Sorry. Good luck with your warlock."

Tanesha closed the door behind Serena, but she didn't lock it. She gave him another five minutes to make up his mind, and then she'd go to him.

She went back to the sofa and sat, taking another sip from the wine. It went down her throat tasting of berries and oak, fruity and sweet yet crisp. It was her favorite taste. She'd gladly forsake it forever if she could taste him instead.

Chapter Seven

Danilo paced up and down the street in front of Tanesha's apartment, his feelings conflicting with his ability to grasp a straight thought. He found himself in a unique situation, and he wasn't quite sure how to handle it.

He'd made a mistake.

After she had once more run away from him, leaving him alone on the roof, he'd returned to his apartment. But even a cold shower hadn't helped. The water running over his skin had reminded him only that it wasn't her touch.

She was the most desirable creature he'd ever laid eyes on. He wanted her now, tomorrow, and for the rest of his life. Whatever she had done in the last five years, he didn't care anymore. She was feline—beautiful, powerful, deadly. His mate. Without her, he'd never feel whole.

Rationally, he acknowledged that it had been an unfair deal for a young woman, a feline, to marry someone without being offered a choice, but he still wanted to rip out the throat of every single male who had ever touched her. He wanted to forgive her for the pain she'd caused him, for the years she had denied them to be together. But he feared his pride stood in the way.

There was a good chance she might never come to return his feelings anyway. The sick feeling in his stomach spread to his chest. His actions hadn't inspired any feelings of love for him in her, he was sure. He couldn't beat his love into her. The whip had been a bad idea, but still he grew hard just thinking about how the leather had kissed her skin, how she had shivered under his touch. How good she had tasted, legs spread wide on the roof.

He opened his senses, detecting her nearby presence as easily as if she stood next to him. The growl came low in his throat, possessive. He might not have her love yet, or

her trust, but he wouldn't let her hide. Not tonight. After all, they had a deal, and he intended to satisfy his desire. Closing his fingers around the pendant in his pocket, he wanted to return it to her to show her his love—if it wasn't for the sliver of anger still burning inside him that held him back.

* * * * *

What's taking him so long? she thought as she heard the door open and then the lock snap shut. She didn't look at him when he stepped into the room, but she could feel her heart beating in her throat.

"I won't let you run away tonight."

"I know," she whispered, keeping her voice even and her face composed, but inside she'd lost her cool. *God, take me now.* The orgasm he'd given her was just a distant memory—if anything, he'd only stoked the fire.

"Wine?" she asked, turning her head to gaze at him. He'd ditched his loose pants in favor of jeans, and despite the chill outside, he only wore a black t-shirt. Her apartment seemed suddenly too small to hold him. She gulped down the contents of her glass and reached for the bottle to top up.

"No wine," he said, stepping closer. "I want only you." He took the glass out of her hands. "And I want you sober." He went into the kitchen and poured the rest of the wine into the sink. "This stuff weakens your senses." When he stepped close to her again, he looked down at her with the most bone-melting smile she'd ever seen in a male. "I want you to feel me with all your senses perfectly working." He drew her close and she pressed readily into him, not having any problem at all sensing his hard body against her own.

"My senses are fine," she mumbled, running her hands over his back, tracing up and down his spine. She flicked her tongue over his neck, tasting his skin. His hands closed around her shoulders. A slight wince escaped her as his fingers traveled over the scratches on her shoulder blade.

He withdrew from her. "Did you hurt yourself?"

The concern in his voice wrapped like velvet around her, soothing her heart. "It's nothing," she said, trying to brush his inquiring fingers away. "I just tripped when I...when I..." *Ran away from you*, she silently completed her sentence.

He gazed at her, a mixture of impatience and anger showing in the depth of his dark eyes, and, she hoped, a flicker of love. He slipped his fingers inside the torn fabric of her blouse and ripped it open wider. He leaned forward, pressing his lips to her bruised skin. "Tanisha," he murmured against her shoulder. "I wish I hadn't scared you away."

The tenderness in his touch turned her breathless. He left her alone while her heart was pounding. When he came back, he held a damp towel in his hand. "Turn around," he said.

She caught his gaze, emotions tumbling through her mind. There was a sadness inside her only he could banish. She wanted him to stay and let her show him her feelings, but words didn't come easy. "I'm sorry," she whispered, not quite sure what she was sorry for. For running away five years ago, maybe. Or for running away today.

"I guess we're both sorry." A dimple creased his cheek, and she suspected he tried to hold back a smile. He cupped her chin and feathered a light kiss on her mouth then gently placed his hands on her shoulders and turned her to face away from him.

He blotted at her shoulder, cleaning away the blood caked to her skin. It was a small wound, and she knew she healed fast, but having him take care of her felt heavenly. "Thanks," she said, turning to face him when he threw the towel to the floor.

"Welcome," he said quietly.

The way he gazed at her made her feel loved, something she wasn't used to. Rising to her toes, she buried her face into his shoulder, breathing in his clean scent, and, harder to detect, a sharp, musky smell. His feline scent aroused her to no end. Placing her hands flat on his chest, she brushed her mouth against his, smiling when his heart beat faster against her palm.

He aroused her body, turned her maddening liquid with need, but she wanted more. Wanted all of him, forever. She didn't regret how she'd lived the last five years. In many ways it had been the best time of her life. Only now did she realize what she had given up, what she'd thought she didn't want. Him. She leaned her head against his chest. "If it were possible," she said, his heart a steady rhythm against her forehead, "I would turn back the time."

"But we can't," he said, lacing his fingers through her hair, tipping her head up. His eyes glittered dark, and she wasn't sure if he would kiss or leave her. A delicate tipping point and the breath caught in her throat.

His mouth caught hers in a hard kiss, pushing her lips open to thrust his tongue inside. She answered in kind, exploring his mouth, hot desire spreading through her veins. "I want you," she whispered, gently nipping into his lower lip. "I want your tongue between my legs."

He groaned, and she was sure he would sink in front of her and obey her wishes when he pushed her away from him. "Tonight, you'll do what I want," he said, and pulled his shirt over his head.

"But what do you want?" she asked, too quietly for him to hear, the ache in her pussy so strong she wanted to touch herself and make herself come while looking at the perfection of his broad chest and flat abs, his upper body long and lean muscled. Her gaze dipped lower to the bulge in his jeans. This she wanted too.

He prowled around her apartment with a look on his face as if he didn't like what he saw. "Is that why you agreed to our deal in the first place?" he asked, lifting an antique vase from the side table. "You don't want to lose your overheated, overstuffed, overpriced apartment?"

"It's my home," she said, because it was the truth. "Would you be so kind and gently set the vase down—"

"I don't like it." He dropped the vase. It broke with a hollow and horribly final sound on her hardwood floors.

"Are you out of your fucking mind?" she yelled. "That vase cost me a small fortune—"

"And you got that money because you fucked someone who wasn't me," he said calmly, and she held her breath as he wandered off into her kitchen.

Oh. My. God. He's jealous. She couldn't believe it. "I didn't know you," she said, trying to sound soothing, "please don't touch the—" She closed her eyes when he swiped her china out of a cupboard. How the hell had he known how freaking expensive the delicate china had been? She'd probably never forget the sound the porcelain made when it hit the kitchen tiles. But as long as he didn't walk out of her life again, she'd be more than happy to put up with his rage.

"By all means," she said, hiding her smile behind her hand, "if it makes you feel better, destroy my possessions."

He turned toward her bedroom, and she followed him. She found him staring at her bed, and knew just what he thought. "Never here," she said quickly before he could throw the bed out her window. "I've never had sex in this bed." It was true, although she'd have lied if need be. She loved her cast iron bed. She'd found it at an antique market, a bargain.

He turned, his eyes narrowed. "Never?"

She smiled at him, deliberately licking her lower lip, knowing it would distract him. "No," she said, "except with myself."

His gaze lowered to her mouth. "Strip."

Strip?

That I can do. While his gaze never left her face, Tanesha opened her blouse, button for button. The silk fluttered with a sigh to the floor. She undid the buttons holding her skirt and let it pool around her ankles. "My panties are still on the roof. Did you by chance find them?" In her hurry to get away from him, she hadn't bothered with underwear.

He shook his head, his gaze sliding over her as if seeing her for the first time. "You're beautiful," he said, his voice thick with lust, and when she looked into his eyes, they had gone dark. "Touch yourself." He switched on the lamp on the bedside table. Soft light lit up the room. He ripped off the dark red cover of her bed. Underneath, smooth and cool sheets waited.

"Silk sheets," he said, a smile playing around his lips. "You're one spoiled cat."

She smiled. "And if you stroke me, I'll purr in your ear and let you lick my cream." She crawled onto her bed on her knees, giving him a view of her ass in the air. If he could not sense how hot she was for him, maybe the sight of her ass would make it clearer. She leaned back into her cool sheets and closed her eyes. She moaned as her fingers found her wetness, her swollen clit responding eagerly to the attention.

"Spread your legs wider," he said, his voice low. "And open your eyes. I want you to look at me."

He stood at the end of the bed, his gaze glued to her fingers. She circled her clit slowly, drawing her pleasure out. "Fuck me," she whispered, spreading her legs wide, an invitation to join her. "I want more than my fingers inside me."

"Slide your fingers inside you," he said, watching her face, and when she lowered her gaze, she saw his erection pressing against his jeans. She wanted that big cock inside her mouth, to tease him with her tongue. She wanted to hear his groans, wanted to make him as desperate for her as she was for him. She slid two fingers inside herself, drawing her legs closer to her body, intensifying the angle. When she heard a ripping sound, her eyes fluttered open. He had ripped her sheets apart.

"What—" She shut her mouth when he took her by the ankle and wrapped a strip of silk around it. He tied her leg to the iron footboard.

"I do love this bed," he said as he took her other leg.

She kicked at him, but only halfheartedly. Silk couldn't hold her down on the bed. When he was done, she gave her legs a tug, testing the strength of his knots. She gasped as the silk dug deeper into her skin. Somehow he had it wrapped around her ankles in a

way that when she tugged, the silk wrapped tighter. She yanked harder but it only made her bed shake. Evidently, she'd underestimated his skills. The silk around her ankles held her as securely as if he'd used strong rope. Her jaw set.

"I won't run away," she said. "No need to tie me down."

"Yes, I just made sure you won't," he said, smiling. "And feel free to shift. Only this time, I won't let you get away. Once shifted, I'm not very playful. At least I won't be tonight."

She shivered. True, she only needed to shift to free herself. She had no doubt that if they met again in their feline forms they would go straight to the point. Then it hit her. She'd never had sex in her feline form. She groaned, realizing he would get her as a virgin after all.

"But you did let me go," she said quietly. "Why didn't you stop me on the roof?"

"Because you looked so afraid," he said, his gaze flying over her body on display for him on the bed. "I smelled your fear and saw it in your eyes." He glanced up at her face. "I knew where to find you, so it was only temporary."

"You freaked me out," she said. "I'm not used to male feline shifters and you were so much of...everything."

"You've never met another feline before?"

She shook her head. "I haven't shifted in the last five years until you came along. I'm not exactly in touch with my inner jaguar."

"You know," he said, closing his hands around her wrists, pinning her down on the bed, "that I will have you that way too. I want you in every way, all of you."

She nodded, drowning in his both tender and heated gaze. "And I'll fight you tooth and nail before I'll lift my virgin cat's pussy for your pleasure."

He closed his eyes, groaning deeply, brushing his hand through his hair as if battling inner demons. "Any chance I could convince you to shift right now?"

Wrists free of his hold, she wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him, her tongue darting in his mouth, exploring. "So, you've got a weakness for me." She pulled him down to her on the bed. "Are you mine for as long as I want you?" When she tried to wrap her legs around him, the silk biting into her ankles reminded her that he had tied her up.

"I'm as much yours as you are wet for me." He stroked slowly over her folds. "So wet," he murmured, moving down along her body, his teeth trailing over her skin, brushing her nipples. "You taste so good." He moved his hands under her ass and lifted her to his face. The first lick he gave was slow. Slow strokes that sent her almost over the edge, and she cried out. The tip of his tongue traced over her tight ass and then dipped into her pussy before he flicked his tongue against her clit. She rocked her hips against him, sinking her hands into his hair. "Stronger," she said, wishing he would sink his tongue inside her or his finger or his cock. She needed him inside her now.

When he got up from the bed, she groaned with frustration. She stroked herself, her fingers sliding in and out of her pussy.

He laughed, catching her by the wrist. "Hold still."

"Like hell I will." She fought, but with her legs tied down, she couldn't stop him, and she found herself with her arms tied back to the headboard.

"If you knew what an impossible turn-on you are when you fight me, you wouldn't do it." He smiled, his eyes flashing green for a second. "I could get off just looking at you."

My jaguar mate. If she turned him on, he returned the favor hundredfold. Her pussy throbbed with need. She couldn't wait for his hands to explore her body. "I want you to fuck me," she said, watching how he shrugged out of his jeans. She licked her lips when his erection sprang free of the confinement. She writhed on the bed, her pussy clenching in anticipation. He was glorious naked. Tall and lean, broad shoulders and narrow hips.

“Lick your lips,” he said, stroking himself until drops of liquid glistened at the head of his cock. “I want to know how your mouth feels around my cock.” He came back to the bed and straddled her waist. “Open your mouth.”

“Make me,” she whispered, her heart beating faster as he leaned forward to brush his cock against her closed lips.

He moved lower, his mouth closing around her breast. He sucked at her nipple while his hand kneaded her other breast. This was what she wanted. His lips around her nipples, sucking hard at her until she felt it in her pussy. She moaned, licking her lips. When he pinched her nipple, a shot of lust mixed with pain seared through her body, and she opened her mouth in surprise.

He moved forward and pushed deep inside her mouth. He was hard and hot and she almost fainted with the pleasure of having him inside her mouth. She sucked at his cock, teasing him with her tongue, his groans increasing her own lust. He moved against her, gliding slowly in and out, his hands wrapped tightly in her hair. She wanted to feel him come and taste him.

When he retreated, she gave a soft cry of protest.

He moved down, covering her with his hard, muscled body, pressing against her breasts. She arched to bring herself closer to him. He kissed her, long and deep, his tongue exploring her thoroughly before his lips moved away from her mouth. He closed one hand around her breast and found the other with his mouth. He licked her nipple before he sucked it into his mouth. “Please,” she gasped, waves of pleasure rolling through her body. She was wound so tight, she could come with him sucking at her breasts alone.

Her breath grew ragged as his hand moved between her legs. “Please, I need your cock inside me,” she whispered, feeling his fingers dipping inside her. She was so wet she hardly felt any friction as two of his fingers slid inside her.

“Do you like that?” he asked, his finger giving her slow strokes, too slow for her to come, but fast enough to make her quiver with lust.

"I need more," she said, rocking her hips against him. He smoothed her wetness over her folds and then dipped lower. Her eyes widened as he slowly pushed his finger inside her tight ass. "Maybe I don't care what you want because I want to fuck your pretty ass. Would you like that?"

She gasped as he pushed his finger deeper into her tight hole.

"Do you like that?" he repeated, pumping his finger in and out of her ass in slow, deliberate strokes that made her forget about the ache in her pussy.

She bit her lower lip, the sensation he created in her body alien but good. "If I don't, would you stop?" She couldn't even imagine how it would feel to have his cock buried up her ass, but the mere thought of having him inside made her want it.

"Tanesha," he said, rolling her name over his tongue. "I'll fuck you whichever way I want to. You're tied to the bed."

"You don't own me." The second she said it, she knew she'd challenged him. She would forever challenge his dominance. He *knew* that she would. Never would there be an easy surrender. Hopefully, there would be infinite fights. "You only bought me for the night," she said, seeing his eyes narrow. So, she thought, not so happy about that anymore, are we? Time to make him sweat a little.

"Tanesha, I—"

"Don't worry," she said, interrupting him. "Come tomorrow morning, I'll happily skip out of your life. One million will keep me warm at night."

"This is not what I want, I—"

She held up her hand, silencing him. She gazed into his eyes, her feelings for him doing somersaults in her stomach. "I'm not ready for that kind of talk."

"Tell me you feel it too," he said, leaning his forehead against hers, closing his eyes. "Just the smell of your skin drives me mad. I love—"

"That's it," she said, smiling. "One more word and I'll shift and run so fast you'll never find me again."

He laughed as he got up from the bed. When he returned, he held the pendant in his hands. She held her breath as he slipped the chain over her head and settled the pendant between her breasts. "This is yours. Always has been, always will be."

"I've always loved it," she whispered, closing her hands around the carved black jaguar, her heart singing to feel it against her skin. "You've been always with me. I just didn't know it."

He knelt between her legs. "If you run away, I'll forever find you again. There's nothing that I don't love about you." He licked over her stomach and kissed his way down. His tongue trailed through her curls between her legs, his hands moving under her ass, kneading her. "And you'll always submit to me," he said. "I'll accept nothing less." He plunged his tongue inside her and she balled her hands, pushing herself stronger against him. "But you'll always come first."

He pushed two fingers inside her, giving her hard licks against her clit. She screamed out as he fucked her faster with his fingers, his mouth sucking on her clit. Her orgasm exploded in sharp contractions, white light exploding behind her eyes as wave after wave of rolling heat vibrated from her pussy through her entire body.

She hardly noticed that his tongue left her, but she inhaled sharply as the broad head of his cock pushed against her pussy. "You're so tight and hot," he said, his forehead drawn in concentration. She felt how his thick girth widened her, filled her up. She wanted every inch of him inside her.

"Slow and gentle," he asked, "or fast and hard?"

"I want it hard," she whispered up at him. "Fuck me hard."

"Slow it is then," he said, easing himself into her ever so gently.

"Faster," she breathed. She tugged against her restraints, her need to wrap around him too strong. "Untie me please. I want to touch you."

"Nothing can hold you," he whispered into her ear. "You don't need to shift to be strong." He leaned into her, kissing her neck before he bit into her shoulder muscle, making her cry out.

She closed her eyes, flexing her muscles. She tugged again at her restraints, getting angrier that he wouldn't let her free.

"Tanisha," he said, pinching her nipple so hard tears shot into her eyes. "You can do it."

Anger seared through her so hot, she bowed away from the bed, and a snarl shot from her mouth. Silk ripped with a harsh sound, and after a heart-stopping moment, she realized she'd done it. She'd ripped the silk apart. She'd tapped into her feline powers, could still feel them coursing through her blood, heightening her senses. She could smell his musky scent, hear his blood rush underneath his skin, their heartbeats beating as one. "This feels so good," she whispered, the surge of her feline power running through her in waves of heat. A growl escaped her mouth as she met his green gaze.

"Come on, fight me," he said, sliding on top of her. He closed his hands over her wrists, pinning her to the bed. She wrapped her legs around him, arching her hips to take him inside her, and fought his hold on her wrists with all her newfound strength. She gave a cry of triumph when she broke free of him.

He laughed, a rough sound that made her shiver. "My beautiful jaguar mate," he said, took her into his arms and flipped her over. She fought to turn around, but he pressed her deeper into the mattress with one hand while he fingered her ass from behind with his other. "Lift your ass for me."

She moaned as he gave her a slap on her ass. "Do it again," she whispered, and lifted her bottom. Another slap landed on her buttocks before he wrapped his hands around her hips and pulled her into him.

"You're mine," he said, his voice hoarse, and pushed his cock deep into her pussy.

He pulled out slightly, and she moaned when he slipped his thumb into her ass, the feeling of his cock and finger inside her increasing her need. He fucked her in slow strokes, his thumb thrusting in and out of her ass. He claimed her body so completely, the pleasure from him inside her so intense, she cried out.

"I want you to scream when you come." He slapped her ass, a sharp sting running over her skin, taking her breath away. Thrust after hard thrust, he pushed her closer to the edge.

"Do it harder." She pushed against him, urging on his movement.

He growled, pumping into her faster, one hand clamped on her breast, twisting her nipple. When he pulled out to spank her ass again, she screamed as a sharp wave rocked her body, and when he drove deep into her again, her orgasm jolted through her so sudden and intense, she went limp under his hands, giving herself up to him completely. He shuddered behind her, slamming harder into her, pulling her hips against his groin.

She screamed out as her pussy clenched around his cock, another orgasm shaking her body. His shout sounded like a roar in her ears as he pushed deep into her pussy, his cock pulsing in hot bursts.

"I'll never get enough of you," he whispered. When he slipped out of her, he took her into his arms, and she came to rest with her bottom cradling his cock. He brushed her hair away from her face and turned her head. He kissed her, tenderly, and she wondered how he could be both so gentle and hard with her and why she loved both equally.

"You're worth the million," he said, his breath against her neck. "But I'm afraid I can't afford to pay you each time I want to get between your legs." His voice was light, and she snuggled deeper into his arms.

"Or use a whip on me," she said, closing her eyes, the feeling of being held by him so comfortable and *right*. She wanted to do nothing more than stay in bed with him. "I'll never run away from you again," she said, turning around and facing him. She closed her hands around his face. "I can't believe it took you so long to find me."

"I'll never let you out of my sight again." He grasped her around her hips, pinching her ass playfully.

She bit her lip. "Where will we live? You don't—"

“Tanesha,” he said. “I’ll stay with you wherever you want to be. I’ll do whatever you want, except in bed. In bed you’ll do whatever I want.”

She laughed. “You can certainly try.”

“I will, don’t you worry,” he growled, burying his face in the nape of her neck. “My stray cat.”

She couldn’t wait to see the faces of her family when she returned with him at her side, couldn’t wait to celebrate. She wasn’t looking forward to meeting her grandmother, listening to her scolding, but that was a small price to pay. “I’d like to return to Brazil.”

“I’d love to do that,” he said, tickling her, which made her smile.

She realized that she’d arrived in New York with nothing but her pride, but that she left the city with him and love in her heart. She turned in his arms, and when he kissed her, she thought about what he’d said to her—always, he would make her come first. And this was something she could accept for the rest of her life.

About the Author

Amy Redwood lives in Vancouver, Canada. This wasn't always the case. She grew up in Europe, moved to New Zealand and then explored China before settling down on the west coast of Canada. She likes nothing better than dark chocolate, autumn rain and curling up on the couch reading a great story. But what she loves is writing about smart heroines and sexy heroes enjoying hot nights, hotter days and a happily ever after. After all, nothing beats a happy end.

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