

# SERENGETI STORM



VIVI ANDREWS

SANDHAIN productions, Ltd.

The bitch is back, and nothing gets in her way. Except her own heart...

*Serengeti Shifters, Book 2*

Shana Delray is hissing mad. The pride's Alpha has chosen a mate—and it's not her. Bred to be his consort, she's not going to let some runt of the litter take her destined place—no matter how much ass she has to kick in the process.

Her way back into the pride is Caleb Minor—her former lover, the Alpha's loyal enforcer...and the runt's brother. And if she has to go through Caleb to get what she wants, so be it. She'll do whatever it takes to pry the little usurper out of her way.

Caleb's familiarity with Shana's manipulative ways serves him well when he's assigned to keep the seething she-cat in line. A nearly impossible task, as he's forced to use his body—in more ways than one—to save her from herself. Now if only he can save his battered heart from the explosive desire that isn't as dormant as he'd thought.

Caleb's stronger now. Tougher and harder. And, to Shana's fury, he won't be used. The harder she pushes, the more she finds her heart yielding...and suddenly she wonders if she can somehow win back the man she spent a decade trying to destroy...

Warning: This book contains manipulations and power plays (in and out of the bedroom), a naughty kitten who deserves a good spanking, and a second chance at that first love.

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Samhain Publishing, Ltd.  
577 Mulberry Street, Suite 1520  
Macon GA 31201

Serengeti Storm  
Copyright © 2010 by Vivi Andrews  
ISBN: 978-1-60504-875-8  
Edited by Laurie M. Rauch  
Cover by Natalie Winters

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First Samhain Publishing, Ltd. electronic publication: January 2010  
[www.samhainpublishing.com](http://www.samhainpublishing.com)

# Serengeti Storm

*Vivi Andrews*

## Dedication

A writer's life can be isolating. Most of our time is spent alone in front of a computer with only our imaginary friends for company. It's invaluable to have people in the trenches with you, sharing the highs and lows. So I'd like to dedicate this little story to my writing buddies, Kaye Chambers and Kelly Fitzpatrick, who work tirelessly to keep me (somewhat) sane. Thank you, ladies. You're priceless.

# Chapter One

The jeep's engine coughed and sputtered as the wheels locked in place on the rutted dirt road.

Shana Delray swore and stomped on the gas. When the engine screamed in protest, she slammed the clutch to the floor in a last-ditch attempt to keep the damn thing running. The abused jeep just gave one last bone-jarring hack and died.

"Fuck."

She cranked the key, but got no response other than a pathetic whinny and a puff of smoke from the direction of the engine block.

"Double fuck."

So much for her majestic return to the ranch.

Shana breathed warm air onto her freezing hands and glared out the window. The winter night stretched cold and dark around her. Clouds heavy with the threat of snow hung low, almost completely concealing the moon and throwing eerie shadows across the plain.

Shana had never been afraid of things that go bump in the night. Hell, she *was* one of the things that went bump, a born predator, a lioness shape-shifter. But that didn't make the prospect of walking the two-plus miles to the ranch compound any more appealing. Especially not lugging her bags and her wounded pride.

She kicked the door open and stepped into the night, shivering even though it was barely a degree colder outside than it had been in the jeep. The heater hadn't worked for days.

The jeep she'd *borrowed* seven months ago had survived a desert, a flood, and LA traffic, only to die within miles of home. The radio had met its maker at the county line, dying with a pathetic moan immediately after a report on the Blizzard of the Century about to hit west Texas. Throw in the flat tire she'd gotten a hundred miles back and it looked like the Almighty was bitching at her from on high.

If she believed in signs, she might take it as an omen that her current plan was ill-advised and reverse course.

Shana gritted her teeth. The signs could go suck it. She was here for revenge and she wasn't leaving until she got what was coming to her.

Flipping down the tailgate, she dug into her bags, shuffling things around. She'd take the essentials now and send someone back for the rest. There was no way in hell she was gonna show up carting all her possessions on her back like some damned beggar girl.

The icy wind shifted direction, swirling around her and teasing her nose with the familiar scents of the ranch. Earth and hay and that subtle, sexy musk of male lion... That scent...

Shana spun to face the wind, crouching defensively and snarling as she scanned the horizon. Her heart drummed wildly as a dark figure slowly straightened out of the tall grass along the side of the drive, no longer bothering to hide now that she'd scented him.

"Caleb."

She'd meant his name to sound like a biting epithet, but it caught in her throat, emerging on a hoarse whisper instead.

Why did it have to be him patrolling the land tonight?

Her memory had betrayed her. He looked even more edible than she remembered. Dammit.

Caleb Minor stalked toward her through the grass with a deliberate, feline grace belied by his extreme size. He was massive. Six-and-a-half feet tall with broad, heavily muscled shoulders. He could have easily looked like a gorilla, but the rest of his big body balanced the impressive strength so obviously on display in those shoulders. He was built like a Mack truck, but a very sexy, proportional Mack truck.

In spite of the cold of the night, he wore only a paper-thin, long-sleeved shirt that hugged the contours of his chest and a pair of khaki drawstring pants. The clothing was designed to be quickly discarded should he need to shift and fight. Shana dragged her thoughts away from other reasons he might need to get naked.

His hair was shaggier than when she'd last seen him, but still as dark and thick as a mane. It looked black in the night, but she knew when the sun hit it, or when he shifted into his lion form, streaks of red and brown would thread through the black, drawing the eye and making her fingers itch to bury themselves there.

He stopped in front of her, too close for human comfort, but still oddly distant for lions who traded touch so casually. She'd straightened slowly from her partial crouch as he approached and now met his gaze with a mocking arch of one eyebrow.

"Well, if it isn't little Shana. Back to cause more trouble, princess?"

Since that was *exactly* what she was back to do, Shana ignored the question as rhetorical. "Well, if it isn't big-assed Caleb. Still the Alpha's loyal lapdog?"

He bared his teeth on a hiss—no lion tolerated being called a dog. "At least I didn't run off in a pout because things didn't go my way."

Shana bared her own teeth. "I do *not* pout, Fido. And you have no idea why I left."

He snorted. "Oh, I have a pretty good idea. My baby sister married the man you were trying to wrestle to the altar and you ran off to lick your wounds. Stop me any time this starts to sound familiar."

"Marriage." She spat the word. "Such a ridiculously human word. Is your pint-sized sister too squeamish to claim Landon as her *mate*?"

Caleb folded his thick arms across his chest. "Actually, it was his idea. The Alpha's trying to humanize us. Didn't you hear his plan? Oh, no, that's right. You were too busy running away."

The look he shot her was icy with condescension. Scathing and contemptuous.

No man looked at her like that. Shana was a *goddess*. She was what all men desired but could never deserve, not some pathetic creature to be pitied.

She refused to explain herself to him. Goddesses did not explain.

“Get my bags, Alpo. It’s cold. I don’t want to spend all night listening to you embarrass yourself with your ludicrous theories.”

“You think I give a shit what you want?”

She ground her molars. Men did not swear at goddesses. Even rough-edged men like Caleb Minor. It was time to remind him that she was not a creature to be pitied. She wasn’t that lost little girl anymore, begging him to save her.

Hell, she could use that reminder herself.

Shana drew herself up to her full height. She would have towered over an average female, and most men, but she still had to tip her head back to meet Caleb’s chilling gaze. She tossed her long, flame-red hair and arched her back, thrusting out her breasts and seeing his gaze flicker down for just a fraction of a second before locking again on her eyes. Caleb was all about discipline, but he was far from immune to her. She wet her lips and lowered her lashes, searing him with a sultry, melting look.

“You used to care what I wanted,” she reminded him throatily, drenching the words in sex. “You used to beg to be allowed to please me.” She traced one finger over the tightly flexed muscle of his forearm. “Don’t you remember how good I can make it, lover?”

“You’re a praying mantis,” he growled. “I don’t have that suicidal urge anymore.”

She stroked down his stomach to brush her fingers across the rock-hard ridge growing beneath those drawstring pants. He may not be suicidal, but he definitely had the urge. “Oh, honey...” she purred, “...you know I’m always very careful with my teeth. I would never bite the head off.”

His fingers closed vise-tight around her wrist, jerking it away before she could press against his erection like she wanted. “Still the slut, I see.”

Shana flinched in spite of herself. Why did it always hurt when he said it? It was just a word. She’d been called worse and the words just bounced off, but that word, in Caleb’s gravel-deep voice, and she wanted to run to her Momma and cry like a baby. As if her Momma wouldn’t say exactly the same thing. And worse.

But she was going to change that. Claim her rightful place. The place of respect she deserved. Prove to her mother and Caleb and all of them that she was more than the camp slut.

“Still an asshole, I see,” she mimicked acidly, jerking her wrist out of his hold, or trying to. For a heartbeat, Caleb held on, his strong fingers tightening fractionally around the fine bones of her wrist, as if to prove he didn’t have to let her go if he didn’t feel like it.

An unexpected jolt of heat shot down to pool at the base of her spine. She wanted to squirm with it, wallow in his possession and his strength, but she held herself regally still. It had been a long time since



she'd been in the presence of a man she couldn't physically best—ever since she'd walked away from the ranch seven months ago, in fact—and she'd forgotten how much she loved the challenge of it.

As if he sensed her mounting excitement—the bastard could probably *smell* it—Caleb released her suddenly. He leaned away from her to put more distance between them and rubbed his hand on his pants as if she'd left her cooties on him.

In spite of his all-too-apparent disgust, his voice was still a little rougher than normal when he growled, “What are you doing here? Crawling home with your tail between your legs?”

Shana's lip curled in a silent snarl. Goddesses didn't crawl. “You'd like that, wouldn't you?” She let her nails shift into claws and stroked over his arm with the vicious tips. “You'd just love to see me on my knees, wouldn't you, Cale?”

“I'd love to see your ass...” he drawled, “...walking away from this ranch, never to return.”

“Aw, honey, you don't mean that,” she purred. “You'd miss this ass too much.”

She patted the body part in question and his eyes tracked the movement of her hand hungrily. Oh, yeah, Caleb Minor would miss her, all right.

“Tell me what I can do to get you to leave.”

Shana planted a hand on her hip and pushed her face into an exaggerated pout. “All this talk of leaving is going to hurt my poor wittle feelings, sugarbear.”

“You don't have feelings.”

The pout morphed into a feline smile. “You make an excellent point. But if I had feelings, I'm sure they'd be very hurt right now. I'd be poor, wounded Shana. Would you take care of me then? Protect me like the big, strong man you are? Or is your docket for damsels in distress all filled up at the moment?”

She reached to run her claws across his stomach again and he slapped her hand away. Shana didn't bother to pretend the smack had hurt. He wouldn't have been fooled. Maybe that was why Caleb had always been her favorite of all the asshole bullies in the pride. He'd never been fooled by her.

Or, more accurately, she'd only been able to fool him once. And that had been years ago, when they'd both been little more than cubs and too naïve to know better.

“Is some other hot teenage kitten sneaking into your bedroom every night?” she asked, calling up the memory of the time when she'd had him wound so tight around her little finger he'd nearly cut off the circulation.

He stiffened, his big muscles tensing deliciously before her eyes. Oh, yeah, he remembered. And the memory was apparently just as unpleasant for him as it was for her. Shana hoped it burned like a bitch.

“After you fuck her senseless, do you whisper how you'll do *anything* for her? How you *love* her and will protect her from the big, bad world?” Shana fought to keep the bitterness out of her voice. Cynicism was allowed. Cynicism was a barrier. Bitterness revealed pain and pain was a weakness.

Weakness was an anathema in the pride. Or at least it had been, before the dumbass Alpha had passed up his chance to make Shana his queen and taken Caleb's weakling sister, Ava, instead.

As she recalled why she'd come here—to take what she deserved back from puny Ava—anger and purpose washed away the insidious traces of bitterness and hurt. The anger was clean, powerful. She smiled viciously. “Or can you even get it up anymore? Did your master have his favorite dog neutered?”

He growled at her and Shana laughed. Men were so pathetically predictable. Attack their virility and all they want to do is snarl and bang their chests to prove their masculinity.

“I'm only going to ask you one more time. Tell me what to do to get you to leave quietly.”

Shana pursed her lips and cocked her head. “That wasn't asking. That was demanding.” She stepped forward until her front brushed his. “Lucky for you, I like demanding men,” she purred. “Unlucky for you, I'm not going anywhere.”

When he didn't immediately shove her away, Shana crowded closer, inhaling deeply. Goddess, he smelled fantastic. She wanted to wallow in his scent. Did all lions smell this amazing? Had she just been away from her kind for too long? Or was it him?

She leaned in, rubbing her body against his. It was a platonic gesture among the pride, the casual touching, cuddling and petting, but Shana's nipples were hard enough to cut glass and she was close enough to feel that Caleb's reaction to them pressing against his chest through two layers of cloth was far from platonic. *Hello, lover.*

“You're freezing,” he growled, grabbing her by her upper arms and setting her away from him.

Shana was tempted to retort that she hadn't been freezing until he shoved her away. She'd completely forgotten about the cold, the impending blizzard. The world had narrowed down until it was just her and Caleb and heat. But admitting that would have been a confession too big to survive. So instead, she snapped at him.

“Yeah, well, some asshole is making me stand out here in the middle of a fucking blizzard when I could be at home in my nice, warm bungalow.”

Fat snowflakes had begun to drift lazily down from the sky and she hadn't even noticed, though now she could see them melting on Caleb's cheeks as he glowered at her. Shana tipped her head back and stared at the sky, amazed in spite of herself by the display nature was putting on. It so rarely snowed here. She'd always thought snow cold and wet and irritating, but now it fell so softly around her, it seemed the world itself was floating and she was floating with it.

“You don't have a bungalow anymore.”

“Excuse me?” The floating sensation evaporated from one heartbeat to the next. Her gaze snapped down from the falling snow to land hard on Caleb. “What do you mean I don't have a bungalow? I will *always* have a bungalow. This is my pride.”

Caleb shrugged carelessly. “You left.”

Asshole. He was enjoying this. “If your pipsqueak sister has taken over my bungalow, I’m going to enjoy kicking her ass out of it.”

He shook his head as if her mental faculties were disappointingly slow. “Ava lives with Landon now, Shay. That’s what marriage means.”

“Then who is in my fucking bungalow?”

At that moment, she almost wished he would say *he* had taken over her home, though she didn’t care to examine why that thought was so appealing.

He shrugged again. “I don’t know. Somebody. It’s a nice place and it was empty. You know how things are in the pride.”

Shana ground her teeth. She knew. Oh, did she ever know.

Possessions were community property in the pride. If you wanted something to be yours and yours alone, you had to be strong enough to keep it, fighting off all comers. Clothing, bungalows, mates—the best of everything went to the strong. At least, that’s how it used to be.

“I thought your precious Landon was going to change our barbaric ways.”

Caleb shrugged again. Goddess, how she hated that shrug. His fucking nonchalance. As if every shift of his shoulders was more proof that he didn’t give a shit about her and never had. “We are what we are. Change is slow.”

“So some asshole just *usurped* my bungalow?” Her shock was feigned, but her outrage was real. She’d had one of the nicest places on the ranch compound before she left, totally decked out, complete with a fireplace and a Jacuzzi in the bathroom. And she’d had to kick her fair share of asses to get it.

She’d known she was leaving it undefended when she’d stolen, or rather *borrowed*, the jeep and driven off the ranch. But, at the time, she hadn’t planned on ever coming back.

Still, just because she’d walked away without a backward glance and hadn’t been home for seven months didn’t mean she was okay with someone else sleeping in her bed.

“You actually intend to stay?” Caleb asked.

“I have unfinished business.”

And she’d been so lonely outside the pride; she’d discovered that homesickness could actually make you physically ill.

This was her *home*. She wasn’t about to let some undersized bitch and the undersized bitch’s demented Alpha lover run her off.

Caleb must have seen her resolve in her expression. He sighed heavily, the poor put-upon Hercules, and turned to walk toward the ranch. “Come on,” he called over his shoulder, not even glancing at the bags piled into the back of the jeep.

She grabbed the knapsack she’d packed with the absolute essentials and moved quickly in front of him, putting an extra little twitch in her walk just for his viewing pleasure. As she strutted toward the only

place that had ever been home with the only man who had ever tied her up in knots marching along behind her, she thought she heard him mutter something under his breath, but she must have been mistaken. It had sounded a lot like, “Today’s as good a day as any to commit suicide.”

## Chapter Two

Caleb had told her he wasn't suicidal, but there was no other explanation for what he was doing.

Shana was back. And he was taking her toward the ranch. Where she would be staying. Indefinitely.

He groaned aloud at the thought.

She looked like hell, but Shana looking like hell was still Shana—still hot enough to have him half-hard from the second he'd scented her in the night.

Caleb shot off a quick prayer of thanks to whatever unnamed gods were listening that he'd been patrolling in human form. Facing her for the first time in seven months stark naked after a shift was not an experience he ever wanted to have.

She sashayed along the rutted drive leading to the ranch's main compound, swinging her tight little ass. Her long red hair was loose, the ends flicking around her hips like tongues of flame. Most lionesses were blonde, their hair perfectly matching the color of their pelts, but Shana had to be different in every way. She stood out like a fire in the desert, unique and untamable. And dangerous as all hell.

The memory of those flame-red tresses tangling around him as they slept rose up in his mind, but he shook it away.

She was a viper. No matter how lush her body was. No matter how intoxicating her scent or how wicked the things she could do with her tongue.

Caleb barely bit back another groan. If only memories were as easy to fight as enemies.

She never once glanced back at him as they walked, but he knew she was aware of him. Unfortunately, the feeling was mutual. He'd always been hyperaware of her. His body had never cared that she'd become a soulless, manipulative bitch.

The entrance to the ranch's residential compound rose in front of them. There was nothing ostentatious or distinctive about the low, open gate bordered by a cattle guard. Nothing to indicate there was anything extraordinary about the group of families who lived and worked at this particular ranch.

None of the nearby landowners or businessmen in the small town twenty miles down the road had any idea the residents of the Three Rocks Ranch could take the shape of menacing predators. Through the constant vigilance of the pride and with the help of a few technological gadgets Caleb didn't pretend to understand, no one in their little corner of Texas had any idea fifty lion shape-shifters lived among them.

*Fifty-one.*

As Shana swung her ass through the gate, she turned her head toward the large tree where the gate guard would be perched in lion form. Caleb saw her flash a small feline smile in the guard's direction and give a little shimmy.

The sound of claws scrabbling for purchase on wood sounded from the tree a fraction of a second before a young male lion with his mane not fully grown in hit the ground with a thud.

Shana gave a low, wicked laugh that was like claws scraping up Caleb's spine. The juvenile male leapt back into the branches. Caleb closed the distance between himself and the troublemaker, making a mental note to talk to Landon about giving young Ryan a less critical post if he was going to be felled every time a lioness looked his way.

Caleb ignored the fact that he would have probably fallen out of the damn tree too, if he'd seen Shana walking through that gate again after seven months.

He caught her arm and nudged her toward the mess hall, where the rest of the pride was likely still gathered after dinner. The Three Rocks Ranch had originally been built as a summer camp and the communal dining arrangement worked well for a lion pride.

Shana slid her arm out of his grip and headed toward the hall. Caleb let her go, his fingers tingling from the touch of her bare skin, even as he wondered what kind of a fool wore a tank top in a snowstorm. Their body temperature might be a couple degrees higher than a human's, but that didn't make them impervious to cold. She could come down with hypothermia just as easily as the humans she looked down on.

Not that he cared. Not that he was concerned for her. She'd done far too much to kill any feelings he'd ever had for her.

The mess hall was by far the largest building on the compound. Light and the raucous sounds of the pride spilled out of it into the night through windows kept open, even in a snowstorm.

He knew Shana too well to expect she would betray any sign of hesitation. She didn't disappoint.

She strode up the steps and threw open the double doors, head held high, the queen returning.

The reaction to her entrance was instantaneous. Silence rippled out around her until the only sound was the scrape of chairs as those in the back of the hall stood, craning for a better look.

She slammed her hands onto her hips and scanned the room, aggression in every line of her body. Caleb tensed, ready to tackle her to the ground if she went for his sister's throat, but her eyes passed right over Ava, dismissing the Alpha's new mate.

Instead, her eyes locked on the more dominant females, who bristled under her challenging glare. One or two dropped their eyes in submission, but more than would have dared only months before met her eyes head-on.

"That's right," she snapped. "I'm back. Now, which one of you bitches stole my house?"

Shana kept her eyes locked in prepare-to-have-your-ass-kicked fashion on the three most likely bungalow thieves. She heard the door shut behind her and felt Caleb's heat as he crowded behind her—doubtless so he could take her down before she could rip out any throats—but she didn't blink.

Loralee finally dropped her eyes, but Shana made note of the fact that the uppity little bitch had dared question her dominance for as long as she had. Mara didn't last nearly as long, which left only Zoe.

Shana felt a growl start low in her throat. She should have known it would be Zoe who'd stolen her slot in pride dominance. The Alpha's bitch sister had been asking for an ass-kicking for too long.

Shana hadn't challenged Zoe when she and Landon first joined the pride, because she'd been trying to butter up the Alpha and snag the slot as his mate. But that didn't mean she couldn't take the Viking bitch down. The blonde may be just a fraction bigger and stronger than Shana in her lioness form, but Shana was fast and she fought dirty. As Zoe was about to learn.

Shana crouched forward slightly, letting the growl ripple out of her throat as her fingernails morphed sharply into claws. Zoe's eyes narrowed and Shana saw her muscles tense in anticipation of the fight, even though she made no move to step away from her table into the open center of the room.

"Enough!"

The bellow held an edge of authority Shana reacted to instinctively. Her claws retracted suddenly. The Alpha had spoken.

Landon stood, the scrape of his chair against the wooden floor loud in the echoing silence. He sat at a table among the lesser members of his pride, not bothering to separate himself according to rank as his predecessors had. Shana hadn't even noticed him sitting there. Until he stood.

When he rose, the mantle of the Alpha fell on his shoulders. He radiated dominance and authority. And disapproval.

"We do not fight for housing privileges anymore," he announced, his voice ringing out across the room.

Shana fought the urge to cower. And won. She was not so easily cowed. She met the Alpha's eyes across the room and did not blink.

"She doesn't have to fight me. She just has to give it back."

The Alpha growled, the low sound traveling the room to grip her spine, urging her to bend in submission. Shana stood straight.

"That isn't how we do things anymore," Landon rumbled.

"Our instincts don't change, no matter how *human* you might try to make us." Shana spat the word "human" in the direction of the Alpha's spineless mate.

When little Ava flinched, Shana wanted to crow her victory. The Alpha's weakling mate would never be strong enough to keep him. Only Shana had the strength to rule beside him. Her rightful place in the pride was so close she could taste it, sweet and bright on her tongue.

"You are *welcome* to return to the pride, Shana," Landon said, the welcome sounding forced and borderline violent. "But the same rules still apply. We are not a pride of animals."

The abrupt laugh burst out of Shana's mouth before she could stop it. "We aren't? What are we then?"

"Civilized," Landon snarled, sounding anything but.

"Yes," Shana purred, laughter rolling around in her voice. "I can see that. Just look how *civilized* I make you feel."

She wallowed in his anger. Anger was a kind of passion. There was power in it.

The Alpha's mate did nothing to defend her claim, tiny Ava shivering in her chair. But Zoe's lips drew back from her teeth and her body tensed. Shana's claws snapped out, eager and ready.

An arm locked around her stomach, hard and unmoving.

Caleb.

She hadn't for a second forgotten his presence at her back, but she never would have suspected he would interfere with a challenge. It simply was not done in the pride. Here, honor was found only in a fight, with fur and claws flying. No one stood in the way of that.

"I know an empty bungalow," he said to the Alpha, speaking past her shoulder. "She can sleep there, until she decides if she is willing to obey the new rules."

Shana hissed, so low only Caleb would be able to hear her, at the word *obey*. "I would rather sleep in a scorpion nest than lower myself to sleep in your sister's hovel," she whispered.

He ignored her, listening *obediently* as the Alpha gave his verdict.

"Fine. Just keep her out of trouble."

Shana snorted. "I'd like to see him try," she said, loud enough for the Alpha, and Zoe, and Ava, and anyone else who might be stupid enough to think she was cowed, to hear.

Caleb's arm tightened minutely around her waist. She knew he was stronger than she was, knew he could force the issue if he chose, and, for a moment, she almost considered fighting him. The only thing that stopped her was the fact that the entire pride was watching. She did not want her triumphant return to claim her place as the Alpha's rightful mate to be sullied by a scuffle with Caleb. She had her image as the future ruler of the pride to think about.

But, she also couldn't afford to be seen as weak.

Shana's claws flashed out, fast and lethal. She slashed at Caleb's forearm and twisted out of his grip before the blood had time to splash out. She'd always been eerily fast. Her size was an advantage in fights, but her speed was what made her dangerous.

Blood dripped from the gashes on Caleb's arm as the big, slow ox reached for her. Instead of dodging back, she darted toward the double doors. "Come on," she snapped irritably over her shoulder. "Show me where this empty bungalow is. I don't have all night."

She didn't have to look over her shoulder to know every eye was on her as she swept out of the hall.



She didn't want to look over her shoulder to see the slow fire she knew would be in Caleb's eyes. She had a feeling he wasn't going to take her little scratches lightly.

And he didn't forgive easily. She knew that all too well.

## Chapter Three

The sight of blood dripping onto the pristine white snow blanketing the ground was oddly beautiful. Or it would have been.

If it hadn't been his blood.

Caleb flexed his fingers, feeling the pull against the bloody gashes on his arm. Even healing as quickly as shifters did, Shana's little love scratches were going to leave a mark.

His own fault. He'd learned long ago that she wasn't afraid to use her claws, especially when she was trying her damndest to prove she wasn't afraid of anything or anyone.

She started to turn up the narrow path leading to Ava's old cabin, but Caleb caught her eye and jutted his chin toward the main walkway. "This way."

Shana stopped at the T in the path. "Dream on." She planted one hand on her hip and flipped her long red hair, shaking off the snowflakes caught there. "I'd rather sleep with scorpions than in your sister's bed, but I'd rather sleep there than in yours."

Caleb told himself he didn't give a damn where she slept, ignoring the feral urging of his lion to prove her words a lie. He'd scented lust on her earlier. Even if she had just clawed him, Shana'd always liked it a little rough. Drawing blood was probably a goddamn turn-on.

"Not Ava's bed and not mine. This way."

Shana gave a little sniff and fell into step beside him. Her eyes flicked down to his bleeding arm. He knew she was going to say something about it before she spoke.

Shay'd always hated to be proven wrong. She couldn't tolerate any hint of weakness. Any time anyone bested her in any way, she had to remind everyone she was tough. Always.

"Gosh, Caleb, that looks like it smarts," she purred, right on cue. "You really should put something on it."

"It's fine." It was better than fine. It was a necessary reminder that Shana was walking, talking poison.

"Are you sure?" She shot him a rabid smile. "I haven't had my shots."

Caleb just kept walking, stalking silently through the snow.

Shana bounced on the balls of her feet at his side, the movement jostling loose a memory. *His Shay sprawled across his bare chest. His fingers tangled knuckle-deep in her red curls. She twisted and bounced the bed, still energized after he'd done everything humanly—and inhumanly—possible to wear her out. Her happiness spilled around them, sunny and easy. "I love that you're so silent, Cale," she announced out of*

*the blue, fingers then claws lightly flexing into his pectoral muscles to test his strength. "There shouldn't be two talkers in a relationship. I can talk enough for the both of us."*

He hadn't said anything then. At the time, the only thing he could have said was that he loved her. What a nightmare that would have been. Thank God he'd kept his mouth shut.

"Are we going to that bitch Zoe's place?" she asked, jarring him out of the depths of his thoughts and back to the present. "I'll just bet it's empty if she's in mine."

"She isn't in yours."

"No? Mara, then."

Caleb said nothing, but she'd always been able to read his silences better than anyone else.

"Not Mara, either? Not Lorelee. Pathetic little bitch. I've been kicking her ass since the fourth grade."

Caleb didn't call her on the lie. Lorelee was the closest thing Shana had to a friend in the pride. For years, she'd followed Shana around like a duckling and Shana'd made sure no one laid a finger on her. Their friendship hadn't soured until Landon had called a moratorium on challenges and Lorelee hadn't needed Shana's strength anymore. Lorelee stealing her bungalow would be another painful betrayal.

Though, knowing Shana, she would never admit to feeling pain.

"Not Lorelee."

"Good." Shana frowned and worked at her lower lip with her teeth. "Then who? One of the males? Doesn't matter. I can still take him. Whoever it is."

"Drop it, Shana."

"You sure it wasn't you?" she persisted, ignoring his demand. "I can just see you, moving into my old place because it *smells* like me. Mooning over what might have been. Jacking off into my underwear drawer. That's what happened, isn't it? And you're too much of a pussy to admit it. Don't worry, baby. I won't hold it against you." She gave a little snickering laugh. "Much."

"Not me. Shut it, Shay." She was trying to hurt him, but he told himself not to take it personally. Hurt them first before they hurt you. That was Shana's motto, pounded into her by a lifetime with her toxic mother.

"I'll figure it out eventually. It's not like you can keep me from wandering by the old stomping grounds to see who's taken up residence." Her face twisted like she'd tasted something sour. "It's not some little girl you've been fucking, is it? In my bed. Probably calling my name when you come. Ugh. That's disturbed, Caleb. There are counselors you can see about shit like that."

"Shay." Her name was a warning.

She ignored it. "I always felt bad about that," she chirped, her cheeriness making the words a lie. "Ruining you for all other women. And at such a young age. It's sad, really. Poor Caleb."

His tongue itched with the urge to say something about the way she'd ruined herself. There wasn't a bed Shana hadn't slept in, a lion she hadn't spread her legs for, and the nastiest part of his nature urged him to call her every kind of whore.

But they'd arrived at the empty bungalow, and part of him still believed there was a breakable little girl beneath her tough-as-nails front, so he said instead, "Here it is."

Shana looked at the medium-sized, decently appointed bungalow and tipped her head to the side. "Not bad. From the outside. What's wrong with it?"

"Nothing. Go on." He would have shoved her up the path, under the porch overhang and out of the snow, but knowing Shana, she probably would have bitten him for his efforts.

"Is it booby-trapped or something? Trip wire?"

"Shana, for God's sake, just go in the damn house. It's a fucking blizzard out here."

She glanced up, seeming startled anew by the falling snow. "It's barely snowing. Some Storm of the Century. Pathetic."

The devil of it was he couldn't even disagree with her. The blizzard the weathermen had been talking about for days was turning out to be nothing more than an inch or two of lightly falling snow. No wind, no whiteout conditions, nothing. But even extreme torture couldn't have made him agree with her at that moment.

"Go, Shana."

She turned the same look on him that she'd given the questionable bungalow only seconds before. Then, slowly, her eyes grew calculating. Her tongue snaked out to wet her lips. "And what if I don't?"

He'd forgotten how exhausting it could be to deal with her. How nothing was ever easy. Even when he was balls-deep inside her, she was always testing his limits. Always pushing harder. His cock stiffened at the memory.

The answer Caleb suddenly wanted to give her was rough and sexual and would take their relationship right back to a place he had sworn he would never go with her again.

Shana must have sensed some shift in his mood, because suddenly she was three steps up the path to the abandoned bungalow, tossing him a disdainful glance over her shoulder. "Relax, tough guy. I'm going like a good girl."

She wagged her ass at him in a way no good girl had ever dreamed and he growled. Then she disappeared into the house.

Caleb held himself still, fighting down the lingering urge to follow her into that house and show her what happened to little girls who teased men like him. The itch at the base of his spine simultaneously urged him to fuck and to shift. He fought both urges.

Until he felt the slight air pressure *pop* from the house, indicating Shana had taken her lioness form inside.

Caleb shifted involuntarily, the animal rising up fast and hard to claim his body.

In this form, the urge to break down the door and fuck her into submission was a hundred times more intense, the animal in him pressing humanity to the periphery of his consciousness. His lion told him the female he'd once thought would be his mate needed to be mastered, that she would welcome his dominance, but the man was still present enough to keep his paws firmly planted on the snowy ground.

When his animal snarled and snapped at his self-imposed tether, Caleb began a slow, prowling circuit around the house. Every fourth paw print was bloody from the bite of sweet Shana's tender claws. He paced around the house until the track was a circle of red. Guarding. Whether he was keeping her in or keeping others out, he didn't know. The animal in him didn't see a difference. It just insisted that he keep prowling.

So he prowled.

Shana woke and stretched, reveling in the pleasure of being in her feline form.

During her months away from the pride, she'd never had the luxury of sleeping as a lion—or really of living as a cat for more than a few moments of each day, safely behind locked doors and careful not to make any non-human sounds.

Shana arched her back and rolled to all four paws, pushing up to stand. Just for the joy of it, she filled her lungs and roared, long and loud. She flicked her tail just to feel the air brush through the tuft.

Tempted though she was to remain feline all day, Shana reluctantly shifted back to human form.

She quickly pulled a fresh pair of panties out of her pack and pulled them on, along with yesterday's jeans, bra and tank top. She'd get someone to bring in the rest of her clothes from the jeep today.

Shana opened the door to her borrowed bungalow—it was only hers temporarily, until she got her own back—and stood looking out over the snowy morning.

The big storm had only dropped a couple inches of snow on the ranch. Pale morning sunlight was already at work melting it. All signs of the so-called Storm of the Century would be gone by noon. Not far from her—borrowed—front porch, a pair of cubs rolled around in the slushy snow.

Shana frowned at a rusty brown stain on the porch—matching a similar stain circling her bungalow. She sniffed. Blood.

Trust Caleb to bleed out on her damn front porch instead of taking five seconds to have someone put a damn bandage on his arm. Goddess forbid he should disobey the Alpha's command to keep her out of trouble even as long as it took to patch himself up.

Of course, he wasn't around *now* to keep her out of trouble. Shana craned her neck and scented the air just to be safe. But no. No Caleb. Either he was hiding downwind, or he'd run off after making himself sick lying there bleeding on her porch all night long in the cold.

She had no sympathy for him.

A sleek young woman appeared around the corner of a nearby bungalow, giving Shana a tentative smile and a sheepish little shrug of her shoulders as she headed in her direction. Shana gritted her teeth. Loralee. She had no sympathy for her either.

"It's good to have you back, Shana," Loralee called, even her voice sounding pathetically subservient.

Did the girl have no self-respect? Shana appreciated Loralee's respect for power and dominance, but even doormats like pathetic little Ava demonstrated some spine *once* in a while.

"Is it?" Shana asked. Her voice was harsh and she did nothing to moderate the icy thrust of the words.

Loralee's wary smile faded a few degrees. "Yes. I missed you."

"Sure you did." Loralee'd missed having someone to fight her battles for her is what Loralee had missed. "Who's in my bungalow?"

Loralee's face froze. She was never much of a quick-thinker and now she was trying desperately to figure out whether Shana was *allowed* to know the answer to her question. Which meant she acknowledged an authority higher than Shana. Unacceptable.

"Who, Loralee?" she demanded.

"Tyler!" Loralee bleated.

"Shit."

Tyler. Caleb's older brother. Not quite as big, not quite as rough, but not someone Shana could tangle with and win.

"You could have just told me," Shana snapped.

"Alpha said we couldn't. He said it didn't matter who it was. It was the principle of the thing."

Of course. The principle. Trust the demented Alpha to make a big damned deal about principles when he could have just told her she didn't have a snowball's chance in hell of winning it back.

Shana turned and looked at the borrowed bungalow. It actually wasn't that bad. As a starting point. A few challenges and she could trade up—principles be damned. Even if she couldn't get her own place back, that didn't mean she couldn't get some nicer digs. And when she was the Alpha's mate, even Tyler wouldn't deny her. She'd have her place back. And her rightful place in the pride.

Goddesses and queens did not beg. Or fight. People *gave* them things.

"Your mother's asking for you."

Shana flinched at Loralee's softly uttered words. Her mother. Living proof that queens did beg. Pathetic, deposed, drunkard queens who had lost all claims on self-respect. "What does she want?"

"She wants to see you," Loralee said gently. "She's missed you too."

Shana knew what Loralee had missed. It was a little harder to pin down what her mother might have missed in her absence. A handy chauffeur to the nearest liquor store? Someone to look down on when she'd sunk so low it was hard to imagine anyone lower?

“She can go screw herself,” Shana whispered, barely mouthing the words.

“What was that?” Lorelee asked, sweetness and innocence and weakness personified. Pathetic.

“I’ll go see her myself,” Shana said louder, brushing past the smaller female.

She sloshed through the melting snow, her mind closed to the pleasures of the winter sun and the playfulness of a snowy morning. She was going to see her mother. Firing squads were more congenial.

## Chapter Four

Brenna Delray's bungalow stood on the outermost edges of the residential compound, secluded and dark. There were no lights on inside, but Shana knew better than to think that had anything to do with whether anyone was home.

She knocked on the door sharply. A small, cowardly part of herself she hated to admit even existed hoped Brenna wouldn't be awake. Or had already passed out for the day, even though it was only mid-morning. Anything to keep her from having to walk through that door.

"Shana, honey? Is that you?" A thin, reedy voice floated through the door.

Shana closed her eyes for a second, slumping in on herself. She only allowed herself a heartbeat. *Goddesses don't wallow*. Then she snapped her spine straight and pushed open the door. "Hello, Mother."

All the shades were drawn, but Shana saw her mother clearly enough in the dim light.

Brenna never left the house, unless alcohol was being served in the dining hall. She hid behind her former position, using it as an excuse to ignore the unwritten rule that *everyone* contributed in the pride. The pride had its own doctor, carpenter, schoolteacher and mechanic, making it as self-sufficient as possible. Those who chose to work in the nearby town or found opportunities to work online, like Shana did, to bring money into the pride. They weren't work-obsessed—Shana had never met a lion who defined himself by his day job or cared more about fancy cars than his afternoon siesta—but everyone pitched in.

Except Brenna.

She sat in a threadbare armchair, curled in a ratty knit shawl, with both hands curled protectively around a tumbler glass filled with amber liquid.

*If it's Tuesday, it must be Scotch.*

The air was musty and thick in Brenna's bungalow, or Shana's lungs were closing off, she never could quite determine which. She shoved a stack of *Star* magazines off a chair and perched on the edge. She was always on edge here. Her mother might be cheerfully buzzed now, sweet and docile as a lamb, but Shana knew better than to get comfortable. She knew what was coming at the bottom of bottle number two.

"How've you been, Mother?"

"Me?" Brenna batted her hand at Shana playfully. "Oh, you know me. Same old, same old. Did you hear about Brad and Jen? Breaking up like that? Isn't that sad?"

"That was years ago, Mom."



Brenna didn't respond to Shana's words. She just sipped her Scotch and sighed, shaking her head wistfully. "She was such a nice girl, that Jen. Not like that hussy, Angelina."

Shana braced herself for the inevitable comparison. She must've heard a thousand over the years. "*No one respects a trollop, no matter how many African babies she adopts.*" "*You know better than anyone how a slut like that thinks.*" "*A skank is as a skank does, wouldn't you agree, Shana?*"

But Brenna wasn't quite that drunk yet. Still in her friendly first bottle of the day. Instead of the biting words Shana was braced for, she just shook her head and gave a misty smile. "So sad."

"Yeah. Sad." Shana said nothing more. Words weren't power with her mother. They always seemed to become weapons that would boomerang back to her, slicing her open. So she said as little as possible as her mother finished her drink and poured herself another with hands that were surprisingly steady.

"You went away, Shana-bay," her mother cooed. "You left me."

Shana swallowed back the guilt that rose like bile, involuntary and unwelcome. "I thought you'd understand why. You were always talking about the proud tradition of the lions. You said without tradition we were nothing. That we had to honor Leonus as the Alpha, even though he killed..." She paused and cleared her throat. She knew better than to say her father's name. She'd already said too many words. Too many weapons getting ready to spiral back on her. "I thought you'd hate the direction the new Alpha is taking the pride."

"Of course I hate it," Brenna said with a vacant smile. "That's why you needed to stay. A strong mate can turn the Alpha's head whichever way it needs to go. Why, when your father was Alpha, I don't think he ever made a single decision without consulting me first."

*Except the decision to accept a younger, stronger lion's challenge and get himself killed. He did that all on his own. And then the pride belonged to that bastard Leonus.* The words itched to jump out of Shana's mouth, but she kept them tight to her chest.

Now was not the time to speak out. Her mother's nostalgic drunkenness came right after friendly drunkenness. And right before the worst part. At the rate her mother's glass was emptying and refilling, the worst part wasn't far away.

"You have the blood of kings in your veins, Shana," her mother mumbled dreamily, downing the Scotch like it was apple juice. "You were born to be the Alpha's mate."

"Yes, Mother."

"You're the strongest, Shana-bay. No one can take anything from you that you don't let them take. That's the beauty of the pride."

Shana studied the worn shag rug to keep from responding.

Strength was the curse of the pride. Nothing was sure unless you were the strongest. And not even then. Her mother had been the strongest and look what had become of her. She'd won the Alpha as her mate and fought hard to keep him, but it hadn't lasted. Nothing did.

Lions rarely mated for life. The strong fought for the right to the best mates. In the pride, mating wasn't just about procreation. It was about politics and dominance. Brenna's position hadn't been based on the Alpha's love or devotion, but on her ability to dominate the other females.

In her prime, Brenna had proven over and over again that she deserved to be queen. She'd ruled. And she had wanted nothing less for her daughter. Glory. Power.

Choosing a mate wasn't about love. It wasn't marriage. It was survival of the species. The pride's version of a divorce was more often than not a brutal brawl that left the unworthy without mating rights. The birth control shots the pride doctor provided could be a punishment for the weak just as easily as they could be prevention for lionesses like Shana.

For the first time in years, Shana found herself wondering whether her parents had loved one another. She could barely remember them together. And from the way Brenna spoke of the old days, love didn't matter. Tradition mattered.

The same tradition that demanded Shana honor the man who had killed her father to become the new Alpha.

She'd been spoon-fed tradition from the cradle, but it seemed only recently she'd begun to hate the word.

"Why would you leave, Shana? Why would you walk away from the pride?" Brenna's eyes locked on hers, the sudden eerie clarity in them warning Shana to brace herself. "How *dare* you run away?" The words lashed out like a whip, cracking in the air. "This is a proud family. We *rule* this pride. We. Do. Not. Run. How could you sully your father's name that way?"

Shana locked down, pulling tight into herself. As a teenager, sometimes she would shout back. Scream that her mother had destroyed their father's legacy more surely than she ever could, but the shouting only seemed to make Brenna's rages that much worse.

She'd been young when Leonus killed her father and assumed control of the pride. Only seven. She barely remembered the proud legacy her mother had dangled over her head for decades. She barely remembered a mother who hadn't crawled into a bottle each morning.

The drinking hadn't been so bad at first. "*Just something to take the edge off, Shana-bay.*" But during Shana's teen years, Brenna had fallen to the bottom of a well of booze and never found her way out again.

"Are you listening to me, Shana? Listen to me!"

The scream was close to her ear. Brenna had launched herself out of the armchair and stood, weaving, beside Shana's chair.

"I'm listening, Mother."

She always listened. The words pounded like spikes into her brain, bloodily embedded there forever, but she'd never been able to stop listening. No matter how hard she tried.

"You are the Alpha's rightful mate. You are the queen of this pride. You should be *ruling* and what do you do? You run away!"

"I know, Mama. I'm sorry."

"Apologies are for the weak! Lionesses do not apologize. *Queens* do not apologize. But you aren't a queen, are you? You're nothing more than a coward and a *slut*."

Shana flinched. That word again, slashing at her viciously.

"Oh? It bothers you to be told the truth of what you are? *Slut*. Did you think I didn't know you lifted your tail for every lion in the goddamn pride and half the nomads to pass through?"

No. She'd never thought her mother didn't know. They'd had this conversation a thousand times, but she didn't expect her mother's alcohol-sodden brain to remember that. Any more than she expected her to remember that it was Brenna herself who had urged Shana to go after most of those men. "*That one looks strong, Shana. He'll be a good Alpha. He could challenge Leonus. He just needs a little push. The right kind of push.*"

"Did it make you happy to shame your father and me with your promiscuity?"

A sarcastic smile curved Shana's mouth. "Cats are promiscuous, Mother."

Brenna's hand snaked out, slapping her hard across the cheek. Her head turned with the blow.

Shana pulled deeper into herself, feeling the ties to her childhood mother, that sober memory from her early years, snapping painfully tight around her. Her mother had never hit her before. She loved her. That was why she pushed so hard.

"*Queens* are not promiscuous, Shana. *Queens* are virginal and pure."

Queens were sluts who knew better than to get caught or had the power to behead the ones who spoke against them, but Shana kept her lips closed tight over that thought. She'd learned her lesson about disagreeing.

"Are you a queen, Shana?" Brenna hissed. "Because all I see is a pathetic little slut who couldn't get a single lion to fight for her. Did they all see what I see? Did all those men you screwed, hoping to screw them right into the Alpha position, did they all see how pathetic you are? Did they all see a little slut who wasn't worth fighting for? They did, didn't they?"

*Enough.* Shana launched herself off the edge of the chair—*don't get too comfortable, Shay*—and shoved past her mother.

"You made me spill!" Brenna wailed. "Shana, get back here!"

Shana blocked out the words, wishing she could wipe her memory of every word her mother had ever said to her. She ran blindly out of Brenna's bungalow, down the muddy path, away from the rest of the residential compound. She ran until her legs ached and the icy air burned in her lungs. And then she kept running.

Her confrontations with her mother had been bad before, but this had been worse. So much worse. Evidently, Brenna had been saving up her acid for all the months Shana had been gone, building up her vitriol into a seething mass. Shana was a disappointment, Shana was a whore—she'd heard it all before, but this time had been so much worse. No dancing around the subject, just a swift verbal knife to the stomach and a vicious twist.

Why did it still hurt? Why hadn't she learned not to hurt like she had with all the other things that used to pain her? Why couldn't she be immune?

Only her mother and Caleb had ever been able to make her burn like this, acid eating at her from the inside out. But with Caleb, at least it was fair. At least she knew she could hurt him back.

Shana spun, breathing hard and running harder. But now, instead of away, she was running toward something. Someone.

She felt wild and unpredictable, a loose electrical cable whipping in the wind, ready to electrocute anyone who stumbled too close. If she couldn't contain it, at least she could control who she zapped.

He was strong. He could take it.

He was the only one who'd ever been strong enough to take her.

## Chapter Five

Caleb shucked off sweaty clothes and stepped into the shower. Maybe the heat of the water could burn away the lingering scent of Shana in his nostrils. Nothing else seemed to.

He'd woken that morning on Shana's deck with dried blood matted into his fur, but the cuts she'd given him had already closed up. He'd run back to his own place to shift back to human form and grab a change of clothes, not bothering to do more than wash the blood off.

As strong as the urge had been to return to Shana and force her to be good—whatever that meant for someone like her—Caleb busied himself instead with towing the broken-down jeep off the ranch road. When he'd checked back on her at mid-morning, she'd taken off. He could tell the bungalow was empty by the lack of her scent alone.

He'd dumped the contents of the jeep into her room, marveling at how much crap the woman traveled with. When he was done, she still hadn't returned, so he found Michael, the youngest and most impulsive of his brothers, who was always up for a sparring match.

Caleb turned, letting the hard, hot spray of the water pound into the sore muscles of his shoulder. Michael was actually growing up enough to make besting him more of a challenge than it used to be. The cub had managed to get in a few good licks.

But even worn out and sweaty from wrestling with his brother, Caleb's mind was saturated with Shana. And he was half-hard from thinking of her. And smelling her goddamn stuff as he put it inside her room.

Caleb considered taking his cock in his fist and getting what satisfaction he could, but he didn't have any illusions that it would ease the bite of his lust for her. Lions were capable of sexual marathons that could last for days. His body had been designed by nature to take her over and over again. He wouldn't find relief so easily.

Shutting off the water, he stepped out of the shower and quickly towed himself dry. He whipped on a pair of jeans, leaving them half buttoned, and stalked barefoot out of the bathroom.

Landon had asked him to keep her out of trouble. Caleb snorted as he crossed the room and yanked open a drawer. He'd have as much luck domesticating a rabid tabby.

Landon couldn't know about their history. Caleb wasn't sure even Ava knew how much Shana had once meant to him. There weren't very many members of the pride who remembered the way Caleb used to pant after Shana. Before she ripped out his heart and cut off his balls.

She'd been different then. Before she started sleeping with everyone and anyone who had a shot at the Alpha. Still crazy as a wildcat, but she'd laughed back then. Really laughed. Without the bitterness and ice that always tainted her voice now.

And he'd laughed too. God, he'd been gone for her. All she'd had to do was crook her little finger at him and he'd come running. But she hadn't been a tease. Not Shana. She'd delivered on every fantasy his teenage mind could conjure and some he hadn't even thought of yet.

He would have done anything for her. He would have died for her.

And nearly did. He'd nearly challenged Leonus. Nearly gotten his fool ass killed in his attempt to make Shana the Alpha's mate she always talked about being. If Tyler hadn't stopped him, Leonus would have easily defeated him and strung his internal organs up like party decorations. He'd been too young and too green for there to have been any other outcome.

But Shana hadn't seen it that way. All she had heard was him saying no to her. And so she'd run straight from his bed into the bed of a man who wouldn't say no. A series of beds, a series of men. Always trying to fuck her way to the top, but always picking the wrong pony. She'd gotten her lovers run off, maimed, and even killed in their attempts to please her.

Caleb was lucky he'd escaped with no visible scars. He'd just had to watch.

Over a decade of Shana screwing everyone in her path who might have a prayer of challenging Leonus. And then Landon had arrived. He'd arrived, challenged for, and won control of Three Rocks—doing what none of Shana's fucktoys had been able to do.

And she hadn't been able to get into his bed fast enough.

Landon hadn't been monogamous—or even picky—before he met Ava. Caleb knew he'd slept with Shana, and half a dozen other lionesses, before he claimed Ava as his mate.

But somehow, even knowing Shana was as dirty and used as used goods could get, Caleb couldn't make himself stop wanting her. Remembering her low laugh and the stroke of her body against his. The memories were burned into his brain like a brand.

The creaky second step to his porch complained loudly and Caleb's attention snapped toward the door. That familiar scent hit his brain, clouding it with want.

She didn't bother knocking.

Shana was the star attraction in so many of his fantasies, Caleb wondered if his imagination was playing games with him when she closed the door behind her and leaned against it with that familiar, hungry look in her eyes. Her gaze raked his bare chest and she licked her lips.

"Hello, Caleb." Her voice was raw sex, breathless and rough.

She was panting for breath and a sheen of sweat coated her skin, in spite of the cold of the morning. She'd tried to outrun herself, but she never could. He recognized the signs. And the wildness in her eyes.

“How’s your mother?” he asked, knowing the words would be a slap in the face, but wanting her out and gone before his animal took over and he pinned her to the door and fucked her senseless.

Her eyes flashed as she pushed away from the door, stalking toward him. “Fuck you, too, sugarbear.”

“No thanks,” he growled, circling away from her. “I’ve lived this long without herpes and I’d just as soon keep it that way.” Shifters couldn’t transmit human diseases, but he needed to piss her off, get her the fuck out of his house.

“Ha-ha, look who’s funny.” Her fingers closed around the hem of her tank top and yanked it off over her head. The black bra contrasted against the pale silk of her skin, drawing his eyes. Her breasts rose and fell in their black-lace prison with the rapid tempo of her breath.

“What—” He didn’t know what he was going to ask. What was she doing? What did she want? He already knew the answer to both questions. He’d known since she walked in the door and he recognized the wildness in her eyes. Just as he’d known he wasn’t going to fight her, didn’t have a prayer of resisting.

He wanted her just as badly as she wanted him. More.

Moving inhumanly fast, she closed the distance between them and cut off the question with her mouth, slamming it hard against his, her fingers grabbing fistfuls of his hair to hold him tight. Her body pressed fully against him and Caleb lost himself inside the warm, sucking, eager heat of her mouth. The drugging suction of it as she worked her tongue against his, feeding the flame that never died between them into a flash fire of lust.

She released her vise-grip on his hair and went to work on the fastenings of his jeans. In her eagerness, her claws flexed in and out. When one vicious tip nicked the skin of his abdomen, the small, surprising flicker of pain brought him a brief moment of clarity.

He shoved her away so suddenly she stumbled backward until she hit the bed, falling back into the unmade mess of sheets.

“If you wanted me in bed, Cale, all you had to do was ask.” She gave a low laugh, her hands already unfastening the clasp on her bra and tossing it aside.

She quickly unzipped her jeans and began wriggling the tight denim over the smooth expanse of her hips. Caleb stepped forward and grabbed her wrists to stop her.

He knew he was squeezing too hard, but finesse was a thing of the past. Shana always burned straight through the reins he kept on his control. “What the fuck are you doing?”

She arched one auburn brow. “Undressing. It facilitates the fucking. Take off your pants.”

“I wouldn’t touch you with a ten-foot pole,” he snarled, wishing he knew how to make the words true.

His mind might resist, knowing the hell Shana could put him through, but his body was more than willing. Inside his jeans, he was already hard beyond the point of pain.

Shana’s eyes dropped to his erection and she slowly wet her lips. “Ten feet? That’s a bit of an exaggeration, isn’t it, big boy?”

“Stop it.”

Far from obeying, she seemed urged to action by his demand. He still held her wrists, but she writhed on the bed, the movement of her full breasts hypnotizing. His vision was so fogged by want, it took her kicking the jeans off her ankles before he realized she’d been wriggling out of them.

She lay pinned to the bed by his hands on her wrists, in nothing but a sheer, purple thong. She hooked her ankles behind his knees and tried to pull him down onto her. Caleb stumbled, but kept his feet—and his distance.

“Come on, Cale,” she purred, trying again to twine her legs around his. “You know what I need.”

“You need a straitjacket,” he growled. But then he met her eyes. Those wild, feverish eyes.

He’d seen her like this before, in a frenzy of need. She would run to him from her mother. Her face would be twisted as if she was crying, but her eyes would be dry. He’d never seen Shana shed a single tear, no matter how wretchedly she sobbed. He would try to hold her, but gentleness never soothed her. She needed the push and the heat. The frantic strain of her body against his.

And he always gave her what she needed, fucking her high and hard until she screamed in release, trying to absorb all that panic and frenzy into his body.

Looking into those wild eyes, he knew he would never be able to walk away from her.

When Caleb suddenly went still, looming above her, Shana squirmed under the intensity of his gaze. “Cale? Come on, baby.”

She was mostly naked on his bed with her blood boiling. Now was not the fucking time for soulful gazes.

She dropped her eyes to the ridge his cock made in his jeans. *Oh, yeah.* Caleb was ready to play, all right. So what the fuck was he waiting for?

She tried again to kick out his knees and force the weight of his body down on hers, but he just staggered and righted himself again, planting his feet. The rigid muscles across his chest and shoulders made her mouth water, her teeth aching to take a bite, but when she tried to push her shoulders up off the bed, he shoved her back down with her own wrists pressed against her collarbone. “Dammit, Caleb,” she snapped, squirming against his iron grip. The bastard was so damn *strong*. She couldn’t even seduce him properly if he wouldn’t let her touch him.

And she *needed* to seduce him. She needed the hard, fast slap of his body against hers. She needed it hot and wet and so damn good it hurt. She needed to feel like her brain was melting into a mass of instinct and need.

Then Caleb growled, “I must be out of my fucking mind,” a fraction of a second before his mouth hit hers and his weight landed hard against her, pressing her down into the mattress.



*Yes.* Goddess, it was perfection. Sensation swamped her. She moaned into his mouth as his tongue probed hers. She locked her legs around his waist. He was all muscle, everything firm and hot.

Caleb ground the rough denim covering his erection against her clit. Need spiked down Shana's spine, dragging a small scream from her as it burst into wet heat, drenching her thong. Caleb tore his mouth away from hers and finally released her wrists, but only so he could rip her sheer thong into postage-stamp-size scraps.

He shoved himself off her to attack his jeans. Shana's wildness was tempered by his sudden frenzy. She felt like the eye of a hurricane, an illusion of calm just waiting to explode into violent chaos. She squeezed her thighs together as Caleb ripped and swore at his jeans.

Her wrists held the imprint of his every finger. The bruises were going to be spectacular. He'd *marked* her.

Shana licked her lips, her canines sharpening to lethal points at the thought of marking her mate right back. And, that quickly, the eye passed and she was back in the hurricane.

He turned back toward her, shreds of denim hitting the floor. Naked, his body was glorious, a tapestry of strength. Muscle flowed into muscle. His erection stood out high and hard and straight. Maybe not ten feet, but just as thick as she remembered. Thick enough to stretch her just barely to the point of pain. Shana licked her lips. *Come to mama.*

She came up on her knees on the mattress and reached for him. He didn't catch her hands or push her away this time. Shana wrapped both hands around his cock as she sank her teeth into the skin beneath his left nipple. Caleb hissed, and she didn't particularly care whether it was from the bite of pleasure or pain. She worked her hands slowly up and down his shaft, simultaneously nibbling her way down, taking little bites across his flat stomach.

Then she was right where she wanted to be.

When she scraped her tongue across the head of his cock, he growled. Rolling it into her mouth elicited a hiss. She slid it deeper into her mouth, using her hands to slowly feed him to herself until his thickness threatened to choke her, knocking against the back of her throat.

*"Fuck, Shay."*

She chuckled, letting him feel the vibration of her laugh, and slowly withdrew, only to slide him deeper again.

His fingers tangled in her hair, but he didn't push her, just laced his fingers into the red mass, rubbing the heavy strands between his fingers. His head fell back on a groan as she found a rhythm she liked.

Shana felt like a goddess, luxuriating in her power over him. But it wasn't enough.

She released him from her mouth with a little *pop*. Licking her lips to catch every lingering taste of his skin, she stretched up onto her knees again, running her hands up across his pecs and shoulders to twine around his neck. "C'mere," she purred, hauling his head down to hers to slide her tongue into his mouth.

His hands gripped her ass. He lifted her as if she weighed nothing and she wrapped her legs around his waist. His erection bumped against her pussy, but the angle was wrong for anything more than a tease. But even the tease was enough to make her squirm.

Caleb turned and sat on the bed, keeping her thighs spread across his lap. His large hands petted her, gliding over the curves of her ass, over her hips, the curve of her waist, the planes of her back, across her shoulders, her collarbones, skating around her breasts without touching them to graze her ribs and the bones at the front of her hips. He teased the crease of her thighs, the backs of her knees, and along the outside of her thighs back up to her ass again, until she was ready to scream at him to get to the goddamn good stuff.

As he touched her, Shana's hands weren't still. She wrapped them around his cock and guided him to her entrance. She rose up on her knees and angled herself to take the thick head into her pussy. He notched into her and just that much sent shockwaves of pleasure rippling across her nerve endings.

And they were just getting started.

She pressed down, taking another inch before the edge of pain stopped her. She waited for her body to stretch, to adjust, holding onto every drop of feeling.

Caleb chose that moment to flick her taut nipples with his fingers. Shana cried out and sank another inch. He flattened his large hands on her back, holding her steady as he bent and drew his teeth across her breast, missing the nipple this time.

Shana arched her back and sank deeper still onto his shaft as Caleb followed the scrape of his teeth with a soothing swipe of his tongue. When he suddenly sucked one rigid nipple hard into his mouth, the accompanying flood of heat through Shana's body seated her fully.

She felt his primal growl through every inch of her skin.

Bracing her fingers on his shoulders, claws recklessly out, she raised herself slowly. The wet drag of flesh fired a delicious friction. She dropped herself back down, hard. He released her breast on a rough expulsion of air that teased her sensitized skin. Shana drew up and slammed down again. His big hands tightened roughly on her back. He bent his head and sank his teeth into the flesh at the juncture of her neck and shoulder.

The soft bite of pain merged seamlessly with the tide of pleasure rippling up her spine. His strong arms wrapped all the way around her, holding her a little too tight. Shana reveled in the surety of his strength as she quickened her pace, lost in the wet, sucking draw and wild, slamming return.

Pleasure built, coiling deep inside her and yet just out of reach. A chaotic explosion that would be so good, *so good*, if she could just get there, reach it, find it, claim it. Every sense tightened—*so close*. Shana's claws snapped out to full feline length and blooded themselves on Caleb's shoulders. A predator's teeth ripped like daggers through her gums as she threw back her head. Pleasure ripped through her body,

her orgasm crashing through her in a destructive wave that was so damn *good*, wiping away every thought, every fear, every bit of her that was Shana and replacing it with bliss.

Caleb roared, his body pouring his need into hers in a bone-crushing rush. Shana felt her soul lock around his, holding on tight to this moment. She *needed* this moment. This goodness. He was the only thing in her life that had ever made her feel so *good*. She rode the wave of it, clinging hard.

Then she blacked out.

## Chapter Six

The bed was cold when she woke up. She'd been alone for a while.

Shana rolled to a sitting position in the tangled sheets, grimacing at the sticky wetness on her thighs. What a gentleman. Let the lady sleep in the wet spot. He'd probably walked out the door as soon as he'd yanked on a pair of pants. If he'd even bothered. Shifting was faster than clothes any day when it came to immediate escape.

And he had escaped her. Abandoned her.

Bastard.

You give a man an earth-shattering fuck and he can't even be bothered to stick around until you regain consciousness. That's gratitude for you.

Shana kicked off the sheets, gathered her clothes, and padded to the bathroom. She quickly cleaned herself up and then took stock of what was left of her clothes. With the exception of her thong, everything she'd walked in with was in working order.

Pulling her jeans on commando, Shana winced a little at the tenderness between her legs. She hadn't had sex in months—humans just didn't have the same appeal—and she hadn't had sex with someone hung like Caleb since...well, Caleb. And they hadn't exactly eased back into the saddle. She'd been out for a rough ride and that's exactly what she'd gotten—and the soreness to go with it.

The bra and tank top quickly followed. Shana started out of the bathroom, only to pause as her reflection caught her eye.

"Damn."

Caleb had marked her all right. And not just with the purple bruises on her wrists. The skin where her shoulder met her neck was already turning a stunning shade of violet in the exact shape of Caleb's teeth.

Of course, judging by the little flecks of blood on the sheets, she'd given at least as good as she got. She hoped any little lionesses who might be tempted to poach got a good look at the claw marks she'd left on Caleb's shoulders.

Shana froze, frowning at the thought.

She was naturally possessive. Violently so. But Caleb wasn't hers anymore. She didn't want him. She wanted the Alpha. What's-his-name. Landon. She wanted Landon.

Caleb was just a pit stop on the way to her destiny as the Alpha's mate.

She was focused. She had goals. And they did not include mooning after a man she'd once been stupidly in love with just because he was strong and sexy and knew her inside and out.

Goddesses did not moon. Neither did queens. Queens kicked ass.

Shana kicked the door open and stepped out onto the porch. Dusk had fallen while she and Caleb were battling for supremacy in the Fuck-Olympics. The snow had long since melted, but the temperature had dropped again, leaving an icy chill in the air.

Shana sucked in the cold air, letting it cool any lingering heat Caleb had left in her. It was time to make herself a queen.

Caleb ran the outer perimeter, along the edge of the ranch property, but he didn't fool himself that he was doing any good as a guard. A soldier's best tool was his mind and Caleb's was poisoned by the viper who was likely still sleeping off their excesses in his bed.

His animal scratched against the inside of his skull, but he kept his human form. A neighbor or a passing car could see him this far out, though hopefully no one would. He ran too fast to be strictly human, infected by Shana's wildness. She had passed it to him and he couldn't outrun it.

He knew what would happen now. She'd come to him before over the years, when her latest boy toy failed to defeat the Alpha and her mother lashed out at her. Shana always came running to him, wild and hungry. And he still hadn't learned how to say no. Every time he tried. And every time he failed.

And every time, she sank her claws into another forgotten chamber of his heart and ripped it open. He was a goddamn medical miracle—his heart still beating after she'd demolished it piece by piece.

He didn't fool himself that this time would be any different.

She hadn't come back for him. She'd come back for fucking Landon. The fucking *Alpha*.

Caleb's mouth pulled into a snarl as he ran.

She wouldn't get him. Landon looked at Ava like the secrets of the universe could be found in her eyes. He wasn't going to give that up, no matter what tricks the redheaded minx might try to pull.

Images of her tricks flashed through his mind in living color, a lurid montage.

Caleb staggered to a stop. He propped his hands on his knees and gulped down air, ignoring the stitch digging a knife into his side. How far had he run? Five miles? Ten? However many, it hadn't been far enough. He could still taste Shana on his tongue. Feel her on his skin.

She was a virus he'd been infected with. Shouldn't his body have built up the antibodies to fight her hold on him by now? How many times would he have to go through this? Why couldn't he get her out of his blood?

He turned back to the ranch. Running wasn't helping.

It was time—past time—for him to face the feral lioness he'd been running from for the last decade. Time for them to fight it out.

He wanted her—not wanting her never seemed to be an option—and this time he was going to fight for her. Even if she was the one he had to fight.

Shana found the Alpha and his miniature mateling in the dining hall. The hall was beginning to fill as the dinner hour approached, but they acted as if they were alone, billing and cooing at one another, wrapped in their own lovey-dovey world.

Shana folded her arms across her chest and tapped her foot, waiting to be acknowledged. She had no intention of waiting long.

Around them, the rest of the pride trickled in. Seeing Shana standing there, her posture issuing the challenge she hadn't yet voiced, several of her pridemates hesitated, watching her cautiously, curious to see whatever spectacle she'd prepared for them tonight.

Impatient with the turtledoves cooing privately to one another, Shana cleared her throat. Loudly.

Ava looked up and arched her brows questioningly. The look Landon shot her was far from questioning. Irritated, yes. Questioning, no.

Shana didn't care if he was annoyed. She was annoyed too.

"I won't allow you to issue a challenge just so you can get a nicer house, Shana," Landon said, his clear, strong voice calling the attention of anyone who might have missed their little standoff.

Shana wasn't intimidated. She did her best work in front of an audience. "I'm not here for a house, Landon," she corrected. "I'm here for you."

The Alpha frowned. "Me?"

Shana smiled, oh-so-sweetly, and flicked her eyes to the mini-mate. "Or don't you think your little Ava is strong enough to keep you? Maybe she'd rather just forfeit her claim on you now and save us all the five seconds it would take me to wipe the floor with her ass."

The challenge filled the air with a subtle pressure, like a coming storm.

Landon rose slowly from his chair, drawing Shana's gaze away from his wide-eyed mateling. He was a behemoth of a man and his aura of power made him seem larger still. Shana tried to remember what he'd been like in bed—size and strength were definitely among her turn-ons—but all she could recall was that he had fallen somewhere in the Not Bad category, though a little too vanilla for her tastes.

"If you think to touch my wife, you'll have to go through me," the Alpha growled.

Shana managed not to roll her eyes. Barely. Landon's chest-banging might have been impressive, if he weren't negating his own mate's power with every overprotective word.

He'd better not try to fight her battles for her when *she* was his mate.

Landon looked serious. And pissed. Shana didn't doubt that he meant every word. And even though she was the strongest, fastest female lion in the pride, the Alpha could still kick her ass. Probably. Shana almost felt reckless enough to try her luck. There hadn't ever been a female Alpha in a lion pride before, but Landon was all about humanizing them. How about a little equality of the sexes?

Shana prowled slowly toward the Alpha. He held his position. She could practically see his mind racing as he tried to figure out if she was coming closer to attack him or to bow in submission. She made sure her eyes gave nothing away.

When she was less than a foot from him, she looked up into his angry green-gold eyes and slowly licked her lips. "Are you so eager to get your paws on me again, lover? That you'll use any flimsy excuse?"

A low growl rumbled through his chest. A wild, suicidal impulse made Shana want to laugh. She didn't know why she provoked him. Her fight was with Ava. Landon was going to rule at her side. But the delicious idea of fighting for the pride herself made her feel rash and imprudent. She could be a queen. On her own terms. No man needed. She'd been bred for it. She was strong and fast and fierce. This was *her pride*.

"Obey our rules or leave our land," the Alpha growled, taking a threatening step forward.

Shana's hands flexed, her claws snapping out. "Make me."

The roar that met her words was so loud, it took her a heartbeat to realize it wasn't coming from the lion in front of her. It rolled like thunder through the room. Before the echoes had died, Caleb's body was between hers and Landon's. He shoved her away from the Alpha so roughly she was thrown to the ground.

Caleb's back bowed. He was still in human form, but just barely, and battling for every shred of humanity. "Don't. You. Touch. Her." The words were snarled out, guttural and low, more animal than man.

Shana's breath left her in a rush as lust poured through her body, inappropriate and so damn hot. *He was fighting for her*. From her position sprawled on the floor, she could see the muscles across his back tense and ready to kill for her. Delicious shivers rolled across her skin.

Landon didn't step back in the face of the threat Caleb presented—every lion in the room would have recognized the act as ceding to Caleb's dominance. Instead, the Alpha met his lieutenant's gaze steadily, holding his body perfectly still.

"Think about what you're doing, Caleb," Landon urged in a low, uncompromising voice. "Are you sure you want this fight? There's no going back if you challenge me."

Yes, Shana silently urged, *challenge him*. This was it. What she had always wanted, the man she loved, willing to fight for her, strong enough to win. She was so damn close. *Do it, Caleb. Do it.*

Caleb's shoulders relaxed, easing just a fraction, but that little change was enough for disappointment to spike sharply through Shana. "No," she whispered.

Caleb took a slow step back, away from his Alpha. "I'm sorry," he said, bowing his head to Landon.

"No," Shana wailed, louder this time. "Don't be sorry. Challenge him!"

Caleb continued his retreat, not so much as glancing in Shana's direction.

"Caleb!" Shana scrambled to her feet. "Come on. This is our chance! Challenge him. Caleb, *please*."

He didn't pause, didn't hesitate. Caleb walked right out the door without looking back.

A tight heat pressed against the back of Shana's eyes and her throat felt swollen and thick. She wouldn't cry. She never cried. Goddesses didn't cry.

But goddesses also didn't beg, and they didn't lose.

"Obey our rules or leave our land," Landon said again, his voice ominous and dark.

Shana looked up at the Alpha, hating him with every fiber of her being. "Fuck you and your fucking rules," she snarled.

She stalked toward the exit, head held high, defiant and fierce. She half-expected not to make it to the door. The old Alphas—Leonus, her own father—would never have allowed her rebellion to go unchecked. She would have been forcibly put back in her place, but Landon's precious humanity made him weak in front of his entire pride. He just watched as she stormed out.

Outside, the wind wailed, a new storm rising. Matching the storm inside her mind.

Her emotions tangled, a savage knot swelling inside her throat until she choked on a sob. Why did it hurt so much? She'd been disappointed in her bids to become the Alpha's mate before. She'd always just shrugged off defeat—occasionally mourning the poor bastards who were the casualties of her personal war—but it never felt like this. Why did this one eat away at her soul, tearing out chunks of her heart?

*Because it was Caleb.*

The thought called the tears, hot and uncontrollable. It was different because of Caleb. Because he had always been the one she wanted. The One. Always the one she loved—in her way, no matter how twisted. She'd always clung to the promise that he would be the one to save her. If the others failed, what did it matter? Only Caleb mattered. He would fight for her. He would prove he loved her too.

And he'd come so close. He had almost loved her enough.

Shana choked back the tears, forcing them to stop out of sheer will.

He hadn't loved her enough, but she would love him. She knew she didn't deserve him. He was steady and honorable where she was deceitful and manipulative. She didn't know what she deserved, but it wasn't anything good. And Caleb was good. He was everything good to her.

But luckily, Shana didn't believe in getting what she deserved.

Goddesses didn't get what they deserved. They got what they wanted. And she wanted Caleb.



## Chapter Seven

Shana was not the moony-eyed, heart-on-her-sleeve, Dr. Phil-confession-of-love type. Sex was her currency. She would win Caleb back, but she would do it her way.

With that in mind, she went back to her borrowed bungalow, took a quick shower, put on her skimpiest, sexiest scraps of lingerie lace, and began digging through her bags for the naughtiest invitation-to-sex outfit she could find.

She was debating between a schoolgirl outfit that no self-respecting schoolgirl would be caught dead in and the slightly less subtle black vinyl catsuit when she heard a footstep on her front porch.

Her heart quickened. Had Caleb had a change of heart?

Shana threw open the door before rational thought had time to weigh in on the decision, still wearing only a few scraps of see-through black lace and a garter belt.

If little Ava was shocked to see her dressed so provocatively, nothing in her face gave her away. The five-foot mateling craned her neck up at Shana and squared her tiny little shoulders, flipping her long white-blond hair away from her face.

"I'm here to accept your challenge," she rasped, her throaty sex-kitten voice an odd contrast to her Mini-Me persona.

Shana groaned and rolled her eyes. "Oh, please. Does your keeper know you're here?"

Ava tipped her chin back even farther. "This is between you and me."

"Uh-huh. So I kick your ass. Landon hears about it. Landon kicks my ass and throws me out of the pride. As fun as that sounds, I think I'll pass."

Shana flipped the door closed, but Ava caught it before it could latch and flung it open again, stepping into the room. Tenacious little midget.

"I can't let your challenge to my authority as Landon's mate stand," Ava declared. Her voice was sure and calm, nearly masking the fact that she was terrified out of her wits. Only the scent of fear coming off her in waves gave her away.

Shana crossed back to the bed and picked up her wardrobe options. The catsuit perhaps?

"Shana! I demand you acknowledge me!"

Shana waved the catsuit in Ava's direction. "Yeah, yeah, you're the Alpha's mate. Whoop-de-do."

"Landon is mine. You'll never change that."

Shana tossed aside the catsuit. Too obvious. Naughtiness was an art form. She picked up the three-inch-wide strip of plaid that would barely cover her ass. If she stretched the definition, it could almost be called a skirt. Subtle.

"I'm not interested in Landon," she said, shimmying into the skirt. "I never really was."

Ava planted her hands on her hips, her nearly colorless gray eyes narrowing. "You expect me to buy that? After you threw yourself at him? You warned me off!"

"I only chased him because he was the Alpha and the Alpha deserves to be with the best." She buttoned the single button of a stomach-baring, snug white blouse over her breasts and tied the ends in a slip knot. "You were easy to warn off. You really should grow a spine one of these days, Ava."

"I thought you had accepted me," Ava said, flicking her eyes downward in an automatic gesture of submission. The soft vulnerability in her voice made Shana's flesh crawl. She was so damn *weak*, so docile. "I thought you respected Landon's decision. Respected me."

Shana snorted. "Why would you think an idiotic thing like that?"

"The necklace," Ava said. "The one you took from me. You gave it back. I thought you were sorry you'd always bullied me. It was a gesture."

Shana rolled her eyes and dug her white thigh-highs out of her bag. "You thought that meant I liked you? It was a *message*. If strength wasn't valued anymore, then nothing this pride had was of value to me. I was renouncing the pride. Goddess, you're thick, aren't you?"

"If you renounced the pride, why did you come back?"

"Golly, I must have missed your shining face, sunshine," she said acidly, clipping the first stocking to her garter belt.

"Landon will never want you," Ava snapped, the little matelings making a show of spunkiness.

Stocking number two snapped into place. "Don't worry, honey. You can keep your Alpha. I have bigger game in mind." She stepped into her stiletto Mary Janes and did a turn in front of the mirror. "How do I look?"

"Like a cheap hooker."

A short laugh burst out of Shana's mouth. "Careful, sugar, you keep talking like that and I might have to start liking you." She opened her makeup case and went to work on her face. Bright red lips, kohl-lined eyes.

"Caleb will never want you either. My brother would never fall for someone as trashy as you," Ava declared as she watched Shana vamp herself up.

"Sweetheart, I'm not surprised you don't know this about your brother, but, trust me, he likes it trashy. That is one dirty, dirty boy."

Shana caught a glimpse of Ava's slackened jaw in the mirror and laughed. "Goddess, your face. From the look of you, your Alpha doesn't even know the meaning of kink."

Ava snapped her mouth shut. "I'll thank you not to infer things about my sex life."

"You're welcome, but I'm gonna infer all I want, poppet. Goddess, am I ever lucky the Alpha picked you? I'd have been bored to tears inside a week. Of course, nothing says I couldn't have still fucked Caleb on the side."

"He would never betray Landon."

Shana just smiled. The little mateling had a lot to learn about men.

"You're wrong," Ava insisted. "You don't know him."

"I know him a helluva lot better than you do, sweet cheeks."

And she knew exactly what to do to him to make him forget his own name, let alone any loyalties he might have once had. Not that that would be an issue this time. No more betrayals and power plays. That was the plan. Just pure, unadulterated and unadulterous sex.

Shana added a pair of dangling earrings and blotted her lips, turning back to Ava. "Now, how do I look?"

The little blonde grimaced. "Like an expensive call girl."

Shana grinned. "Perfect."

She strutted toward the door, but the mateling suddenly barred her way. "Where are you going?"

Shana arched an eyebrow and waved a hand at her outfit. "Did you think all of this was for your benefit? I'm gonna go give your brother the night of his life. By the time I'm done, he'll be singing my name to the tune of the Hallelujah Chorus."

"He'll throw you out on your skanky ass."

Shana snorted. "Honey, have you looked at me lately? Men don't throw me out of their beds until I've wrung them dry."

Ava shook her head, her expression fierce and protective. A kitten testing out her claws. "You don't deserve him."

"Nope. You're absolutely right about that. But it doesn't change the fact that I'm gonna get him. You can have your precious Alpha, but Caleb's *mine*. Now why don't you get out of my way, half-pint, or would you really like to see how long it takes me to kick your ass?"

The blizzard promised for the night before had arrived in force. Caleb listened to the wind howl and felt like howling himself.

He'd nearly challenged the Alpha.

He couldn't even remember what had provoked it. Memory had been washed away on a tide of animal instinct. All he remembered was Shana and an icy cold rage that Landon would *dare* touch her.

How had he let himself get so tangled up in her again? Hadn't he learned his goddamn lesson by now?

Caleb sat on his bed with his head in his hands. Her scent still clung to the sheets. There was no way he would be getting any sleep tonight.

The door banged open. His head snapped up.

His brain shut off.

What the *fuck* was she wearing?

"Hello, Caleb." Shana kicked the door closed against the wind. She snicked the lock into place.

"Get out."

Her lower lip poofed out in a patently false pout. "Are you mad at me?" she asked, the baby-sweetness in her voice a lollipop complement to the fuck-me-suck-me outfit.

"Yes," he growled, even as his cock stood up for duty, and added, *but not mad enough to pass up what you're offering.*

The fake pout vanished and her emerald eyes flashed irritably. He wasn't playing her game the way she wanted it played. "Fine. You're mad. I get it." Then a feline gleam flickered to life in her eyes and a sensual smile curled her lips. "You wanna punish me? I've been a bad, bad girl."

"Get out, Shana."

She smoothed her hands down her thighs and bent so her ass flared out beneath the miniscule skirt. "I think I need a spanking."

His balls tightened as if she'd squeezed them in a goddamn vise. "Very funny. Get out."

Shana ignored his words, focusing on the flare of heated interest she'd seen in his eyes. He'd always had a thing for her ass. They'd never tried spanking before, but she had a feeling it was exactly Caleb's brand of kink. From the look in his eyes, she was right.

And from the way she was drenching her thong, it was her kind of kink too.

"I know I've been a bad girl. You have every right to be mad at me." She walked toward him slowly, twirling one red curl around her forefinger. "Won't you punish me, Caleb?"

She stopped in front of him and bent over just enough to tease, cleavage on full display. Caleb's hands gripped the sheets beside him. He didn't move to touch her.

"I'm in no mood for games, Shana."

Shana caught her lower lip between her teeth. What was she doing wrong? Why wasn't he taking what she was so obviously offering? Caleb never said no. Or if he did, he never actually *meant* it.

She straightened out of her pose and looked into his eyes. There was undeniable lust there. He wanted her, no question about that. But there was also a rawness, a wariness behind the heat that had more to do with hearts and flowers than the sweaty slap of skin on skin.

Shana resisted the urge to make a very unsexy face. She'd really hoped the mushy love stuff could wait until she had him doped up on afterglow, but it looked like he wasn't going to touch her until they had their girly talk about *feelings*.

"I love you."

Caleb frowned. Okay, her confession had been a lot grouchier than she planned, and accompanied by an irritable glare, but did he have to look so damned pissed off by her girly emotional moment?

"No, you don't."

Shana gritted her teeth. "Yes, I do. Honest."

He arched an eyebrow skeptically. "You love me."

Shana tossed her head, feeling the tips of her hair catch on the bottom of her skirt. "I might not do it the way other people do it, but I do love you. And I wanna be with you." She waved her hands in a vague gesture. "Like, forever."

Caleb snorted and Shana leveled a glare in his direction.

"I can be faithful," she snapped defensively.

"The only person you're faithful to is yourself."

"I was always faithful to you," she insisted. "Technically. I didn't sleep with anyone else when I was with you. And when I wasn't technically with you, I only cheated on the others with you. So in my way, I was always faithful to you. Even when I was with them."

He frowned. "That makes no sense at all."

"I only ever loved you." His eyes softened a bit and Shana quickly pressed her advantage. "And I promise you right now that I'll only sleep with you. Until you're dead. I'm not gonna be a celibate widow. That's just cruel and unusual. If you die young, I want lots of hot widow sex." The softness in his eyes hardened again and Shana internally cursed. She sucked at the mushy girl stuff. Sex she was good at. Love was trickier. "But I promise not to cheat on you until you're dead. You have my word."

"You break your word every day."

"Yes, but only when it doesn't matter. This matters. You matter. So I won't."

He closed his eyes and slowly shook his head. "Shana, I don't think—"

She cut him off before he could tell her no. No was not an acceptable answer. "Don't you want to spank me? It'll make you feel better, put us back on even footing. You can spank me once for every guy I was with when I should have been with you."

He snorted. "That would take weeks. My hand would fall off before I finished."

"Ha-ha."

She saw a flicker of a smile around his mouth and her heart jumped. Shana reached out and tentatively brushed his hair back from his forehead. He never used to let it grow so long. "Caleb?"

"You're trouble, Shay," he said without opening his eyes.

"You like trouble," she reminded him. She bent to brush her lips softly across his.

She kept the kiss no more than a seductive tease. When she pulled back, he leaned forward, chasing her mouth. She let him catch her lips, enjoying the slow, drugging pull of his mouth. He deepened the kiss, his tongue sneaking into her mouth. The man sure knew what he was doing. She could kiss him for days.

But she wasn't that patient.

Shana straddled his legs and began to lower herself down, sliding down his chest, but Caleb caught her waist and held her still. He pulled back from the kiss, opening golden eyes gone dark and intent.

"Caleb?" she asked, hating the shiver of uncertainty in her voice. Had he changed his mind?

"You've been a bad girl, Shana."

She licked her lips, a spike of nervousness threading deliciously through the sensual anticipation heating her blood. She nodded slowly. "Very bad."

He spun her abruptly away from him. She was still stumbling on her four-inch heels when he hauled her back and yanked her facedown across his knees. Her breath left her on a gasp. Caleb's hand hovered just over the skin on the backs of her thighs, so close she could feel his heat, but not quite touching. The teasing not-quite-touch moved up to the curve of her ass, left exposed by the thong and the too-short skirt. Shana squirmed, cream drenching her thong. He was really going to do it.

"Do you need to be punished?"

Her breath came in little pants now, her body tight with anticipation. "*Yes.*" *Oh Goddess, did she ever.*

The first smack was more startling than painful. A sensual wake-up call. Caleb's hand landed and stayed, massaging her ass, soothing any trace of hurt.

"How naughty have you been?" he asked, his voice gravel rough, the erection riding her hip letting her know she wasn't alone in her need.

"*Very.*"

Another slap, another slow caress. Shana hissed and squirmed, pressing up into his hand. This was nice, but it had better be just the appetizer. She wanted the main course. She wanted to lose control.

"Are you sorry?"

This time he didn't wait for her to answer before bringing his palm down on her ass. Her response was lost in the cry that ripped from her throat. He picked up the rhythm, a series of quick smacks, wringing a series of sharp, yearning cries from her throat. The feeling was perfection. Her ass grew hot from the blows that he kept just the right side of pain. Shana spread and braced her legs, raising her ass higher.

They were both breathing roughly when he paused, his palm flat on the curve of her ass. Caleb slid his hand down, his fingers sliding beneath her thong. He speared one long finger inside her and swore.

"Fuck, you're dripping."

Shana barely heard the words. She tightened her inner muscles around his finger, writhing helplessly on his lap. Enough spanking. They'd try more later. Right now, she just needed him inside her. Now. "Fuck me, Caleb," she urged. "Do it now."

He cursed jaggedly and flipped her off his lap onto the bed beside him. Shana watched him yank off his clothes as she sprawled seductively on her back. His body was a feast for the eyes, muscles gleaming deliciously in the low light.

She licked her lips. "God, you're gorgeous."

Caleb just grunted, kicking off the last of his clothes. Naked, he turned back to the bed.

Shana reached for the fastening to her miniskirt, but Caleb gave a single sharp shake of his head. "Leave it on."

His strong hands closed on her waist, flipping her and drawing her up onto all fours. He nudged her knees wider apart and pressed her shoulders down until he had her just the way he wanted her, with her ass raised up to him like an offering, her legs spread wide.

A single quick tug ripped the thong away from her body, but Caleb left the schoolgirl outfit intact, from garter belt to heels. His fingers slid into the wet folds of her pussy, probing. "You ready for me, Shay?"

Shana didn't think she could get any wetter. Moisture dripped down her thighs. "Yeah, Caleb, do me now," she urged, giving him a teasing little waggle of her ass.

"Don't move," he ordered, gripping her hips hard enough to bruise. The thick head of his cock pushed into her heat.

Shana grabbed fistfuls of bedding, needing to sink her claws into something. His hips shoved forward and his name ripped out of her throat like a curse. His fingers squeezed her hips and he rocked deeper, but it wasn't deep enough. She needed more. She needed all of him, pounding into her. This was taking too fucking long. She needed to come.

"Come on, Cale." She shoved her hips back roughly against his unyielding hold.

Caleb drew back and slapped her ass hard a fraction of a second before he pistoned his hips forward.

"Jesus, yes!" Shana screamed. Her inner muscles clenched tight around the invasion of his cock. He drew back and rammed home again. She bit her lip hard to hold in her cries. Her head thrashed back and forth, whipping her hair across his stomach. Caleb fisted one hand in the thick red mass at the base of her skull, holding her steady with his other hand at her hip as he drove into her.

Shana dug her nails into the mattress, her entire being focused on his cock sliding into her, his body slapping rhythmically against hers. Short, keening cries burst from her throat in time to his movements. He ruled her, body and soul. Untamable Shana was a puppet to his will, drawing her pleasure—so tight and sweet and hot and hard—only as he allowed her.

The sharp sting of one last rough smack on her ass sent her careening into her release. She erupted into contractions of pleasure. Caleb's body covered hers, slamming deep and high one last time. He sank his teeth into her shoulder and she came again with him. The lioness rippled under her skin, clawing to get out, and Shana didn't have the will to hold it back. Her spine arched on another sharp wave of bliss as, together, they shifted form, the animal wildness claiming their joined bodies as the lion claimed his mate.



## Chapter Eight

Caleb was really going to miss that little schoolgirl outfit. It was a real shame it had been demolished when they shifted. Shana had looked like a thousand kinds of sin in that getup.

She shifted restlessly in her sleep at his side before settling again. She'd always been an uneasy sleeper. Caleb stroked her hair, remembering the way it had flowed down her back, loose and wild and longer than that postage stamp of a skirt.

He'd buy her a new one.

Provided she stuck around long enough to try it on for him.

Caleb winced. Dawn was breaking through the storm after a night of the best sex of his life and he was already waiting for her to renege on her promise to stick with him this time.

So much for trust.

Shana stretched against him and gave a low purr. In the dim light, he saw her emerald eyes open and blink at him sleepily.

"Good morning, lover." She kicked free of the sheets tangled around her ankles and flung one leg over his, draping herself across his chest, a blanket of warm, willing flesh.

Caleb combed his fingers through the disorderly mass of her hair. He longed to stay like this forever, in this quiet pocket of peace, but he knew it wouldn't be long before the devil inside her spurred her to something they would both regret. A part of him was already braced for it. Waiting for the ax to fall.

Shana stacked her hands on his chest and propped her chin on them. "So, do you forgive me? I forgive you."

Caleb frowned. So much for peace. "Forgive me for what? You *told* me to spank you."

Shana rolled her eyes. "I *liked* the spanking. Obviously. I meant for before." She gestured off into the distance, letting him know she didn't mean the recent past.

"What before?" he asked warily, unsure what he was being forgiven for.

"For not challenging the Alpha. For not fighting for me."

"Fighting for you would have gotten me killed. I was a kid."

"You were strong enough," Shana insisted. For a moment she fell silent, and he thought he might be able to drag her kicking and screaming back to that peaceful place. But then she spoke, her voice soft and sly. "You aren't a kid now. You almost challenged Landon today. You could defeat him, Caleb. You could be Alpha."

A veil of red fell over his vision as anger coursed through his veins. She was still trying to manipulate him. Still trying to turn him into her own personal mercenary. *Will fight for sex.*

Disappointment and frustration warred with anger, but it was the anger that won, tightening every muscle in his body.

She would never change. No matter what sweet words she gave him, no matter how many different ways she found to tell him she loved him, he would never be more than a tool to her. A means to an end. Her *love* would always be a lie.

Caleb felt like a thousand kinds of fool. He had almost believed her this time. She'd almost had him.

"Is that what this is about?" The words felt like jagged shards of glass leaving bloody tracks as they dragged themselves out of his throat. "You thought you could fuck me into challenging Landon?"

"What?" Shana blinked at him, wide-eyed and innocent. "No."

He didn't buy her act for a second. He shoved her off him and quickly stood, grabbing his discarded jeans and yanking them on. "I'm never gonna be Alpha, Shana," he growled roughly. "I don't want to be. I may be stronger than Landon, but we'll never find out, because I'm never going to challenge him. *Never.* I'm not a leader. I never have been. You've always known that, but you could never get it through your thick head that I'm not going to change. I'm not going to become the perfect Alpha just because you have some twisted need to be the Alpha's mate."

Shana pulled the sheet up in front of her, the move modest and distinctly out of character. "I didn't mean it like that."

"How did you mean it?" He held up his hand to stop her before she could reply. "Don't answer that. I don't want to hear whatever lies you dig up."

"I'm not lying!" She threw down the sheet, kneeling on his bed, wearing only her hair and her indignation.

"No? Then tell me you don't want me to challenge Landon."

Shana hesitated, her eyes flicking down to the mattress.

"You can't say it, can you?" Caleb shook his head. "I should have known. It was always about finding someone strong enough to best the Alpha. You never wanted to be with me. And, you know what, Shay? The feeling's mutual. I don't want to be with you anymore. I've had enough."

"Caleb, I did want you! I do!" she shouted, but the door had already slammed behind him.

Snow and ice covered every surface after the night's storm, but Caleb didn't feel the cold. He shifted into his lion form and ran, trying to outrun Shana's hold on him. Fearing he never would.

Shana took her lioness form, needing the comfort of her fur wrapping around her.

He'd left her. Again.

She'd confessed her feelings, did the whole mushy Dr. Phil crap, and he'd fucked her brains out. But, at dawn, he'd still run out on her so fast, he'd practically left skid marks. What did a girl have to do to get a man to stick around past breakfast? One lousy little comment—one extremely *true* comment—about the fact that he could be Alpha any time he wanted to be and he completely lost his shit.

Shana slashed her claws through his sheets, but the tantrum did nothing for her mood. She still wanted to claw and bite and savage something until it was unrecognizable. Preferably something live and twitching.

He hadn't really meant that. About being done with her. About having had enough. He couldn't have meant it.

Her throat and eyes felt tight. *Goddesses don't cry.*

Shana ran out of Caleb's bungalow before the growing urge to destroy something overpowered her and she demolished his furniture. She ran across the compound on four paws, through the heavy snow that had fallen the night before. The Storm of the Century had finally hit.

She leapt onto the snowdrift-covered porch of her borrowed bungalow, freezing in her tracks when she scented a male lion waiting for her inside.

Not Caleb.

She hoped whoever it was wanted a fight, because her claws were itching to oblige.

Shana shouldered open the door and stalked in, belly low and hackles high. Landon, in human form, rose from the chair he'd been waiting in. The Alpha stared her down. From the look in his eye, he was all too willing to give her the fight she wanted.

For a brief, reckless moment, Shana wondered what it would feel like to go for his throat. She wondered if he would be able to shift before her teeth closed around his throat, their sharp points easily piercing the vulnerable human softness of his skin. How would he fight back? Would he try to overpower her with his size and strength, giving her the advantage of speed and flexibility? Could she defeat him?

The thought swirled in her brain like alcohol fumes, teasingly toxic.

Shana shook it away and shifted form. Landon averted his eyes as she went to grab a pair of jeans and a sweater.

"It's not like you haven't seen it all before," she drawled as she yanked on the tight denim.

"And every time you remind me of that, I wonder why I haven't already thrown you out of this pride."

Shana snorted, unimpressed by the threat. "You can't do that. It would ruin your whole I-accept-you-you-accept-me bullshit plan for us."

The Alpha's jaw locked. "It isn't bullshit."

She turned back to face him, shoving her sweater sleeves up as she folded her arms beneath her breasts. "You're asking us to ignore hundreds of years of tradition and a hierarchy of strength that is as natural to us as breathing. It's bullshit."

“Equality is natural too.”

Shana laughed out loud at that little gem. “Are you freaking kidding me? Equality isn’t even *natural* to the humans. The drive to dominate, to *win*, is natural. This whole kumbaya crap is an attempt to overcome our natural urges. Not an extension of them.”

Landon was silent for a long moment, studying her. There was an oddly speculative gleam in his eyes. And something else. Something soft. Mushy. Like the way he looked at Ava. The way Caleb used to look at her.

“What?” she snarled.

He shook his head. “I was just thinking how lucky I am not to have chosen you as my mate.”

“Yeah, well, the feeling’s mutual, asshole.”

Landon sighed. “You can’t call the Alpha an asshole, Shana.”

“Oh, yeah? You’re not a big fan of freedom of speech, then? Just equality. No freedom. I get it.”

He wiped a hand across his eyes, groaning. “I didn’t come here to argue with you. Ava told me about you and Caleb.”

Shana’s eyebrows flew up. “Your wife told you about my sex life? That must have been a real bonding moment for you two. Was it good for you?”

Landon ignored her snide remark. “He won’t fight me for you,” he said. “No matter what you do to him. Caleb’s loyal and he doesn’t want to be Alpha.”

Shana’s temper spiked. “God, what is it with you guys? That isn’t what I want anymore, get it? How long are you going to punish me for the actions of the past?”

“The past?” Landon asked in disbelief. “We’re talking about *yesterday*. You told him to challenge me in front of the whole pride.”

“Yeah, but that was *yesterday*. Past. I’ve got a new game plan now.”

“That’s exactly what I’m afraid of. You and your game plans.”

“I don’t care about being the Alpha’s mate anymore,” Shana insisted, wondering as she said it if the words were actually true. They didn’t feel true, but she wanted them to be. She wanted to just want Caleb. She wanted to not be twisted and power hungry.

“Look, Ava tells me your mom is no picnic—”

“*Don’t you talk about her*,” Shana snarled, her claws flashing out as anger boiled hot in her veins.

Landon raised his hands in surrender, but his words continued, relentlessly. “Ava’s worried about Caleb. She doesn’t want you hurting him. And as long as you’re tangled up in your mother’s power plays, someone’s going to get hurt.”

“You’re asking me to choose between Caleb and my mother.”

“I’m asking you to think about what you’re doing and who it’s benefiting—if anyone—before you go starting any more fights.”

Shana's blood cooled as the logic of what he was saying slowly penetrated her anger. "My mother would never do anything to hurt me," she said, even though the words felt like sawdust on her tongue.

Landon didn't call her a liar. Her estimation of him rose a few notches.

"Look, I believe in second chances," he said. "This is my second chance at a healthy pride and I'm going to make it work. But the thing about second chances is they don't work if you're carrying a grudge. Forgetting is a bitch, but you've got to at least try the forgiveness part or you'll never get away from your past." He moved past her to the door, pausing at the threshold. "If you want to get away from it."

After the Alpha disappeared out the door, Shana dropped down onto her bed, drawing her knees up to her chest.

She'd asked Caleb to forgive her that morning and he'd thrown it back in her face. What the hell else was she supposed to do? She couldn't *make* him forgive her. It wasn't like she could fight him for his forgiveness.

She'd offered to let him spank her—which had actually been damn hot—but that hadn't earned her any brownie points on the forgiveness scale. What did he want from her?

Anger boiled up again, hot and thick in her veins.

No one was satisfied. Caleb, the Alpha, her mother. Shana wasn't good enough for any of them.

The anger swirled around, seeking a target, finally settling on her mother.

It was *her* fault. If she hadn't filled Shana's head with tradition and her *rightful role*, none of this would have happened. Shana would have stuck with Caleb, happily paired off with him at the age of sixteen. She wouldn't be the wretched mess she was today, alone and likely to remain that way.

The anger burned, its acid turning in on her. Shana fisted her hands, her claws digging bloody gouges into her palms. The pain was welcome, the scent of blood hot and thick in her nostrils. Brenna had done this. She'd *ruined* her.

Then, suddenly, Shana realized what the Alpha had meant. Caleb wasn't the problem. He wasn't the one who needed to forgive. *She* was.

## Chapter Nine

Shana crunched through the snow on her way to a reckoning that was long overdue.

She stopped in front of the all-too-familiar bungalow and braced herself for the confrontation to come. Backing out now wasn't an option.

She was going to lose Caleb—if she hadn't already lost him—all because of some stupid slip of the tongue. All because she couldn't seem to stop being her mama's girl. It was past time that changed. It was time *she* changed.

The house looked like something out of a goddamn painting, snowy and homey and sweet. Shana kicked a snowdrift off the porch to wreck the postcard perfection of the scene. She pounded her fist on the door, loud enough to be heard through an early morning hangover stupor. At the vaguely human groan of "Come in," she stomped in and kicked the door shut behind her.

Shana planted her feet and crossed her arms, hoping she looked like walking, talking menace, but feeling nervous and tremblingly small, as only her mother could ever make her feel.

Brenna pushed herself up to a sitting position on the messy daybed where she often passed out. She blinked at Shana blearily. "Shana-bay? When did you get back?"

"I've been back," Shana snapped. "I was here yesterday."

Brenna frowned in confusion. "Was that yesterday?"

"Memory a little foggy, Mother?" Shana kept her voice rough and merciless, letting all the anger of the last two decades bleed acid into her words. She was hurting and not caring who she hurt. "Why don't you have another drink?"

She crossed to the crates her mother had set up as an impromptu bar. Grabbing the first bottle that came to her hand, Shana held it up, angling the label toward the morning light seeping in through a crack in the blinds. "Ketel?" She grabbed a glass and splashed vodka up to the rim. She carried the glass and bottle over to where her mother huddled, watching her warily.

"Have a drink." She waved the glass toward her mother, careless of the alcohol that splashed out on the floor.

Brenna didn't reach for the glass. Her expression was cautious, but her eyes were locked on the glass. She licked her lips.

Shana's hand tightened spasmodically on the glass, shattering it. Shards bit into her palm, sterilized by the alcohol dripping from her hand. She threw away the remnants of the glass, not caring where they fell.

Her mother's nostrils flared as the alcohol fumes hit them.

"Not in the mood for vodka?"

Shana didn't have any conscious intention of throwing the bottle. One second it was in her hand. The next it exploded against the door in a shower of glass. Her brain didn't even seem engaged in the action. She didn't have any conscious thoughts right now, just an anger that had waited too long to be released.

Brenna flinched and cowered. "Shana-bay?"

"I'm angry with you, Mother," Shana said, the words distant and foreign on her tongue. "I've never said that before, have I? I think I've been angry with you my entire life."

Her mother's eyes grew wounded and misty. "Shana. Why?"

"Why? Are you fucking kidding me?" Shana's hands curled into fists. She needed something else to throw. Something else to break.

She stormed over to the crates, inspecting the inventory of bottles. Brenna could have thrown a party for a rock band without needing to visit a liquor store. Shana grabbed gin with one hand and vermouth with the other, ignoring the way the glass shards dug deeper into her palm. She didn't throw them, just gripped them by the necks.

"Do you remember what you said to me when Landon took over the pride?"

Brenna's eyes flickered nervously. "He seemed a good catch."

"Fuck him.' That's what you said. 'If you're going to be a slut, Shana, at least fuck someone worthwhile. It's your time. Be his consort. Do whatever it takes.'"

"I'm sure I didn't say—"

"Oh, no. Of course not. You're the mother of the fucking year. You would never tell me to whore myself out to any man who might have half a prayer of being Alpha. You would never dream of telling me to leave the only man who ever made me happy because he was never going to amount to anything."

"You deserve to be with the best."

"I deserve to be happy!"

The vermouth bottle shattered against the door.

Shana tried to take a breath, tried to find a place of calm, but all she could feel was the bottle she held. "He made me happy, Mother. I *loved* him and he loved me. But all you could see was that he would never be more than a lieutenant, a good soldier."

Brenna's face screwed up with distaste. "Is this about that Caleb?"

"Yes!" The gin erupted, a fountain of pale green glass.

Her mother flinched at the violence, but her expression had turned mulish. “You were too young to understand what you were giving up by being with him. I only wanted what was best for you. You were bred to rule, Shana.”

“I don’t give a shit what I was bred to do! That’s no excuse for turning me into the camp slut.”

Disdain flooded Brenna’s face. “You did that all on your own.”

“Did I?” Shana hefted an oversized bottle of Scotch. “I suppose I told myself how easy men were to manipulate in bed. I suppose I decided all on my own to leave Caleb and sleep with a series of men you so kindly picked out for me. Richard...” the Scotch crashed against the door, “...Daniel and Dillon...” Chopin and Tanqueray joined the destruction, “...Ari and Corin and Jato.” Three more bottles exploded into hundred-proof debris.

Shana’s throwing arm was starting to ache, but in terms of the men whose lives she’d destroyed to become the Alpha’s mate, men hand-picked by her mother, she was just getting started. Names and bottles flew across the room, until she was panting and sweaty. Her face was hot and wet, but she didn’t remember crying.

She looked down at the crates. There was only one bottle left. An industrial-sized plastic jug of cheap tequila. She picked it up and unscrewed the top. The mixed-drink puddle at the door crept across the room, soaking into the rugs. Shana splashed through it and kicked open the door. She upended the tequila over the snow on the porch, melting the pristine sweetness of it.

After the last drop had fallen, she dropped the jug beside the wreckage at the door, crunching through the glass. She didn’t bother to close the door. She wouldn’t be staying much longer.

“I’m done, Mother. I’m going to be with Caleb now, if he’ll have me. No more machinations. No more plots. Just me and my good-for-nothing soldier.”

“You deserve—”

“Shut up! Just shut up about what I deserve!” The words were a rabid scream that sucked the last of her energy. Shana felt battered and defeated, exhausted to her core. “I have to forgive you,” she said softly. “I have to forgive you or I can never expect Caleb to forgive me, but every time you talk about what I *deserve* and my goddamn *legacy*, you make it so damn hard. I need you to stop, Mother.” She took a deep, ragged breath, trying to get air back into lungs that had gone unbearably tight. “Just stop for me.”

“Shana...”

“Stop.” Shana turned and walked through the lake of poison and out the door. She didn’t look back.



## Chapter Ten

From the liquid still dripping down the front door and the shell-shocked expression on Brenna's face, Caleb had just missed Shana.

As soon as he'd run off his anger, guilt had caught up with him. He had realized that he'd never answered her question about whether or not he forgave her. Because he hadn't. He had been looking for a reason not to trust her. Looking for a way to pick a fight. He hadn't forgiven her at all. Not even close.

Shana wasn't the only villain in their relationship.

He'd been hurting her, shoving her away as hard as he could, ever since the first time she hurt him. Smacking her back every time she tried to get close again. But he'd never been able to forget her. Never been able to just walk away. Shana was in his blood. In his soul. He couldn't be happy without her. No matter how he tried to pretend.

And he was never going to be happy *with* her until he stopped clinging to past hurt. It was a choice. Forgive, move on, love her as hard as he could and hold on for dear life. Or live alone and miserable, clinging to his righteous anger.

As choices went, it wasn't difficult.

Caleb turned back to the ranch, intent on starting the rest of his life with Shana.

Provided he could find her.

Her mother's bungalow wasn't the first place he looked, but the chaos there was the first actual sign of Shana he'd found.

Caleb thought of tracking her immediately—her scent would be fresh—but some instinct stopped him. He stepped over the puddle of booze, drawing Brenna's dazed gaze. He crossed to crouch in front of her, sympathy warring with anger on Shana's behalf. The battered shell of a woman huddled in front of him had put the woman he loved through a lot of shit, but she was still Shana's mother and, in her own way, she loved Shana just as fiercely as he did.

Brenna's bewildered eyes met his. "She yelled at me," she said, visibly confused. Caleb didn't know what Shana'd yelled about, and he doubted Brenna did either. Only the volume seemed to have penetrated.

"You deserved it," Caleb said, but he kept his tone soft. He wanted her to hear every word. "This is a conversation we should have had a long time ago," he said. "You've been tying Shana up into knots for over a decade."

"I didn't mean to," Brenna whimpered.

"I don't care what you meant to do. I couldn't care less about your intentions. I don't give a shit if you blame the booze or blame Shana or blame me. I'm not going to let you hurt her anymore. She's mine now and I'm going to take care of her. That means no one is allowed to hurt her. Not you, not even Shana herself. No one."

"I would never—"

"You have and you will try to again," he cut her off brutally, though he kept his tone soft and smooth. "You need to stop drinking. I'm going to give you a chance to do it on your own, but if I see you with so much as a drop of alcohol, I'm going to have the Alpha put you into rehab so fast your damn head will spin. And I'll have him keep putting you there until you learn. You may not respect my authority, but you'll respect his. And he listens to me."

A sly gleam entered Brenna's watery eyes. "He does?"

"Yes, and you'd better be grateful he does. Because of you, Shana's done everything she can think of to piss off Landon. I am the only thing standing between you and your daughter being kicked out of this pride. So you're going to do as I ask. You're going to sober up and you are going to be a paragon of motherly love. Or I will make damn sure you never come within three miles of your grandchildren."

"Grandchildren?"

Caleb ignored the hopeful light in her eyes. He and Shana'd never talked about cubs, and she wasn't exactly the maternal sort, but he was willing to pull out any manipulation tactics necessary to get Brenna to toe the line.

"This is your one chance to shape up, Brenna," he said sternly. "I don't give second chances. Just ask Shana."

The three rocks for which the Three Rocks Pride was named formed a little cluster, marking the southernmost border of their land. They were the only landmark on the stretch of quiet plain.

Shana scrambled up onto the largest of the rocks, slipping and sliding a bit on the snow-slick surface. She perched at the top and hugged her knees to her chest, looking back over her solitary tracks through the snow.

She'd left her mother with the noble intention of finding Caleb and proving her love to him, but she'd quickly realized she didn't have the first idea how to do that. Seduction was so much easier than sincerity. How could she possibly convince him that this time, unlike all the others, she really meant to stay for good? It seemed a hopeless task.

Shana dropped her forehead onto her knees, hoping for divine intervention. Now was definitely the time for some help from a goddess.

The winter wind buffeted her back, carrying on it the possibility of yet another storm. Shana usually loved wild weather, but she wasn't sure she could take another blizzard right now. There was only so much chaos a soul could take.

"You're a hard woman to track down."

Her head snapped up at the sound of his voice. He'd come from downwind, the sound of his steps vanishing under the cloak of the wind. He looked amazing, so tall and strong, with bits of snow clinging to his hair. Shana's heart gave a little jump, but she didn't let herself hope yet. Just because he'd sought her out didn't mean he would take her back.

Caleb walked forward slowly, as if afraid he'd spook her. He leaned against the massive rock on which she perched, his head a couple of inches below hers.

"I have an answer to your question," he said.

"My question?" She didn't remember asking a question. Had she asked a question?

"If I forgive you."

Shana's stomach did a slow somersault. "Oh. That question." She didn't want an answer. Really she didn't. She just couldn't handle another heartbreak right now.

"I've been thinking about it. About all the things I've been mad at you for over the years. It's quite a list."

Oh, Goddess. Please stop him from giving her a list. She couldn't handle a list.

"But I've done some pretty shitty things too."

Shana felt her body tighten and still as her awareness sharpened.

"It won't be easy for me to trust you again." He gave a small grimace. "Any more than it will be easy for you to trust me. Trust that I'm not going to go off like I did this morning and run out on you."

Her entire life dangled precariously from his words. Was he saying what she thought he was saying?

"But my answer is yes. I do forgive you." His shoulders tensed like he was bracing to take a hit. "I love you, Shay."

She didn't move a muscle, but her heart took off like a racehorse out of the gates. "Seriously?" she whispered.

He met her eyes, his own open and resolute. "You think I'm messing with you? I'm sorry about this morning. I just..." He shook his head sharply. "No excuses. If it happens again, you have my permission to kick my ass. I'm always going to be there for you, Shay. Always."

Shana eyed him warily. If something seemed too good to be true, it always was. "I'm not going to get nicer. Just because you love me, I'm not going to turn into some sweet young thing. I come as a package. Bitchiness included."

"I know. Believe me, I know."

She slugged him lightly on the shoulder, relief and something warmer flowing through her. He did know her. And he loved her anyway. Shana gently pushed his hair back away from his face. “You need a haircut.”

He arched a brow, incredulous. “I tell you I love you. I tell you I will stand by you forever and that’s what I get? ‘You need a haircut’?”

She made a face. “I did the confession thing last night.”

“You can say it more than once, you know.” Doubt suddenly darkened his eyes. “Or was that a limited-time offer?”

She bit her lip and slowly shook her head, threading her fingers through his hair. “No time limit.”

“Shay?”

“I love you, okay? You’re a piece of me. And if you mean it, about giving us a shot again, I promise I won’t fuck it up this time.”

His eyes lit, filling with that adoring look she’d been missing for years. The one she thought she’d killed. It was like sunshine, and her heart soaked up the rays.

“I mean it. And I won’t fuck it up either.”

“Good.” Better than good. Caleb loved her. Life didn’t get much better than that. She shot him an impish smile. “So now that we’re done with the mushy love crap, can we get on with the hot make-up sex?”

Caleb gave a short bark of laughter. He yanked her ankle and she slid down the rock and straight into his arms. Her arms wound around his neck and she smiled against his skin, breathing in the scent of her mate. *Hers*. And this one was forever. She was strong enough to keep him. And he was strong enough to keep her in line.

“If you’re a good boy, I might even let you tie me up,” she whispered darkly into his ear.

## Epilogue

“I was thinking I might challenge Ava for mating rights to Landon. What do you think, hon?”

Caleb looked up from his sprawl on the rug and growled at her. The pair of cubs crawling all over their father quickly mimicked his growl with little mewling snarls of their own, prowling toward her on furry feet, with their tiny teeth bared.

Shana held up her hands in mock surrender. “A joke! Come on. At some point it has to become funny.”

He couldn’t have honestly thought she was serious. She was so pregnant with their second set of multiples—why couldn’t the man just impregnate her with a single child for a change?—she made Shamu look dainty.

Caleb rolled to his feet, his liquid grace making her mouth water. He lifted her out of the chair—Shamu belly and all—and sat, settling her back down in his lap. “The idea of you with someone else will never be funny,” he rumbled in her ear.

The twins attacked his ankles, but when he didn’t react, they quickly lost interest and went tumbling together across the floor.

“It’s ridiculous. By this point, we all know that the idea of me with anyone else is ridiculous, so it can be funny. Ha-ha. Get it?”

“You’re mine. End of story. Get it?”

Shana burrowed into his embrace, but still quietly grumbled, “At some point it will become funny.”

“Never.”

She tucked her face against his chest to hide her smile at his possessiveness. She wouldn’t want him to know how much she liked the way he owned her, heart, body and soul. No one owned goddesses.

But she didn’t need to be a goddess for Caleb to make her feel like one.

## About the Author

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The Ghost Shrink, the Accidental Gigolo & the Poltergeist Accountant  
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*In a choice between fight or flight, love makes the final decision.*

## **In Plain Sight**

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### *A Cougar Falls Story*

Cullen Whitefeather is Ac-taw –a fierce golden eagle shapeshifter. The ultimate predator, he doesn't shy away from confrontation...unless it involves one tempting, smart-mouthed woman. The woman destined to be his mate. The woman who doesn't even know he's alive.

Sarah Duncan made one mistake years ago and hasn't stopped paying for it since. Tired of the town's treatment, she finally tells the truth about what really happened and pays a hard price. Her clan wants to silence her. Permanently.

Rescue comes from a completely unexpected source—Cullen, a man who can barely seem to string two sentences together. Yet his fierce protectiveness, compassion, and bewitching touch are worth more than a thousand words.

With Sarah so close, Cullen is losing his mind—and his heart. She says she wants to leave, and the raptors want her gone. But if there's one thing Cullen's good at, it's a fight. And he's not letting her go without one.

*Warning: This book contains explicit sex, a woman done wrong, birds of prey, sexy men who can't talk to women, and red hot lovin' that'll make you wish you could fly.*

*Enjoy the following excerpt for In Plain Sight:*

He baffled her. Who was Cullen Whitefeather? As much of a predator as he was, he hadn't made a move on her until tonight. And he'd given her a room with a lock, as well as the only two keys to the door.

Cullen did his best to show her she was safe here, until she'd catch him watching her with those eagle eyes, eyes that missed nothing. Had he seen her unwilling attraction to him? Did he know how many times she'd gazed at his mouth, wondering how he'd kiss? She wasn't sure if her eager response to him was the result of chemistry or an awakened need for physical intimacy.

She wished she had more to go by when it came to sexual experience. If she was half the slut she'd been painted to be, she'd have thrown him to the ground and jumped his bones. Instead, pathetic nobody that she was, Sarah blushed every time she caught him looking at her.

God, even her subconscious was confused. She'd spent the past few days dwelling on the innuendos about her sexual promiscuity, yet she lusted after the man who'd saved her.

Disgruntled that she couldn't seem to dwell on anything without Cullen's face clouding her thoughts, Sarah changed into the flannel pajamas she'd packed, turned out the light, and curled up in bed under the heavy blanket Cullen had given her. She should have been tired, but she couldn't sleep.



She'd spent the day alternately reading and watching television. Cullen's media room held a number of recent movie titles she'd wanted to see, and she'd filled the afternoon immersed in fantasy worlds where the hero took down the villain and got the girl in the end. A happy ending, at least for someone.

Watching such fantasy, Sarah had imagined Cullen in the lead role. The mysterious hero, so silent, so strong. Curiously, his quiet freed her from worry. She liked being around him. She couldn't deny she loved looking at him, though she hoped she'd been a bit less obvious in her gawking than he'd been while staring at her. Cullen had a body made for sin, streamlined muscles that could cradle a wounded bird to his chest or lash out at an enemy in a heartbeat. His shoulder-length black hair looked so silky and fine. She wanted to run her fingers through it, to stroke him as she would a feathered bird. His eyes captivated. So dark one minute, so bright gold the next. He was like a wild animal held in thrall by magical means.

Cullen, her bird sighed with longing. Mine.

Lost in another argument with her animal spirit, she started when he knocked on the door.

"Yes?" she called out.

The knob turned slowly. She hadn't locked it tonight. Funny he chose this night to visit.

He stepped inside and flicked on the light, dressed in his jeans and nothing else.

Good Lord, I'm in heaven. His sculpted muscles rippled as he moved, his stomach a washboard of temptation that had her fingers itching so badly to touch.

"I wanted to check on your injuries, and to make sure you don't need anything before I go to sleep."

She'd gently refused his assistance since he'd patched her up. Sarah could have seen to herself just fine tonight, but a niggling urge to have his hands on her took away any sense of caution. "Uh, okay."

Cullen sat on the edge of her bed while she answered, apparently planning on helping her whether she wanted him to or not. Excitement, not fear, pulsed in her veins. He pulled the covers down to her waist and shook his head when she moved.

"No, lie there. I'll do it." His voice sounded deeper, huskier.

She nodded. He slowly unbuttoned her flannel top from the bottom to just under her breasts. Pushing the material aside, he ran a hot hand over her ribs and the prickle of a scar bruising her belly.

"Looks good."

Feels incredible. "Oh, uh, right. It's healing. No problem." She could barely speak, so absorbed with the warmth bleeding through his palm. Her breasts felt heavy, and her sex pulsed with a need she'd never before felt, not even with Will.

"How about the other one?"

"Other what?"

He rubbed her belly with a caressing touch, so gentle, yet so erotic it was all she could do not to moan her pleasure.

“Your other wound, the one between your, uh, under the last button.” He licked his lips, the motion drawing her attention to that firm, gorgeous mouth. “Sarah?” he asked, his breathing ragged.

She couldn’t think past the need boiling within her. Her inner raptor flailed wildly, wanting to get as close as possible to Cullen Whitefeather. “I don’t know,” she breathed.

Cullen slid the last button free. Her shirt gaped, but didn’t fall apart until he pushed the sides away, baring her breasts.

“Damn,” he rasped, staring not at the slight line on her skin, but on the aching points of her nipples.

“Cullen,” she whispered.

He ran a knuckle over the fading injury. “Almost healed,” he said, brushing the underside of her breasts. “How does it feel?”

“It aches,” she admitted, meaning her breasts, her body, her desire for this man she didn’t really know, but needed with her last breath.

“Yeah,” he agreed and lowered his head. The feel of his mouth over her breast stunned her. And then he sucked on her nipple, and she lost her will to do anything but feel.

He cupped her other breast, kneading and teasing it until she wanted to scream. All the while, he tormented her nipple with small bites and the generous suction of his talented mouth.

She groaned his name when he left her, only to sigh when he lavished her other breast with the same attention. Squirming to relieve the tension in her body, she still wasn’t prepared when he slid a hand beneath the waist of her pajama bottoms.

“Shh, trust me,” he whispered, leaning up to meet her gaze. His eyes were bright gold, blinding in their intensity.

“I do,” she replied with the truth.

*When the sun goes down, passion is unleashed*

## Primal Hunger

© 2009 Sydney Somers

### *Pendragon Gargoyles, Book 1*

Kennedy Beaumont loves her bartending job, even if her spirited nature sometimes gets her in trouble. Like threatening to hose down one of Pendragon's co-owners. When it comes to Tristan, she could use a good hosing down herself—maybe it'll help her stop casting him as the star of her wickedest dreams. Since he goes out of his way to avoid her, it ought to be easy to put him out of her head—until he reluctantly offers her a ride home.

Gargoyle shape-shifter Tristan Callaghan hasn't had time for anything other than recovering the mystical dagger that was used to permanently lock his brother in a prison of stone. The cat inside him should have stopped craving Kennedy's touch long ago, but now that she's sitting next to him in his car, his very human need for her is sharper than ever.

The distraction is costly. In a split second, Kennedy finds herself thrust into a dangerous, millennia-old hunt for Excalibur. A hunt that marks her for death—and leaves Tristan with a painful choice—sacrifice his family, his quest...or the one woman meant to be his.

Warning: There's nothing tame about this alpha male hell-bent on claiming his mate. Featuring bone-melting explicit sex, graphic language, violence and a little harmless bite...or two.

*Enjoy the following excerpt for Primal Hunger:*

"I still don't see why we're not going to the police first." Kennedy studied him, confusion lingering in her pretty brown eyes.

He jerked the wheel to the right, swerving at the last second to avoid a pothole he would have noticed if he hadn't been staring at her again. "We're closer to Cale's."

A few minutes later he stopped in front of the gate that kept unwanted visitors—mainly humans—off the property. He frowned at the security console. The number sequence that would open the gate jumbled together in his mind, and the harder he tried to recall the code, the harder his head pounded.

"Problem?"

Not compared to the spider web on her hand, but he didn't tell her that. Instead, he shook his head and hit the intercom button. Whatever the wraith had used in the darts was still screwing with his head. The mercenary couldn't have been expecting Tristan would show up to give Kennedy a ride or the darts would have been loaded with something a lot more potent.

Cursing his sister, who should have answered, he stabbed the intercom again. Another minute ticked off, and he gave up, digging out his cell phone this time. When Briana still didn't answer, he shoved the

phone back in his pocket. Reversing back onto the street, he parked the car and climbed out. Kennedy followed suit, glancing around.

“It’s safe.”

She cast him a dubious glance, trailing after him as he walked the front perimeter of the stone wall bordering the property. “This *is* Cale’s place, right?”

“Last time I checked.” He spotted the tree towering above the wall on the corner of the lot. “Stay right here.”

Her spine snapped straight. “Where are you going?”

“I’ll just be a few seconds. You’re safe. Promise.” Until the wraith tracked her here, but that was one more certainty he didn’t plan on sharing. “I’ll be right back.”

Ducking around the corner, he sprang up—high enough Kennedy would have asked questions—and grabbed the top of the stone wall, pulling himself over. From there he jumped easily into the tree and then back to the front of the wall overlooking the street.

“Give me your hand.”

Kennedy peered up at him. “How did you get up there?”

“Footholds on the other side.”

She stared at his outstretched hand. “I’m sure I can climb it too.”

“This is faster. Unless you’re scared of heights,” he taunted, grinning when she planted one foot on the wall and pushed off, catching his hand.

A burst of warmth exploded up his arm, the sensation tunneling straight to his groin. He tightened his grip and hauled her up the wall.

She grabbed ahold of him when she reached the top to steady herself. “Work out much?”

His grin widened as he savored the feel of her body tucked close to his. Her hand drifted down his arm, but the narrow wall didn’t leave her much room to back away.

“Do you do everything the hard way?”

“This coming from the woman who relies on water hoses to settle disputes at a crowded bar.”

A reluctant smile drew his attention straight to her mouth. He spanned his fingers across her lower back, preventing her from edging away from him. He’d let her go in just a minute, first indulging the cat’s need to touch her. The man, however, wanted a whole lot more. Hours more. Days.

Kennedy shivered. “You’re not still mad about that, are you?”

He shook his head. “But I can’t promise I won’t retaliate the next time.” Because the need to lower his head and run his mouth along the slender curve of her neck threatened to overwhelm him, he nodded to the thick branch extending from the tree. “Ladies first.”

Easing out of reach, she stepped gingerly onto the branch, clinging to the overhead limbs for balance. When she reached the trunk, she moved to another branch and waited for him to climb down first.

The cat wanted to climb higher in the tree and wait for the wraith to make another appearance, but he needed to get her inside first. His feet hit the ground and he reached up to help her down.

“Crap,” she hissed, skidding down the tree.

He should have caught her easily and kept them both upright. Maybe it was the drugs slowing his reflexes, or maybe he wanted to feel her sprawled across his chest when the impact knocked them both to the ground.

“Are you okay?” Her eyes widened and she tried sliding off him.

He anchored one arm across her back, keeping her still. “Not really.” He probably wouldn’t be okay for a long time. The closer she got, the more he wanted her there, proving his attraction to Kennedy ran much deeper than he’d imagined.

“You’re bleeding.” She caught her bottom lip between her teeth, wincing in sympathy.

“Just a scratch.” He barely registered the scrape on his cheek from connecting with the tree bark during the fall. Barely registered anything but all the places she was nestled against him. The only thing better than having her draped across him, would be her draped across him *naked*.

She stared in the direction of the main house, exposing the tempting curve of her throat.

Tristan didn’t think about it, he lifted his head and closed his mouth over her skin.

Kennedy moaned, and he ran his lips higher, sliding one hand into her hair and coaxing her down. Her thigh slipped between his legs, rubbing his arousal. The friction unleashed a groan in his chest, and he grazed her with his teeth before sucking her harder between his lips.

Why did she feel so good, taste so good? Attempting to wrap his mind around it didn’t matter to the animal basking in the feel of her fingers threading the ends of his hair, dragging him closer.

In the distance a lone howl, then a series of barks echoed through the night, and he tried to remember why that was important.

*Fuck.* The dogs.

“Oh, shit.” Kennedy scrambled off him, and he rolled to his feet as a pack of Dobermans tore across the grass toward them.



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