



The Shifter's Mate

Copyright © March 2010, Eden Cole

Cover art designed by Jordyn Tracey © March 2010

ISBN 978-1-936110-61-2

This is a work of fiction. All characters and events portrayed in this novel are fictitious or used fictitiously. All rights reserved, including the right to reproduce this book, or portions thereof, in any form.

Sugar and Spice Press

North Carolina, USA

www.sugarnspicepress.com

Chapter One

Serenity hooked her mask behind her ears and unscrewed the top on the small brown bottle. She dumped a pool of the contents into the waiting bowl and then set the bottle aside. Taking a deep breath, she grasped a Q-tip, dipped it into the clear liquid, and leaned in close to the painting in front of her. Just a millisecond before she connected with the delicate canvas, a breeze disturbed her hair, blowing a wisp across her face. She paused, knowing what was coming.

“Darling! What are you doing?”

Serenity sighed. “Mom, what a surprise.” She set the Q-tip down and wiped her hands on a rag. “It’s been all of what, two days since you last visited me? Isn’t it Salacity or Sky’s turn?”

Her mother, floating a good foot above the floor and transparent as usual, pouted and clutched her hands together in front of her. “Don’t be so snippy, Serenity, and stop frowning. You’ll never get a man like that.”

Serenity cocked an eyebrow in her mother’s direction. “Please, Mom, the way my life is going, I’ll never get a man anyway. And certainly not with you popping in every moment of the day and night. I asked you to come to the door and knock like a normal person. You don’t respect my boundaries.”

Her mother waved a wispy hand. “Boundaries, smoundaries, Serenity. Besides, what would I look like, a ghostly figure standing outside your door ringing the bell? If I could even get it to sound.”

“Whose fault is that, Mom?” Serenity glanced at her watch and stood to begin cleaning up. She’d thought she had more time to work on her current painting, but apparently not. Not with her mother nagging at her, wasting time. She tried to muster some sympathy for the woman, but dealing with her at all hours wore Serenity out. She would never admit it to her mother, but Serenity thought she understood why her father had run off when he did.

While she packed away her things, her mother flitted about, surveying the room they occupied. Serenity loved this particular room in her house. The ceiling was vaulted, stretching two stories, and all the walls were lined with books. Serenity enjoyed working in the loft at one side of the room with the windows thrown open for ventilation. Peace—that was her motto for life, but somehow she seemed cursed to never have it, especially with a mother who was determined to drive Serenity to drink.

“This room is perfect, darling,” her mother chirped behind her as Serenity strolled toward the stairs. Warning bells went off in her head.

“What are you up to, Mom?”

Her mother tsked. “Oh nothing, just . . .” She rested a slender finger alongside her pink lips. “I want a party.”

“A what!” Serenity was already forming the words to say ‘hell no’ when her mother rushed on.

“Hear me out, darling. It could be so much fun, and what better place to have it than right here in the house your father left you? In this very room. It’s perfect, I tell you.”

Serenity rolled her eyes. “Mom, you say it like the man is dead.”

“He might as well be.”

“Lord, help me.” Serenity ran a hand through her hair and shoved the heavy mass over her shoulder. She’d been considering whether to chop it all off but hadn’t found the time to think much about it between dealing with her mother and her business, along with Lenny’s issues. “Mom, I don’t have time for this today. I’m taking Lenny in for his operation. If I don’t hurry up, I’ll be late. The answer is no. You are not having a party in my house just because you think it will spite Dad. End of discussion, and have a good day.”

Before her mother could say another word or think up some new way to manipulate her, Serenity passed out of the library and shut the door behind her. She wiggled a finger, uttered a few choice words, and smiled knowing she had sealed her mother off from following her. The spell wouldn’t work long against a relative and certainly not one in spirit form, but it would give her time to get Lenny and head over to the vet’s office.

When she entered her bedroom, she greeted her cute little pooch, tickling him behind his ears. His big, sad eyes struck a soft spot in her heart. “Aw, don’t look at me like that, Lenny. Your wandering off and sowing your wild oats is what has gotten you into this mess, and I don’t need another male reminding Mom about the unfaithfulness of men. So snip, snip, bud.”

Lenny whined as if he knew what was coming. Serenity wasn’t giving in to her cockapoo this time. She’d spoiled him enough.

Within an hour, they had driven the forty-five minutes to the vet’s office and were waiting to be called. Serenity surveyed the other patrons and was somewhat surprised that they were almost all women—primped women. Most of them were fixing their hair, staring in compact mirrors and whispering nervously to each other. She wondered what was going on since she had never been to this particular vet. Her old vet, Dr. Samuels, had gotten sick recently, and his wife had insisted he retire. Dr. Samuels had suggested Jon Blackwood and said he was good with animals, had a natural ability. He’d better be good for the price she was paying to have Lenny fixed.

“Ms. Powers?”

Serenity glanced up. “Yes?”

“Dr. Blackwood will see Lenny now.”

The assistant held the door for Serenity while she scooped up a whimpering Lenny from under her chair. From the extra weight she felt, she was also going to ask the doctor about a diet. Her canine Romeo was out of hand.

Serenity was shown to a room and instructed to wait with the dog resting on the table. She had been expecting a good fifteen minute delay but was pleasantly surprised when the door opened right away. She kept a firm hand on Lenny’s back and swung around to face the doctor. All the breath left her body in a noisy rush before she sucked it back in.

The room was small of necessity, but it grew smaller still with the big, hulking man that stood in the doorway, shoulders so wide, she thought he should turn sideways to keep from hurting himself. He might have said good morning, but Serenity wasn’t sure. The gentle smile on his face arrested her along with the mesmerizing midnight eyes that twinkled and made her insides tremble. Dr. Blackwood shut the door and advanced on Lenny, but her kind-hearted pooch began to growl.

Serenity was about to whisper a calming spell, which she should have done before the man came in, but all thought to how to do it went right out of her head when she caught

the man's natural woodsy scent. Not cologne. That would be too much for his poor patients, but something earthy, something wild, and *all male*.

Good Lord, no wonder the women in the waiting room were primping with this Greek god back here.

"Ms. Powers, are you okay?" he asked.

No, not a Greek god. A Scottish god, if there was one. She knew zip about the subject. He had a sexy lilt to his words that made her want to hear him speak dirty words in her ear while he brought her to the fiercest orgasm.

Okay, Serenity, get a hold of yourself. Her mind wasn't listening. Common sense had fled. He was tall, too. Most men she seemed to attract stopped at her nose since she was just one inch short of six feet. Dr. Blackwood was at least six inches taller, making her feel average height in comparison. That was refreshing.

He laid large hands over hers and leaned in with that sexy smile aimed at her. "Ms. Powers?"

At last, she snapped out of it. "Oh, yes, um, sorry. I-I..." She put a hand to her head and closed her eyes a second. "I've had a screaming headache today and haven't been able to concentrate. Sorry about that."

"No problem at all."

She was not so out of her head that she didn't notice he left his hand on top of hers. Snatching her hands away, she rambled to cover her nervousness. This was not her. She was the calm one. Sky, her youngest sister was the shy, awkward one, poor thing. "About Lenny, yes, he's gotten a few girl dogs pregnant in the neighborhood, and it was a real task to placate the owners. So I had to break down and get it done. You know."

"Yes, I know. Don't worry. He'll be right as rain in no time." He glanced at Lenny who was still growling and raised an eyebrow while clicking his tongue. Lenny settled down right away, making Serenity stare at him. He had never calmed without a little magic before. The man *was* a natural. After he had gotten the dog quiet, the doctor looked at her again. "I should have introduced myself since you are new. I understand I have Dr. Samuels to thank for bringing you to me."

"I..."

"I mean bringing Lenny to me." He held out his hand to shake. Serenity hesitated a second before allowing him to take hers in both of his. She swayed a little toward him but caught herself. *Okay, Serenity, this is not a regency novel. Control, calm!* "Jon Blackwood," the doctor was saying through her haze.

She felt obligated to give him her first name as well, and not that she didn't want to. She wanted to give him a whole lot more. "Serenity Powers."

"Mm. Beautiful name, Serenity." His voice rumbled over the syllables giving her chills. Her normal confidence surfaced, and she quirked an eyebrow at him.

"Do you get fresh with all of your patients, doctor?" She tilted her head toward the door. "The waiting room was like a harem."

He grinned. "Jealous?" Serenity tugged her hand free of his hold and took a step back. He rushed to calm her. "I'm sorry. That was uncalled for, especially since we've just met. But you have to admit you were wrong, too?"

Her agitation dissipated. "True. All right. I'm sorry. I shouldn't jump to conclusions. It's not your fault the women have dragged their poor pets to the place they least want to go just for an excuse to see you."

Dr. Blackwood gave a great impression of a cat sound, and Serenity laughed. She held up her hands in surrender. He was interesting, she had to admit, but there was no sense getting herself worked up. Dr. Blackwood was no doubt an ordinary human, and those were not on her eligible list no matter how delicious they looked. Her mother would snap the last nerve she had, and frankly trying to hide her family's secrets would be too much to deal with. She sighed. Oh well, it had been fun teasing him and feasting her eyes on his face and body for a few moments.

"So," Dr. Blackwood said, as if he sensed her resolve to dismiss him from her life, "I will do the procedure in about an hour when my assistant has everything in place, but Lenny will have to stay overnight for observation to make sure everything went fine. You can wait and see him after the procedure, or my assistant can call you when he's ready to be picked up."

"Thank you. I will see him tomorrow then." Rather than tempt herself a second longer, Serenity said her good-byes and hurried for the door. After filling out some paperwork, she made it to her car and heaved a sigh. Sometimes it sucked royally to be a witch, and today was one of those times. All signs pointed to her dying an old, bitter woman with nothing to show for her life but a few paintings no one but her and her clients gave a damn about.

Chapter Two

Serenity surveyed the crowd below—wall to wall people, middle-aged women, and younger men. Her mother was in fine form, flirting with every man. She gave a whole new meaning to *cougar* when she'd instructed Serenity on whom to invite. Any other set of sisters would assume their mother had invited a minimum of thirty young men for them to choose from, but no, their mother wanted all of the men for herself—all to seduce, make them fall in love with her, and then dump them cold.

Ordinary human men, Serenity thought, with no magic ability. Her mother would never consider a man like that marriage material, not after her father had run off and broken her heart. Serenity's sister Sky strolled up, all wide eyes and sweet innocence. Just looking at her always brought out Serenity's big sister protective instinct.

"Why did you give into her, Serenity," Sky asked.

Serenity took the glass of red wine Sky handed her with thanks. "I had no choice. Didn't you hear? Mom, haunted my clients, scared most of them off, making them think I had ghosts in my house. My business is my livelihood, so I figured one night was better than being tossed out on the street because I can't pay my bills."

Sky laughed. "Poor, Sis. But aren't you being dramatic? I mean your house is paid for, and Salacity and I get some money every month. We could pay the electricity at least."

Serenity patted her sister's hair that would have matched hers to a tee if Sky hadn't been cursed with static-y, flyaway hair. At least the colors matched. With their red hair and hazel eyes, they could have been triplets rather than being two years apart in stepladder. "Dramatic or not," Serenity said, "I can't have Mom interfering with my business, so here we are at this ridiculous party where she's keeping all attention on her."

Sky crinkled her cute little nose. "I know, and none of them are interesting."

Serenity laughed. "So you've talked to them?"

"Not exactly."

Knowing her sister, Serenity was sure Sky hadn't said more than a quiet hello to anyone male or female. She took her sister's hand and led her down from the loft to the first floor. They weaved through the people milling about, discussing political current events that Serenity knew nothing about, nor did she care to know.

When it became obvious that they were heading toward a couch in the corner where two handsome men sat alone talking to each other, Sky pulled back on Serenity's arm. Serenity held on. "No you don't. We're going to introduce ourselves."

"But they're ordinary. I don't sense a drop of magical ability from them. Mom won't approve," Sky justified.

"Who cares what she says. Besides, it's just practice for when destiny brings your mate," Serenity told her. "If you've warmed up to talking to men, then you won't push the right one away because you're too afraid to take a chance."

"Bah," Sky grumbled. "You don't believe in destiny, and I haven't seen you talking to any of the men either."

"I can't get past Mom's breasts," Serenity quipped.

They both laughed and turned to survey their mother's outfit once again. The dress hugged her slender figure like a second skin from the waist up, and from the waist down fell to the floor in sensuous flowing silk. However, it was the bodice that commanded

attention of all in the room. The V cut at the front dipped almost to their mother's navel, and she had never been flat-chested. The swell on either side of the V made Serenity blush every time she looked at her mother.

When she turned to Sky, she saw what was probably a reflection of her face, flaming red cheeks. "I can't believe she dresses like that at her age, and it embarrasses me more than anything she's ever done."

Serenity agreed. "Exactly. So to catch these two men away from Mom is a treat. Let's take advantage of it before she turns her attentions to them and we're left chatting with Mrs. Hildegarde or Ms. Corinne the rest of the night."

Sky heaved a sigh. "You're probably right. By the way, where is Salacity?"

As if on cue, their sister strolled into the room on the arm of one of the men. Her flaming hair, usually kept in order, was all over her head. Her cheeks too were red, and her lips looked swollen. Serenity rolled her eyes. That girl would never be outdone by their mother. If she had to climb on a man's lap to get his attention, she'd do it, and from the looks of it, Serenity thought, her sister had done more than that.

"Never mind her. Let's have fun of our own."

They started to walk again when the butler her mother had insisted on hiring for the evening came strolling into the room. Serenity winced at the formality in his uniform and the way he stood at attention with his chin raised high in the air. Serenity knew he was about to announce another guest, but when the name Jon Blackwood fell from his lips and the sexy vet strolled in after the butler, she couldn't move. Nor could she take her eyes off him.

While he didn't have formal wear on in keeping with her mother's dress code, his short sleeved shirt, showing off bulging biceps, made him no less appealing to any red-blooded woman in the place. The dark, inquisitive eyes scanned the room, and Serenity found herself wanting to be the person he sought. Then commonsense retuned when she remembered of course she must be who the doctor searched for. If he was here, there might be a problem with Lenny. Her heartbeat quickened with her fear, and she released Sky's arm to start off in Dr. Blackwood's direction.

Serenity barely heard Sky's question of what's wrong as she weaved through the crowd. By the time she was within shouting distance of him, Salacity had beaten her to the doctor's side. Serenity paused frowning. Her younger sister had quickly released the poor man she'd been kissing and wound herself around the vet's arm, pouting too damn beautifully up at him.

Telling herself that the pang she felt was still about her concern for Lenny, Serenity drew up in front of the couple with their heads close together. "Is Lenny okay, Dr. Blackwood? What's wrong?"

Salacity looked around at her with an expression of a cat having gotten into the cream, and Dr. Blackwood looked guilty. Serenity wanted to toss them both out of her house for no good reason.

"Oh, Ms. Powers, I apologize for interrupting. I'd no idea you had a party going on when I brought Lenny back," the doctor explained. "I would have waited until the morning."

"Nonsense, you came for me," Salacity told him in a throaty voice that grated on Serenity's nerves. "It's fate, destiny, you know. Although you being Serenity's nasty dog's vet spoils things, but you look good enough to eat, so I can overlook that." She

lowered long thick lashes and pressed her breasts against his arm. “Oh, and don’t call me Ms. Powers like you call my older stuffy sister. Call me Salacity, okay?”

She said the last part like it was all settled, but Serenity’d had enough. She peeled her sister off the vet. “Go find the man you were missing with for over an hour, and let me complete my business with Dr. Blackwood.”

Before Salacity could reattach herself, Salacity guided the doctor out to the hall and across to one of the sitting rooms. As usual, she felt a sense of loneliness leaving the ballroom turned library—forcefully changed back to ballroom for the night by an overbearing mother. She attributed the feelings to the fact that she and her father used to have long conversations over good books almost every night when she was eleven years old. He had his favorite pastimes with Salacity and Sky, she supposed, but her time with him had been precious. No other person could replace what she lost when her father left.

When she and Dr. Blackwood entered the sitting room, he turned to her. “I’m not used to seeing a butler answer the door in this day and time. I was a little thrown off, and couldn’t stop his enthusiasm when he told me he would announce me.” The doctor widened his eyes in amusement and ran a hand through his tight coal black curls. Serenity’s fingers itched to do the same, to run along his handsome face, and have him look down at her like he’d done with Salacity. She wasn’t the shy type, but she couldn’t see herself pressing a breast to his arm either. The thought almost made her laugh.

“Oh don’t worry. I’m not used to a butler either. It was all my mother’s doing, and you’re right, the butler is a little too happy with his duties. No harm done.” She clasped her hands together and raised her eyebrows. “So Lenny? Is he fine? Where is he?”

“Oh, yes,” the doctor exclaimed. “With all the excitement, I forgot. He’s in my car, in a carrier. He’s just fine. Since I was out this way, I thought I’d bring him by. The infection I told you about which caused me to keep him another few days has cleared. No worries there. And...would you like to go to dinner with me?”

Serenity blinked. “Me?”

He grinned, flashing a charming smile that weakened her knees. “Is there any other lovely woman in the room?”

She blushed. “Dr—”

“Jon, please.”

“Jon. That’s a kind offer, but I’m so busy with my work right now and well...” She trailed off having no idea what excuse she could give him. *My witch of a mother would only get in the way of anything serious, and fighting my nympho of a sister for your attention isn’t my idea of fun.*

In two long strides, he closed the space between them and took her hands in his. In an instant, Serenity’s wish came true. The doctor stood over her staring down into her eyes, and the warm look she saw there made her tremble like Sky. She felt warmth creeping into her cheeks. No man, no matter how attracted she was to him had set her off balance like this one. She wanted to say yes to him if only to explore these odd feelings. She had to admit she kind of liked a man challenging her control, as odd as that seemed.

“You’re different, he announced. When she raised her eyebrows, he explained. “Like you observed, I have more female clients than male. The women do chase me, and I don’t say that to be vain. I’d prefer a quieter life, just to enjoy my practice of working with animals.”

Serenity's heart sank although she hadn't been thinking of him as husband material. No matter what she wished, her life was anything but quiet.

"I sense a...what do you women call it...a kindred spirit in you. I can tell just by our brief exchange and dignified way you carry yourself, that you too like a calm, ordered life."

She grinned. "You can tell all that, huh? Well, I think that's a fancy way of agreeing with Salacity that I'm stuffy." He rushed to apologize, but she laughed. "I'm only teasing. You're right. I do like order and peace. Unfortunately, my family as you've seen at least in one of my sisters does not allow that often."

Her thinking was not as clear as she liked standing so close to him and with him holding her hands, she put space between them. She glanced back at his handsome face, broad shoulders, the entire package, and an impulse hit. Why should she deny herself time with him because of her family? After all, he was talking about dinner, not marriage, and it had been awhile since she dated. Beyond that, it had been too long since she'd had sex. Fingering herself was good, but couldn't compare to a man. She resisted allowing her gaze to venture lower on his body.

"Okay, why not? Let's enjoy ourselves."

The happiness she saw in his expression made her tingle, but as she walked him out to his vehicle to retrieve Lenny, Serenity had a distinct premonition that things were not going to go smoothly between the two of them. She didn't have to guess at what—or rather *who*—would be the cause.

Chapter Three

Serenity sat at her vanity inspecting her face. She'd completed her makeup, had slipped into her dress, and buckled on a nice low-heeled pair of pumps, but she couldn't make herself leave the room. Not because she didn't think she looked nice. The low cut of the dress showed off the swell of her breasts and had more tiny buttons on it that could be undone for a more daring woman, something she was not. Although she didn't spend much time in the sun which left her skin pale, it was smooth and youthful. Jon had seen her bare arms the night of the ball and at his office, so if he wanted a bronzed woman, he could have chosen one.

No, her problem was her house was in an uproar at the present moment with every family member present. Her mother having declared a hate for the house that was her father's had bullied Salacity and Sky to move in together into a smaller house nearby. However, both of them spent more time at Serenity's than at home. Her mother might hate the house, but her spirit haunted the place often enough.

Now, minutes before Jon was due to arrive, Salacity had not two but three men fighting over her in one of the sitting rooms, and from the thumps, they must have moved from shouting to fist fighting. Sky had locked herself in the kitchen with a spell on the entry so she could create a masterpiece that would win her soul mate's heart, or so she said, and Lenny hadn't stopped barking at the cat their mother had decided to make her familiar, although she had no way of taking care of it herself.

Serenity closed her eyes and massaged her temples. She needed to go out there and toss them all out of her house, but that would take time and energy she didn't have. If she didn't think of something, Jon would arrive and continue right on around the circular drive until he was headed home again.

The distinct sound of a car turning into the property reached her. Serenity glanced toward the monitor she'd conjured just so she could hear over the din in her house. A sable sports car had just pulled up. She had no doubt that it was Jon. Rising, she waved a hand to dispel the monitor and headed over to her private bookcase where she kept books she didn't want the others borrowing. A spell on the shelf kept her sisters and mother from seeing it when they entered her room. Only if they knew it was there could they break the spell, as she was not more powerful than her sisters and definitely not more than her mother. That last fact was a shame or she'd have broken the spell her mother cast on herself after her father had walked out. Then maybe her mother could have a life independent of Serenity. That hope remained unfulfilled.

When she had selected the book she sought, she opened it and flipped through the five hundred year old tome. Soon she found the spell and repeated the words. At once a vibration of energy pulsed through the house from foundation to roof. All went silent and still. Serenity smiled, closed the book, and put it away.

As she descended the stairs, she spotted Lenny in the act of barking at the cat atop her grandfather clock. The cat's back was hunched, and his mouth lay open in a silent hiss. Lenny was crouched down, angry that he could never reach that high with his short legs and plump body. Serenity tucked Lenny in the library and the cat in the sitting room with her frozen in place sisters. Her mother stared at her from the other side of the room with arms folded, eyes narrowed. Her mother wasn't frozen, but she was trapped in the space

she occupied until the rest of the room returned to normal. Serenity waved and shut the door.

Just as she reached the foyer again, the doorbell sounded. She checked the hall mirror and touched a hand to her upswept hair and straightened her dress before opening the door. All calm fled, and her breath caught in her throat. Jon was everything a woman could dream. He was dressed in a dark suit, the jacket hugging his powerful build like it had been tailor made for him. His hair was slightly damp but fell about his head in a way that made her want to play with it. She kept her fingers to herself and stepped back.

"Hello, Jon. Come in. I'll just get my purse so we can go." She had no idea how long the spell would last. It should be at least fifteen minutes, but her sisters were clever. They might know something to weaken it without researching. She imagined their minds were working away at the problem even though they couldn't move physically.

He stepped inside and glanced around. "Wow, big difference from the last time I was here. It's so quiet. You must have gotten plenty of work done today."

She smiled and shrugged, hurrying to get her purse. "No more than usual. Let's go, please. I'm famished. I'm not one of those women who eats like a bird to impress a man, so I hope you're not expecting that."

He chuckled. "Why would I? However, I don't believe you. You're tiny and beautiful. There's no way you eat more than a bird."

She winked. "Flattery will get you everywhere, sir."

Jon stepped up behind her and rested a hand on her lower back as he opened the car door for her. "Is that a promise?" he whispered in her ear. She shivered but didn't respond. She wasn't planning on jumping right into bed with the man, but she wasn't going to delay to seem more like a lady either. She didn't have to win his heart after all. That made her a lot freer to just have fun.

They arrived at the restaurant Jon had chosen, and Serenity was pleased with his choice. They were seated right away since he'd also made reservations. While they perused the menus, Jon said, "I'm pleased you decided to go out with me. Otherwise I would have had to resort to Salacity."

She stiffened. Often men preferred her younger sister for her lower morals. Serenity never cared since the empty-headed men Salacity liked to control didn't appeal to Serenity. "So it was a toss up between the two of us. Either sister would do?" she asked, annoyed that her feelings were hurt a little. Jon didn't seem like the type to go for her vain sister.

"Not at all. I am with the sister I want," he assured her. "However, if you stubbornly refused to see me for the catch I am, I would have resorted to making you jealous to win you over."

She burst out laughing. "You're terrible."

"I'm persistent." He winked. "I get what I want."

"Hm, maybe a little too often, doctor. I must be less accommodating of your swollen head." She blushed at how her words sounded, and he laughed, seeing where her mind had led her.

"With references like that, I think you're more ready to *accommodate* my swollen head than you're letting on."

Serenity narrowed her eyes at him and shook her head. She'd enjoyed the company of her fair share of men, but never had she been this free to flirt with sexual innuendoes.

Okay, she wasn't exactly *free* with it given her words were an accident, but she didn't regret saying them.

"I think, Mr. Blackwood, that we'd better steer the conversation to safer topics for this date. Else, you'll be mewling for a treat later."

"Mewling huh? I do a mean 'mewl' actually. Care to hear?"

She grinned. "No, thank you. Behave yourself."

He held up his hands in surrender. "Okay, I will behave. Now, what shall we have tonight? The lake trout is delicious. So is the salmon."

She studied the menu. "How about the steak? Any good?"

He shrugged. "I've only ever had seafood. You can try it, and if you're not happy, I will get you something else."

"How sweet. No, I'll trust your judgment and get the salmon." She added to that her order of sides including a small salad and requested her favorite wine to complement it. Jon liked her choices and chose the same for himself. When she had sipped from a glass of Robert Modavi Chardonnay, she asked him, "So tell me about yourself, Jon. I hear an accent. Are you new to our fair city?"

"Mm, somewhat new. I've been here three years. I moved my practice from London to the States for a change of scenery and some other private reasons."

The 'private reasons' comment intrigued her, but she let it go. "Ah, London? I was so sure you were Scottish."

He grinned. "Yes, born and raised in Glasgow. However, I'd lived in London for ten years before I moved to the States. My mum and brother still live in Scotland, and as far as I know they have no plans to follow me."

"Your mum," she mimicked. His accent gave her chills. She'd like to hear him speak a lover's gentle words with that lilt of his, but that was for another time. "I envy you to have your family so far away. Don't get me wrong. I love my family, but they can be a handful and more."

"I can imagine from what I saw. The women in your family *are* beautiful. Your mother—"

"Don't say it." She laughed, knowing he was going to comment on her mother's dress. *Beauty* was not the word she would have used. "My mother is the biggest of my challenges in life. Let me tell you."

"Is that so?"

Serenity froze. Her mother had just spoken behind her. Since tonight was not a full moon, she had to guess her mother wasn't visible to anyone in the room—that is anyone who could not see spirits, and certainly not ordinary humans. Reaching up to touch her ear, Serenity turned her head to the right in a casual attempt to check. Her mother floated a foot off the floor, arms crossed in annoyance. Serenity didn't know why she hadn't sensed her sooner.

She looked back at Jon, and she could have sworn he aimed his gaze directly toward her mother, but then he focused on her face with a pleasant if ignorant smile. "Something wrong, Serenity?"

"No, not at all." She put her napkin to her mouth pretending to wipe her lips and spoke under her breath. "Get out of here, Mom."

"Not on your life! I want to see who this man is who makes you disrespect your mother in this way."

She groaned. Jon watched her with curiosity sparking his dark eyes. She thought fast to discourage her mother from staying. "Would you like to dance, Jon?" she blurted out.

His eyebrows went up. "We haven't eaten yet."

"It might be a while." She stood up.

"Of course." He came around the table and took her hand in his. Serenity almost jogged to the small dance floor and allowed Jon to pull her close to him and wrap his arms around her. The moment his palm rested on her lower back, all thought of her mother fled from her head. Desire ignited inside of her like someone had added lighter fluid to it. Serenity let out a small *o* while Jon pulled her tighter.

"I knew I'd enjoy holding you in my arms." His lips brushed her ear, and she shivered. "I'm glad you suggested it. Now, I will not let you go."

"Promises, promises." She simpered and coiled herself closer, rubbing her breasts into his chest. Jon took in a sharp breath while Serenity ran a hand down his over his hip and on around to his ass. It wasn't until her fingers were inching toward a more shocking area that she realized her mother was influencing her. She stiffened and fought for control. "*Get the hell out of my body, Mom!*"

"*Aw, you're no fun,*" her mother whined and then stepped out of her.

How had she not felt her enter? Two spirits could not easily occupy the same body. One would be forced to take the lesser role, and she'd be damned if she let her mother seduce Jon. What he must think of her. It was one thing to tease with words, but to start acting like a slut was a whole other ballgame.

Embarrassed, she pulled her hand off his ass, but he caught it and put it back. "We were having such fun. I was about to follow suit." He looked disappointed at being denied the chance to grab her ass as well.

"Maybe we should get back to our table," she suggested. If her mother didn't leave, she might at least be less tempted to touch Jon from the other side of the table.

Jon agreed, and they returned to their seats just in time for their dinner to arrive. Serenity tucked in with relish. The salmon had been an excellent choice, and she let Jon know.

"I hardly ever get to taste food, Serenity. Can't you let me enjoy it with you for a few minutes? I'll behave." Her mother leaned over her shoulder looking starved although Serenity knew she wasn't. She sighed.

"Fine," she muttered, too low for Jon to hear.

Her mother stepped into her body, and this time she did feel the slight push inside of her like a barrier had been breached. Her belly tickled somewhere deep, her mother wiggling as if to get comfortable. When Serenity's hand rose without her thought to grasp her fork, she yanked it back.

"*I am in control, Mom. Just taste. That's all. And then get out.*"

"*Fine!*"

She ate in silence. After a few moments, she felt Jon's eyes on her and looked up at him. "What?"

He shrugged. "Something about you is so different. I don't think I've met a woman quite like you, but I'm enjoying it immensely."

"So am I," she agreed. "Although I warn you, it will get worse before it gets better." He raised an eyebrow at that comment but didn't respond. Worse, it seemed, was closer than she thought.

Her mother, not known for keeping to her agreements, began to push for control of Serenity's body. Serenity should have been on her guard, but she had been lulled by watching Jon's face and listening to him speak, something she thought she could do for hours. The words in her mind had been uttered before she recognized what they were. Like she'd done on too many occasions with Salacity and Sky, her mother had used her physical body to cast a spell, one that put Serenity's spirit in a semi-sleep. With it, her mother could make use of Serenity's body without hindrance.

"This is for your own good, darling. He's an ordinary human after all, and from the way you two get along, I can tell you'll hand your heart to him before a month is out. Now rest. Let Mom handle everything."

"Mom, no," Serenity called out, but her voice was weak, and she was sluggish like she'd been drugged. All she could do was watch and listen.

Her mother began by fanning herself. "It's hot in here isn't it? No, it might be you getting me all overheated." She pinched open a couple of buttons on Serenity's dress and fanned some more while she pushed her breasts forward. Serenity watched Jon's eyes widen and focus on the amount of cleavage she'd just revealed. The lust in his dark eyes was plain. His fork clattered to his plate, and he became still like a wild animal surveying its prey.

Having him watch wasn't enough for her mother. She ran a cloth napkin over her chest, down into the valley between her breasts, and then tossed it on the table. If Serenity had control of even her heart, it would be thumping hard right now when her mother rose. She rounded the table, and with a pout pushing out her lips, she sat down on Jon's lap. Serenity was not surprised to find his cock rock hard beneath her ass. Her mother wriggled on it to Serenity's shame.

"Mom, please!"

"Let's fuck right here, right now," her mother suggested to Jon.

She'd gone too far. Jon drew back a little, his expression changing. "While there's nothing I'd enjoy more, this isn't the place. We would end up in jail."

Her mother harrumphed. "Oh you're no fun. Let me see if I can find someone willing to make me scream in ecstasy." She stood up and whirled to face him while surveying the restaurant. By this time, all eyes were on her, especially since she decided the amount of skin she flashed still wasn't enough. Two more buttons followed the previous she'd undone. She pushed the silky material aside, just short of showing off Serenity's deep rose areolas.

Jon leaped to his feet, almost knocking over his chair. He caught it in time and set it right. With a snap of his fingers, he had a waiter and had paid the check. Without a word, he shuffled them toward the door. Moments later they were in his car, and Serenity's mother had made Serenity climb on Jon's lap. She put a hand down over his crotch and squeezed. He covered it, keeping it still.

She moved in for a kiss, and when their lips were no more than a quarter of an inch apart, he let loose a low growl that sounded feral. Her body shivered, and it made her think of wild animals and white hot sex. In response, her mother moaned, but Serenity wept in silence because she wasn't the one to enjoy Jon.

Jon moved back from the kiss before their lips touched, and he raised her hand instead to his lips. He planted feather touches along her palm and flicked his gaze up to

her eyes. His dark eyes seemed blacker if possible, and then without warning, he bit her hand. She cried out.

Serenity felt a jerk in her abdomen, and then with the clarity that comes with being in one's right mind, she knew her mother had somehow been forced out of her and the spell broken. If by some miracle Jon took her out again and they made it to the all out sex stage, she would have to let him know that she wasn't into biting. His teeth were razor sharp, it seemed. However, for now, she was happy for the accident. She was free before anything worse could happen.

Under full control, she climbed down from his lap and fixed her clothes. "Um, I can't explain why I behaved like I did, but well...uh...I think it's best if we call it a night."

Jon watched her in silence for a few minutes, and then he smiled. "Like I said, beautiful woman, you're unlike anyone I've ever met. I'm going to enjoy getting to know you."

Chapter Four

Jon woke up the next morning with a grin on his face. He could not believe the madness that had happened the night before. And he'd been seconds from having sex with his girlfriend's mother. He shivered in disgust. The woman was drop dead gorgeous, but it was Serenity he wanted. Of course since she was using Serenity's body at the time, he had found it hard to resist. Her body was all a man could want and more. When she'd flashed those lovely breasts at him, it had taken all the willpower he could muster not to take the gift offered to him.

Of course he could see her mother's spirit. All animals could see into the spirit realm, and after all, he was a panther shape shifter. They didn't know that, and he wanted to keep it that way for now. Most humans could not understand his kind and presented fear when they found out his kind existed. He had assumed Serenity was just like every other human, which was why he kept quiet in the first place, but from what happened last night, he thought there was much more to that family than met the eye.

The woman he wanted had a ghost for a mother. Yet, he was sure he'd seen her in the flesh the night of the party. Others had seen her as well, and most of the men there had been human from the scent of them. He'd spent his life with animal instincts, sniffing out potential enemies as easily as breathing. The Powers women were something else. They smelled like humans, but they were more. He looked forward to finding out their secrets before he revealed his own.

Resting an arm over his head and staring at the sunlight reflected on the ceiling, he brought Serenity's face to mind. With all the mayhem that was her life, would she enjoy living at his house in the country? "Get control of yourself, Jon."

He sat up. So that was it. Somewhere in all this, he'd made his decision to have Serenity as his mate. His mother had told him for years that he'd know the moment he met her. And the oldest in his clan, Mordecai, had said he had a dream that the States was where Jon would find his mate. All had listened to Mordecai's wisdom over the years. The old panther shifter had never steered them wrong. That alone was why Jon had come. Yet for the last three years, he'd wondered if he had come to the wrong city or didn't make himself known enough by going out to clubs and bars.

They weren't his idea of fun. He loved peace and quiet, a calm life living close to a forest where he could run free in his shifted form. What would Serenity think of that, he wondered. Were they truly as compatible as they seemed? He stretched his arms up over his head and stood up. A cold shower the night before had helped him ease the pain of arousal, but a warm one this morning would get his blood flowing. He would have a full week of work, and then this weekend he'd convince Serenity that last night didn't matter. They could begin again. If he could get her away somewhere her mother could not follow, things would develop naturally, and he could begin to woo his mate. Excitement at the prospect stirred his cock.

Serenity might be looking at him as a potential lover, but he had more in mind. *Much* more.

* * * *

Serenity hadn't heard from Jon in days. Sure, he had said he looked forward to getting to know her better, but in the light of day after he'd had time for a cold shower or even working out his sexual frustrations on his own, he might be thinking she was either crazy or a dirty whore. He may have decided not to call her again. And how could she take Lenny in for his follow up visit and for the shots he was due? She couldn't show her face at the pet hospital, and it was all her mother's fault!

"Mom," she shouted in the hall at her house. Her mother had kept low for a couple of days now, but Serenity wasn't giving up. She would put her parent in her place once and for all, and Serenity had plans to search her special book for just the right spell that would banish her mother from her home. That might be drastic, but she'd had it with the woman's interference in her life.

Serenity did not believe in influencing humans with magic unless it was absolutely necessary, but when a couple of clients with big restoration projects would not return to her, she'd had no choice but to tweak their memories. With the terror of Serenity's haunted house gone from their minds, they were both free to decide on their own to give Serenity their business. However, she would not overlook her moral code again.

"Darling, what's all the shouting about?"

Serenity spun around to find her mother at the top of the stairs. Dressed in a shimmering nightie and an eye mask shaped like a butterfly on her forehead she was the picture of lovely innocence. Serenity rolled her eyes. "Cut it, Mom. A spirit does not need to sleep. You've said so a number of times when you woke me up at three a.m. out of boredom."

Her mother sighed, and her appearance changed to the dress she'd been wearing the day she cast the spell on herself out of heartbreak. "You're still no fun, Serenity. Even after I gave you a few days to appreciate what I did for you with that man."

"Appreciate!" Serenity sputtered. "You interfered with my life. I'm twenty-six, Mom. I don't need you to fix anything. *If* I date a non-magical person, damn it, that is my business!"

"Language, Serenity," her mother admonished.

Serenity growled. She lifted a hand and snapped while dropping a few choice words. Their surroundings changed in an instant. All around was darkness. The only reason Serenity and her mother could see each other was because she arranged it that way. "Do you want me to lock you in here, Mom?"

Her mother scanned the area although there was nothing to see. "The void? This cannot be it. You don't have the power, Serenity, and you wouldn't dare do that to your mother!"

"Try me." She put a hand an inch or two above her. "I've had it up to here with you. I won't stand for your meddling in my business or my personal life. If you don't back off, I swear to goodness, you'll regret it. I will lock you in the void for a solid year."

Her mother rushed forward and extended her hands as if to clutch Serenity's, but her ghostly fingers passed through Serenity's. "Please don't do that, darling. You know that would make me crazy. I have to have color. I need life."

"Really? Think about that the next time you are tempted to take over my body. In fact, why don't you travel or something, give us all a rest."

The older woman pushed her lip out in a pout, but Serenity felt no compassion. She stood there glaring at her mother, unmoved.

“Just do me the tiniest of favors, Serenity, and I promise I will go away. I know you don’t love me, so I won’t bother you after this one thing.” She crossed her heart and held up a hand.

Serenity ran a hand through her hair and then flipped it over her shoulder. She blew out a heavy breath. With a snap, she brought herself and her mother into the library, which she had fast restored to the way she liked it after the dance. “What favor, Mom?” she asked as she ascended to her loft.

“I’ve found a clue to where your father is.”

Serenity stopped on the stairs and turned back. “What?”

“Well, where he was at one time,” the older woman admitted. “In Washington State, a small B&B there. I just know that witch he ran off with is using her magic to cover his tracks, but I have friends who can trace her. To some degree anyway. One of my friends has uncovered what he believes is your father’s lingering aura. If you could let me use your body to—”

“No!”

“But Serenity, this could be my only chance. You wouldn’t deny me that.” Serenity saw real anguish in her mother’s eyes. The woman had loved Serenity’s father, and it had devastated her when he walked out. She’d been so heartbroken, she’d cast the spell over herself intending to end her life. Fortunately, or unfortunately depending on Serenity’s mood, the spell had gone wrong and taken her mother’s body but left her spirit. In fact, they had no idea where her body was or if the spirit form her mother took was a manifestation of her physical self, just on another plane. She’d spent years trying to find something to reverse the spell without success.

“Mom, you know you should let go and move on with your life. He obviously doesn’t want to be found or want anything to do with his family.” She wasn’t without her own hurt in this situation.

“How can I?” Her mother held her arms out to the side. “How can I move on, Serenity? You tell me. And you and I both know that I suspect that bitch he ran off with had something to do with my ending up like this.”

Serenity rolled her eyes. Some days her mother blamed Serenity’s father, an ordinary human who had never exhibited any abilities in magic whatsoever. Serenity’s love life was in the toilet, and it looked like Jon wasn’t going to call. She was at a standstill currently with her business, so there was no reason why she couldn’t do this quick investigation for her mother. After all, Serenity longed to know why her father had cut line and left her and her sisters along with their mother. She wanted to talk to him, if only once to resolve the pain in her own heart.

“Okay, Mom, I’ll do it. I’ll go to Washington State, and whether there is anything for me to find there or not, you stay out of my hair when I get back. Deal?”

Her mother clapped her hands together like a child. “Oh, darling, you won’t regret it. I know this is a good lead. I feel it in my bones.”

“I said is it a deal, Mom?”

“Yes, fine. It’s a deal.” Her mother sighed. “Okay, now come on, Serenity. You really should make lunch. Your sisters will be here shortly.”

“Why would they—” The bell sounded at that moment. Serenity grumbled and left the library with her mother floating behind her.

“You pulled a nasty trick on them the other day, and it’s good that you offered to cook for them to make them feel better. I think they may have been doing a little cooking of their own, a spell to get you back, I mean.”

Serenity eyed her mother over her shoulder. She suspected that if her sisters were doing any such thing, it was their mother that was egging them on. She wasn’t scared of Salacity and Sky. Let them bring it on.

Chapter Five

Serenity gathered her bags in one hand and opened the taxi door with the other before stepping out. The trip to Washington State had turned up little for the three days she'd been there. Her father had stayed in the bed and breakfast all right, but that had been more than a month ago according to the records and a small spell she used to discern which of the registry names was the fake one he used. At least they had that. If her father didn't know she knew the name he was using, maybe he would use it again. Serenity intended to turn over all the info to her mother. Let one of her 'friends' handle it.

She'd taken possession of her luggage and paid the driver before her weary mind registered the fact that Jon's car was in the drive. Her heartbeat kicked into high gear. Excitement made her quicken her steps to the front door, and she had to fight to keep a grin from spreading from ear to ear. He had come back, but why was he still here if one of her sisters told him she was out of town and wasn't expected until evening. She'd been bumped up to an earlier flight and hadn't had time to inform her family.

After unlocking the door, she shuffled inside and set her bags down. Music she'd told Salacity she hated blared from one of the sitting rooms. She regretted telling the woman she could stay while Serenity was out. She should have known it was the wrong choice. Stopping in the hall to check her appearance in the mirror, she straightened her clothes and tucked loose strands of hair behind her ear. To keep it from flying all over her head during travel, she'd pulled her thick hair back in a bun. Jon would think she looked like a school teacher, she thought in disgust. It couldn't be helped. She didn't want to wait another minute to see him again.

When she neared the room where the music came from, her ears rang. She winced and uttered a spell. Silence reigned. She laughed knowing they'd think the player had malfunctioned. With any luck, she will have ousted her sister before she figured out Serenity had caused it.

The door way stood open, and she was just about to turn into the room, when Salacity's words reached her. "I'm sure you understand how I feel, don't you, Jon? I mean you're a handsome man, but I...I met someone else. That's where I've been these last couple of days. With him. We hit it off right away."

Serenity froze. Her sister was using her voice, and since Jon hadn't demanded to know what the hell was going on, she guessed Salacity had also transformed herself to look like Serenity. *Damn it!* She'd known before she left that Salacity hadn't forgiven her. Sky had because that's how sweet a girl she was, but not the grudge-holding Salacity.

She fumed. This was kindergarten stuff. They'd pulled this nonsense as kids against whoever had been hired to watch over them at the time after they lost both their parents. Salacity with her antics had driven away most of the staff their trustees had hired. Now she would pull this kind of prank on the man Serenity was interested in? This was too much.

She backed from the door and scoured her mind to recall the old transformation spell they had used as children to look like each other. Who needed to be identical triplets when they had magic? Serenity recalled and uttered the spell. She reached up and yanked the pins from her hair to let it fall down around her shoulders and down her back. A few buttons undone on her blouse finished the look, and she strolled into the room.

“Serenity,” she shouted. “I need to have a word with you right now.”

Salacity’s cheeks pinked at being caught, but Serenity glared at her until she rose and excused herself from Jon. Serenity snatched her arm and almost dragged her from the room. Once they were in the hall, Serenity shut the sitting room door and turned to her sister.

“How could you do that? We’ve never interfered with each other’s romantic relationships, Salacity.”

Her sister planted her hands on her hips. “Oh yeah? What do you think you did when you froze us all? I was deciding between those three men, and your little trick made one of them late for an appointment. I was going to choose him, but I didn’t get the chance.”

“Come off it,” Serenity grumbled. “You just don’t like anyone getting the better of you.”

The cold grin her sister flashed made her grit her teeth. “You’re right, and no one ever will. Your ex is waiting. Hm, I should have had breakup sex with him.” With that, she flounced off, not a care in the world.

Serenity moved back to the mirror to change her appearance once again and pin up her hair. This time, she didn’t bother with trying to smooth every strand. Occupying her mind was what excuse she could give Jon for what Salacity had said to him and if their budding relationship could be repaired at all.

When she could delay no longer, she took a deep breath and headed for the sitting room.

* * * *

Jon stood when the door opened. He narrowed his eyes on the woman standing there with her hands clutched together. Anger surged through him. He didn’t know what kind of game Serenity and her sister were playing, but although they changed their appearance, he knew which sister was which. Neither could change her scent, and Serenity’s scent was embedded in his memory. One could never fool a panther’s sense of smell.

He did wonder what kind of ability the women had if they could so radically change their appearance. Salacity had looked exactly like Serenity, even down to the tiny scar she had to the base of her right thumb. He’d noticed the small imperfection at dinner the other night. However, he was also pissed off that they would trick him in this way. Serenity had struck him as a more straightforward woman, one who took care of her own business rather than leave it to Salacity. And why send the slut of a sister for the breakup? That made no sense at all.

He had no intension of letting Serenity slip away from him, but he decided to play along with the game. At least the real Serenity was now in the room, the woman he grew more sure with each passing day belonged with him. He’d missed her over the last week. The small crisis that had kept him elbow deep in work had driven him crazy, especially when he hadn’t been able to reach Serenity. He’d at last come by only to be dumped by her sister.

“So I guess there’s nothing more to say,” he announced. “You’ve decided on someone else. I don’t force myself where I’m not wanted.” He picked up the small gift

he'd brought by—chocolates. Since she was so slender and didn't need to watch her weight, he hoped she wasn't dieting and would accept it.

"No, wait," she almost wailed. The hurt Jon saw in her face cut him, and he stopped. "I..um...you didn't call. I thought..." she began.

"That's what this is about?" He narrowed his eyes at her. "I didn't take you for one to play games, Serenity."

Her eyes widened, and she looked worried. "Games?"

Too late, he realized she wouldn't know that he could sniff out which sister was which. He thought on his feet. "Lying to me about another man rather than telling me that you're angry I didn't call." She sighed. He'd been right that she worried about him learning her secret. He still didn't know the specifics. "I did call. I left several messages for you, but you didn't return my calls. I was also stuck in emergency surgery with two dogs and a cat—if you can believe it."

She nodded. "Problems arise in threes." She crossed the room and stood in front of him with her head bowed. After collecting herself, she raised her head and looked him in the eyes with determination in hers. "I'm sorry, Jon. About everything. We've gotten off on the wrong foot from the start, but...I really want to be with you." She bit her lip. "I think you know what I mean."

Jon tugged her into his chest. He ran his hands down over her back and stopped just before her ass. He did not need a repeat of their first date, but he had every intension of exploring Serenity's body—soon. "Come away with me. I know it's early in the relationship, but I think we both need a small vacation. Don't you agree?"

"Do I ever!" she declared. "Where would we go?"

He grinned. "I have a small house in the country, surrounded by endless woods. It's calm and peaceful from morning to night. All we have to do is enjoy it. What do you say?"

"Yes, I'm there," she said with a happy laugh. Jon's anger faded away.

They'd had their fair share of mishaps, misunderstandings, and false starts. He would do everything in his power to be sure their time at his country house was perfect. That would start with contacting Mordecai. His clan leader would know just what to do to ensure that Serenity's mother did not interfere with their plans.

* * * *

The following weekend, Jon's arrangements were made. He picked Serenity up at her house at six-thirty Friday morning, and with no drama, they headed for his country home. Anticipation had his shoulders tight. He hoped the item Mordecai had told him to buy would work. By no means did Jon have a magical bone in his body, so he'd felt like a fool collecting the substance the older feline had instructed him to get. Mordecai had told him he couldn't cast a spell, but certain protective barriers were possible even without magic to keep spirits at bay. One type of barrier was built using iron pellets alone.

When they drew up to his house, Jon jumped from the car and hurried to help Serenity. He held his breath to see what she thought of the place, if she would prefer the noise of the city.

Her beautiful smile spread over her face, and she drew in a huge breath. "Feels like coming home. I could stay here and never leave." Joy burst forth in his chest, and he

squeezed her close to his side a little more than necessary as they continued up the walk and let themselves into the side door leading to the kitchen. Jon had every intension of making this weekend one that Serenity would never forget.

Chapter Six

Serenity followed Jon to the second floor of his house and down the hall to one of the bedrooms. When he opened the door, she realized the room was his and paused before entering. Was she ready for this? When he invited her, did he expect they'd become lovers right away? *Of course he did, stupid. You said this is what you wanted.*

She stepped inside and placed her bag on the bed. What she hadn't thought through was what if they didn't mesh well in bed? She'd be stuck here the entire weekend or would be forced to ask him to take her back to town. With a peek over her shoulder, she saw that he hadn't moved from the door way, but instead he watched her in silence. Her throat dry, she swallowed, facing her bag. Her fingers curled around the handle, she couldn't make herself begin to unpack. A sound behind her made her stiffen, and Jon's hands came down on her shoulders.

"If this isn't what you want..." he began.

"I..."

He leaned around and kissed her cheek. On impulse, she turned her head and let him capture her lips in a heated kiss. Fire ignited in her body, and she twisted to snake her arms up over his shoulders and around his neck. Jon molded her body to his. She felt his hard-on pressed in her belly, stoking the desire that had already begun to grow.

This was good. This was so good she could give into more right now. Fear subsided, so she reached out to find his hand and lifted it to her breast. Above her lips, Jon gasped, but he didn't pull away. He molded her breast, pinched her nipple, and rolled it between his thumb and forefinger. She moaned, arching into his touch.

Jon broke the kiss to stare down at her. His hand stilled. "Are you sure, Serenity? I don't want to hurt you. We've moved very fast."

"We both know what we want," she whispered and teased his mouth with soft kisses. "I hope in being honest about my needs, I haven't given you a bad impression of me."

"Never!"

"In that case, I'm sure this is what I want." She ran a hand up over his powerful chest, loving the feel of his taut muscles. Beneath his shirt, she found he sported a six pack many men would long to have. She'd dated men with good bodies before, but Jon went beyond all of them. Anticipation to see him naked rose up inside of her, but Jon pulled her hands away.

"I would love for us to make use of this bed right now, but it might be best if we settle in first, have a bit to eat, and then relax together. Trust me. My appetite is such that you will need all the energy you can muster."

Serenity almost panted at hearing that. "Okay, but you better live up to those boastful words, mister." She turned, and he smacked her on the ass.

"I intend to."

When he closed the door as he left, her legs gave out, and she sank down on the bed. She put a hand to her forehead and closed her eyes. Jon was different. There was no evidence as to why, but she knew he was. If she wasn't careful, she'd fall in love with a non-magical man, and that would spell disaster. She needed to remind herself that this was all about pleasure and having fun. Nothing more. That morning she'd told herself to leave her heart at home and to look at this weekend as the vacation that Jon had suggested it was. Women on vacation took a brief lover all the time.

“Now, if only Mom doesn’t find me out here, everything will go smoothly.”

She stood and strolled over to the window. Something she’d felt upon crossing a certain point on Jon’s property had been bothering her. She couldn’t put her finger on it. Looking out the window, she narrowed her eyes to the small road they had traveled along. She remembered that it had extended at least a mile from a bigger road which the public used. *That’s when*, she thought. When they turned into this small road, she’d felt something different in the atmosphere.

“Serenity, would you like something to drink? Fruit juice or soda?” John called from a distance.

“Yes, thanks. Fruit juice would be great,” she called back. She smiled. No doubt the weirdness was the lack of family pressing on her consciousness. Jon’s estate represented tranquility. Of course she would be affected by it and even do a mental shift when she arrived. Dismissing those thoughts, she moved to the bed to begin unpacking.

* * * *

After a day filled with exploring Jon’s land and house and a short trip into town to get a few supplies, Serenity settled with him in his living room by the fire he’d lit. She had removed her shoes and socks and sat curled next to him. He poured them each a glass of wine and handed hers to her.

“Thanks,” she murmured. “Don’t you think it’s a little warm to have a fire going?”

“The temperature drops considerably at night out here. Besides, nothing says romance like a roaring fire.”

She chuckled. “So you’re trying to seduce me. Is that it?”

“Oh no, beautiful lady. I’ve already reeled you in.” He winked and sat on his heels to remove his shirt. His bare chest tantalized her right away, and she knew the real reason he wanted it overly warm in the room. “Tonight is about us getting to know each other physically, and for me to help melt away your reservations.”

“Hm, I have no reservations. I’m a twenty-first century woman. I’m open about my sexuality.”

His twinkling eyes challenged her to prove it. Serenity handed him her glass to rest on a nearby table and stood up. With confidence she wasn’t feeling deep down inside, she began to remove her clothing. Sure, she liked her body just fine. Exercise and diet kept it where she liked it best, but no woman was without doubts or fears about how her lover viewed her. Still, Serenity forged ahead. Jon seemed like a good judge for what would please him, and he’d chosen her.

Her blouse slipped to the floor, and she worked on unbuttoning her jeans next. A peek at Jon showed he was almost salivating watching her. She chewed on her bottom lip as she worked the pants over her hips. When her white with lilac flowered bikinis came into view, he grinned.

“That surprised me.”

She pouted. “Surprise isn’t what a woman wants to hear a man say when she strips down to her bra and panties.”

“No, no, baby, trust me. Your body is doing things to mine even without a touch.”

Directing a pointed glance at his crotch, she had to agree. The fact that his cock had hardened and twitched while she undressed was the only reason why she hadn't run out of the room from his comment.

"What I meant was"—he stood up and came to rest his palms on her hips—"I expected to see you dressed in lacy panties with maybe holes in the bra where the nipples point out."

Her eyes widened. "That's what you want?"

"No." He drew her closer. "I thought you might do it because you assumed I expect it. I love your panties." He demonstrated by hooking his hands in the band and tugging downward. "And your bra is so sexy." He leaned in to bite the edge before licking her skin behind it.

Serenity shivered. When Jon pushed his tongue farther and then, impatient, reached inside her bra to guide her nipple into his mouth, she almost collapsed. He helped her wiggle the rest of the way out of her panties but never stopped sucking her nipple. She moaned and cried out, pushing closer to him. Jon lifted her in his arms, wrapping her legs around his waist. He lowered the two of them to the bearskin rug and only then released her.

Hovering above her, staring into her eyes and then examining her body like it was his next meal, he whispered, "Your body is perfect, Serenity. I already know I'm not going to be able to get enough."

When he sat up straight to undo his pants, she helped him and reached inside to cup his cock. Jon hissed. He threw his head back, eyes closed as she stroked him. He was so rigid and tight. Her pussy moistened just with her touching him, and although she'd never craved it before, she hungered for a taste.

Together, they got him out of his jeans. While he stood, Serenity scrambled to get him into her mouth. "You don't have to..." he began, but she swallowed much of his thick, long length and began working him.

"Mm," she moaned, thrilling in his flavor, loving even the salty taste of his precome. She pulled heavily on him, wanting more. Jon almost shouted from her actions. His firm thigh muscles quivered where she gripped his legs to keep herself balanced. He placed a hand on the back of her head and with a gentle movement pushed her forward so she would take him deeper.

"I never imagined," he moaned. "Damn, your mouth, Serenity! Suck it, baby. Suck your mate's cock hard."

She wasn't sure if she'd heard him say "mate" or if she was imagining it, but the way he commanded her turned her on. The gentle vet had turned feral, and it made her wetter and wetter. She'd always been in firm control of her life and decisions. To have him take it in a word, a touch, was unbelievable.

When it seemed that he was about to release, he caught hold of her chin and took his cock from her. Serenity whined in protest. "Hold on, beautiful. I'm not coming just yet. When I do, I'm going to be buried as deep as possible inside you. Now, then." He swiveled his finger in front of her. "On your knees."

Serenity, who had sat back on her heels when he took away her prize, did as he instructed. She turned around so her ass faced him. Jon must have liked what he saw because his eyes flashed brighter and wider. He licked his lips, dropped to one knee, and reached out to unsnap her bra, the last of her clothing.

Her breasts tumbled free. Jon leaned down over her to play with them, twisted her nipples and kneaded their heavy weight in his palms. When he released her breasts to glide his hands down her belly and around to her hips, she clenched in anticipation of his entry. He massaged her ass and stroked her back.

“Relax, baby. I promise I won’t hurt you.”

She closed her eyes. “It’s not that I’m afraid. I want it so badly, I can’t stand it. Jon, give it to me now. I need it.”

He tested her wetness instead. “You need it, huh?”

“Yes!”

He pushed a finger into her, and she could have cried, but he didn’t tease her long. He must be as desperate for more as she was. The next instant, he parted her folds with the tip of his cock and pushed forward. His long shaft pierced her. She whimpered and drove back onto it. He was so thick, but so good. She couldn’t help trying to take as much as she could, to take it all. Her pussy walls stretched and molded around him, drawing him in. For a moment, Jon fell forward to rest his forehead on her back. He held them both still, his heavy breathing the only sound in the room. Serenity waited, knowing he was trying to gain control so he wouldn’t finish too soon. She could be patient for that because she wanted this to go on until she screamed through an earth-shattering orgasm. There wasn’t a doubt in her mind that Jon could get her there.

After some time, he sat straight, grasped her hips, and began a slow, sensuous stroke. Serenity clenched the rug under her and bit her lip. She moaned and dropped her head toward her chest. Matching Jon’s rhythm, she gyrated her hips, luxuriating in the feel, the sounds of their mating.

“You feel amazing, Serenity,” he said in a voice she’d never heard before. She thought of glancing back at him, but couldn’t do more than flow with his movements. He reared back, pulled almost all the way out of her, and then slammed forward. Serenity shouted in pleasure. The sensations were almost too much. She didn’t know whether to faint or to beg for more.

“Harder, Jon. Take me harder,” she pleaded.

“You couldn’t take it as wild as I could go, Serenity,” he warned.

“I can. Do it harder, please.”

He picked up the pace and ground into her. With an arm under her, he lifted her higher and drew her back to him with unimaginable strength. Each thrust sent her to new heights and brought her closer to an orgasm. Jon didn’t seem tired in the least. He never slowed his pace or backed off until her core muscles clamped down, and her thighs quivered. She cried out in ecstasy as the world seemed to shatter around her. Whimpering his name, she came and came until all the strength left her body.

Jon pushed her down on the floor and lay his weight atop her. He found her lips and kissed them lightly. “Can you take me until I come?” he asked.

Her eyes closed, she nodded. “Yes, of course. I want you to be pleased.”

“You can’t begin to know how pleased I am thus far.”

Her pussy tighter since she lay flat, she caught her breath at how he worked his cock in and out of her at a much slower tempo. Between thrusts, he kissed her, pushing his tongue into her mouth. She sucked it groaning, knowing her actions would drive him higher. A low growl sounded in his throat. He was near to his breaking point.

“Yes!” he shouted through his release. He collapsed on top her, his mouth covering her ear. “I love coming. I love—”

Serenity wondered what he had been about to say. “You love what?” she dared to ask.

“Never mind. I want you to come again.”

She opened her eyes to look at him. “So soon?”

“Are you too tired?”

She mentally checked her body and knew she wasn’t too tired. She loved coming too and had brought herself to climax over and over somewhere around ten times in a row with her fingers. Could Jon do that for her? She didn’t think so, but from the challenge in his eyes, she thought he was willing to try. What man could last through all that, when they came a lot less often?

“No, I’m just getting started,” she told him.

He grinned. “Good because you might have noticed I’m still hard as a rock.” He demonstrated by pulling out of her and gliding back in. Serenity groaned, pushing against his cock. “You do have the ability to have multiple orgasms, don’t you, Serenity?”

She couldn’t stop the grin spreading over her face. “Yes.”

“Then come, my love, let me please you.”

He pulled out of her and turned Serenity so they faced each other. She scooted over while keeping the bearskin beneath her and braced her back against the couch. Jon raised her up on his thighs, and before she could take another breath, he pushed into her. A pulse of need ignited her desires all over again. She let her head fall back when Jon lowered his mouth to her nipple. A hand between them, he tantalized her clit and sucked at her nipple while slamming his cock up her channel.

Serenity’s second orgasm came without warning, rendering her helpless to Jon’s loving. Tears filled her eyes, and all she could do was whine through it. On the climax’s heels were two aftershocks that were almost as intense. “I can’t believe how good you are,” she rasped. “No man has...” *How can I ever let him go? I won’t. I just won’t!*

When Serenity came down from her high, Jon pulled out again and lifted her until she sat on the edge of the couch. He lowered his head to her pussy, but she stopped him with a hand on his shoulder.

“Wait, you’ve come in me.”

“So?” His eyes glittered dark as midnight. She panted. “Do you want me to eat you, Serenity?”

She couldn’t help herself. “Yes, I want it.”

“Say it then,” he demanded.

She was not afraid to ask for what she wanted. “Eat me, Jon. Eat my pussy.”

He slung one of her legs over his shoulder and bowed a second time. His tongue snaked out and lapped at her from top to bottom. She shuddered. He moaned as if the mixture of her juices with his was the most delicious thing he’d ever tasted. Just knowing he was willing to do such a thing made her hotter.

She tangled her fingers in his dark locks and thrust him forward. His tongue slid up her pussy, and she wiggled against it, demanded more, and insisted he suck every drop into his mouth. Jon ate with relish, the greedy sounds he made driving her to the brink. She screamed his name and threw her head back. Another few licks, and she came riding his mouth hard.

When he finished, Jon rose with narrowed eyes, and towered over her. He pulled her roughly to her feet. His man-handling of her made her feel smaller, more delicate, almost afraid of him, and it got her off. He turned her, walked her around the couch to its arm and then pushed her forward until she bent over it with her ass in the air. Jon pushed two fingers up her pussy, coated his fingers well with her cream, and then trailed the slippery mixture to her ass. She gasped, knowing what he intended.

She'd had anal sex before, but Jon was the biggest man she'd ever been with. It would hurt, but she wanted it, ached for it. Sucking in deep breaths, she waited for him to invade her body with his shaft, but he used his fingers first, working her hole until her muscles relaxed. When he had slipped in three fingers and teased her rim until she was dizzy, he pulled them free and followed with his cock.

Serenity drew in a breath, struggling to adjust. Jon stroked and squeezed her ass as he worked himself deeper. "Relax, my love. Take your mate's cock. Take all of it. You must please me."

"Yes," she cried, tears in her eyes. Why did it feel like she belonged to him, like he had laid claim and not just as a lover? She didn't care. She needed to be one with him right now, to have him possess her, body and soul.

His pump was calculated and controlled. Between thrusts, he smacked her ass and then soothed it. Serenity shook through a third and then a fourth orgasm, yet still, Jon didn't stop making love to her. He reached under her to play with her clit and push fingers in her pussy. His fingers combined with his cock in her ass made it all the tighter. She couldn't stand the pleasure and fainted.

When she came to, Jon had moved them to the couch. She lay under him, and from the fullness in her rear, she knew he was still buried inside her. "You need to rest," he whispered. "I'll pull out."

"Don't." She willed her body to relax more. "I've never felt like this. I don't want to be disconnected from you. Is that weird?"

"No, it's right." He kissed her ear. "I feel exactly the same way. Now, let me bring you to a few more orgasms, and then I will carry you up to a bath and let you rest. You'll need as much as possible because my appetite is great."

She nuzzled her face to his neck. "I want nothing more than to please you."

"I want the same, my love. This is only the beginning."

Chapter Seven

Serenity woke some time after midnight. She reached out to feel for Jon, but he wasn't in bed. She couldn't figure out what had made her wake until lightning lit the room, and thunder echoed in the distance. She swung her feet to the floor and sat up. Every muscle in her body protested, and her pussy was on fire. Jon had not been exaggerating when he said he had a big appetite. They'd had sex for hours, and every moment of it had been amazing. He'd brought her to not ten but fifteen orgasms, and if she hadn't fainted again, she was pretty sure he could have just kept going on and on.

She would fight her mother forever if she had to, but she wasn't giving up Jon as a lover. Somehow, she'd keep her life separate from him. Maybe they could come out here on the weekend and spend it in each other's arms. During the week, she could make the excuse that she had to work and so did he, so he wouldn't ask about spending the night in her house.

In the bathroom, she searched beneath the sink for Epsom salt. That and a spell to boost its affects would help heal her body and get her ready for more with her lover. She believed with time her body would adjust to so much sexual activity, and it wouldn't hurt at all.

Before her bath, she wanted to find Jon. She needed to see if he was as lost on her as she was on him. She'd never been dominated by a man, but Jon pulled it off and brought out the submissive in her that she never knew was there. Maybe it was the submissive now that cried out inside to be near her...*mate*? He'd used the word. She was sure of it after the second use. He might have meant something like match, as if they were a great match. That she could understand.

The house was in total darkness. Rain pounded on the windows, and the lightning every so often freaked her out. "Jon?" she called, but he didn't answer. She was beginning to think he wasn't in the house, but where would he go at this time of night? Having searched the entire first floor, she came to the conclusion that Jon was gone. Unreasonable loneliness hit, but she brushed it away.

She was about to try scrying in a mirror to find out where he was, although she didn't do it often as she respected other people's privacy. She thought she heard something at the back of the house.

Beyond the kitchen window, a shadow stirred among the trees, visible between lightning strikes. Jumpy now, she wanted to ignore it and wait for Jon after turning on all the lights, but he might be out there hurt. She had to check. Reviewing a couple of defensive spells, she opened the back door and stepped out in the rain. Her nightgown, which she had slipped on after she rose, plastered to her body. She shivered.

"Jon? Are you out here?"

No answer, but something out there moved. Peering harder, she spotted it no more than a few yards away, a sleek, black panther soaking wet. She gasped.

"What the hell? What is he doing in this part of the world?" The animal held its head low and walked with little energy. She imagined it was pissed that it had been caught in the storm. Everyone knew cats hated water. At least that's what she always thought.

"Serenity, go...I mean come inside the house."

She uttered a small shriek at the sudden voice she recognized as Jon's, but she couldn't figure out where it was coming from. It seemed to have come from inside her

head, and oddly enough made her feel like the panther had spoken to her, but that was impossible.

Jon had said come inside the house, so she had to believe she'd overlooked him somewhere or he had come in a different door. She stepped in out of the rain. "Jon? Where are you?"

Becoming annoyed, she began switching on lights and going over the first floor with a fine tooth comb, not skipping any closed doors. A thump made her turn around to find Jon descending the stairs in a bathrobe and wiping his wet hair with a towel. "Baby, you're making a lot of noise down here. What are you up to?" he asked with all the casualness of a man who had not been missing for the last twenty minutes.

"Where were you?" she demanded.

He strolled over to her and kissed the tip of her nose. "Aw, did my baby miss me? I was in the shower, in the guest bedroom. I didn't want to disturb you when I woke up since I did wear you out earlier. What are you doing awake?"

Serenity stared at him for a few minutes, wondering if his story was plausible and then realizing why wouldn't it be? There was no mystery here. She was the one wandering around in the dark late at night and scaring herself, not him. Tired as she was, the panther and voice must have been an illusion as well.

She shook her head and moved into his outstretched arms. "I woke up, and you were gone. I wanted to be near you."

"My baby," he soothed. "Next time I will take you with me to the shower. How about that?"

"Mm, yes," she murmured. "I did intend to take a bath to soothe my pains. You want to join me? That tub is big enough." She lifted her head to look at him. "Unless you think you'll turn into a prune?"

He grinned. "I'll risk it."

For an hour, they luxuriated in the bath, holding each other. Jon bathed her, trickling warm water down over her and then massaging her limbs until the pain eased. When he had stepped out of the bathroom for more towels, she had cast the boosting spell, and by the time they were finished, she was back to her normal self.

For the rest of the night, they snuggled like two people in love, and Serenity had to keep reminding herself that this thing they had was purely physical, nothing more. By the time the sun rose high in the sky and it was pushing afternoon, she had almost convinced herself.

* * * *

The scent of bacon woke Serenity from the sleep she'd found at last, and she forced one eye open. Jon, looking too chipper for so little sleep, stood there grinning at her, dressed in a half apron and nothing else. She sat up to find he also held two plates filled with eggs, bacon, and waffles. Instead of orange juice, which she would have expected to accompany such a treat, Jon had poured them two huge glasses of milk.

She flicked an eyebrow up. "Milk? Really?"

He shrugged. "It's a weakness."

She chuckled. "Don't tell me you like to dunk cookies in it as well."

His nose wrinkled. "No, too much sugar. I like the subtler taste of milk. Somehow it soothes me. Always has, probably always will."

"You're so unusual," she told him. "I think I'm going to enjoy our time together."

"You say that like it's limited." He set the plates down on the nightstand, removed the apron as if he was fully comfortable with his nakedness, and he climbed into the bed next to her. "We can stay together forever, Serenity."

When he handed her a plate, she pretended to be engrossed in eating. "Mm, this is good. These waffles taste homemade and not like the frozen kind."

"Serenity?"

She peeked over at him. "It's a little too soon to be talking like that. Besides, I thought we were both looking for a sexual partner and nothing more. I thought we were moving fast just for me to come out here. I mean you could have been a serial killer masquerading as a vet."

He took her fork from her and set it on her plate before moving the plate to the bed. When he reached for her hands, she let him tangle his fingers with hers. "Is that what you think about me? Do you regret coming here? I can take things slower anytime you say. I don't want you to feel uncomfortable."

She ran a hand through her hair and closed her eyes while she rubbed her forehead. "I just want...I mean with the panther and..." She broke off not knowing where she intended to go with those words. She'd told herself to dismiss what she thought she saw, but when she went to sleep, she'd dreamed of him, the panther. She wasn't a dreamer by any means. Hers were often silly with no reason to them, but last night after she drifted off, her head was filled with thoughts of the panther, so vivid and strong. She sighed finding nothing more to say.

"Come on. Eat your food," Jon suggested. "We'll have a deeper conversation later. Right now, I want us to hurry to get dressed so we can catch the farmer's market."

"Oh good," she said with excitement. "They don't have one where I live, so I don't get to enjoy much fresh fruit and veggies straight from the farm. Do you have roadside vendors as well out here?"

"We do. So when we're ready to head back, I'll let you load up."

"Sounds good."

In companionable silence, they ate and later showered and dressed to head out to the market. Like a contented married woman, Serenity hung on Jon's arm testing the fruits and veggies to see which she wanted. Not that she knew much because cooking was not her forte. However, she knew what she enjoyed eating, and Jon was an excellent cook. He had promised to make her anything she chose at dinner that night.

When a vendor offered Serenity a sample of his honey dew, she waited for a slice while Jon wandered over to another stall. By the time she had exclaimed over the deliciousness of the fruit and purchased two heads, a woman in a frilly little white sundress had approached Jon. With the complexion of a country miss and deep rose pouty lips, she latched onto Jon. "I didn't know you were home. I missed seeing you, Jon."

Jealousy reared its ugly head in Serenity like she'd never experienced before. She raised a hand about to put a bit of acne on that fresh face or to make those pert breasts appear to sag, but Jon turned toward her with a gentle smile while unhooking his arm from the girl's. "Lena, let me introduce to Serenity. She's very *special* to me."

Serenity wondered at his emphasis on special but warmed to his putting Lena in her place. She hated thinking about what she'd been about to do to the girl. Lena had no way of knowing Jon was dating someone if he hadn't been home. Repentant, she stepped over to Jon's side and took the hand he reached out to her. They laced their fingers together.

Lena's surprised then angry gaze scanned their faces and dropped to their linked hands. "But she's not—" she began.

Jon tsked, Serenity thought a little too quickly. "Now, Lena, don't be like that. You knew this time had to come."

"But I thought I—" she began yet again. For the second time, Jon cut her off.

"There was never anything between us, Lena," he told her with firmness in his tone. Serenity glanced at him and noted that his eyes seemed darker. She couldn't see what would upset him about what Lena said. He'd taken the news with a laugh that his patrons were more interested in him rather than what he could do for their pets, but he was annoyed at Lena for assuming she and he would get together. Was the man so blind to how women threw themselves at his feet?

She reviewed in her mind what Lena had said before he cut her off. "*But she's not...*" What did that mean? Serenity wasn't her? Wasn't from the country? Hell, Jon wasn't from this nation let alone from this small area. Lena didn't appear to be that ignorant. Serenity didn't know Jon that well, but she knew him well enough to know he wouldn't have given Lena false hope. Serenity concluded it was wishful thinking, nothing more.

After Jon placated Lena, they headed back to where he had parked the car. Serenity glanced over her shoulder to scan the area. Whatever feeling she'd gotten around the grounds of Jon's home, it was different here at the market and at small shopping areas they had visited. Not once while she was there had she been plagued by her mother, which was a welcome vacation, but she worried when they left his grounds. She kept thinking her mother would spring out unexpectedly, and she'd blurt out something to her parent making herself look nuts to Jon. Feeling that way kept her from enjoying Jon fully, until she forced thoughts of her mother out of her head.

Besides, her sexy lover deserved all the attention she could shower on him. She grinned over at him as they pulled out of the parking space. "Right, Jon?"

He looked confused. "Right, what?"

She laughed and began to massage his inner thigh. Jon grew out in a flash. "My sexy man deserves all the attention he can get, doesn't he?"

"Oh yes!" he declared. "Any attention you want to shower on me is welcome."

Inspiration struck her. "Let's have sex in the woods, Jon. I've never done anything that wild. It feels public. I tend to be more cautious." She checked his expression to see if she'd shocked him or turned him off. "Want to?"

His eyes softened. "My love, I would partake of your lovely body any time, anywhere." He lifted her hand from his leg and kissed her fingers. "In fact, I know the perfect spot."

Like two horny teenagers, they hurried back to his house, put the food away, and prepared a picnic basket with snacks in case they got hungry later. Jon assured her they would be back in time for him to cook the meal he promised. When the food was ready, Serenity went to their room to change into a light dress rather than the capris she'd worn to the market. Her body was almost singing a tune to be with Jon again, and she wanted him to have easy access to her most intimate places.

Forgoing a bra, she tided the straps of her dress around her neck and arranged the two slips of material covering her breasts. Jon strolled into the room and stopped. The heat in his eyes told her he'd noticed she'd worn no bra. "Do you have panties on under that?" He nodded to her dress.

"Yes, why?"

"Take them off," he commanded.

She shivered, loving when he was like this. Lifting her dress, she reached under it and hooked her panties to slide them off. She stepped out of them and flung them on the bed. Jon licked his lips.

"Much better." He crossed to the dresser and selected lighter clothing for himself as well and changed quickly. Within minutes they were outside walking along a trail she hadn't spotted yesterday. "Watch your step, baby. There are fallen branches from the storm."

"Hm, that reminds me. Maybe it will be too wet to lie on the ground."

"Not where we're going," he called back to her. "It's out in the sun, and as you've seen, it's a very warm day. The ground there is moister because of the water, but because of that, there's lush grass."

"Water?"

"There's a lake not too far. You don't mind making love in the water, do you?"

"Not at all." The trees opened to a beautiful lake with gently rippling water and lush green grass as Jon had said. Serenity caught her breath at the peaceful scene. "Now this is what I've been looking for."

"Is it?" Jon set the basket down and moved behind her to run his arms around her waist. She felt his hard-on against her back and grinned. He chuckled in response. "Since I walked into our bedroom and saw what were *weren't* wearing, all I can think of doing is this." He untied her dress and let the two trips fall to her waist. His hands moved to cover her breasts. "Mm, these drive me crazy. Do you know that?"

"I had a small clue."

He let out a low growl and turned her in his arms. Within two shakes, he had her dress around her ankles. Jon dropped to his knees. He rested his forehead on her belly and then leaned in to kiss her pussy. She swayed closer to him, resting her hands on his shoulders.

"See why I wanted no panties to get in my way?"

"Yes." She moaned when he snaked out his tongue and ran it along her slit. Serenity wanted to ask about others that might be out on the lake, but she didn't want to interrupt what he was doing. She raised one knee to widen her legs, and he delved deeper into her. Her legs gave out, but Jon held her up. She fought to regain her balance. "I'm sorry. When you do that...I can't help myself. You make me weak."

He caught and held her gaze. "You are precious to me, Serenity."

"Y-You barely know me," she whispered. "I don't know you."

"You know me."

A vision of the panther flickered through her mind when she closed her eyes. This was no time for such fantasies. She wanted Jon, all of him. He wanted her to fall in love with him, for her to forget her vow never to love a regular man. But that was her mom's desire, wasn't it? She was an independent woman.

Jon got into what he was doing to her body. He squeezed her thighs, reached between her legs to finger her, and then replaced them with his hungry mouth. Serenity forgot her fears and grasped his head to pull him tighter to her mound. She bucked her hips and rode his incredible tongue until she climaxed.

Her lover stood up, tossed off his clothing, and then took her hand to guide her toward the water. When they were waist deep, Serenity hugged herself shivering. The sun had dipped behind the clouds. Jon frowned.

"Never hide yourself from me, Serenity. I want nothing between us. Do you understand?"

She lowered her arms so her breasts were bare to him but kept her hands pressed against her sides, arms still crossed. "It's like you have a different personality when we make love. You're dominant. I think I'm different too, because I feel like all I want is to obey you, to have you command me. I've never experienced anything like it."

Leaning into the caress he placed at her cheek, she closed her eyes. They drifted close to each other, their skin barely touching. Jon's breath stirred her hair which hadn't gotten wet yet. "Serenity, I never want us apart."

She gasped. "You speak as if you love me, Jon, and that can't be. I-I don't want you to feel that."

"Why?"

"Because..." She was at a loss for words. How could she explain what she was to him, what all the women in her family were? "You don't know what...*who*... I am."

"I know all I need to know," he assured her. "I know that you were made for me. I know that I'm never letting you go."

She opened her eyes and looked at him. "What if that's not what I want?"

He smiled. "Can you honestly say it's not? I see it in your eyes. From the moment we met, we connected, and that bond still holds. I see how you're drawn to me just as I am to you. Your mischievous mother cannot undo it."

Serenity watched him for a long while trying to figure out if he had guessed or figured out that they were witches, that her mother was a ghostly pain in the ass. He was right though. She did feel drawn to him and didn't want to lose what they had begun to build. If she had her way, they would either never leave this beautiful sanctuary or come back often. If factors didn't stand in the way, their relationship could be permanent. But—and there was always a *but* in life—he didn't know all her secrets, and revealing them to him might drive him away. The hurt she experienced just thinking of it said she was well on the way to falling for him.

Maybe it was best for them all that she break it off now, and if she wanted a lover, she could choose one that she was a little less compatible with, as insane as that sounded.

Chapter Eight

Jon saw the change in Serenity's expression and knew that she had come to a conclusion she didn't necessarily like. The sadness that filled her beautiful eyes hurt him as well. He could guess what she was thinking, that they might be better off not being together. He also guessed it had something to do with her mother, the fact that the woman could be both spirit and flesh. He considered that fact. Maybe she could be flesh only at certain times being that he hadn't seen her in a physical form since the night of the party.

He recalled that night, wondering if there was anything special about it. Of course! The full moon. His patients were particularly restless during a full moon. The affects were not limited to wolves. Even he became a bit agitated three nights of the month, like he needed to run wild in his animal form, chasing an elusive prey.

Well, his love might think she was going to toss him aside, but he'd never stand for that. If he believed she wasn't attracted to him or just didn't want him, he'd walk away, but Jon didn't doubt Serenity was his mate. He needed to prove that to her, or show her that her secrets meant nothing. She'd be free to choose him, and then he would share his secrets as well.

He drew her close and bent his knees so his cock shifted between her legs. Her moan excited him. Pleasuring her drove his desires over the top. Yet, nothing was as good as dipping inside her tight little body and feeling how her muscles stroked him, caressed his shaft until he couldn't hold his load.

With gentle care, he eased himself inside of her while gripping her hips. It took all Jon's concentration not to let his desires take the lead. He wanted Serenity to come again more than he wanted to find his own release. She wrapped her legs around him, and he guided her head to his shoulder. Squeezing her ass to push her closer, he lifted her weight and drove her down on him. The feeling was so intense, he could not help shouting his pleasure, and Serenity's cries followed his own.

Soon they hit a rhythm and rode through several orgasms on Serenity's part and a couple for him. When he had worn her out, he lifted her off his cock and set her down in the water. Caressing her body with each touch, he washed her, savoring the part when he put a hand beneath the watery surface to wash her pussy. His cock stiffened just parting her folds with his fingers to rinse away the residue of their loving, but he knew better than to try to enter her now. She needed rest.

With such sweetness she leaned into him half asleep. He held her up to complete her cleansing, and then he lifted her in his arms. By the time he reached shore, she was out. Jon laid her in the thick grass with the sun beaming down to dry her skin. He would watch to be sure she didn't burn while he prepared a snack for the two of them.

Before she drew close, he sensed the woman coming. "You will not disturb us here," he announced.

The woman gasped. "How did you..."

"I've always been able to see spirits."

She hissed. "So you're one of those. You knew I was there when the two of you had dinner. Did you know I entered her?"

"I did." Jon continued to peel an apple for Serenity. They both understood the peel was healthy, but neither of them cared. Jon ate well overall and wasn't given to fatty

sweets. Serenity's appetite matched his in that respect. He smiled to himself. Everything he did or thought, it seemed, brought him back to how well they fit.

"Just what she needs," the woman stated without sincerity, "a human male who is not altogether useless."

He didn't bother to correct her on the human part but began to speculate if that was the problem. *Human*. Would Serenity's mother have called him human if she was also human? He didn't think so. He glanced in Serenity's direction. She smelled human. That had been clear from the start, but was she something more, some DNA flowing through her that made her beyond an ordinary woman? Now *that* intrigued him.

"Human, huh? Are you saying Serenity isn't human? That you never want her with one?" He held his breath waiting for an answer, but none came. When he turned around, Serenity's mother was no longer at the tree line, and he didn't sense her nearby. A sigh escaped him. At least she wasn't going to make trouble, and given he didn't sense her near the house, the iron had worked. He determined they would enjoy their last day without interruption.

Jon finished up preparing Serenity's plate and set it aside to wake her. For a few moments, he stared down into her face, enjoying the sight of her long lashes curled against her cheeks. He imagined having a son or daughter, maybe both, with her features, that flaming red hair. A grin split his face. Would she or he have their mother's disposition as well? He only hoped his daughter would not be like the interfering grandmother or man crazy like one of the sisters. Being shy wouldn't be so bad.

He laughed. "Look at me considering what my kids will be like just as women tend to do." He shook his head and ran a finger over Serenity's lips. She murmured. He kissed her.

"Wake up, my love. Time to eat something. We expended a lot of energy." Her eyes fluttered open, and she looked pained. He grew alarmed. "Are you hurting, baby? Maybe I should take you back home so you can soak in the bath."

"No, I'm okay." She seemed to mutter something, and he leaned closer to catch the words, but she smiled. He knew whatever it was, she didn't want him to know. He sighed, wanting the secrets to end. Perhaps he should begin by telling her his secret. He'd been giving her hints by feeding visions of his animal form. To communicate by telepathy came with the ability to change, since as a panther he couldn't speak out loud. Over the years, he'd learned to retain the skill even in human form. While he should tell Serenity that he was a shape shifter, he hesitated. Telling her too soon, when she wasn't sure of her feelings for him, might be disastrous. He would just have to be patient—easier said than done.

"Mm, this fruit is sweet," she commented.

He agreed. "Would you like to return to the house or stay out here longer?"

"Longer. I don't want to go back for a while."

He grinned. "Ah, an outdoorsy woman, huh?"

"I didn't think so, but I'm loving it. I was going to ask you about the chance of people floating by seeing us naked out here, but well, I got caught up in what we were doing." She winked at him.

He dropped his gaze to her breasts. For sure he didn't want another man to see her naked, but there was something primal about the two of them as they were. When he was out here alone, he often went about naked. No one had ventured onto his property to

discover him that way, and at night he ran through the trees in animal form. He'd met Lena out there once. She was like him but a cougar. She'd thought they would pair, but he knew right away, she wasn't the one. At the time, he didn't know why he felt that way since she was his kind and pretty. Of course after he'd met Serenity, he knew why.

"I don't usually go naked down here, but I do know the closest neighbors who might happen by. Most of them didn't come this weekend. Those who live in the area full time live farther away. The risk is minimal." Jon put his plate aside and held his arms out to her. "Come here. The ground is hard, and I don't want you to hurt your pretty little ass."

She smirked. "You just want me to sit on your dingaling."

He burst out laughing. "Dingaling? I've never heard that term. It's funny."

She agreed with a chuckle. "I heard it from Sky. She kept repeating it over and over like she got a kick out of saying something naughty. She was nine at the time. You can imagine my mom about blew a gasket when she learned what it was slang for. Too bad for her and good for Sky that she couldn't punish her at the time."

"Couldn't punish her?" Jon asked with a casualness he didn't feel. He hoped Serenity was not alert to what she had just let slip. "Why couldn't she punish her?"

"Because it wasn't the full...uh...I mean just because. I don't remember the reason, just that Sky wasn't punished. Later, she forgot all about the word and had moved on to something else."

Jon held in a grunt of frustration. He'd hoped Serenity would admit that her mother wasn't in a physical form when she couldn't punish Sky. Then again, he was sure Serenity had been about to say it wasn't a full moon, confirming his theory. To think the woman had been stuck in spirit form most of each month for so long.

Serenity put her empty plate aside and raised her arms over her head, causing her breasts to rise. Jon grew stiff, and his mouth watered. He watched her stand, walk down to the water, and stoop to rinse off her fingers. The view was more than he could bear. He laid down to place his hands behind his head, watching Serenity return. She sashayed with sensual grace and didn't look the least bit sore. He wished it was true.

She stopped beside him. "I'm feeling much better."

Delight filled him. "Is that right?"

Her gaze moved from his face to his erect staff. She tapped a finger to her lips. "Look at that, all alone. Maybe it needs company." She parted her legs and began to stroke herself.

Jon growled. "You're tormenting me, my love. How can you be so cruel?"

"You want some?" she teased.

"You cannot imagine how much!"

Without warning, she dropped to her knees and then extended a leg over him. Poised above his cock, she paused and rubbed herself some more. Jon didn't move his hands from behind his head. Let her please him as she wished. She stroked and stroked, her lids drooped and her moans stirring his lust. While he watched, her fingers disappeared up her channel and came back slick and wet. Jon's balls clenched. His shaft twitched.

When Serenity cried out, she also fell forward, catching herself on his thigh. He felt the shudder that passed through her, and she met his gaze. "I went a little too far. I couldn't stop and having you watch me turned me on even more."

"Don't worry, my love. I want you pleased in every way." He lifted his hips toward her. "Are you ready for me?"

She grinned, taking hold of his cock to stroke it from base to tip. “Have you been a good boy?”

He grunted in answer.

She tugged lightly on him, ran a thumb over the slit in his cap, and tasted the precome. Jon was ready to release before he even entered her, but she lifted up enough to position him at her entrance. When she parted her folds and came down on him, he gritted his teeth and swore.

Serenity balanced herself by bracing her thighs against his, and she rode him hard, bucking up and down his cock until he knew he’d never last. Tantalizing him, she lifted her hands to push her hair back over her shoulders. She kept her arms up, raising her breasts and giving him full view as they bounced.

Jon thrust forward to meet her pump, driving himself to the hilt inside her. His roughness made her tumble forward, and he caught her against his chest. Her sweet lips touched his in desperate kiss that threatened to send them spinning into eternity. Jon sat up with her on his lap, held her close, and buried his tongue in her mouth. He greedily took all she had to offer, never drawing back in his pursuit of her.

Together they rocked, whispering words of need. Serenity’s face was wet with tears, and he knew she didn’t realize she’d said she loved him. He wasn’t going to press her to repeat it at this time. Let her think about it, consider what the impact of their mating meant—not just on a shape shifter, but on his mate, whether she was like him or not. A hormone was released sealing them as one.

Jon turned Serenity around so her back was to him. He encircled her in his arms. Small kisses planted on her neck had her wiggling on his lap, making him harder. He put her on his erection again, but just long enough to rewet his shaft from her delicious juices. This time, he pulled her higher and felt his way to her rear entry. They’d been this intimate the day before, so he knew Serenity both liked it and she could take him.

He eased in. She gasped and broke from his hold to lean forward. Jon watched his cock glide in and out of her ass while he held her waist. Just seeing it brought him to a head. Too soon, he emptied himself inside Serenity’s body, satisfied beyond anything he had ever experienced.

Afterward, they washed in the lake and settled quietly on the grass. Jon held her close to him, knowing that the sun was beginning to go down. Just a little longer, and he’d take her to their home. Right now, he couldn’t bear to let her go, not even for a moment.

Chapter Nine

When Serenity yawned to full wakefulness, it was to find not sunlight but moonlight bathing her naked body. She jerked to a sitting position and looked around for Jon. He was nowhere in sight. Fear gripped her chest. He wouldn't leave her, would he? She didn't know these woods. How could he have wandered off?

Quickly in the dull illumination, she dressed and gathered their things. Jon's clothes lay where he'd stripped them off. He hadn't been kidding when he said he enjoyed going bare. Not sure where he was, she decided to leave his clothes there just in case he found his way back while she went searching. Besides, that's what he got for not waking her.

She decided not to lug the picnic basket in case a wild animal came after her and she needed to run. She laughed at that considering these woods weren't the wilderness or somewhere farther from civilization. Inching between the line of trees, she called out, "Jon, where are you?"

He didn't answer. She swallowed, squared her shoulders, and began to work her way through the trees. Each step away from the water, the surroundings grew darker. Serenity shivered against the cool night, wishing she had a jacket. Every few steps, she called for Jon, and when the light had all but winked out since the moon's light didn't seem to penetrate to where she was, her imagination began to run wild.

An owl hooted overhead, and she squeaked, freezing in place. She peered around her, seeing nothing, but then something snapped nearby. Her throat went dry. For no reason at all, thoughts of the panther entered her mind. She'd dreamed of him again while she slept by the lake, and by now he felt familiar—if he was even real.

Another twig snapped, and Serenity whirled around. There in a narrow strip of moonlight, which was eerie, stood the panther. He watched her with eyes she knew were able to see clearly in the dark. He was huge, bigger than what she thought a panther would be, with taut muscles rippling under his smooth fur as he walked toward her.

Serenity flattened herself against a tree, panting. "I-I'm your friend," she told it, hoping it understood and wasn't looking at her like dinner. "Don't eat me," she whimpered when he drew alongside her.

The cat brushed her legs and nuzzled under her dress. She shoved the material down and just caught herself from popping his nose. The beast looked up at her and then sat down. All of a sudden, all her fears drained away. She dropped to her knees before it.

"You don't want to hurt me at all, do you?" She reached a tentative hand toward it. The animal brushed its head into her palm, and she began to stroke him, scratch behind his ears, and then kissed his nose. "I can't believe I'm treating you like my mother's cat familiar. I must be crazy. I'm not a cat person, but I like you better than Sil. No, that's not short for Sylvester. Mom named the thing Silvia if you can believe it—as if we don't have enough *S* names in our household."

She stopped speaking, realizing she sounded like an idiot. The panther had no clue what she was talking about, and there was still no guarantee that it wouldn't turn on her. But she couldn't detect a threat. Besides that, now that she was less afraid, all the defensive spells that had fled her mind when the cat first appeared came flooding back. She'd string him up by his toes with barely a word if he turned violent.

"So what are you doing around here, darling? Did you escape the circus? Does Jon know about you?" She moved closer to peer into the animal's eyes. "Did you *eat* Jon?"

She laughed at that absurdity. She stood up. "Never mind. Come on. You can help me find him."

To her surprise, the animal walked at her side. When Serenity was about to make a right turn through the trees, the cat crossed her path and nudged her to the left. She gave into it, knowing she'd never win with the direction they chose. Within five minutes, the trees thinned, and Jon's house came into view.

"Wow, you led me home. You're amazing, boy."

Home. The word echoed in her mind, almost like someone had spoken it with joy, thrilled that she had called Jon's house her home.

"What should I do? Where's Jon? He wouldn't have left me by the lake to come back home alone. And I can't just go inside and wait for him. Something could have happened. Maybe I should go look for him."

She spun to head back into the trees, but the panther blocked her path.

"Move, boy. I have to find him."

The panther looked her dead in the eyes and spoke to her mind. "*It's fine, Serenity. Go inside and wait.*"

She blinked. He couldn't have...She didn't hear...Serenity came from a long line of witches, a bloodline kept pure to preserve the level of power they possessed. That line had never been broken until her mother fell for a regular human man and had been disowned because of it. Still, with that history, Serenity had seen a lot of strange things—some she could conjure herself—but she'd never met a panther such as this. It was as if...as if...he was human.

She remembered the night before when it rained and she'd seen the panther then. She'd heard Jon's voice tell her to go back in the house. Not come back as he pretended to be in the house. The voice had said *go back* or started to. This time as well, the voice in her head had sounded like her lover.

"J-Jon?" she asked.

There was no answer in her mind, and the animal didn't move. Serenity moved to go around it, but again, it blocked her path. She backed away and turned to go inside the house. When she was at the door with her hand on the knob, he called to her.

"Serenity."

She gasped. Too afraid to face him, she froze in place, unable move forward or go back. The rustle of grass met her ears, and then she felt him near, his breath on her hair. "Don't be afraid. I won't hurt you. I wanted you to know. Probably should have chosen a better way to break it to you."

"I don't understand." She shivered, and he reached around her to open the door and conduct her inside. When she was seated at the kitchen table staring at her fingers, Jon moved about the room preparing tea to warm her. From somewhere, she found the courage to speak again. "So you're not human at all."

"No."

"You're a shape shifter?"

"Yes, that's one of the terms I've heard. metamorph, mesomorph, changeling, were—

"Were-?"

"Were-cat," he explained.

When he set her tea in front of her, Serenity was so rattled, she took a huge sip of the brew and burned her tongue. Without thinking, she muttered a spell to relax the nerves in her mouth just enough for healing to begin without suffering.

"There," Jon exclaimed. "What did you just do? I've come clean about myself, Serenity, but you're keeping secrets. I'm very observant, as cats tend to be, and I've noticed you do that sometimes, mutter something."

She wasn't sure she was ready to reveal her secret. Women in her family were sworn to secrecy about their existence. They were not like the average witch, the ones portrayed in movies or in books. None of her clan had ever been involved in the Salem witch hunts and things of that nature throughout history. That's how elite they were, how protective of their presence in the world.

Then again, she, her mother, and her sisters had been disowned with no support ever to come from their family again. Was this how it was for Jon, or was he the only one of his kind? She dared peek up at him, finding that he watched her with interest and concern. He must be worried about her accepting him for what he was. At the moment, she wasn't sure whether she believed it and what it meant for their relationship.

Since he wasn't an ordinary human, he wasn't off limits, but mixing shifter and witch? How odd would that be? An ache began in her temple, and she tried to rub it away with her fingertips. The tension increased. Jon stood up to come around to her side of the table. He laid gentle hands on her shoulders and began to massage.

"You don't have to say anything. I will wait until you're ready," he told her.

Longing to be held in his arms, to pretend that none of these issues existed, she laid her head against his abs and closed her eyes. "I'm not sure. Everything inside me tells me to trust you, to take a chance, but I have to think of my sisters and even my mother who drives me crazy with her antics. *We are all we have.*"

"I understand that." He leaned over and kissed her. She gave into the pleasure for a while before pulling away.

"I have no real proof that you are what you say. For all I know, it could have been a trick. We don't know each other that well." She looked up at him in time to see hurt pass through those dark eyes, but it disappeared quickly. Still naked, he moved from behind her and stood to her side.

"Watch, Serenity."

She dared to keep her focus on him and almost lost her breath and dropped her tea cup when he began to transform. Black straight hairs grew out of his skin at all points. His bones cracked and popped to reshape into that of the panther. This wasn't a trick or magic. She could sense magic, and this is why she'd never sensed it from him, why she didn't know that Jon wasn't human. The shape shifter was genetically made up to do what he could.

"Only the black panther?" she asked breathless.

Like before, he spoke in her head. "*Yes. My family are all panthers. I found after I got here to the States that there are others like us. We can smell the difference. Lena is from a clan of cougars.*"

Jealousy rose in Serenity. "That's why she was so clingy to you. Does that mean you can only be with others like you?"

Jon changed back to his human form and crossed to her, but when she stiffened, he didn't take her in his arms like he had obviously been about to. Instead he drew a chair

close and sat in front of her. Serenity wished he would put some clothes on. She couldn't think clearly with him naked. He no doubt knew that, even wanted it that way.

"Before I left London, Mordecai, my clan leader, told me I would find my mate in the States and that I would know her when I found her." He reached out to take Serenity's hand. She didn't pull away. "I knew you from the moment I saw you, and you knew me too. You may not be a shifter, but you know me. Just as I told you before, baby, you believe that I am the one. You sense it inside of you."

"What if you're wrong?" Tears filled her eyes and spilled down her face. "I've always been independent, and I don't say that because I feel like you'll take over my life. My sisters and I live with the consequences of such a union gone wrong—because my mother loved the wrong man."

She stood up and went to get a tissue to wipe her nose. From the doorway she watched him, his shoulders slumped, pain in his bearing. Not for anything did she want to hurt him, but things weren't so simple.

"When I close my eyes, I see my father's face just as it was so long ago. In my heart I believe he is a good man, that there were reasons he left his family. We'd all been so close. Jon, if I give in to being with you, what happens years from now when we have children? Will you leave us?"

"Never," he roared and rushed to her. Against her will, he tugged her into his arms and held on tight. "I wanted to wait until you were sure, Serenity, but I love you. We haven't been together long, but the feelings are true. I know you feel it, and from what you tell me, I understand your reservations. But I promise you, I won't leave. I'll never leave you. Not now. Not ever!"

"We're witches," she blurted out.

He pulled back and looked in her face. "You're what?"

"Witches. Magic flows through us. We create it from nothing. We don't necessarily need an herb or a potion. Knowing the right words can accomplish anything from stopping time to changing our form."

His eyes grew wide. "So that's how she did it. I knew it wasn't you at your house."

She gasped. "You knew?"

He tapped his nose. "My nose doesn't fool me. Salacity can change her appearance, but she can't or maybe didn't change her scent. I had recorded which of you was which by scent."

She grinned. "Interesting." So her lover would never be fooled by an imposter. The thought thrilled her given how Salacity liked to play tricks. For a moment, she dared to think that Jon could be the one. After all, she had taken the leap to share her family secrets with him. In the past a memory wipe was the result for any who'd learned the truth about them.

Jon lifted her in his arms and carried her to their bedroom. He laid her down and stripped her of her clothing. In silence they laid for a while in each other's arms. Serenity went over their situations time and again, but it all boiled down to being afraid. She had no idea before until she met Jon how terrified she'd been of love all these years. Time and again, she'd blamed the lack of magical men or that she only met ordinary ones who could never be trusted with their secret.

Yet like Salacity and Sky did, she could have attended the annual festivals of magical creatures and found someone if she truly wanted to. Now she began to wonder if both her

sisters were like her, too afraid to end up with their hearts shattered like their mother. Serenity was terrified of taking a chance on Jon, but she might be even more scared to lose him.

"I'm so confused," she admitted.

"Shh, my love." He kissed her forehead. "Who said anything about you choosing tonight what you want to do? We can go back home tomorrow, continue to date, and I won't rush you. Knowing that we've shared our secrets is enough for now, and we'll both take our time, get to know each other better, and see where it all leads. How's that?"

At last, the tension and fear in her chest eased. She breathed out a sigh of relief. "Yes, I like that plan. It will give me more time to come to terms with what I feel. Can we keep this between us? Will you promise not to come to the house until I'm sure? We'll meet somewhere and keep my family out of it."

"Agreed. Whatever it takes, Serenity. I'd wait an eternity for just a moment with you."

Chapter Ten

Serenity had made her decision. No matter what the risk, she would see where things led with Jon. With a grin she hadn't been able to wipe from her face all morning, she put the finishing touches on the painting she was restoring and cleaned her hands on a cloth. For the last month, she and Jon had been dating, and to her surprise, her mother didn't once try to poke her nose into Serenity's life by asking her where she was going each night and who she was with. The woman didn't even try to take over Serenity's body, making Serenity conclude that her mother was busy driving Salacity or Sky crazy.

The time back home instead of being filled with the normal stress from her family had been quiet on all fronts. Serenity was happier than she'd ever been, and that gave her confidence that her decision was the right one. Being six in the evening, she had just enough time to shower and change before she would meet Jon at his clinic. At first they had avoided meeting there in case one of her family members suspected, but when no one showed interest, she told him it was the best place since he'd been late wrapping up work several times. At least if she was at the clinic, she could sit in the waiting room and chat with his assistant Becky.

By seven-thirty, Serenity had changed to a cute black dress that clung to her curves in just the right places. She'd slipped her feet into high-heeled sling backs, and with the addition of a few tasteful accessories, she'd left the house and headed over to Jon's work. She couldn't wait to see him, to kiss him and hold him in her arms. More and more as the days passed, she disliked being away from him. There was almost an ache in her heart when they parted each night. Not being one to deny reality, she knew what it was. She loved him.

Since she'd made her decision, tonight was a good time to tell him how she felt. He'd be ecstatic, she knew. Serenity would have to be blind to miss the love that shined from Jon's eyes every time he spotted her, and it had made her feel like the most precious woman on Earth—well after she'd gotten over her fear of it.

"Hello, Becky. How was your day?" she called to the assistant when she strolled into the waiting room.

Becky smiled and pointed to the phone she held up to her ear. She waved Serenity on through, pressing the buzzer to unlock the door. "Hey, Serenity," she whispered and went back to her call.

Serenity picked up her step to hurry down the hall. She'd phoned Jon to tell him she was on her way, but he didn't answer. When she reached his office, it was to find his back to her and his fingers pushed into his hair, head lowered. She grinned and tiptoed toward him to press herself to his back. "Hey, you," she said in a husky tone in his ear. "Wanna come out to play?"

Jon didn't look up. "Serenity, shut the door please."

Confused, she did what he asked and moved to sit in the guest chair beside his desk. Jon's face when she saw it at last held sadness. Serenity's heart began to race from fear now instead of excitement. "What's wrong?"

He reached for her hand and held her fingers between his. Jon's hand was ice cold, and Serenity couldn't identify the odd vibe she caught coming off him. Her emotions were in a jumble. Yet, she waited with all the patience she could muster for him to explain.

He breathed deep and blew out a breath. "I'm leaving the United States," he announced.

Serenity blinked at him. "Say again?"

"I'm sorry, baby, but it's not going to work between us. In fact, I think the best thing for us both is that I go back to the U.K."

Serenity jerked her hand from his and jumped to her feet. "What are you saying? I don't understand this." She paced to the other side of his tiny office, stared at his posters of cute little pooches on the walls with no comprehension of what she was seeing. After a minute, she turned around to face him. "How can you tell me this when you said you love me? When you said I am your mate? Was that all a lie to get me to sleep with you? Damn it, I made it clear that's what I wanted too. I didn't need the song and dance, Jon."

Tears sprang from her eyes and ran down her cheeks. She scrubbed at her face, knowing she was smearing her liner.

"Baby—"

"Don't call me baby!" she screamed near hysteria.

Jon stood up to come to her, but she took a step back and crashed into some type of monitor. It rolled a few inches and banged against the wall. Behind the door, Becky called out, "Everything okay in there?" They both ignored her.

She shook her head, searching her mind for an answer to why this was happening. "It's the witch thing, isn't it?" she asked. "You couldn't come to terms with it."

"Witch thing?"

She looked up. His face was a mask of confusion, like he had no clue of the fact that she'd shared with him her biggest secret, that she was a witch. "That I'm..." she began and stopped. Jon waited with expectation in his expression. Serenity narrowed her eyes at him. An idea occurred to her. She tried dispelling any charm cast on Jon, but nothing happened.

Was there a spell, or was he just being obtuse because he wanted out of the relationship? Tentatively, she approached him. He watched her in concern as if she was the one who'd lost her mind. Serenity laid a hand on his chest, and all the emotions she always felt for him flooded her senses, but she did her best to block them out. This was no time to give in to the longing she felt for Jon.

She bowed her head, and Jon wrapped his arms around her to comfort her. Let him think she'd broken down—which was what she wanted to do right now, but if someone was blocking Jon's memory of how he felt for her, she would find out for sure. Concentrating hard, she tried to calm herself and listen with her spiritual ear, with the magic that had been a part of her all her life.

Then she sensed it, a binding spell, with a level of magic she could not begin to reach in her twenty-six years. This was a power she wondered if even her mother had obtained before she lost her physical presence. Serenity tried uttering a phrase for release, but nothing happened. Jon was still bound. She tried for almost half an hour before Jon put her from him.

"That's enough, Serenity. Don't cry anymore. I know I hurt you, and I'm sorry. You're a very special person. You don't deserve this, and I've been standing here trying to figure out why I wouldn't fall for a woman like you." He ran a hand through his hair. "All I feel is a compulsion to go back home, to forget I ever came to the States."

“No, Jon, it’s a trick,” she blurted, but then couldn’t think how to explain it to him without him thinking she was nuts. She suspected Jon was so heavy under this other witch’s spell that even if Serenity cast a spell before his eyes, he wouldn’t see it. “I mean. If you’ll give me some time...”

He shook his head. “I’m sorry. I have to go. I’ve already given Becky her notice.”

Serenity’s eyes widened. “But she looked so happy when I came in.”

“I gave her a generous severance package, and I secured another, higher-paying position for her with a vet friend of mine.”

“That fast?” she said with bitterness.

“I’m sorry.”

In disbelief, Serenity stood there looking at him, waiting, hoping that he would say that it was all a joke, that he didn’t mean it. When Jon didn’t say more, only directed those sad eyes which put her in mind of the black panther he could change into, she spun on her heel and marched out of the office.

She made it to her car with her composure intact. She made it through the drive home fine. However, when she walked into her home, the unusual silence pressed in on her. Her keys slipped from numb fingers to clang on the floor with her purse following. Serenity threw her head back and screamed as loud as she could. “Mother!”

Over and over, she yelled, unsure if her mother was even in the area. A thump on the stairs made Serenity look up and remember that this was the night of a full moon. With fluid grace, her mother descended wearing a baby doll nightie that was too sheer for Serenity’s comfort.

“Darling, there’s no need to shout like that. I couldn’t zip on down through the ceiling like usual.” She waved a hand over her head. “A physical body is wonderful, but in that respect not. What’s all the hullabaloo?”

Serenity cupped a hand over her eyes. “Mom, please put something more on, for Pete’s sake.”

Her mother sighed and snapped her fingers. A robe settled on her shoulders, and she knotted it around her waist. “Is this better, Ms. Priss? Honestly, you interrupted my fun with Dabney. He’s scrumptious. You have to see him.”

“Why, Mom, why?” Serenity sobbed, no longer able to contain her emotions. “Why did you put the spell on Jon? I...I love him, and you took him away. Why would you do that? Do you hate us being happy that much?”

Her mother grew serious. “A spell? I didn’t cast a spell on your little kitten, Serenity, and to insinuate that I don’t want my daughters to be happy is insulting.”

“Kitten?” Serenity gasped. “You knew? You knew that he...”

“That he’s a shape shifter? Yes, my young innocent.” Her mother sighed and took her hand. “Come with me. No matter how unhappy we are, there’s never a reason to look a mess. Your makeup is atrocious.”

They moved to the bathroom off the hall, and when Serenity’s face was clean, she followed her mother to the sitting room. At last they were seated, and Serenity explained everything. If she thought her mother didn’t care about anything or anyone but herself, but she was wrong. Her mother surged to her feet and began pacing from the fireplace to the door, all the time grumbling under her breath.

“It must be her,” she announced.

“Who?” Serenity was unaware of any *her*. All of her mother’s friends were men, all the contacts, all the investigators. She loved to be surrounded by them, to manipulate them, and to humiliate them when the mood struck her.

“Your grandmother.”

Serenity gasped. “I have a grandmother? I never knew. I mean I knew we had family who disowned us, but for some reason I pictured aunts and uncles, relations twice removed. That kind of thing.”

Her mother’s eyes flashed. “Oh you have a grandmother all right. And if ever you thought I drove you crazy, she’s worse. I believed you knew how much I love you girls. But her—she is the epitome of...of...well, I like to say Evil Incarnate.”

“Mom, you’re exaggerating.” *As usual.*

“She’s more powerful than you can imagine. I suspect she’s more than one hundred thirty, but I can’t be sure. Darling, if she put a spell on Jon, neither you nor I can break it.”

Serenity felt her breath constrict, and her mother rushed to her side to pull her into her arms. “Don’t start that again, sweetie. I’ll think of something. I promise I will. You’ll have your shifter.” Her mother leaned back and grinned. “After all, he’s not an ordinary human, right?” She chuckled.

“So that’s why you haven’t harassed us and why you didn’t come down to his country home to interrupt our time alone.”

Her mother raised an index finger. “Make no mistake that I will do what I need to, to protect my babies. I did come by the lake because something was bothering me about that boy.”

Serenity’s eyes widened. “The lake?”

“Yes, the lake. I remembered that he broke my spell over you with a bite.” Her mother shook her head. “Before you ask, yes, I mean a bite. I thought that was strange, so I came down there to have another look. He could see me in my spirit form. That’s not unusual for some humans, but I wasn’t satisfied, so I had a friend check his background. Didn’t take much to learn his secret, and then I decided to let you two explore the relationship to see where it went. I told your sisters to steer clear as well. My friend told me if Jon had chosen you, then that meant you were his fated mate. That could not be changed even with a meddling mother.”

Serenity choked off a sob. “But fate never met Grandma.”

Chapter Eleven

Jon sat back in his seat and closed his eyes. He tried to relax, but all the muscles in his body were tight, and his head was pounding. At least the insane need to get out of the United States had eased. He had no idea what had come over him. Even Mordecai couldn't explain it, but his elder wanted to meet with him the moment he got to London. Jon wanted to put it off, tired of explaining himself. Every person he'd met while running his practice over the last three years demanded to know what bee had gotten in his bonnet to drive him away.

Serenity sprang to his mind again and again. Every time he thought of her, he felt an unexplainable ache. Yet, no matter how many times he searched his heart, she was just not there. He didn't love her, and he didn't understand why he'd been with her if he didn't feel that way. Jon had never gotten serious with a woman. A mutual satisfying of their desires was all it had ever amounted to, because all he'd wanted all of his adult life was to find his mate. Why in the world would he delay that by getting serious with Serenity?

"A mistake," he muttered and opened his eyes to look out the window. That's the only way to explain it.

Her beautiful face seemed to form in the clouds. He grumbled. A book would dismiss her from his mind. After searching his carryon bag, he found a medical murder mystery—his favorite—and cracked it open at the dog-eared page he'd left to mark his place. The words blurred before his eyes. *Damn it!*

This was no use. She was someone special. He might not be able to figure out why, but she was, and something odd was going on to make him think she wasn't important. The minute his plane set down in London, he would search out the real truth if it drove him insane. Hell, thoughts of Serenity were already sending him there. He needed to work fast.

* * * *

"Mother!" Arabella called out. "Mother, I know you hear me! Answer!"

The elderly witch appeared before Arabella, and although she hadn't seen her mother in more than thirty years, her mother looked exactly the same—hard eyes that bore into her to capture every secret she would even dare to hide, straight back, good figure, and a presence that could bring a lesser person literally to their knees. Arabella resisted the pressure to bow. She hated her mother. She'd once been proud of the lineage she derived from, but now, she wanted nothing to do with any of them, least of all this witch in front of her.

The twitch from her mother's mouth and a raised eyebrow meant her mother had delved into her thoughts and knew what Arabella thought of her. Let her look. She was glad the old woman knew the truth. Turning her back on Arabella just because she'd loved her daughters' father was unforgivable.

"I know it was you," Arabella spat. "I know you cast a spell over the man Serenity had been dating, and I want to know why. You never interfered with us before. Why now? Why him?"

“Stupid,” her mother groused in anger. “I’ve never stopped watching all of you, to be sure you don’t bring shame to the family. A lot of good that did with you at your age sleeping with anything with a penis.”

Arabella rested her hands on her hips. “I could try a vagina if it would piss you off.”

The slap across her face made her draw back and cover her cheek. She’d never seen her mother move and still wasn’t sure she had since the woman stood there with both hands atop a cane, outfitted in a long dress that must be from the early twentieth century.

“You watch your mouth, miss,” her mother answered. “She will not marry an animal. It’s beneath us.”

“You disowned us all,” Arabella shouted. “That was enough. They’re blood is already tainted by a lesser being according to you. Her life has nothing to do with you, Mother. He believes she’s his mate as fate would have it. You can’t interfere with fate.”

What seemed like a self-satisfied smile creased her mother’s porcelain face. “If it’s fate, then nothing I do will change it, will it? His kind lives by fate. We live by magic, a substance that is in our veins, in the air we breathe. Let’s see which is more powerful, shall we? Besides, I have put fate in its place before. I’m doing so again.”

Arabella gasped. “What do you mean by that?”

“Have I not always said you are stupid, Arabella? How I wish I had not given in to weakness and married the more handsome candidate rather than the smarter one. What’s done is done.” She tapped her cane on the floor once. “Remember that I am watching you, and though you’ve suffered a lot, I think you haven’t suffered enough with all the debauchery you’ve engaged in. My patience grows thin, Arabella. Do not call me again.”

With that statement, her mother disappeared. Arabella sank down on the floor crying. She’d done nothing to help Serenity, and the last thing she wanted was for any of her daughters to go through what she went through every day. She pretended that life was one big party, but in truth, she desperately longed for her husband. Even after so many years, the pain of his loss hadn’t lessened an inch. Each man she slept with, she hoped it would wash away the anguish, but nothing worked. Serenity couldn’t go through that. There had to be a way to reach Jon’s memories of his love for her—before he disappeared like Arabella’s husband had.

* * * *

Serenity stood in the airport holding her ticket and wondering if this was such a good idea. She’d wrapped up all her work, referred new clients to another restorer, and closed her house. Then she had packed what she would need to travel to London and arranged for anything else to be shipped.

Her stomach fluttering, she went to the ladies room to throw some water on her face. A glance in the mirror showed that the short black hair and green eyes made her look radically different. Changing her appearance and her ID might be a shot in the dark, but she was willing to try anything. Her mother had said she was attempting to locate an elder in the magical community who could counter her grandmother’s spell, one willing to go against her grandmother, but Serenity didn’t want to sit still and wait for that. It might never happen. So she’d taken matters into her own hands.

When she got hold of herself, Serenity left the bathroom and returned to the boarding area where her flight was due to take off. While she waited, other passengers from a

flight just arriving began disembarking. Serenity gasped upon spotting Jon. What in the world was he doing back in the United States?

She rushed across to him without thinking and grabbed his arm. “Jon, what are you doing here?”

He turned to face her with a blank look. “Do I know you?”

Serenity had a moment of terror thinking his memory had grown considerably worse, but then she remembered her appearance. She’d been thinking she could somehow woo him into falling in love with her as another person. Now, standing here looking him in the eyes, she realized it would never have worked. All she wanted to do was cry and cling to him. What man would fall for a woman like that?

She thought fast. “It’s Katrina...ah...from school. Fancy seeing you here in the United States after so many years. You look just the same.” Knowing Jon for the polite man he was socially, she figured he wouldn’t tell a woman he didn’t remember her. He smiled and asked how she’d been and inquired for her family. Serenity linked arms with him and turned to continue the direction he was going. Somewhere overhead, she heard the call for passengers to begin boarding her flight to London. Serenity ignored it. “So why don’t we have lunch and catch up?” she offered.

“Well I needed to meet with someone...” He trailed off staring at her. “Something about you feels familiar.” He looked sheepish. “School, I know, but something else. I can’t put my finger on it. Ah, well it will come to me. Why not? I can spare time for lunch.”

At first Serenity thought the man she loved was blowing the real her off if she was what he was back for, but then she began to wonder if somehow the fated mates thing he’d told her was true. Would he be drawn to her even if she looked different? Would Jon’s inner panther sense she was the one he sought even if his mind was clouded? She was pretty sure it wasn’t his sense of smell this time, because she had specifically formulated a masking spell. Jon should not be able to tell it was her in anyway except on a spiritual level, if that was possible.

Forgetting her luggage, her trip, everything but Jon, she left the airport with him, and they found a nice quiet seafood restaurant where they could talk. Sitting across from Jon, Serenity wondered what he thought of her, if he thought this woman before him was strange to have gone with him spur of the moment. She’d quickly hidden her ticket and let him assume she’d just flown in as well.

He watched her with those intense yet friendly eyes. “What do you do, Katrina?”

She cringed at the use of the false name but didn’t correct him. “I restore pai—restore houses.”

He frowned. “Restore houses?”

“Yes, I mean I don’t do the physical work of course. I just oversee. Some say I have an artist’s eye.” Jon knew that the real her liked to dabble with paint on her own aside from her canvas restoration business. She didn’t want to veer too far from the truth if they spoke more on the subject, and just maybe speaking of restoration would make the new her more familiar to him.

At length, they spoke while they ate, getting to know each other all over again. Serenity stuck to the truth and heard the same in Jon since she already knew everything he shared. Her heart still ached being so close to him yet so far. Her suspicions of his being drawn to her were confirmed with each look of confusion cast her way one minute

and genuine happiness aimed at her the next. *We're complete together*, she thought with sadness.

There was something to this fate thing, but how would it all work out? Would her grandmother just come along and wipe Jon's mind again? Should Serenity walk away to give the poor man peace, a chance to find a woman who would be his wife? The thought of him with anyone but her hurt even more. She felt trapped and knew that Jon was as well, at the mercy of an evil old woman who had nothing better to do other than to screw up their lives. Something had to give and soon.

Chapter Twelve

Jon sat on the side of his hotel room bed staring at the small gift in his hands. When he'd come back to the United States, he'd had every intension of seeking out Serenity to see what it was about her that drew him, while at the same time his mind told him she was no one special. The thoughts and emotions he experienced were at war with that inner voice.

And yet, from the moment he met Katrina, he could not stay away from her. He'd not thought to find Serenity once. It was as if everything in him was directed to this new woman, and oddly, the inner voice, his head, and his emotions were in tune about Katrina. Who was she? Why did he feel like she was his mate? He'd met her in the States as Mordecai told him his mate would be, but she'd said they went to school together.

Over and over, he reviewed what Mordecai shared years ago about his mate. Jon was certain the elder panther had said Jon's mate would be American. Katrina had no accent and didn't have the basic knowledge of Scotland. Could she have lied? He didn't want to believe that. When he looked into those lovely green eyes, he saw the same earnestness he felt inside of him for her. In just the few days they had been seeing each other, he felt a connection with her, like they belonged together. He couldn't have explained it if he tried.

What was odd to him was that Katrina was willing to continue seeing him while he tried to figure out his life and the reasons why he would uproot himself to flee the country, only to come right back and live out of his suitcase. He still owned the house in the country, but he was reluctant to go back there right now—as if that would jinx his budding relationship with Katrina.

A knock sounded on the door, and he rose to answer it. There she stood so beautiful. While he stared at her not saying a word, he flashed on long flaming red hair and gasped. Katrina was gorgeous as she was, but the image of her with red hair put him in mind of Serenity. He shook his head and blinked. Katrina was her normal self. Rather than leaving her standing in the hall, he reached out and drew her inside.

"Should we be doing this?" he asked.

"Yes," she said too quickly. "I mean no." She bowed her head, and he grinned at her sweet shyness. "I don't know," she confessed.

He drew her closer, resting light fingertips at her nape and raising her chin higher so she was forced to look at him. "I admit I'm unsure as well. I don't know what it is about you, why I feel like I've known you for longer than a week. Yet, when I do this"—he brushed her soft lips with his—"nothing could be more right."

Desire uncoiled inside him, and he brought her closer to him, ran a hand down over her back and around to her hip. Jon lowered his head for another kiss. This time, he deepened it, pushing his tongue between her soft, trembling lips to taste her. *Mm, she's good*, he thought, hungry to sample more.

The way her goose bumps broke out on her arms and how she quivered in his embrace, he thought she was just as affected by their kisses and caresses. He lifted her and carried her to the bed. After laying her down, he stretched out beside her and would have continued what they were doing, except he noticed tears spilling over onto her pale cheeks.

Jon hesitated. "What's wrong, my love? Why are you crying? I thought you wanted this."

"I..." she began.

He drew back. "It's too soon. I rushed you. I'm so sorry. Damn it, I'm disgusting." He would have rolled away, but she grabbed his arm to hold him in place. He waited for her to speak, his heart aching at the unhappiness he saw reflected on her face.

"I just want..." She sniffed and glanced away so he couldn't see into her eyes. More tears fell. "I just want you to make love to me as *me*, not someone else. The real me. I want you to see *me*." She sobbed.

"Oh, baby." Jon gathered her in his arms and held her tight. He laid his head on a pillow and lay Katrina's head on his chest. "I do see you. I promise I do. As odd as it seems, I feel like we're connected, like we're already one, Katrina—"

"No!" She was really shaking now, struggling in his arms. He didn't let go. He couldn't let her go. She pounded on his chest, still crying. "Please, Jon. I love you so much. I can't stand being this way. Please, see me! Jon, I love you!"

He was about to again reassure her he saw her just fine, but then the flash happened. This time he was sure he saw Serenity in his mind, not Katrina. A slight pain started in his temple, spread throughout his entire head, and then dissipated as quickly as it had begun. For a few seconds, Jon was aware of no other change in his body, and then memories flooded his mind—memories of Serenity, of how much he loved her. Serenity was his mate, the only woman for him.

He jumped up from the bed and backed away from it. At the same time, he felt a powerful loss of putting space between himself and Katrina. "I remember," he whispered. "I remember Serenity. She's my mate. I can't—*won't*—be with another."

Katrina sat up, joy bursting forth on her lovely face. She muttered several phrases and then said, "Release." The first change was her scent. All at once, Jon knew that scent. He would never forget Serenity's natural, intoxicating essence.

His eyes widened as he watched her. "Serenity?"

She nodded. Her face shape changed, the green in her eyes dripping away like teardrops to be replaced with hazel. Her hair lengthened and turned a flaming red. Jon's heart hammered in his chest. He didn't pause a second but almost leaped across the space between them to drag her into his arms. Devouring her mouth, he groaned and crushed her to his chest.

"Serenity," he moaned.

Her eyes fluttered closed, and she dipped her head back to give him access to that long, graceful neck. "Jon."

He tore her blouse open and ruined her bra. Trailing greedy kisses over her tender skin, he placed her on the bed to rip off the rest of her clothing. While he stared down at her creamy skin, he tore out of his clothing and then felt for her pussy while he kissed her. She was already wet and ready for him. Not wanting to waste a second in case this gift was snatched from him, he thrust his cock into her heat. She screamed her delight, arching her back and offering him her nipples.

While he pumped hard into her, Jon greedily sucked her tight little tips. He just couldn't get enough. He didn't *want* to get enough. Threading his fingers with hers, he raised her arms above her head and let much of his weight come down on her body. He thrust harder and faster, staring into her face and daring anyone to take away what

belonged to him. He pounded deep into her. She cried out, and her muscles squeezed the hell out of his cock as she exploded into an orgasm. Within seconds, Jon followed with his own release.

Panting, he let his head fall down beside hers, and he felt her small figure shaking under him. He put a hand up to comfort her, caressing her soft shoulder. With depleted energy, he turned his head to look at her. "Don't cry anymore, Serenity. We're together again. I'm so sorry that I left you. I don't know what happened to my mind. It was as if all of a sudden I couldn't remember how I felt about you."

Jon pulled out of her feeling the loss and turned on his side to hold her in his arms. They clung to one another in silence for a while, and then she answered him. "I know. It was my grandmother. She's a powerful witch I never met. My mother says she's evil, but I don't know if she means like darkness evil or a bad disposition. Likely both. All I've ever known over the years is that she and the other elders in my family—a bunch of old hags who carefully preserved their sacred bloodline—tossed my mother out when she fell in love with my father. He was not accepted, his blood not pure enough for them. And you..."

She fell silent when it came to explaining him, but he could guess. The women in Serenity's family thought he wasn't good enough because he was part animal. If a regular human wasn't good enough, then he wouldn't be.

"My mother is gifted with strong magic," Serenity admitted, "but even she couldn't break my grandmother's spell. How did you get out of it? Are your people resistant to magic?"

He shook his head. "Not that I know of. Now that I think about it, I suspect it's our love, the fact that we are fated to be together and that we sealed our relationship before the spell." He stopped to kiss her and nuzzle her cheek before continuing. "I do love you, by the way, Serenity. You are everything to me."

A tear slid down her cheek, and he wiped it away with his thumb. "You love me," she whispered. "I was so afraid that I would never hear you say my name again. I thought it was a good idea to win your love as a different person, but I found out it hurt that much more."

"We're together now, and we won't let anyone take that way from us."

"No!" came an explosive declaration.

Both Jon and Serenity looked to the foot of the bed. Upon seeing an old woman there, Jon flung a blanket over their naked bodies and began to scramble into his clothes. "Who are you?"

"It's my grandmother," Serenity told him. She sat up and yanked on her clothes to stand beside Jon as a united front against the witch. "Why are you here, Grandmother? Your spell has been lifted."

"I won't stand for it."

"You don't have a choice," Serenity challenged her.

Her grandmother flicked a finger and uttered words Jon could not discern the meaning of. He grabbed hold of Serenity's hand and put her behind him. He knew he was no match for this woman's magic, but she would still have to go through him to hurt Serenity. He'd die if he had to, to protect her.

Spell after spell dropped from the old woman's lips, but nothing seemed to be working. Jon marveled at how much more enraged she became with each turn of phrase. "Why?" she shouted. "Why doesn't it work? Who are you?"

Jon squared his shoulders staring into the woman's eyes. "I am no one except the man who loves your granddaughter, the man who will rip you and all your kind to nothing if you so much as touch one hair on her head. I don't know why your spells are no longer working on us. Perhaps it's because she is meant to be mine, and I'm meant for her."

"Bah," she grumbled. "Don't give me that! No one is *meant* for any other."

"Believe what you want, but remember what I said," he warned. Jon let his teeth sharpen and the irises of his eyes shift just enough for her to notice. He let out a guttural sound that had always put fear in his enemies. The woman took a stumbling step back, but her eyes blazed with hatred, and she kept the arrogant bearing she'd arrived in.

"You are not good enough for our kind," she announced. "Mark my words. When I have learned your weakness, I will be back. You will not have her."

"Bring it on," he countered, and the witch disappeared.

Jon ran a hand through his hair and blew a breath out. Serenity's arms came around his waist. He turned to draw her close, kissed her soft lips, and ran his hands down over her sides. It was over for now, and Jon had every intension of sealing them together as one in every sense of the word.

He dropped to one knee in front of Serenity, taking her hands in his. Her widened eyes and mouth shaped into an *o* made him smile. "You know what I'm going to ask, don't you, Serenity?" He couldn't stop repeating her name. Just uttering it brought him joy after he'd almost lost her. "I want you to marry me. Say you will, baby."

"I... Yes! Oh my goodness. I can't believe I hesitated, about to give you an excuse like we haven't known each other long. Forget about that." She dropped down before him and hugged him. "I warn you my family never lets up with the madness."

"I still own my country home. We can escape whenever we like."

She gasped. "Our time there was perfect. How about next weekend?"

He chuckled. "Your wish, my love, is my command."

Epilogue

“Do you think she’ll keep her word, Serenity?” Sky asked with fear in her eyes. “Will Grandmother come after you to try to break you and Jon apart?”

Exhausted from being up with the twins for what felt like forty-eight hours straight, Serenity covered her mouth through a yawn before answering her sister. “I don’t know. Her spells didn’t work after Jon and I sealed our love for each other. But that could have been a temporary phenomenon. She won’t give up, but what I’m really concerned about is her coming after you or Salacity. I’m also worried about Mom.”

Sky rocked her baby niece while Serenity changed her other daughter’s diaper. Only after they had married and she was five months pregnant did Jon warn her that twins ran in his family. She loved her daughters very much, but they were more than a handful. If she thought escaping to the country would give her and Jon needed peace, it ended as soon as she gave birth.

“Why are you worried about Mom?” Sky asked her.

“Because she’s been quiet, not bothering any of us. I think Grandmother got to her.”

Sky squeaked, startling the baby in her arms. “I’m sorry little one. Shh, calm down.” She raised her hand as if she intended to cast a spell, but Serenity caught her arm.

“Don’t use a spell on my daughter, if you please.”

Sky looked sheepish. “Sorry. Force of habit. You never know. She may be casting them herself soon.”

Serenity shrugged. “Doubtful. I don’t sense a lick of magic, and Mom said we were all three spurting magic as much as throwing up milk when we were infants. She thinks that’s what drew Grandmother to us in the first place. We might have been ‘tainted,’ but we took on all of Mom’s genes.”

Serenity finished changing her little one and picked the baby up to kiss her pillow soft cheek. “Anyway, don’t say anything to Salacity, but the reason I’m worried about Mom is because from what Grandmother said, we’re now suspecting that Grandmother had something to do with our father running off.”

Her sister gasped. “You’re kidding. Is it true? What did she do?”

“I don’t know, but Grandmother told Mom that she had interfered with fate once before. That made Mom think Grandmother is the one that ran our father off since she hated Mom with him.”

“But to wait so long,” Sky mused. That was her youngest sister, clever, a thinker, despite her shyness.

“I know. I don’t understand everything, and neither does Mom. If Mom was meant to be with our father, then they should have been able to break the spell that Grandmother put on him.”

“If she did put a spell on him,” Sky interjected.

“Right. And if she did, then why didn’t she do it well before I was born?”

Sky shook her head. “We might never know.”

“Oh we’ll know, my darlings,” their mother declared as she floated into the room. “We’ll know!” The energy that rolled off Serenity’s mother was at its peak again. Serenity sensed she had revived to her old self, had somehow overcome the helpless feeling Serenity had sensed in her after learning she was not powerful enough to combat Grandmother. “I have every intension of getting to the bottom of this family mystery, and

you, Sky, and your sister Salacity are going to help me. Serenity has her hands full with a husband and children. So be prepared.”

Sky groaned. “Mom.”

Serenity laughed. *Here we go again.* She reached out to take her daughter from Sky’s arms and prepared to take them up for their nap. Soon Jon would be home, and Serenity wanted to be refreshed for him. Even with lack of sleep, she was feeling a serious need to wrap her legs around his sexy body. Anticipation made her pick up the pace, and she smiled in contentment if not peace.

Despite all the craziness that was in her life because of her family, she was confident of one thing. She and Jon would stand together against all odds, and just like Jon had promised her grandmother, Serenity would do whatever it took to keep them all safe—*together.*

The End

About the Author

Eden Cole has been creating stories in her head since she was a small child. Love and romance, sensual pleasures find their voice in her erotic stories of romance. Fantasy, paranormal and science fiction are her favorite genres to write in.

Sugar and Spice Press
Where romance is everything nice.
www.sugarnspicepress.com