



KAREN MICHELLE NUTT  
Destiny's Prerogative

THE LOVERS

Destiny's Prerogative  
*by Karen M. Nutt*

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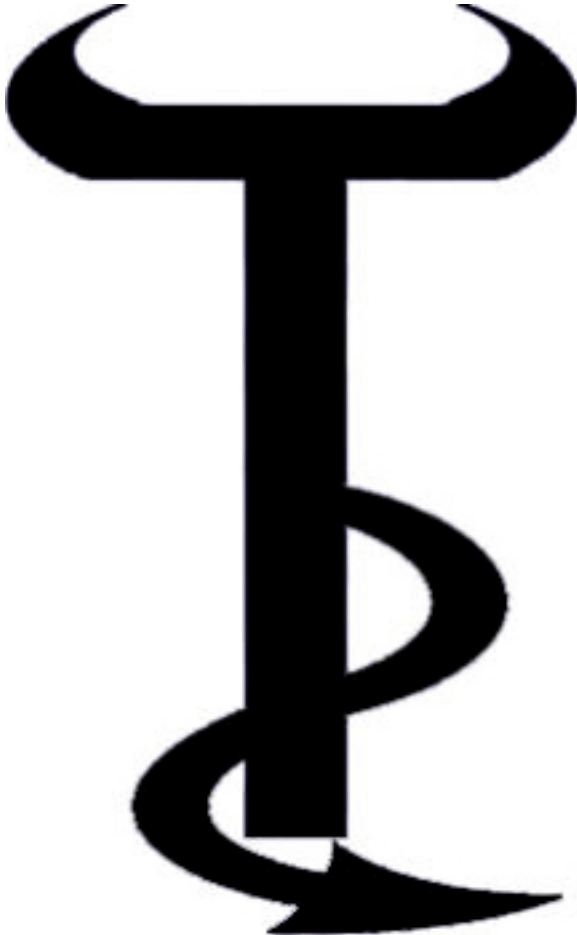
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Dark Tarot

Destiny's Prerogative

Karen Michelle Nutt

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Dedication: To Cathy for all her help. It is truly appreciated. Thank you.

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A special thank you to my editors Gail and Lori. You're both gems.

## Prologue:

Gabriel felt exhausted from the changes that racked his body. At thirty, this was a normal function for a werejaguar—a nagual. The transition would have run smoothly if he had chosen a mate wisely. He hadn't and now he would pay for it. With only two and half weeks left before the new moon, time had run out for him. The chances of him pulling through the *were-flux* were slim to none.

In his compromised state, he knew he shouldn't channel, but he heard the call for help. There was a lost soul out there and a nagual's duty was to guide those in the spirit world to safety. He couldn't abandon the soul even if it meant he'd be weakened further.

He concentrated, letting himself relax, to drift, letting the soul pull him. He picked up the essence. The soul was female. She was scared, and confusion guided her movements through the spirit world, leaving her between worlds between life and death.

He probed further, needing to know if he should guide the soul to the otherworld or back to her body. "She's strong." He was pleased to know. She hadn't been separated by her physical form for very long. There was still time. She could live if she so wished.

He opened his eyes and his eyebrows lifted in surprise. In this plane, the soul created the atmosphere. She designed a world his nagual form could appreciate. There was lush foliage, a running river and trees that lined the horizon.



Perhaps the woman had a natural closeness with animals. He shifted to his jaguar form with ease.

He breathed in and his nostrils filled with her scent. She was near, running toward him. He would wait for her by the river.

She broke through the trees with a flash of brightness that nearly blinded him and her sweet smell intoxicated every pore of his being. He wished he could see what she looked like in her human form, but when the soul was separated from the physical body, they projected only light. The purer the soul, the brighter they appeared.

Her hesitation alerted him. He was convinced she viewed him as the jaguar. Usually the soul chose to see something else, someone they were comfortable with in life—a parent, a lover, or friend. She was indeed a unique woman.

"Don't be afraid," he told her.

"Oh God." Her eyes widened. She backed up, turned and ran.

Time was slipping away for her. She couldn't leave. Without thinking he went after her. He leapt bringing her down. For a moment he witnessed a glimpse of her true form. He'd touched her soul, but he couldn't worry about the consequences of his actions now. Time was of the essence. "Don't run," he whispered in her ear. "I only wish to help you." He stepped away from her, giving her space.

She scrambled to her feet.

"I'll not harm you," he told her. He concentrated and changed to his human form, hoping to put her at ease. He

wished he wasn't so weak. He needed to be strong or he'd lose her. "You need to come with me."

I don't understand," she stammered.

"We don't have much time." He glanced over his shoulder. The window for her was already closing. He looked at her again. "Take my hand." He held it out to her. "Please. I only want to help you. It's not your time. You have to go back."

"Where?"

"Back to your body. If you don't go soon, you'll die." He paused, waiting for her decision. He hoped she would choose life. He sensed a woman who would make a difference in the world, a woman he would be honored to meet. He sighed with regret. He would never make her acquaintance. His fate was sealed, but he could still save her. "It is your prerogative, but choose with haste." Pain racked him and he couldn't hold the human illusion and he changed back to the jaguar. "It's still me," he hurried to tell her. "Your eyes do not deceive you."

"You're a jaguar."

"Please trust me. Will you let me help you?"

Again the brightness of her soul revealed a part of her, proving she was comfortable with him, a rarity with humans who didn't come from the shaman lineage. He waited patiently and she rewarded him with her answer.

"Yes."

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## **Chapter One**

Demetrius Cruzado loosened his tie as he thought about his visit earlier today from Antonio Vertiz.

Vertiz ran the local pub in town where most of the preternatural beings hung out. He asked Demetrius to look into the disappearance of his son, Tony, a sixteen year-old werejaguar, who went missing two months ago. Demetrius practiced law; he didn't run a detective agency. Because Vertiz and his father went way back, he made a few calls. To his chagrin, he discovered a rash of missing person reports had been filed in the Los Angeles region alone. At first the cops assumed the gangs were retaliating against each other, but now the faction targeted teenage weres—good kids with no history of trouble.

A few years back, his cousin at the San Francisco PD told him they experienced a similar problem. The police ferreted out a cult—humans whose motto stated: Eliminate shapeshifters from existence. Demetrius knew it had been too quiet.

Before he left the office, he put out a bulletin alerting the nearby were community to watch for suspicious behavior. How he detested humans who acted out of fear and not facts. Weres in general didn't threaten mankind. Sure, an occasional rogue shapeshifter reared his ugly head, but statistically speaking, humans murdered in greater numbers.

Demetrius headed down the long hall of the family estate glancing at the portraits Gabriel had painted of jaguars, large,

strong and determined. Demetrius had to admit his brother's talent surpassed the conventional in the way he blended the colors triggering the painting to life. At first glance, one would only see the scenery until the optical illusion revealed the animal, as if it could leap from the foliage.

Gabriel finished a painting yesterday for the preserve's auction. Demetrius hoped his brother remembered to deliver it. With Gabriel's change nearing its peak, he'd been unpredictable.

Demetrius opened the mahogany wood door to the study, flipping on the lights as he walked in. He dropped his briefcase by his recliner before heading to the sidebar to pour himself a glass of wine. He sipped, the dark liquid held the aroma of mint and black currant. He let the silky texture linger in his mouth before he swallowed. "Aah, exactly what I needed."

He intended to indulge again, but a sound pricked his ears. His face tightened, his adrenaline level spiked as he scanned the room for the intruder. Spotting a whispery movement near his desk, he placed his glass down, keeping his gaze locked on his prey. He moved with swiftness born to his kind and lunged. He grabbed the intruder by the scuff of his shirt and hauled him up, eager to do damage.

"Holy..." Demetrius bit back a curse. "Gabriel, what are you doing? I almost drove my fists into your skull." Demetrius let go of his brother, shoving him aside.

Gabriel slumped forward.

"What in the world?" Demetrius' hand snaked out once more and steadied him. He pulled out the desk chair, letting

his brother fall into the seat. "What's happened to you? Are you hurt?" He scanned for injuries.

"I'm spent," Gabriel rasped out, his massive shoulders heaving with each breath he took.

Demetrius took in his brother's appearance and frowned. T-shirt halfway tucked into his jeans; his thick dark hair matted to his head, while trickles of sweat dripped down his face. His normally bronzed skin appeared pasty and blotchy. Demetrius' eyes narrowed to slits as he realized what caused his brother's rapid deterioration. "You channeled, didn't you?"

Gabriel met his gaze. "I had to. A lost soul wandered between life and death. I couldn't ignore the plea."

"You know it's too risky for you right now. It's near your time. You could have been lost."

"Better me than the woman I guided back."

Demetrius' right eyebrow rose. "A woman? Your grandness of honor staggers me."

Gabriel breathed an exaggerated sigh. "How do you live with yourself, Demetrius? How do you pretend the souls aren't out there? We're the descendants of the nagual. The Jaguar is our brother and we are one."

"I accept we are shapeshifters. No, correction." His voice had risen. "I embrace it, but I do not risk my life to save a human who would rather see us dead. I will do business with them, I will live among them, but I will not risk my neck by playing hero in the astral plane." His cold eyes sniped at him.

"You need a human to mate," he reminded his brother.

"Need? The statement is a perverse joke in itself. We're ordered to take one and change them so we may strengthen

our numbers. They're hybrids, Gabriel. I can smell them a mile away. They aren't born weres and you would be wise to remember the difference."

They stared at each other with eyes the same color of golden brown. Gabriel took a ragged breath as he spoke. "The woman, this lost soul, accepted me in my were state."

Horried, Demetrius snarled. "You appeared to her as a jaguar? Even if she couldn't project her own illusion, you should have."

"I couldn't help it. The changes in my body interfered with my shifting." His tongue moistened his lips. "She didn't fear me. In fact she seemed more comfortable with my animal side."

Demetrius rolled his eyes heavenward. "All fine and interesting, but where was Sandra when you were risking your life on the astral plane? She should have stopped you. Until you bond, you shouldn't shapeshift or channel. Did you forget what we were taught? I don't understand why the two of you are prolonging the mating ritual. Do it already or does Sandra find some perverted pleasure from your suffering?"

"She's gone," Gabriel stated. He clutched the chair and squeezed his eyes shut.

Demetrius pierced his lips together as he noticed Gabriel's pallor turn a nice shade of green. "What do you mean gone?"

Gabriel opened his eyes, the unspoken pain illuminating them. "She left me." He swallowed hard.

Demetrius remained silent until the information hit home. "She can't leave you. You marked her. She let you."

"I didn't initiate the final bite. She couldn't deal with becoming what we are."

"Now," Demetrius threw up his hands. "She decides this now. Dammit Gabriel, you should have taken her anyway."

"Not against her will. I don't want a mate who will despise me for changing her."

Demetrius heard the slight warning in his brother's voice, but he chose to ignore it. "You only have to mate once every year. She could stand you for that long."

Gabriel slammed his fist down. The sudden movement cost him. He swayed and he gripped the side of the desk. Demetrius cringed as he witnessed his brother swallow back the bile threatening to come up. After a few seconds, he gained control again. "I want someone willing to take the bite, be my partner for life," Gabriel insisted.

Disgusted with his brother, Demetrius couldn't stop the heavy dose of sarcasm from dripping into his words. "Well fool, I can see how splendidly true love has worked out for you so far. You've run out of options, haven't you?"

"I'll deal with it." Gabriel leaned back in the chair.

"How are you planning to do this? If you haven't looked in a mirror lately, you look like shit. Your body is already giving into the changes and in little over two weeks it will be the full moon and too late to help you."

Gabriel clamped his mouth shut. The ringing silence drew out.

Then it dawned on Demetrius how his brother planned on dealing with the situation. He wouldn't mate. "You're insane." He threw up his hands and backed away from the desk. "No

one has ever survived, Gabriel. Don't let Sandra's rejection guide you in your decision. Choose someone else."

Gabriel rubbed his hands over his face. "It must be my mate's prerogative."

"Oh stop being a martyr. So what if Sandra didn't want to be a werejaguar. If you aren't aware of the options, it's also your choice to live or die."

"You are being overly dramatic, Demetrius. I may survive the change."

"And be what? If you survive, you won't blend in with the humans. Your animal side will become dominant."

"Then put me in the Feline Wildlife Preserve. The Cruzados donate enough money to them? I'll live out my days there."

"Fine stupid ass. If you survive, I'll see you're placed in a nice cell for the rest of your life."

"Hey, look at the bright side, I may combust eliminating your worries."

"Fabulous," he scorned. "I'll let our parent's know their eldest son decided to take a cosmic nap instead of taking a mate. If you were so bent on finding your soul mate, you shouldn't have wasted your time with a human who didn't give a damn."

"She cared," Gabriel defended Sandra.

Demetrius' gaze pinned him down. Everyone knew Sandra Tupac's father suffocated her with his perverse shaman rules. The woman jumped at the sight of her own shadow, but Gabriel loved lost souls. No one could deny he hadn't tried, but Sandra's fears were more than Gabriel could handle. "Love is not what it's cracked up to be," Demetrius



said. "When my time comes, I'll pay for a woman. We have the money. That's the advantage of being a Cruzado."

"I think your plan constitutes as prostitution."

"I'll marry her. The Cruzado name alone is worth its weight in gold. She'll have prestige in the were community and the money to go with it. All she'll have to do is sleep with me once a year. Frankly, I don't see how that's a bad trade off."

"It sounds cold and lonely."

"And your way sounds so much better. Now tell me where Sandra is holed up. I'll drag her ass back here and you'll deliver the mating bite."

"I won't do it. I gave her my word that she would be safe. Don't you dare give her another reason to fear us."

"The surprises keep on coming. You knew she feared us, yet you stayed with her. I don't care how good-looking the woman is the grief she's given you isn't worth it. Now you'll die for her so you can prove your human side of compassion is the dominant. Get over yourself. This is survival of the fittest."

"I said leave it. It's my choice."

Demetrius' nostrils flared as he scrambled for another argument to sway his brother. At a loss for words, he slammed his fists on the desk and left the room.

\* \* \* \*

"I should handle this on my own." Demetrius played with the idea before he vetoed it. He might need help. "Lucas could lend a hand." He played with the idea and cringed.

Demetrius preferred control and insisted on order. The laid back youngest Cruzado, by two years, knew nothing of organization. He preferred to spend his time at the beach, lounging in the sun without a care in the world. All werejaguars loved the water, but Lucas took it to a new level. Beach bum status fit him to a tee. Dark hair streaked lighter by the sun, and his skin held a tropical glow all year round. His wardrobe consisted of t-shirts, board shorts and flip-flops. Demetrius didn't mind the casual look, but the guy didn't own anything else.

Lucas was here now. Demetrius convinced him to stay until the special dedication dinner at the Feline Wildlife Preserve. So he'd be here for at least a couple of more weeks. That reminded Demetrius, he needed to find something in his closet for Lucas to borrow. Being about the same size, it shouldn't be difficult.

He didn't knock, but burst into his brother's room.

Lucas leaned over his surfboard, probably examining it for dings. He looked up with an upward jerk of his head in greeting. "Hey."

"We have a problem," Demetrius announced.

"Yeah? What kind of problem?" Lucas continued to work on his surfboard.

"Sandra left Gabriel out to dry."

"Man, that sucks."

Demetrius rolled his eyes. "It will if we don't find someone to take Sandra's place."

"Us?" Lucas' attention riveted to him. He put his board down and focused. "Don't you think Gabriel should choose?"

"He won't. He doesn't want to jeopardize the woman. He's afraid he might harm her. She might be allergic to the were gene. She might die. Blah, blah, blah," his sarcasm dripped nastily.

Lucas' brow furrowed. "Sure it might be risky, but he has to take someone. Granted a soul mate would be preferred, but he can't be choosy now."

"Exactly." Demetrius threw up his hands relieved Lucas joined him on the same page. "However, sainted Gabriel will have nothing to do with it."

"So what can we do?" Lucas shrugged.

A slow smile spread across Demetrius' face as a plan formed in his mind. "We bring a woman to him."

Lucas chuckled joining in on the joke until he met Demetrius' somber expression. "Oh come on. What are you going to do? Hold Gabriel down and hope the woman takes advantage of him. Besides, Gabriel will never forgive us if the girl dies."

Demetrius harrumphed. "I didn't say I had all the details worked out."

"What do you have worked out?"

"Uh..." Demetrius rubbed his chin. Then he remembered something Gabriel told him. He looked at Lucas with a smug smile. "Gabriel channeled."

"So?"

"He made a connection with a human, revealing his jaguar form. He marked her soul."

Lucas nodded. "It could work. The were DNA won't be such a shock to her system."

"Exactly," Demetrius said. "All we have to do is find out who she is."

"How do you plan on accomplishing that feat, calling every hospital to find out who had a near death experience?"

"No." He smiled. "You are." He turned and headed for the door.

"Oh come on, Demetrius," Lucas whined.

"And," Demetrius looked back at his brother, his gaze taking in his brown board shorts and t-shirt. "I'll have a suit ready for you."

"Suit? What for?"

"For the fundraiser at the Feline Wildlife Preserve." He grinned as he continued on his way.

"Fine, but I'm not wearing shoes," Lucas called after his brother.

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## Chapter Two

### *Nine Days Later*

Dr. Shay McCormick locked her Civic and headed toward the Feline Wildlife Preserve's main building. She could see Bly Casillas waiting for her at the door, dressed in the preserve's assigned uniform of tan pants and light-blue shirt with the preserve's logo in the upper right corner. Not an attractive uniform, but functional when they worked with the animals. Bly had braided her thick black-hair and coiled it on top of her head like a crown. Shay smiled. Bly swore the bun added two more inches to her petite height of five-one.

"Welcome back," Bly said. She smelled like coconut suntan lotion, which she lathered on daily to keep her golden-hued skin from sun damage. Shay used it too, but her fair skin still freckled.

"It's good to be back" Shay leaned down to give Bly a hug.

They headed to the office. Shay threw her briefcase on the vinyl lime-green couch she'd picked up at the swap meet last summer. She glanced at the stack of papers on her desk and made a mental note to riffle through it later today. "So how are our cats doing?"

"Gregori has been acting up. I think he misses you."

Shay chuckled. They had three margays, but Gregori had been hand-raised, making him very friendly with the staff.

The preserve also housed ten Amur leopards, six Northern Chinese leopards, four ocelots, three sand cats, one tiger, and one cougar.

Shay sat down behind her desk and listened while Bly gave her the rundown on what happened since she'd been gone. Two employees eloped without notice, two schools double booked for a tour of the facility, and one of their leopards had become pregnant. How could so much happen? She'd only been gone a couple of weeks.

With a deep breath, Bly took a seat on the side of the desk. Her dark eyes looked Shay over as if deciding for herself if Shay should be back at work.

"Well, do I pass muster or not?" Shay asked.

Bly grinned. "You look damn good for a dead woman."

"Thanks and technically, I was only dead for three minutes."

"Dead is dead if you ask me, and three minutes is a hell of long time before they brought you back. So tell me, did you see anyone you know in the white light?"

Shay's smile faltered and she couldn't meet Bly's gaze. "Not exactly."

"But you caught of glimpse of something?" Bly pushed.

Shay hadn't discussed what she witnessed with anyone. How could she explain her experience when she didn't understand what happened herself?

Two weeks ago, she had checked herself into the hospital as an outpatient to remove a cyst. A simple procedure, but she had a reaction to the anesthetic, causing her heart to stop. There had been no white light, no loved one there. In all her religious studies, nothing prepared her for what waited for her on the other side.

For a moment she went back recalling the experience.

\* \* \* \*

*Shay spun around, taking in the thick, wooded area with the lush green shrubbery covering the ground. How did she end up here? Panic welled inside her making her heart thump madly as if she punched a doorbell. An inner warning told her, she didn't belong here.*

*The urgency to reach home consumed her. She ran through the foliage without caring what direction she took. Branches lashed at her skin, but she didn't slow down until the trees thinned. She could hear running water and headed toward the sound. A river. She could follow the river home. She sprang into the clearing only to skid to a stop. A jaguar stood down by the river's edge.*

*The cat's gaze locked onto hers. "Don't be afraid." It's suave Spanish accent flavored each word.*

*"Oh God." Shay's eyes widened convinced she'd lost her mind. Jaguars growled and roared; they didn't speak. She backed up, turned and ran.*

*The crash of foliage behind alerted her, but she didn't change direction in time. The jaguar pounced, bringing her down. "Don't run." He whispered in her ear, his breath hot and moist. "I only wish to help you." He raised his lithe body off hers, the warmth going with him.*

*Shay scrambled to her feet. She blinked. The cat had vanished and a tall man with dark hair and golden brown eyes stood in its place.*

*"I don't understand," Shay stammered.*

*"We don't have much time." He glanced over his shoulder as if he expected trouble. He looked at her again. "Take my hand." He held it out to her. "Please. I only want to help you. It's not your time. You have to go back."*

*"Where?"*

*"Your body. If you don't go soon, you'll die." He paused as if waiting for her to answer. When she didn't, he added, "It is your prerogative, but choose with haste."*

*Before she could give her answer, the man became a jaguar once more. Shay's mouth dropped open and she stepped back not sure what she witnessed.*

*"It's still me. Your eyes do not deceive you," he said.*

*Did he believe his honesty would convince her that changing from beast to man and back again was normal?*

*"You're a jaguar," slipped out before she could stop herself, but he ignored the outburst.*

*"Please trust me. Will you let me help you?"*

*Half-man, half-jaguar, power coiled in the creature and yet she didn't fear him. "Yes."*

\* \* \* \*

*"Shay?"*

*Bly's worried tone drew her attention back to the now. "If I tell you what happened, you must promise me you won't repeat it to anyone."*

*"Cross my heart and all that nonsense." With her index finger, she hastily made a cross over her chest. "What did you see?"*

*"A jaguar."*



When Bly didn't immediately say something, Shay hurried on to fill in the silence. "I figured it's because I work here," she rambled with a nervous chuckle. "It's obvious why I would dream about a wildcat."

"We don't have any jaguars in residence," Bly pointed out.

"I've always been intrigued by the animal. What can I say? I've never been comfortable with my family. It's only appropriate a wildcat would come to escort me to the other side." Shay couldn't help but notice Bly didn't crack a smile. "You think I'm crazy," Shay said.

"No, of course not. Did you ever consider you might have been in contact with a spirit guide?"

"I know your grandmother lived on a reservation, but don't become all Native American on me now." Shay chuckled and waved her hand. "Spirit Guide?" She pointed to her head. "If you haven't noticed the red curly hair and freckles, my last name should have given it away. I'm Scot-Irish. I'd be more apt to see a leprechaun than a spirit guide."

"I can't help what came to you, besides I've heard leprechauns are nasty little elves you can't trust. So what did the jaguar say to you?"

"Say? Who said anything about a conversation?" Shay didn't quite meet Bly's gaze.

"You're blushing." Bly gladly pointed out. "Dios mío! It must have been a heck of a conversation."

"I don't remember." Shay pierced her lips together.

"Sure you don't."

"I had a weird dream. Okay?"

"So share it." Bly crossed her hands across her chest and waited.

"I don't know how to explain it, other than the jaguar had some very human qualities about him."

"Him?" Bly's beautiful arched eyebrows lifted.

"At times, I couldn't distinguish between the animal and the man. The man's features were blurred. All I can remember is the dark hair and golden eyes. The jaguar stood out more and his words, his stance ... Oh, this is silly."

"No, go on. Tell me."

"His presence calmed me. I knew he wanted to protect me and I trusted him. He guided me back."

"Interesting."

"I've concluded the whole experience was due to a lack of oxygen."

"I'm not so sure. If I remember correctly, the shamans believed the jaguar possessed the ability to move between worlds. Your love for cats probably puts you in sync with their spirits." She placed a hand on Shay's. "I'm glad he found you and sent you back."

"Yeah, me too. Enough of this." She made a dismissing gesture with a wave of her hand and stood. "I need to see my babies. Gregori first." She started for the door, but turned back when she realized Bly hadn't followed.

"Go ahead," Bly said. "I need to call Mrs. Kim."

"Who?"

"The principal at the middle school we double booked. Remember? I'll catch up with you in a few."

"Sure."

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Bly waited until she heard the outer door close, then she picked up the phone and made the call, relieved when he picked up. She didn't bother with pleasantries. "We need to talk."

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## Chapter Three

Shay stretched her arms above her head and frowned at the pile of paperwork she hadn't gone through yet. She needed a break. She picked up her coffee cup and took a sip. The moment the cold bitter taste hit her throat; she knew she'd made a mistake. Her last warm up had been about an hour ago. She pushed the cup aside and glanced at her computer. She tapped her fingers on the side of her desk, debating if she should search the web for her answers. "Why not?" She pulled the keyboard toward her and typed in shapeshifter. She chewed on her lower lip, her finger hovering over the return button. "There's no such thing as shapeshifters," she said to convince herself. It didn't help. She hit return.

All types of sites came up: forums, chat sites, and the clinical terms of what it meant to be a shapeshifter. One site intrigued her with the information and folklore of the *weres*, but not all of the tales were informative. The last site she clicked on scared the crap out of her. A series of video reels stared back at her daring her to choose one. At random, she hit file two.

The camera caught the fear in the teenage boy's eyes as he ran to the forefront. He slid to a stop. "Somebody help me!" His heart-wrenching cry tore at Shay. The roar of a wildcat startled the boy to whimpers. He turned with a quick snap of his shoulders, searching for the danger. "No!" the boy screamed scrambling away as a grotesque creature leapt into

the picture: Black and menacing the cat's elongated head sported to blood red eyes and snarling fangs exposed and ready for the kill. The boy shapeshifted into a leopard and both cats collided. Blood spurted like a fountain as the creature tore flesh.

"Jesus," Shay gasped as her heart pounded against her ribcage. She didn't want to see what happened next. What in the hell did she download? The site had to be some kind of perverted joke. She fumbled to click out of the reel, punching the escape button over and over again.

The blood curdling screams silenced. She drew in a ragged breath and stared at the screen. Nerves at full stretch, she jumped when the phone rang.

The backline blinked blood red. Only employees knew the number, but Shay hesitated to answer it. Her hand hovered over the phone.

Three rings.

"I'm being silly," she whispered. She picked up. "Hello."

"Dr. McCormick?" a male voice inquired.

A whisper of apprehension coursed through her. How did the man know the backline extension? "Whom am I speaking to?" she asked, but her inquiry went unanswered.

"Do you believe in shapeshifters?" His deep baritone voice held a slight southern drawl.

Her gaze riveted to the computer. The home page to the disturbing video reel she had watched showed a man frozen in the middle of shapeshifting. "She clicked out of the site. "Who is this?" she asked again.

"I need to speak to you in person and discuss your new obsession with were creatures."

"We deal in reality here. So unless you have a wildcat on your hands, we aren't interested." She slammed down the phone and stared at her computer. "I found a horror site, nothing real," she told herself. "The phone call didn't mean anything—a coincidence." She didn't have a webcam. He couldn't see what she did. She freaked out anyway, and grabbed her purse and keys. The paperwork could wait until tomorrow.

The alarm set and the facility locked, Shay jogged toward her car, but the distant roar of a wildcat caused her to stop dead in her tracks. She couldn't readily identify the cat, but she knew it didn't come from the facility. Her gaze scanned the terrain. She caught a shadow out of the corner of her eye. She whirled toward it, but nothing stood out. The fear of danger shook her into a full run, desperate to reach her vehicle. She fumbled with the keys, dropping them twice before she managed to open the door. Once in, she slammed the door shut and locked it.

She gripped the steering wheel and glanced into her rearview mirror. Her heart pounded against her ribcage as she searched the landscape unable to shake the creepy sensation of being watched.

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## **Chapter Four**

Shay had busied herself with last minute details for the preserve's fundraiser, making it easy to dismiss her late night caller and the disturbing horror website. The preserve transformed the Community Center into an enchanting dinner house. Each table had been adorned with a rustic vase full of sunflowers, orange roses, berry stems and leaf trimmings. The centerpieces would be auctioned off later in the evening along with the pies from Polly's, gift certificates from various businesses and the painting the Cruzados had donated. Shay had worried about accepting art, but Bly assured her the artist painted wildlife scenes for a living.

Bly strode over to her and grabbed her arm. "What a turn out," she said. Bly wore a midnight-blue cocktail dress. She'd curled her hair, letting the dark tresses cascade down her back. Even with her three-inch heels, she barely came up to Shay's chin.

"I'm pleased." Shay grinned.

"Have you seen the band?" Bly fixed her eyes on the empty bandstand.

"They're taking a break."

"I swear the drummer, John has had one too many drinks. Do you know he had the gall to hit on me?"

"Well, you do look hot."

Bly looked down at her attire. "I do, don't I." She smiled and her eyes took on a mischievous glint. "I think I'll go check on drummer boy." She hurried toward the kitchen.

Shay chuckled and turned. Her gaze landed to the far side of the room. There stood a dream and he had long dark sun-streaked hair pulled back in a ponytail. "My, my." Broad shoulders filled out the suit, fitting him to a tee, but he kept adjusting his jacket then his tie, as if he couldn't stand the fit. He sauntered over to the bar, giving her the pleasure of viewing the rest of him. She suppressed a giggle. The man wore an Armani suit with flip-flops. As if he sensed someone staring at him, he turned. When she met his gaze, he gave her a sheepish grin, shrugging his shoulder.

Shay chuckled softly before she turned her attention toward Mrs. Pelouski, who wanted to tell her about her newly adopted ocelot named Anna.

The preserve encouraged the patrons to adopt one of the wildcats. The adoptee would send monthly payments to the preserve. The fees housed and maintained the needs of the cat they adopted. The parent's name would be printed on the cage and they received special privileges: free admission to the preserve on the nights they opened late, discounts for other events, and special recognition in their monthly newspaper.

A tap on Shay's shoulder had her turning around and coming face to face with Mr. Flip-Flop.

"I'll let you get back to your young fella." Mrs. Pelouski winked and went off to tell someone else about her wildcat.

Mr. Flip-Flop handed Shay a glass of wine. "Your fella, huh?"

"Mrs. Pelouski is a romantic at heart. She's been married to her husband for forty-five years. She asks me every time



she visits why I don't have a ring on my finger. She's probably planning our honeymoon as we speak."

"Well then, if you're my bride-to-be, I should introduce myself. I'm Lucas Cruzado."

She'd finally met one of the elusive Cruzados. Their donations helped feed most of the cats through the winter. She offered her hand with a smile. "Pleased to meet you, Mr. Cruzado. I'm Dr. Shay McCormick."

He took her hand. "Please, let's not be so formal. I leave the stuffy codes of behavior to Demetrius. My brother," he clarified. "Lucas is good enough. May I call you, Shay?"

"You may. On behalf of the facility, we would like to thank you and your family for their continuous support."

"Our pleasure."

The band had returned. The lead singer's whiskey rough voice drifted over to them.

"How about a dance?" Lucas jerked his head toward the dance floor.

"I really should—"

He took her glass and placed it on the table with his, then held out his hand. "Come now." His gaze slid over her.

Shay had spent extra cash on the dress she wore, which she knew flattered her full figure and had been the perfect shade of green to compliment her eyes. If Lucas' grin could be an indication, it appealed to him as well.

"You're all dressed up and looking beautiful," he told her. "It would be a shame if you didn't show it off." He flashed her a boyish grin.

How could she refuse?

\* \* \* \*

Demetrius cornered Lucas the moment he arrived home. They went into the study and closed the door. They wouldn't be disturbed; Gabriel had retired for the night. Demetrius took a seat behind the desk and Lucas plopped down on the edge of it. He removed the tie he had been forced to wear. He didn't appreciate his part in spying. He hit it off with Shay McCormick. Under different circumstances, he'd consider her a friend. However, the ploy to save Gabriel, would force him to betray her. Not cool. Friendships tended not to flourish when based on lies.

"Well," Demetrius said, his impatience brimming over with a huff. He ran his fingers through his hair making his short-strands stand up on end.

"If she dreams tonight, I'll sense her and join her on the astral plane. If she's the soul Gabriel marked, I'll pick up his scent."

"Good."

"Why is it, you aren't tracking her yourself?" Lucas asked. "And where were you? You forced me to wear a monkey suit, but you didn't show."

Demetrius leaned back in his chair. He folded his hands making a tent with his index fingers and tapped his chin. "I had other business to attend to."

"Man, by the look on your face, it wasn't pleasant. Wanna spill it?"

\* \* \* \*

Demetrius shifted in his seat. He rubbed his face and inhaled deeply. "I've been hired to defend Daniel Morales, a werecat from Yuba City. He's been here a month visiting cousins. No priors, been a decent kid working his way through college."

"Yeah, what did he do?"

Demetrius met his brother's gaze. "He tore his cousin apart."

"Whoa, that's harsh."

"Tell me about it. The story gets weirder. Morales claims someone kidnapped him and his cousin Jose. The kidnapper supposedly drugged them and chained them down with silver. Deprived of water and food, Morales admitted he hallucinated at times. However, he swears he doesn't remember attacking Jose."

"So how did Morales escape the kidnapper?"

"He doesn't remember. He stumbled into the Antelope Valley Hospital suffering from dehydration and exhaustion."

"Maybe someone else murdered his cousin."

Demetrius shook his head. "They found Morales' DNA everywhere, but what doesn't add up is Morales being anxious to lead the police to the crime scene. When the cops showed Morales, Jose's mutilated body, he nearly threw up his *cojones*."

Lucas swallowed hard. "You sound like you believe Daniel Morales' story."

"The family backs up his claims. Jose's parents continue to support Morales. Usually I don't believe half the crap my

clients tell me, but something in the tortured kid's eyes has me believing his story has a ring of truth to it."

"What are you saying, Demetrius? We have some crazed dude out there kidnapping and torturing weres?"

Demetrius met Lucas' gaze. "Yeah, I do." He not only believed it. He feared the horror had only begun. They still hadn't found Tony Vertiz. He feared the worst.

"Demetrius, are you okay?"

He blinked. "Why are you still here? Don't you have a date on the astral plane?"

"Whatever dude." Lucas held up his hands and stood. At the door, he turned and looked at Demetrius. "You never told me. What are we going to do if Shay's the woman we're looking for?"

"Let me worry about the details."

Lucas rolled his eyes.

"Shut the door on the way out," Demetrius called out and cringed when the door slammed.

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## Chapter Five

Dressed for bed, Shay sipped her mint tea. The preserve managed to secure enough donations to finish landscaping the leopard's cage, rock walls and all. She placed the teacup on her nightstand before she turned down her bed and flipped the light switch.

Finally, she'd met one of the elusive Cruzados. As far as she knew, they never attended the fundraisers; they sent checks with an apology, stating they had a prior engagement.

Lucas Cruzado turned out to be a pleasant surprise ... thoughtful and down to earth.

*"I don't usually attend functions where I'm required to wear shoes," he told her.*

*"So why are you here?"*

*He sighed. "It's complicated. Demetrius decided someone in the family should attend."*

*"How many Cruzados are there?"*

*"My brother Demetrius, stuffy and arrogant. He practices law." He leaned near and cupped his hand near his mouth.*

*"You wouldn't have any fun with him."*

*Shay chuckled.*

He mentioned another brother, but she couldn't remember his name. She yawned, pulling her covers to her chin.

\* \* \* \*

Shay took in the lush trees, plants and the river flowing beneath it, a perfect habitat for a jaguar. Death led her here before, but she knew she dreamed now.

She wished she could see the jaguar ... the man again and thank him for saving her.

"Hello Shay."

She turned around and smiled. "Hello Lucas. What are you doing here?"

He shrugged. "It's your dream."

"Okay." She tilted her head as she stared at him. He sported a different look: t-shirt with a decal of a surfer riding a wave. He wore shorts and to finish off his attire, he had on rubber and leather sandals. "You look more at home in what you're wearing," she commented. Then she looked down at her garments and frowned.

"You look good in the Rolling Stones T-shirt," he said.

"I don't have shoes on."

He ignored her statement and strolled over to her. He circled her, stalked her and she could have sworn his eyes glowed. Then he leaned near inhaling deeply.

She took a step back. "You know Lucas. I think you're sweet, but you're not my type."

He grinned with a chuckle. "I know," he told her. "You're only dreaming. And do you know what?"

"What?"

"It's time to wake up."

Shay's eyes popped open at the sound of the alarm buzzing. With a moan, she hit the snooze button.

\* \* \* \*

Lucas sat down for breakfast, dishing out a generous helping of eggs and ham. He shoveled in a few bites before Demetrius lost his patience. "Are you keeping me in suspense on purpose?" He shook his paper and glared.

"You need to chill, man." Lucas sighed. "Gabriel marked her all right. His scent was all over her."

"You didn't touch her, did you? The last thing we need is Gabriel going ballistic because you touched his mate."

"Give me some credit. Of course, I didn't touch her." He buttered his toast and lathered it with strawberry preserves. "I think she digs him."

"What do you mean?" Demetrius leaned forward.

"In Shay's dream, she created a jaguar habitat. Man, I loved it."

"Interesting."

"What is?" Gabriel asked as he stumbled in. He pulled out a chair before he fell into it. He reached for the coffeepot. His hand shook and he sloshed half of the contents on the tablecloth before the liquid made it into the cup.

Demetrius and Lucas exchanged worried glances.

Demetrius cleared his throat. "You missed Lucas describing the new surfboard he created. I'm sure he'll fill you in."

Lucas choked on his toast and grabbed for the water pitcher.

"You okay?" Gabriel asked as his brother downed a cup of water.

"Mmmhum."

Demetrius pushed back his chair and stood. "I'm off to work. Criminals need to be defended." He headed for the door but turned back. "Don't go out, Gabriel. And for God's sake don't channel. There's someone out to eliminate weres. You'd be an easy target right now."

Gabriel didn't quite meet his gaze.

Demetrius cursed under his breath. "You did it again last night, didn't you?"

"I couldn't help it. A were wouldn't cross," Gabriel defended himself.

"A were?" Demetrius' ears perked.

"He endured great pain before he died and the soul became distressed, confused and disoriented."

"Do you know who he was? Did he give you any clues?"

Gabriel shook his head. "You know channeling doesn't work that way. I picked up a strong signature. A were scent—a young male. I think he died while in his werecat form and whatever killed him followed him into the astral plane."

"Another were?" Demetrius asked.

Gabriel shook his head. "I don't think so, but I sensed something preternatural about it ... something evil. Its sulfuric scent wafted toward me making the were tremble." He looked at Demetrius and Lucas. "The *were* recognized it, made me think the evil being caused the werecat's death."

Lucas frowned. "Why would it follow its prey into the afterlife?"

"I don't know." Gabriel sighed.



Demetrius digested the information. He didn't like it. "Gabriel, promise me you won't do anything stupid, like trying to save another soul. Antonio Vertiz's son is missing..."

"Tony's missing?" Gabriel looked at him.

"Yes, along with a whole string of others in the L.A. area. So do us all a favor and ignore the call." He waited for an answer, but his brother remained silent. "Gabriel, do you hear me?"

"I can't promise you anything."

"Demetrius is worried about you, man." Lucas placed a hand on Gabriel's shoulder. "We both are."

"A little less worrying would be nice," Gabriel grumbled into his coffee cup.

Demetrius threw up his hands and looked at Lucas. "Continue to talk some sense into the stupid ass, will you? I've got to go."

\* \* \* \*

Lucas didn't know what Demetrius expected him to do. Gabriel ran his life with a certain code of ethics, bordering on medieval. Lucas called it the knight and shining armor principle. Honor bound to save a soul, were or human made no difference to him.

Lucas adored humans. Demetrius tolerated them, but Gabriel embraced the differences and found the compatible ground. Lucas would have better luck riding a tsunami than harassing Gabriel into ignoring a soul in trouble.

Lucas pierced his lips together. Gabriel's pale skin made the dark circles around his eyes stand out like bruises. Gabriel

wouldn't be taking on the Big Kahuna any time soon; he needed rest. Lucas shook his head. "You don't look so good, Dude." He handed him a piece of toast.

Gabriel lifted his hand, refusing. "I'm fine." He pushed back his chair, attempting to stand, but he didn't quite accomplish the feat before his body shapeshifted. He cried out in pain as if every bone in his body snapped.

When the jaguar took over, Lucas knelt down beside him. "That's gotta hurt."

"You have no idea." He padded up and down the room. "It happens for no reason. I can't control it."

Lucas reached out. "Man, you gotta take it easy."

Gabriel growled. "Don't look at me with pity!" He let out a roar, causing the crystals on the chandelier to chime against each other. He distanced himself from Lucas to pace near the open window. He crouched and his muscles rippled beneath the fur, making Lucas nervous.

"Gabriel, you can't go out there." He maneuvered him away, herding him behind the table.

Gabriel jumped over it and out the window, the screen giving away easily.

Lucas ran to the window grabbing the frame as he leaned out. "You're so going to regret this, Gabriel!" With an exasperated sigh, Lucas shapeshifted and went after him.

\* \* \* \*

Gabriel picked up his speed the wind feathering down his body. All his senses were in tune with nature. He heard Lucas' pursuit, his strides not far behind him. It didn't matter, he

could see his destination and as he slid to a stop in front of Sandra's house, he shapeshifted to human form.

Lucas came up behind, shifting to stand next to him. "Man, do you mind telling me why you made me chase you across town?"

Gabriel didn't answer. He took a step toward the house.

Lucas's hand snaked out and grabbed his arm. "Dude, you don't want to do this."

Gabriel looked at him. "I need to know Sandra's okay."

"Why wouldn't she be?"

Gabriel's brow furrowed. "I ... I don't know," he stammered, realizing he didn't have a concrete reason for coming here.

Lucas stiffened and slapped Gabriel's shoulder. He turned following his brother's line of vision. Gabriel had wondered if he would be welcomed. The shotgun pointed at his head gave him his answer.

"Why are you here?" Abe Tupac demanded his voice deep and forceful, his stance tense and the muscles in his arms flexed beneath his T-shirt. Sandra's father came from a long line of shamans from West Africa, but he tended to forget jaguars were once the shaman's spirit guides. Sandra's mother had been murdered by a *werejaguar*. The details were sketchy but the *werejaguar* acted out of character; weres didn't kill for pleasure, but Abe made it his duty to hold all shapeshifters in contempt.

"I needed to see Sandra," Gabriel said and he glanced toward the upstairs window of the house. The pink covering

shifted and he caught a glimpse of her before the curtain fell back into place.

"My daughter made it clear. She doesn't want to see you anymore." Abe's eyes narrowed and his nostrils flared.

"He knows," Lucas stepped forward.

Abe's gaze shifted to Lucas. "Then I suggest you leave with him now."

Lucas tugged on Gabriel's arm. "I believe he means it."

The tension reached a flash point and Gabriel imagined shifting and flying through the air to take Abe down. He shuddered and backed up a step, startled by his dark thoughts. "Yes, let's go."

They turned and walked away, but Gabriel sensed death, lurking ... waiting to try her hand. He didn't have to look over his shoulder to know Abe kept the shotgun pointed at their backs.

Not until they were a good distance away, did Lucas speak. "Do you mind telling me how you wound up dating Sandra when she had a whacko father like Abe?"

"I didn't date her father." He looked at his brother as they walked. "I don't expect you to understand, but when Sandra and I were alone ... away from Abe ... He shrugged. "She became a different person."

"I don't know, man, I can't see how a relationship like..." Lucas held up his hands. "Hey, I'm sorry. I didn't—"

"Don't sweat it." Gabriel understood now the relationship had been doomed. To care didn't necessarily mean love followed. He wanted to bond with his soul mate, but he confused what it meant to be in love with his fierce

compassion to protect. "You can't save everyone," he mumbled.

"Did you say something?" Lucas asked.

Gabriel ran his hand through his hair. Every nerve in his body tensed and begged for release. "Back at the house, before I changed, I sensed danger. I don't know why, but the desperation to see Sandra took precedence over everything else." He met his brother's gaze. "Sandra and I didn't complete our union, but I..."

"You're still connected," Lucas finished for him.

"Yes, but do I sense her fear or my desperation?"

Lucas shook his head. "I don't know, man."

Gabriel inhaled deeply, something primitive called to him. He stopped in his tracks and bent forward gripping his knees. "I'm changing." He squeezed his eyes shut, trying to stop the roaring of blood in his ears.

"No, Gabriel. Come on, fight it." Lucas gripped his shoulder.

"I can't," he bit out. With terrible suddenness, he threw back his head and screamed a guttural cry setting the cat in him free. He heard Lucas call after him, but he couldn't stop. He allowed his wilder side to take over and headed for open terrain.

\* \* \* \*

Abe walked into the house, slamming the door behind him. "Sandra!" he shouted for his daughter as he placed his rifle on the rack above the fireplace.

He waited at the foot of the stairs his arms crossed against his chest.

"Yes, Daddy?" She stood at the top.

"Come down here."

She hesitated but took the steps gripping the rail as she went. His daughter inherited her petite frame and toffee-hued skin from her mother, but her straight smooth hair she created with chemicals.

Abe frowned. Sandra became more like her mother every day; never satisfied with the way things were meant to be.

"Did you call him?" he accused.

"Daddy, you know I didn't." She stopped midway and looked at him. "I'm not ... I'm not seeing Gabriel anymore."

His eyes narrowed wondering if he should believe her. Her mother lied. "I'm trying to protect you, Sandra. Your mother never listened to me and you know what happened to her."

"I know." She nodded.

"I think you forget. Come here." He pointed in front of him.

Sandra shook her head. "Daddy, please. I do know."

"I said come here!" His voice boomed and she jumped.

"Now!"

With her head lowered, Sandra continued her descent. Before she took the last step, his hand snaked out, grabbing her arm. He dragged her behind him as he led her to the back room.

"Daddy, stop. I don't want—"

He stopped so fast she slammed into the back of him. He whirled around. Grabbing both her shoulders, he shook her.

Destiny's Prerogative  
*by Karen M. Nutt*

"You will do as I say or I'll be forced to let Gabriel suffer. Do you hear me, girl?"

A tear slid down her cheek, but she didn't fight him anymore.

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## Chapter Six

After work, Demetrius strode into Antonio's Pub with its rustic décor—alder-wood tables and wooden floorboards. He looked around the room to see who ventured out tonight.

Two werewolves, Marcus McBain and Callie Murphy huddled close at one of the corner booths. Three college kids—James, a werecat and two Avians, Jaiden and Jairec played pool and drank Coronas. Billy Preston, a *werecheetah* sat at the far end of the bar with his tap beer reading a newspaper.

"The Pub's quiet tonight," Demetrius said as he sat down at the bar.

"Yeah. Ever since the warning went out about the were kidnappings." Antonio slid a mug of beer to Demetrius. "I'd close the bar," Antonio continued. "But I can't bear the silence at home. I never knew how much I'd miss noise until now. I'd do anything to hear Tony's god-awful music blaring. I miss my boy, Demetrius. Any word?"

"No, but no one's given up on finding him."

Antonio leaned on the bar. "It's the not knowing that kills you. Is my boy all right? Is he scared? Is he..." He choked on his words fighting back the tears. "I apologize."

"No need." He was pulling his hair out over Gabriel's predicament. He didn't know what he'd do if he had a son missing.

"We're heading out," Marcus called to Antonio. He had his arm draped over Callie's shoulder.



"You two take care."

"We will," Callie said as Marcus led her out the door.

Antonio turned to Demetrius. "That Callie's been stringing Marcus along for months."

"If I know Marcus," Demetrius said. "He'll convince her to choose." He downed his beer. "I have to head out too, Antonio. I have an appointment I can't miss."

\* \* \* \*

"The night's still young. Do you want to head on over to my place?" Marcus asked. He inhaled deeply; Callie smelled wonderful. The approaching full moon made him horny as hell and with her ripening filling his senses; it took all his control to hold back.

"And why would I want to do that?" Callie smiled and slipped out of his embrace.

Marcus wanted Callie for his life-mate. He could use his strength to take her, but the McBain werewolf clan forbade it. Their motto: *Patience Will Triumph*

His grandfather, Charles McBain came from Ireland escaping extermination from Oliver Cromwell's hand. Cromwell destroyed everything in his wake. His grandfather fought, but when he realized there could be no hope, he made the choice to start over in the new world. Many clans followed, but not enough—twenty-thousand perished. Brute force didn't mean victory. Patience proved triumphant. Charles McBain found his opportunity in 1658 and paid a visit to Cromwell, infecting him with the were gene without turning

him. History states Cromwell died from complications from malaria and kidney infections. The McBains knew better.

Marcus had been indoctrinated with patience. He had endured six long months of it, but it would soon pay off. Every touch, every look Callie gave Marcus, told him she would choose him over the other eligible weres in the clan.

He draped his arm around Callie's shoulders and moved her long brown hair aside so he could nibble her neck.

"Stop it, you're tickling me." She giggled trying to move away.

"I want to do so much more."

"Oh yeah. What does the big bad wolf want to do with me?"

Marcus' brows rose up and down mischievously. "Oh you'll see my sweet little lamb." He growled pretending to bite her. Callie screamed laughing as she ran. She shifted and he followed suit. The myths claimed the werewolves were ugly monsters, which stood on their hind legs, but they were wrong. Marcus and Callie were both large brown furred wolves like the rest of their clan, Marcus slightly larger in stature.

Callie howled at the full moon as the primitive yearning raced through her body. Marcus' ragged whimpers of sheer need escaped his lips. He would mate with Callie tonight and their union would then be complete.

"You'll have to catch me first." Callie's telepathic call taunted him.

"And when I do?"

She sent him a mental picture of what she wanted him to do to her. He lifted his head to the moon and howled. The strong and vivid desire to take her now coursed through him.

She chuckled and took off at a full run. Marcus' adrenaline spiked as the wind carried Callie's scent to him, blanketing him with her growing desire.

"I want you to teach me everything," Callie's mind reached out to him with her request. She was ready for him, slick and wet with yearning. The thought of mounting her in wolf form had him howling again. They would have all night to explore the different ways they could couple and he looked forward to every one of them.

A few lengths behind her, he lost sight of her as she rounded the bend. He couldn't wait to catch her.

A yelp of terror from his intended mate had him skidding to a stop instantly on guard. "Callie?" He tried linking to her, but found only a void. As he came around the corner, he gasped. Singed fur hit his nostril.

Callie whimpered her snout muzzled shut with silver. The human, who caught her, stayed in the shadows but Marcus could smell the man's glee as if he got off from inflicting pain.

Marcus growled and leapt, thinking how he would enjoy ripping the guy's throat out, but in mid-flight, he realized his mistake. The man casually lifted his arm revealing a gun. Without hesitation, he pulled the trigger. The bullet slammed into him, knocking him to the ground. Poison burned through his veins. "Silver," he hissed. The bastard had shot him with a silver bullet.

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## **Chapter Seven**

Shay cared for all the cats, but she'd taken a special liking to Gregori. His blotchy fur made him look a lot like a miniature jaguar.

"Come here, Gregori," Shay coaxed. "I have something for you." Using a tree limb, Gregori sauntered over to Shay. Not much bigger than a housecat, Gregori played like one, too. "Look what I have," Shay said as she revealed a stick with a ball of yarn dangling off the end of it. She set the yarn into motion, making it swing back and forth like a pendulum. Gregori took whacks at it before he leaped onto another tree limb. An agile climber, Gregori spun and headed down the tree again. He went after the ball of yarn from the other side, hanging from the limb with one foot, a remarkable trait known only to the margay.

"Looks like Gregori is in a better mood," Bly said as she entered the habitat.

"He's been clingy." Shay scratched behind Gregori's ear, as he leaned into her. "Something has him spooked. All the animals are on edge."

Bly's dark brows drew together. "Maybe we're in for a change of weather."

"Maybe." Shay's intuition said otherwise. Animals sensed a threat long before humans knew they were in danger, but what peril lurked around the bend?

Bly tapped her shoulder.

"Sorry, I was daydreaming."

Bly smiled. "It's been a long day. I was on my way out. Do you want to walk out together?"

"No." She shook her head. "I have a few reports I need to write up."

Gregori lost interest in the ball of yarn and climbed up the tree again. His eyes darted warily back and forth.

"What's wrong, Gregori?" Shay cooed to him.

The margay made a mewl sound before running along the tree limb to his wood house for cover.

"See," Shay said as she turned to Bly. "He's frightened."

Shay's gaze riveted to the hills behind them; clouds lined the sky, but nothing proved threatening.

"We'll keep an eye on him for a few days," Bly suggested. "Maybe something he ate didn't agree with him."

Shay turned toward the cathouse, but she couldn't see Gregori within the inky blackness. "Yeah, maybe."

Shay followed Bly out of the habitat, locking the gate behind her. She looked up one more time for a glimpse of Gregori, but he remained hidden.

"Are you coming?" Bly asked.

"Right behind you." Shay turned and followed Bly back to the main building.

\* \* \* \*

As Shay worked, the mewls and roars of the wildcats kept her company. They were restless tonight.

The phone rang and Shay picked up. "Hello, Feline Wildlife Preserve."

"Don't hang up," the man ordered.

Shay stopped writing and glanced at the phone's switchboard. The backline shone red. "Give me a good reason why I shouldn't?"

"We need to talk." He had a cultured voice with a hint of a Spanish influence. Not the same guy from the other night.

"Listen, I don't know what kind of gag you and your friends are pulling, but I don't believe in shapeshifters. Got it."

"Sure, you don't." He chuckled. "I'll be there in fifteen minutes." He hung up before Shay could protest.

She slammed the phone down. She had no intentions of waiting for the lunatic to show up. She grabbed her purse and keys, furious she had to put up with someone harassing her. She'd have to call the alarm company tomorrow and boost security.

She strode to her car. The overhead lights flickered and a gust of wind whipped her hair in her face. She brushed it back with a curse. "Damn Mohave winds." Despite the warmth of the night, she shivered. The fine hairs on the back of her neck stood on end. She whirled around facing the foothills expecting to see someone there. A blur of fur raced by. "What the ... No, it's not possible..." She blinked and it disappeared. She didn't hang around to find out where.

"Weird phone calls, now a possible jaguar on the loose," she mumbled. "I'll deal with the threats in the light of day. Thank you very much."

In her car, she slammed the door and locked it. She leaned forward to put the keys in the ignition, but the rapid beat on the passenger's window made her jump. "Shit."

A good-looking man with dark hair leaned down to peer in. His nice smile didn't put her at ease. Serial killers didn't come labeled with caution stickers.

"Dr. McCormick?" He spoke loud enough for her to hear.

"Who wants to know?" she yelled back

He walked over to her side of the car and leaned down. For a second his eyes glowed, but it must have been a trick of the light.

"I need your help," he told her.

"What kind of help?"

"My family and I found a wildcat."

Sure he did. Yep, a real winner this one. "Yeah, where?"

"At our home. If you'll come with me—"

"I don't think so. I don't know who you are."

From his pocket, he pulled out his wallet and pressed his license to the window. "I'm Demetrius Cruzado."

"I can read. So?" A Cruzado or not, she wouldn't let him bully her.

"Lucas sent me. He claimed you'd be able to help."

Lucas? She found it odd she'd now met two Cruzados in the same week. "Okay, Mr. Cruzado, I—"

He motioned for her to roll down the window.

She cooperated by rolling it down a third of the way. "You said you had a wildcat at your home. Which breed?"

"A jaguar."

Shay remained silent.

"Dr. McCormick?"

"Is this a joke?" She didn't dismiss the fact she'd seen a jaguar right before Cruzado appeared. However, if she put any stock in Cruzado's story, two jaguars roamed the hills.

"I assure you, I'm not joking," Demetrius insisted.

Shay drummed her fingers on the steering wheel, trying to decide if she should believe him. Demetrius' condescending demeanor, his formal attire told her he didn't play practical jokes. "You have a jaguar," she stated. "How did you find it?"

"I'd rather not explain everything here. I need you to come to our house—"

"Hold on. I don't make house calls. I'll have someone come by in the morning."

"No. It must be you. If you want the truth, we ... we found him wandering around on our property. He needs medical attention."

Demetrius' fidgeting made her suspicious. "Listen, Mr. Cruzado, I think your little prank has gone on long enough. Since Jaguars aren't exactly roaming the hills, I highly doubt you found one. Matter of fact, California hasn't seen a jaguar since the 1800's. So if you'll move out of my way, I'd like to go home. Goodnight." She pushed the button to roll the window back up, but Demetrius held it in place with his hand. She pushed her button again, but the window wouldn't budge.

"Dr. McCormick, I'm sorry, but I must insist. Tomorrow may be too late."

Around here, wildlife wandered near homes unafraid of the population or too hungry to care. However, the reason Demetrius may have a wild cat on his hands didn't explain



why he acted like he stepped out of a James Bond movie with his cloak and dagger crap.

Shay fought to be calm, not an easy feat when Demetrius failed to put her at ease. Maybe the guy had a wildcat and maybe he didn't. She glanced at his hand gripping the edge of her window. She needed him to relax. "Why don't you tell me again what kind of animal you found?"

"I told you earlier a jaguar."

Shay chuckled. She didn't mean to, it slipped out. Demetrius had to be delusional. "And I believe, I told you they were extinct in these parts."

Demetrius' eyes narrowed.

Maybe it wasn't such a good idea to piss off the crazy man. "Okay," she held up her hand. "Maybe, and I stress the maybe part, a jaguar might have crossed over from Mexico."

He leaned near sending a chill down her spine. "Trust me they're more prevalent than you think."

What did he mean? She didn't have time to think about it. Demetrius eased her window down.

"Hey!" she cried. She kept pushing her control button to roll the window back up, but he proved too strong.

"I'll drive," he said as he unlocked and opened her door in one swift move.

"Excuse me?"

"It'll be easier if I drive. The foothills are dark and you might find yourself lost. I assure you, Dr. McCormick no harm will come to you."

"You used bodily force to open my window. Not feeling safe here."

"I apologize."

"It's probably broken."

"So sue me."

She narrowed her eyes. "Aren't you the lawyer?"

He flashed a grin, making his teeth glow white against the tan of his skin.

"Right," she said, dragging out every syllable.

He sighed. "I will pay to have it fixed. Are we better now?"

He gave a good imitation of being ashamed of his actions, but Shay didn't buy it. He put on a show because he wanted her to cooperate. She had a hunch few said no to him. "Why didn't Lucas come with you?"

Demetrius glanced away. "He's indisposed. If you wish, I'll call him for you and—"

"I'll call." Shay opened her purse and dug out her cell phone along with the business card Lucas had given her at the fundraiser. As the call went through, she fingered the card, which illustrated a big wave with the words: Lucas' Spirit Boards. Ride the Waves. He told her he fashioned surfboards at his shop in Huntington Beach. "No one is answering," she said after the fifth ring.

"I don't know what to say. He's notorious for leaving his cell somewhere or other. He's at the house. You can talk to him there."

"God, you're pushy."

"I'm desperate, Dr. McCormick."

Shay took a breath. "I'll make a deal with you. Let me leave a message with my assistant, Bly and I'll go check out your jaguar."

His lips twitched. "Be my guest."

Weird, a definite candidate for therapy. She punched the speed dial. "Hello Bly. It's Shay. Mr. Cruzado came to visit me at the preserve."

"Which one?" Bly asked.

"Demetrius."

"Oh, Mr. Stuffy." She laughed.

"Do you know him?"

"Uh ... Only what I've heard. Is he as good looking as they say?"

Shay's gaze slid to him before she turned her head and whispered into the phone. "Maybe, but I don't like pushy men."

"Lawyer, remember? They fight to have their way."

"Yeah, well I can play the stubborn card, too. I'll talk to you tomorrow." Shay flipped the phone shut and addressed Demetrius. "You do know you can't keep a wildcat locked up. You'll have to let it go."

Demetrius chuckled. "Isn't that what you do here? Keep the cats locked up in their mock habitat?"

She lifted her chin, not liking his attitude. "Our center is part of a worldwide network of zoos and facilities dedicated to the preservation of endangered cats. The animals have plenty of open space."

"If you say so." He shrugged.

"Your family donates money to the preserve. I take it you disapprove."

"On the contrary. I know it's a necessity."

"Mr. Cruzado..." She took a deep breath determined not to argue. "You changed the subject."

"Did I?"

"Yes, you did. What I was about to say is if you truly have a jaguar on your hands, you're not only endangering the animal, you're endangering yourself and everyone around you. I don't think your neighbors will like it if your jaguar eats little Fluffy for an evening snack. Jaguars love water, too. Anything could happen if it wanders off to a neighbor's pool for a swim. Jaguars aren't exactly pussy cats, Mr. Cruzado."

"Trust me, I know." With a wide sweep of his hand, he motioned for her to step out of the car.

"I must be crazy." Standing beside him, she looked at him with her hands on her hips. "I'll need my medical bag."

"We have all you need at the house." He sat down and moved her seat back so his long legs would fit.

"Where's your car?" Her gaze swept the parking lot.

"Please, we must hurry." He completely ignored her question and revved her engine.

She blinked with an exasperated sigh. She walked to the other side of the car and got in.

As they drove out of the parking lot, she realized there weren't any other vehicles. They were miles from his home. She glanced at Demetrius' nice suit and expensive shoes. She highly doubted he walked here. So how did Demetrius Cruzado end up at the preserve?

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## **Chapter Eight**

If Demetrius told the truth, and he really did have a jaguar, an adult cat weighed anywhere from one hundred fifty to two hundred pounds. That's a lot of cat to be lounging in a person's home, even if the so-called person probably owned a mansion three times bigger than the preserve.

"What's wrong with your cat?" Shay started a conversation.

"You wouldn't believe me even if I told you. It's best you see for yourself."

He's full of information. She rolled her eyes. The rest of the drive her questions were met with silence.

She calculated the ride to be about fifteen minutes, tops. He pulled onto a gravel road, which winded uphill. Finally, the car came to a stop in front of a Spanish style home that didn't disappoint her in its grandeur.

They entered through the front door to a large foyer. Like a good host he placed her purse and keys on the small wood table situated beneath an impressive painting. She would have looked at it closer, but Lucas had rounded the corner.

"What in the..." He stared at her, a look of surprise flitting across his features before he could conceal it.

Hum, he didn't know about my visit. Shay wanted to lay into Demetrius for lying to her, but the words never left her mouth. Her gaze traveled over Lucas' attire of shorts and a T-shirt. She stared at the surfer riding the wave, experiencing a moment of *déjà vu*.

"Are you all right Shay?" Lucas asked drawing her attention to his face.

Then it hit her. In her dream, Lucas wore the exact outfit. How could she know what he owned? I had a silly dream, she reminded herself. She'd been thinking about Lucas before she fell asleep and he did tell her he liked board shorts.

"He's down in the basement," Demetrius said.

She looked at him. Demetrius stood by his brother, the resemblance obvious. Both tall and sturdy, but Lucas had lighter hair, a cleft chin and a mischievous smile.

A part of her wanted to hightail it out of there, but she knew she couldn't leave if they truly had a wildcat in their house.

What's going on?" Lucas asked his brother.

Demetrius dragged Lucas to the side. She knew they were talking about her since Lucas kept glancing her way.

"Hey, listen." She approached the brothers and they both came apart to stare at her.

"You two can argue later. I'm here to see the jaguar."

"Are you crazy?" Lucas' head whipped toward his brother and he ran his fingers through his hair.

He looked nervous. Why would Lucas be nervous?

"It's not a good idea," Lucas said. "I told you what happened earlier. We're too late. He doesn't need a vet, Demetrius. He needs to..." Lucas stopped in mid-sentence. He looked at Shay then back to his brother.

"She'll satisfy both needs," Demetrius answered, obviously deciding his flimsy statement explained everything.

Lucas chewed on his lower lip and stared at Shay.

She cleared her throat not liking Lucas's worried expression. "Listen, if you don't have a jaguar then I'll let myself out and not waste anymore of your time." These guys may be the preserve's major contributor, but it didn't mean she had to put up with their games.

"Maybe you should take a look at him," Lucas spoke.  
"Maybe you'll be able to reach him."

They kept mentioning a jaguar, but a niggling at the base of her skull told her the story didn't jive. Shay licked her lips, wondering how she could escape her predicament. She eyed the door. I could make a mad dash for it before these two are the wiser.

"You can't leave," Demetrius stated like a command.

Shay's right brow shot up.

Lucas rolled his eyes at his brother before he turned his attention back to Shay. "I don't know what my brother told you, but we do indeed have a jaguar. And man, does he ever need attention. You strike me as a woman who wouldn't let a dude ... uh ... animal suffer."

She shook her head. "No, of course not. But if you two don't stop with the creepy innuendos, I'm leaving."

I didn't bring you here to have you turn around and leave." Demetrius dispensed with the pleasantries. Before Shay could react, he swept her off her feet and threw her over his shoulder like a rag doll. She weighed one hundred and forty pounds and stood five-foot eight. Did the guy have super human strength?

"Oh Man, come on Demetrius, put her down," Lucas reprimanded without phasing Demetrius in the least.

Shay struggled and Demetrius whacked her behind. "Be still."

His command sounded like a threat and she didn't want to know what the warning entailed. He took her down a flight of stairs. Finally, he came to a halt and she heard him fiddle with keys, heavy keys by the sound of them. He pushed on the door, the hinges moaning against the intrusion.

"Back away," Demetrius warned.

Like a jaguar would listen to his command. "What you're doing is crazy, put me down," Shay demanded.

Lucas came up from behind to help push the door forward.

Shay closed her eyes expecting the wildcat to lunge at them, but nothing happened. No snarls, no growls met her ears. Demetrius dumped her on a cot, the springs squeaking in protest. She waited, too scared to open her eyes. When the door slammed shut, she sat there dumbfounded. Surely, they wouldn't lock her in a room with a wild injured animal.

Shay's eyes snapped open taking in her surroundings of adobe colored walls, one small window with bars, a small lamp, sink and some sort of imitation of a commode. She heard movement to the left of her and her gaze darted in the direction, half expecting a cat crouched and ready to spring. Her eyes widened and she gasped. "My God, what is going on?"

A man with dark hair barely brushing his shoulders, moved from the shadows. Her mouth dropped opened. He stood there in all his natural glory, an Adonis ready to be viewed. Shay inspected his wide shoulders, muscular chest, tapering down to a flat waist. Her eyes involuntarily followed the trail



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*by Karen M. Nutt*

down to his ... She swallowed hard as his erection took form.  
Her eyes flew to his and he spoke.

"Welcome to my hell."

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## **Chapter Nine**

Shay scrambled to the far corner of the cot as if she'd be safe. The Cruzados locked her in a room with a naked man ... an aroused naked man. "Stay away from me." She pointed her finger at him. Then her gaze riveted to the only door wondering if she could reach it before the guy made his move. However, what were the odds of the door actually being unlocked.

He chuckled with a dry and cynical sound, which grated on her nerves. "Stay away from you? That's exactly what I wish to do."

"What?" Shay glanced at him, her eyes sharp and assessing as she decided if he told the truth.

"I have no wish to mate with you," he said to clarify.

Okay, she should be happy with his statement, but it only proved to confuse her. Her gaze wondered down the length of him. His growl forced her to meet his eyes again.

"I cannot help how my body reacts, but I will promise you I will die before I touch you."

Since she met the Cruzados, her night has been like an episode straight out of the Twilight Zone: first kidnapped from her work and now thrown in a basement with a naked man. The guy's body says horny, but his declaration proclaimed otherwise. Her eyes narrowed. "Really?"

He nodded. "It is my intention, but then you will have to be as committed."

"What do you mean?" The uncertainty of the situation made her voice harsh and demanding.

"When the heat flickers to life within you, you must resist your instincts to come to me."

It took a moment to realize what he implied. She harrumphed with a dry chuckle. "You're a little full of yourself aren't you? I'm not in the habit of throwing myself at the first man I see, naked or otherwise." However, her eyes betrayed her as she drank in his beauty. A tingle started at the pit of her stomach ending between her legs. She licked her lips and the man groaned.

"You are already weakening," he snapped. She opened her mouth to deny it but his next flow of words halted her. "I can smell your awakening."

"Huh?"

"My mating cycle will be in full force in two days and more powerful to resist. You'll not be able to stop yourself from wanting me."

"*Pluheese!*" She rolled her eyes as she stood and walked over to the door, trying the knob for the hell of it. Of course, the bastards didn't leave it unlocked.

\* \* \* \*

Gabriel remained silent as the woman tried in vain to find an escape. He admired the curves of her body, the sway of her hips. She had long muscular legs, which could wrap around him and ... He squeezed his eyes shut trying to wipe the vision from his mind, but found it difficult when he could hear her movements, smell her fragrance. He recognized her

scent. He opened his eyes again. She wore khaki-colored pants with pockets and a blue polo shirt. Her hair fell in curls of burnished copper and her eyes resembled the color of moss. He didn't believe he met her acquaintance before today, but ... He took a deep breath filling his nostrils with her aroma. Yes, the scent tickled his memory. His eyes narrowed as he tried to place her. He shuddered. He was too close. He needed to distance himself, clear his mind. He moved away to the opposite side of the room where the shadows would hide him. "Save your energy," he told her. "There's no way out. Believe me, I've searched every cranny."

She stopped her pacing and looked at him. He knew she couldn't see him clearly, but he could see her.

"Who are you?" she demanded. "Why are Demetrius and Lucas Cruzado holding you prisoner?"

He sighed. "Please sit and I will tell you."

She surprised him when she complied. She sat down on the cot, leaning forward and resting her forearms on her knees. "Okay, I'm listening."

"I am Gabriel and the two gentlemen who escorted you down here are my brothers."

"Your brothers?"

She stood again, sleek and strong reminding him of a cat, an unhappy cat by the way she paced the room.

"I don't understand," she said. "Why would they lock you down here? Why am I here?"

"In a perverse way, they believe they are saving me."

"Your brothers think they are saving you by leaving you locked up down here with no clothes. And how do I fall into

the scenario?" She waved her hand in front of her. "Let's speed up the tale."

His gaze lazily traveled the length of her. "You're young, sturdy..."

"Hey, watch it." She stopped moving and glared at him with her hands on her hips

"I meant no disrespect. It's a compliment. I believe they chose you for these reasons."

"Chose me for what?"

He didn't answer at first. She wouldn't believe him. He sank to the ground, leaning the back of his head against the wall. "You were chosen to be my mate."

"Pinch me."

He looked at her again. "Pardon me."

"I want you to pinch me for surely I'm sleeping and what I'm experiencing is some sort of erotic dream. I'm locked up with a naked guy who is looking for a mate." She laughed but the amusement didn't reach her eyes. She paced again.

"Unbelievable!" She looked up at the ceiling and spoke to the heavens. "All I wanted to do was to go home and draw a hot bath before I hit the sack, but now I find myself kidnapped by a family of lunatics." She spun around, her eyes flashed with outrage causing Gabriel to flinch. "Your brother, Demetrius brought me here with a cockamamie excuse about a jaguar he found."

His brows drew together. "Why would you go with him to see a jaguar?"

"I work at the wild animal preserve up the road. I'm a doc—"

He laughed.

"And what's so funny?"

"My brothers haven't lost their sense of humor, I see. A vet," he said and chuckled again.

Her reddish eyebrows furrowed, exaggerating her frown.

Of course, she didn't grasp the irony of the situation. He shrugged. "What's your name?"

"Dr. McCormick to you," she told him with a lift of her chin.

His lips twitched. "Okay Doc."

The endearment infuriated her further. She glared at him walked one end of the room to the other. Her scent wafted over to him. Her fragrance filtered through his system intoxicating him. Every nerve ending blazed with want. He must touch her, feel her beneath him, his groin ached from the need of it. A low growl escaped his lips and she stopped her ranting to take notice.

"Did you just growl?"

"Please, stop moving." His tortured plea reached her for her stance became less hostile.

"Are you hurt?" She took a step closer.

"Don't," he warned, lifting his hand to keep her away.

"What's wrong with you? Maybe I can help."

She had come close enough for him to see how her full breast pressed against the fabric of her shirt.

He licked his lips as a low chuckle escaped. "Help would mean your willingness to let me bed you."

She froze in her step.

\* \* \* \*

Shay stared at him sitting on the cold stone floor, hiding what she knew would confirm his willingness to try out his request. An iridescent glow eclipsed his eyes and she frowned. Draped in shadows, his silhouette stood out, but she sensed he observed her with ease. She backed up a step before she turned and ran to the cot on the opposite end of the room. She sat against the wall and hugged her knees to her chest. She would be no match if he decided he would take her despite his promise. Visions of what she glimpsed of him earlier crept into her mind. His firm chest that she could run her hands over, that luscious behind she could grip as he rode her. She shook her head. I'm losing my mind.

She'd seen attractive men before and Gabriel headed the category, but she never lost her head over a pretty face. Sex meant more to her than a quick pleasure ride. Call it old fashioned, but she wanted commitment. "Why did your brothers leave you in here naked, but let me keep my clothes? Not that I'm complaining, I'm curious."

"Because they know you will remove your clothes willingly."

She snorted. "I most certainly will not."

"You will."

She couldn't see him, but she could imagine his full lips curving into a smile.

"You won't be able to stop yourself."

As if on command, her breast strained against her shirt and she knew he told her the truth. "I don't understand. Have I been drugged?"

"In a way you have been. The pheromones I am producing are stimulating your senses like a slow seduction, but eventually as with any drug taken in excess, it will cause you to overdose. It will rage like a fever spreading through your body and the warm heat between your legs will throb for release." He stopped speaking. He inhaled deeply. "Your punishing scent of arousal comes in waves to wash over me."

She cleared her throat. "Animals produce pheromones. It is still up for debate if humans do," she told him.

"Perhaps."

"Then what are you talking about?" she asked only to be interrupted by the door swinging open. Demetrius stepped in carrying a tray. Lucas stood guard at the door.

"Dinner is served," Demetrius announced as if they had ordered room service.

She'd be blind if she didn't notice all three brothers in their own right, possessed enough charm to have a girl's heart dancing—tall, broad shoulders, eyes of golden-brown. She liked how Gabriel's eyes slanted more at the corners giving them an exotic ... She cleared her throat and looked away. Who cared what any of them looked like unless she wanted to ID them for the cops?

\* \* \* \*

Gabriel followed Demetrius' every move. His brother placed the tray down on the floor. Demetrius glanced at Shay who sat on the cot, her legs tucked to the side. Her hair fell around her face in array of untamed curls and her eyes were wild with fear or ... When Gabriel witnessed Demetrius' smile,



he knew his brother recognized the truth, too. Shay's eyes had dilated with desire.

Against his will, Gabriel let out low guttural warning. Demetrius met his gaze with a knowing gleam. "It won't be long," Demetrius said. "You both have a pleasant night." When he departed, he slipped the bolt into place.

"Your brothers find our circumstances amusing, don't they?" Shay asked the rhetorical question. "I may be stuck here for now, but I told a friend where I went. If I don't show up tomorrow at work, she'll call the police."

Tomorrow might be too late, but Gabriel didn't voice his opinion.

Shay walked over to the tray and leaned down to see what the menu had to offer. "Looks like we have oysters, asparagus, cucumber salad, and some kind of..." She picked up the bottle and sniffed. "Beer or wine."

"Mead," he said. "A honeyed-wine."

"What a strange meal."

"Each food you see on the tray will act as an aphrodisiac."

"You must be kidding."

"I'm not. My brothers are most determined."

"Hum." She took the wine and poured. "Does it matter then?" She took a long swig.

"You must fight it."

"Why? Since we have nothing better to do, let's look at our situation hypothetically. I mean, what is the worst that can happen. We sleep together and your brothers let us go."

"It isn't that simple. You don't understand what is involved. If you did, you wouldn't be willing."

"We're speaking hypothetical," she reminded him. "Work with me here. Explain what's involved and let me be the judge."

When he didn't answer, she strolled over to him. She crouched down before him with a mug, not realizing the danger she put herself in.

"Gabriel, talk to me."

With a trembling hand, he took the mug from her, careful not to touch her.

"Are you suffering from some sort of communicable disease?"

"Not what your thinking."

"Okay," she said slowly. "Enlighten me."

His eyes clung to hers wondering if she would believe him. He sighed. It soon wouldn't matter. It would be better if he informed her of the inevitable. "Do you know what a shapeshifter is?"

To his dismay, she sat down and crossed her legs.

"I'm learning more and more since my near..." Her eyes narrowed. "Is my being here about the website I logged into?"

His brows drew together. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Sure you don't."

"I don't," he insisted.

Shay lifted a brow. "Okay, maybe you don't know about the website. I wanted to know about shapeshifting. I looked up the information on the Internet. As soon as I logged into the website, I received a phone call."

"From one of my brothers?"

"I received two calls. The first caller I'm not sure, but you can bet the second caller was your brother Demetrius." She laughed. "Now I know why I'm here. And I'll tell you, just because a woman is interested in some information about shapeshifters, it doesn't mean she's desperate," she defended herself. "Listen, I won't kiss and tell. You can say we did it. I don't care, but I'm not sleeping with a guy I don't know, gorgeous or not."

He didn't say anything for a moment. His intense gaze touching her, stripping away the shield she put around her until she lost her haughty stance. "I'm not making up a story to entertain you," he told her. "And for your information, I wouldn't take part in such a charade. I don't know why you'd have a problem finding a date. You're a stunning woman."

She opened her mouth and shut it again. "You find me attractive?" she asked with disbelief, which surprised him.

His lips twitched. "Isn't it obvious?"

She turned three shades of red.

"Let's get back the question. You've learned about shapeshifters from an internet site."

"Hum, yes and..." She cleared her throat. "Let's just say, I've read a paranormal book now and again."

The information on the internet was bad enough, but he wished she hadn't read fictional accounts. She would have all kinds of misconceptions of his kind and if she read a paranormal romance it would be worse. There would be no happy-ever-after if she gave herself to him. "I'm from a clan of shapeshifters," he told her.

"You really think you're a shapeshifter?"

"I know I am." He declared.

"So what do you shift to? Lion, tiger, bear, oh my," she teased, but then she snapped her fingers. "I know it's a cheetah. I do so hope you can shapeshift into a cheetah. I've always been intrigued with them."

"You mock me."

"Well, what did you expect?" She threw up her hands.

"You asked so you could at least give me the benefit of the doubt." He drank drowning his misery. He wished she'd go back to her side of the room and leave him alone.

"I'm sorry."

He looked at her expecting to see she still teased him.

Shay rested her chin on her hand, giving him her undivided attention. She drew a deep breath and adjusted her smile, keeping her expression under stern restraint. "So, what do you change into?" she asked.

"A jaguar."

"A jaguar, of course." Now she sounded pissed. "I should have known. Why not say a werewolf? Hell, there's a full moon in a few days. I might be more apt to believe you."

"I'm a werejaguar to be precise, not a werewolf. There are others as you mentioned tigers, lions, and bears." He lifted his brows. "There are cheetahs, too," he continued, ignoring the daggers she threw at him with her heated gaze.

"However, trust me the cheetahs are solitary creatures and most are loners in their human state."

"You're serious?"

"Do you want to hear me out or not?" he threw back.

"I might as well. I'm stuck here for now. Entertain me."

"Centuries ago, my clan's responsibilities included being the nagual or spirit companion to the shaman. We'd protect the shamans from evil spirits, while they moved between the earth and the spirit realm."

\* \* \* \*

Shay remained polite and listened to his far-fetched story. She finally meets a gorgeous man who finds her attractive and he ends up being a nutcase. How unfair life could be. Sure, she'd died and dreamt of a half-man, half-jaguar. It didn't mean they really existed.

"You asked," Gabriel broke through her thoughts. "I'm trying to be honest with you."

"Okay," she said slowly. Her wheels turning as she comprehended what he revealed to her. "And now? What do werejaguars do now?"

"We help spirits pass over to the other side or help them find their way back to the shell which housed their soul."

She swallowed hard thinking how close his explanation mirrored her incident. The werejaguar, who appeared to her when she had her out of body experience, had dark hair and a suave Spanish accent flavoring his words. His features had been a little fuzzy to her, but she could easily imagine Gabriel as the were. She pierced her lips together in exasperation. What could she be thinking? She had a weird dream in La La-land. That's what a lack of oxygen will do to a person. If she really wanted to push it, Antonio Banderas could also fit the description.

"Let me understand what you're saying." She tapped her chin with her index finger. "You once helped shamans to cross over to the otherworld, keeping them safe from harm, now you go on your own and do some kind of ghost whispering mumbo jumbo. You're a shapeshifter, a werereature who can change from a human to a jaguar in a blink of an eye."

"Maybe not in a blink of an eye."

She could stop him. Expose him as a charlatan she knew him to be. "Show me."

"Excuse me." He blinked.

"Show me," she gladly repeated. "I want to see you change."

He shook his head. "No."

"Why not? You expect me to believe you but you won't prove it to me." She hoped with her demands, he would let the whole shapeshifter delusion go.

He refused to budge. "Remember you asked for it."

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## Chapter Ten

Shay gasped, her eyes widening. Fur sprouted from Gabriel's face and arms, legs. His body contorted, thicken in one fluid act. He padded over to her, on all fours, looking like a bigger, stronger cousin of a leopard with his rosettes larger and farther apart. "Holy shit!" She scrambled to her feet backing up

"Don't be afraid," Gabriel soothed.

"You spoke? Of course he didn't speak to me. He's a ... he's a freakin' jaguar! I'm not dreaming. I'm seeing you. You spoke."

"Your eyes do not deceive you," the jaguar with Gabriel's voice told her.

"How?" She backed up to the cot as the cat stalked her, moving closer.

"It doesn't matter."

"Change back."

"I can't. Not yet anyway." He sighed. "A foolish act on my part to prove my point. It may be hours before I'll have the energy to transfer back to my human form."

"Are you new at this ... this shapeshifting thing?" A million questions assaulted her, but she couldn't spit the words out.

"It's because I'm entering the mating cycle. My shifts are unpredictable, making it difficult to reverse the transformation."

She sat down hard, rubbed her eyes. She looked again thinking her eyes had deceived her, but no, the jaguar stood proud. She reached for him, but withdrew her hand.

"I won't bite you."

She reached again.

"Unless, you want me to," he teased.

She chuckled. She touched his head and he leaned into her palm. "I believe I like you as a jaguar."

"Why?"

"You have a better sense of humor. Your fur's soft." She looked at him, his eyes the color of dark honey looking back at her. "You're a jaguar." If he could have smiled, she knew he would be now. "Does it hurt? To change, that is?"

"Now yes, but if my body is able to complete the cycle, I'll be fine."

She marveled how the exotic wildcat shielded a man inside. She couldn't deny what happened—Gabriel shapeshifted. "This is so cool. You're a werejaguar."

Gabriel sighed and shrugged away.

Shay frowned. She didn't understand his melancholy. He showed her the miracle and she believed. "What's wrong, Gabriel? Did I say something to offend you?"

"No, of course not. I've never regretted being a were until now. For the last month, I've feared my existence is a curse."

"You can't hide what you are, Gabriel. Everyone goes through changes in their lives. Maybe not as physically dramatic as yours, but you can't give up."

"Why is it you're not put off about me being a werejaguar?"



She shrugged. "Wildcats have always held a special place in my heart. You're beautiful."

The jaguar looked back his gaze seeking hers.

"Do you doubt my words?"

He gave a long exaggerated sigh. "Go to sleep, Doc," he told her before he turned away and padded over to his side of the room.

\* \* \* \*

Sometime in the middle of night, the temperature dropped leaving Shay chilled. She had the comfort of the cot verses the cold floor, but Gabriel's brothers didn't bother to supply blankets.

"You're shivering." Gabriel spoke. He hadn't transformed to his human state.

"It's chilly in here." She sat up curling her legs close to her body. Gabriel padded over to her. "Scoot."

"Excuse me."

"Move over. You can lean against me for warmth," he offered.

Too cold not to accept, she moved over to the far wall. He jumped gracefully, and spread himself out, leaving enough room for her to cuddle up next to him. A jaguar in the wild stayed away from humans. As far as she knew, there'd never been a noted jaguar attack, but she wouldn't recommend hugging one. Yet she didn't follow her own advice. Her fingers delved into his soft fur sending warmth penetrating down to her bones. "You're a werejaguar," she whispered.

His chuckle rumbled from his chest. "You still don't believe?"

"I find I have no choice. Here you are in the flesh. But I'm curious."

"About what?"

"In the wild, when jaguar's pair up they will mate up to a hundred times a day to accomplish the job."

He cleared his throat. "Curiosity killed the cat, you know."

"I'm not a cat."

"No, but I am," he growled. "It's difficult enough without talking about sex, too."

"Sorry, the scientific interest kicked in. Cats are my specialty, but a were is something entirely different."

"I should have known." He sighed and explained in detail. "Weres have characteristics of the animal they represent, but we also have a human side to counteract some of the more primal urges."

"You have a conscience."

"Yes, for the most part. Even humans lack in that department."

"So are you and your brothers from the same litter?"

Gabriel chuckled. "My mother would have killed my father. No, we're from separate births. We're born human and age as one until we complete our cycles. We go through two dramatic changes. Our first shapeshift is around thirteen years old.

"Talk about hormonal changes."

"Tell me about it. Along with those changes, our were physiology matures also. We have a warning, a slight tingling, but only minutes before the shift happens."

"You're like a ticking time bomb."

"Mmmm, in a sense. Demetrius shapeshifted at school, luckily at lunchtime. No one witnessed the change, only a jaguar heading toward the foothills."

"Oh my."

"Oh my, is right. His teacher hyperventilated thinking the jaguar dragged Demetrius away. Chaos of screaming children filled the halls. A total disaster."

Shay burst out laughing. "And what about you?" She asked, wiping her eyes.

"I shifted in front of Marie, a girl I had a crush on. Aah ... She had black hair and those dimples made me weak in the knees."

She cleared her throat, interrupting his nostalgia. "And?"

He sighed. "I freaked her. My mother had to enter the dream plane. The technique is similar to saving souls," he explained. "My mother had to sooth Marie's fears until she thought she dreamt up the whole episode."

Shay put her hand at the cuff of his neck and rubbed. "I'm sorry. She didn't understand, is all. Fear sometimes causes irrational reactions."

He didn't answer.

"And the other change is now?" she reconfirmed.

"Yes, around thirty or so human years, when we must choose a mate, our bodies go through another crucial change."

"Hum. You said until you're thirty you age like a human and after?"

"We age much slower. We could live centuries."

"Unbelievable." Her wheels turned at the possibility. She wanted to know more, but Gabriel withdrew.

"I'm tired," he said before she could ask. "Do you mind if we sleep now."

"Sure." Shay didn't find sleep right away. If the change for a werejaguar was simple, Gabriel's brothers wouldn't have acted out of desperation to kidnap her. Why did they need to find someone for Gabriel? He needed a mate. No big deal. He could ask women out and find one on his own. It's called dating. It's done all the time. So why hadn't Gabriel solved his own dilemma? If sex is the cure, in this day and age women would fall over themselves to have him. He fit the term eye candy, delicious and...

Gabriel's growl startled her. "What are you thinking about?" he demanded.

"Nothing." She gulped her response.

"I don't believe you. Your arousal has filled every crevice of the room." He sounded angry.

"Sorry, I ... Did you lick me?" She scooted away to look at him.

"Clear your mind," he demanded. "Don't think about sex because every time you do I can smell your arousal like a fragrant flower ready to be plucked.

"Jesus." She clamped her legs together.

He growled again.

"The picture's coming in loud and clear. Don't say anymore," she told him taking in deep gulps of air. She did what she used to do as a kid when sleep eluded her. She recited. "Washington, Olympia; Oregon, Salem; California, Sacramento."

"Are you naming states and Capitols?"

"Idaho, Boise. Yep. Nevada, Carson City.

"Why?"

"To take my mind off ... you know what."

"Is it working?"

"I'll have to give you an update later."

He chuckled and closed his eyes.

"Gabriel?"

"Hum?"

She turned toward him leaning on her elbow to look at him. "I'm sure Demetrius came for me in his jaguar form, but he approached me all decked out in his Armani suit. What happens to your clothes when you shapeshift?"

"A question the weres have always wondered about, but have learned to accept. It's magical, shifting between realities I suppose."

I guess it would be inconvenient if you showed up somewhere butt naked."

"Yes, I can attest to that. Having your brothers steal your clothes isn't wonderful either."

"Why's that? Why did they take your clothes?"

He looked away.

"Gabriel?"

He growled. "Because I kept escaping in cat form. They knew I wouldn't run off with the chance I would change back into human form naked."

She smiled. "You were a naughty boy."

"I suppose you could say that."

Unconsciously, she rubbed behind his ear and he leaned into her touch. She seemed to be million miles away.

"What are you thinking about, mi amour?" The endearment slipped out surprising him, but she didn't appear to notice.

"I wondered what a soul looked like?"

"A soul?" He cleared his throat.

"Do I surprise you?"

"I find you refreshing, Doc. A soul which is pure is haloed in white, almost iridescent."

"It doesn't look human?"

"Not exactly."

"Have you saved many souls, Gabriel?"

"A few."

"I think you're being modest. Does anyone ever come back to thank you?"

"They see me in a way they can accept. I may look like anyone or anything for that matter, a bright light, a guardian angel, or Elvis. People see what they want to see and they project what they can accept."

"Oh." She rested her head near him, and yawned. "Sorry." She chuckled.

"Go to sleep, Doc."

As she drifted off to sleep she wondered if Gabriel guided her in her time of need. Wouldn't that be something? Too bad they wouldn't know for sure.

\* \* \* \*

Sleep however eluded him until the wee hours of the morning. He liked this unique woman, who didn't fear his were-side. He didn't realize a relationship could be comfortable. With Sandra, he learned to tiptoe around her fears so as not to scare her.

His connection with Dr. McCormick ran deep. Nevertheless, he wouldn't ask her to risk her life. They met too late for him to introduce his DNA. Her body needed weeks to adjust and accept the final nip without complications. He only had days.

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## Chapter Eleven

Shay draped one of her long leg over Gabriel's, drawing him out of his cobweb-like sleep. He wondered how he managed to find a warm woman when his brother's locked him up in the ... Then he remembered. His eye flew open. Sometime in the night, he shifted to his human form. His body responded to Shay becoming hard with want. He had his arms wrapped around her. She rested her cheek on his chest, her left hand on his stomach. He ached to touch her soft skin. He swallowed the lump in his throat and nudged Shay hoping to wake her so he could move his arm. She snuggled closer causing him to inhale deeply. "Doc," he said as he gently nudged her again.

Her eyes fluttered open and her gaze caressed him. "Hum?" Her lips parted ever so slightly, a sweet invitation he couldn't pass up.

His hand cupped her face and held it as he captured her lips, his tongue entering her mouth in a mating ritual that shook him to the core. He pressed his hard shaft against her and instinctually her hips responded by jutting forward. His kiss deepened and he groaned. She rotated her hips against him. "Oh God."

He had to gain control and throttle the dizzying current racing through him. With a ragged breath, he pulled away, ready with an apology. A stab of guilt lay buried in his chest; he shouldn't have touched her. He shouldn't have lain down next to her.



Her long fingered hands delicately circled his chest. He grabbed her hand to still her movements. "We shouldn't be doing this. We..."

She moved quickly covering his mouth, her tongue tangling with his making it impossible to think straight let alone speak. His hands glided down the length of her, folding the fabric of her shirt ever higher. His conscience kept yelling at him to push her away before he couldn't. He moved his head to the side. "Stop, we play with fire." He successfully broke the embrace, but she came at him, passion out of control. He scrambled away nearly killing himself in the process as he tumbled out of the bed hitting the ground hard.

Shay's eyes glazed over and the sweetly intoxicating fragrance of her body overwhelmed his senses. She removed her top, her breasts rising and falling against the lacy fabric of her bra. His blood surged down to his toes. The wild beat of his heart flooded his ears. He wanted to touch, kiss every inch of her body, and bury himself inside her warmth. He swallowed the lump lingering in his throat.

If he allowed himself to take her, he might kill her. And if she survived, she would hate him for taking advantage of her. He blinked, covered his face with trembling hands as he gave vent to what he had been about to do.

He forced himself to his feet. His communicating skills had left him so he did the next best thing. He grabbed her by the shoulders shaking her until she focused on him, seeing him not as a means to an end, but as a man trying to save her from herself.

"Gabriel? I..." Her gaze focused on his lips and he shook her again.

"Doc, stay with me," he told her. He wouldn't let her gaze falter from his. "Stay with me," he repeated. She took a deep breath and nodded. "Good. Take slow even breaths. Let your heart rate drop down to normal. That's it."

He knew the moment she gained control again. Her skin flushed like a fever and she stepped back.

She turned away and grabbed her shirt. "I'm sorry ... I..." She looked back at him concentrating on his face.

"It's okay. You weren't yourself."

She turned away again. "I didn't believe you. Not really. I don't normally throw myself at men."

"It's not your fault." He moved behind her placing his hands on her shoulders. She jumped at his touch and he sighed stepping away.

"Oh God." She ran her fingers through her curly hair. "You must think I'm...."

"Human," he finished for her.

She turned toward him.

"You're human, Doc. My change is filling your senses like an aphrodisiac."

"Damn, you need to bottle it." She threw him a weak smile. "You'd have people lining up. You'd bring in millions."

His mouth twitched at the corners, knowing she babbled because her nerves were stretched.

"You'd have to come up with a catchy name. Hum. Of course." She snapped her fingers. "Indiscreet. No." She shook her head as she paced. "Something to do with who you are."

She stopped and looked at him a smile spreading across her face. "Curiosity." Her gaze slid down. She gulped, stumbling backwards onto the cot. She scooted to the far corner and tucked her long legs near her body, hugging her knees.

Being locked up with him proved difficult enough. She shouldn't have to see his blatant desire on display. He moved to the other side of the room and sat down shielding what he could. Damn his brothers for not allowing him his dignity.

\* \* \* \*

Shay tried not to let her gaze wonder over to Gabriel. She didn't have to look at him to know she found him attractive with his beautiful proportioned body. As a man or as a jaguar, his stance spoke of power and ageless strength. She admired his self-control, too. No matter how he wanted to justify it, she behaved wantonly, taking off her shirt as if she'd become a cat in heat. She squirmed uncomfortably, knowing she hit it right on. Gabriel could have easily taken advantage of her, but he held himself in check. How long would his gallant efforts keep her from the inevitable? If Gabriel's brothers planned on keeping them locked up until ... She didn't want to finish the thought. It seemed cold, so primal.

"Are you okay?" Gabriel broke through her thoughts.

"Embarrassed, but fine." She cleared her throat. "So what exactly do you do for a living when you're not being held hostage?"

He chuckled. "I paint illusions, where you see one picture, but if you look closely the strokes of color will reveal another."

"Something like how you are. There's more to you than meets the eye."

"You've never seen my work, but you understand what I try to capture. We have a connection, you and I. I wish we'd have met under different circumstances."

She smiled, but she turned away.

"What is it?" he asked.

"You're sweet."

He tilted his brow. "Why do I have the distinct notion you're patronizing me?"

"Face it. If we were introduced somewhere, you'd be polite, but afterwards you wouldn't think of me again."

His cat eyes narrowed. "You underestimate yourself. You're a very attractive woman."

"I'm not model material."

"And how did you come to the conclusion I would like a skin and bone woman with nothing to hold onto?"

She cleared her throat. "I apologize."

He nodded seemingly satisfied.

"So tell me Gabriel, what do you look for in a woman?"

"She must be sure of herself and not afraid to go after what she wants."

"And looks don't matter."

"Of course looks matter. I would be lying if I said they didn't." His gaze roamed lazily over her, caressing her with want. "Trust me Doc, I would look twice."

Oddly, she believed him. "Shay," she said.

"What?"

"My name is Shay. I suppose since I slept with you, so to speak and our tongues have been in each other's mouths, we should be on a first name basis."

"Of course." He nodded. "Shay," he said her name as if testing its worth. "Shay is a beautiful name."

The way it rolled off his tongue made it sound magical. "Thank you." She licked her dry lips. "Okay. Let's pretend we were properly introduced. Where would you take me on our first date?"

"Someplace elegant where we could dine by candlelight, beneath the shimmering stars. We would talk long into the night. You would tell me about your day and I would try not to bore you with mine."

"Sounds romantic."

"Enough to go on a second date?"

She chuckled. "Depends."

"On what?"

"If you're a good kisser."

His gaze locked onto her lips. "I believe you didn't complain earlier."

"Then I suppose you have your answer."

The bolt on the door slid and they both turned as Lucas walked in with their breakfast. He glanced warily at his brother as he leaned down to scoot the tray in.

"You need to let her go," Gabriel pleaded. "You know keeping her here isn't right. She didn't choose to be with me. You forced her."

Lucas glanced her way before addressing his brother. "She wouldn't be losing out, taking you as a mate."

"I would like to be the one to choose if you don't mind," Shay spoke up. "Your brother is charming and if you would have introduced him to me, I wouldn't have been opposed to a date."

Lucas shook his head. "There isn't time for a long courting. He has one day now. If he doesn't—."

"Stop Lucas," Gabriel interrupted. "You've said enough."

"Maybe if you tell her, explain—"

"No. She can't possibly decide on such short notice. You know I'm right."

"We won't lose you, Gabriel." Lucas looked back to Shay. "I'm sorry, but we had no choice."

Shay didn't understand. What did they mean by they would lose him? What exactly happens if he didn't find someone?

"It will soon be over," Lucas told her.

"What do you mean?" Shay wanted real answers, not the answers she'd been given so far.

"You won't be able to resist him much longer," Lucas said as he inhaled. "You're already having trouble."

Shay realized how he concluded his observation and heat rushed to her face. She chewed on her lower lip, knowing Lucas's crude words spoke the truth.

"By the full moon you will be fevered with lust and will be begging my brother to take you. End your torture and his." He nodded toward his brother.

"Leave her alone," Gabriel yelled.

"Fine, Dude, but we both know how this will all play out if you keep up with your silly code of honor." Lucas turned on his heels, securing the door behind him.

"What will happen to you, Gabriel?"

"Nothing you have to worry about."

His gaze sought hers.

She knew he wanted her to stop badgering him. She wouldn't. "What will happen?" she repeated.

"Trust me. It is nothing compared to what will happen to you if we mate."

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## Chapter Twelve

Gabriel kept his distance from Shay answering her questions at a minimum. He clammed up after Lucas' visit, refusing to talk about what would happen if he didn't mate. Stubborn man.

The day stretched in agony, as she wondered why Bly hadn't come to her rescue? The cops should've of been beating down the doors.

Shay faced the wall as she rested on the cot, forever conscious of Gabriel's presence—naked, ready. She chewed on her lower lip. His promise to leave her alone weakened with every moment as he neared his time. She could tempt him with a few kisses. Damn it anyway. Pheromones aside, she wanted to make love to Gabriel. However, the terrifying statement Gabriel tossed at her kept her frozen to the cot. It is nothing compared to what will happen to you if we mate. What did he mean? What will happen? Will she grow two heads? He sounded ominous.

Shay shifted her weight, trying to find comfort, but the remembrance of Gabriel's tender kiss and his strong hands on her kept haunting her thoughts. She wanted to touch him, run her hands through his hair ... over his chest. "Mmmm." She wanted to have flesh against flesh, man against woman, not caring of the consequences. Her clothes constricted against her like a makeshift straight jacket. She needed to break free.

\* \* \* \*



"What's wrong, Shay?" The soft timber of his voice even turned her on.

She whipped around to face him. "I'm burning up. My clothes are sticking to me and all I can think about is—"

He went to her, bending down next to the cot so his gaze met hers.

"Shush." With gentle ease, he caressed the side of her face. "It is your body reacting to mine. You have to fight it."

"Oooh ... why?" She squeezed her eyes shut, a tear sliding down her cheek. "I don't know if I want to."

"You must," *because I don't know if I can stop myself if you give in.* "I can relieve some of the discomfort."

"How?" Wariness laced her question as she eyed him.

"You'll have to trust me."

She looked at him, her eyes wide and unsure.

"I would never take you without your consent."

She nodded, her hand reaching out to touch his face. Her fingertips massaged the rough stubble of new growth on his cheek. "I know."

"I can give you release and it will ease the fever."

She nodded. "Yes. Anything."

She moved over allowing him to lie down next to her. She trembled with want but also with fear.

He traced her lips with his finger. "Trust me."

She nodded.

He moved his hand down the side of her circling her breast. She closed her eyes, relishing in the sensation.

"It's been a long time for you?"

Her eyes flew open again. "You can tell? Am I so obvious?"

"I told you my sense of smell is heightened. I detect no other scent other than yours, sweet and fresh."

"Oh."

"Why have you been alone?"

His hand found her other breast giving it as much attention as the other, her nipples pressing against the fabric.

"I never had time for boyfriends. I studied and when I finished, I studied some more. I graduated a year and half earlier than expected."

"You didn't know how to have fun."

"Fun? Studying day and night doesn't make me the life of the party?" Her sarcasm came with a chuckle.

His hand moved up her thigh to rub between her legs.

Shay groaned. "I've died and gone to heaven."

\* \* \* \*

Shay squirmed and Gabriel knew she wanted more than the touch of his hand through the fabric. He hesitated not sure if he should remove the barrier, but she whimpered and encouraged him by unzipping her pants. He slipped his finger below her waistband and she let out a little gasp as his fingers met her sensitive warmth. She was so wet and he'd barely touched her.

Then his finger slid into her slowly moving in and out taking her over the edge. "Kiss me, Gabriel. Please kiss me."

How could he refuse such a request? His lips took hers greedily as she shuddered against him. Her tongue mated

sucking hard as if she couldn't get enough of what he offered, but then she broke away gasping for breath.

"Gabriel, I want—"

He covered her mouth again before she could utter her request. He couldn't hear it or he might not be able to stop.

\* \* \* \*

Shay moved her thigh against his hard and unyielding member. She moved to touch him, but he grabbed her hand holding onto it for dear life.

"You mustn't."

"Can't I relieve your discomfort?"

His broad shoulders heaved as he took a deep breath.

"Only if you let me mate with you will my agony end."

"Oh."

\* \* \* \*

"Lie still. I will be fine." He kissed the top of her head as she snuggled closer. He had been wise not to remove her clothes. The barrier gave him some semblance of control. He squeezed his eyes shut, as another wave of wanting her seemed to overtake his sense of honor. I won't take her. I won't.

"Gabriel, what's wrong." She changed positions, causing him to hold on tighter.

"Please, don't move."

\* \* \* \*

Shay turned anyway to face him. Sweat dripped down his face as if he was running a fever. She brushed a strand of hair away from his forehead. She leaned near and caressed his lips with hers. His eyes flew open. She kissed him again before he could tell her to stop. She wanted him and it had nothing to do with his overactive pheromones. He intrigued her with his charm. He had a code of ethics which society missed these days. She lowered her hand to cup him; his hard member throbbed against her palm. He groaned as he slipped his hand beneath her shirt. In one fluid move, he undid her bra, releasing her breast to his touch. She wanted him inside her. She wanted all of him.

"Take me, Gabriel. I give myself willingly. I don't care what the consequences are. Don't stop."

"Shay, if you knew if you truly understood..."

She stroked him and he shuddered. "I understand, Gabriel."

\* \* \* \*

No, she didn't understand. He closed his eyes, willing himself to have the strength to stop. He couldn't. He'd gone beyond the point of no return, unless he could...?

The agony of his scream echoed, as he shapeshifted. The beautiful jaguar jumped down from the cot.

Shay's breathing remained labored as she stared at him. "Why did you do that?" She threw her legs over the side of the cot. "I like you. I believe you like me, too. We're both adults. Let me help you. I won't think you're taking advantage of me."

"Shay, a mating ritual with a were isn't a one nightstand, you do me; I do you and in the morning we walk away."

"I'm relieved to know you have morals."

"Listen to me, mating with a were is for life. Do you understand? If we have sex, it's forever."

"We'll be married in a sense"

"Not in a sense. We'll be bonded."

"No divorce I take it."

"No. I'm not joking. And there is more."

"More?"

"You'll change. You'll become what I am."

"A shapeshifter?" she asked. "You mean I'll be able to shift between human and jaguar form. With all your ominous talk of doom, I expected more."

"There's more. You haven't heard the worst. Not everyone survives, Shay. It's dangerous. My DNA should be introduced in small doses, your body needs to adjust."

"And how do you introduce the DNA?"

"Don't think about it. It's too late for it to matter now." He recognized the moment it hit her and wished he could have saved her from the truth.

"Your brothers were aware I could die, but they didn't care what happened to me."

"Forgive them, they didn't think the plan through. They acted out of..."

"Fear? And what happens to you, Gabriel, if you don't mate. There's obviously some kind of repercussion or else your brothers wouldn't be so determined to force someone on

you. And why is that? Why don't you have someone? You knew your body would change."

Gabriel looked away, humiliation coloring his features. Then she knew.

"You did have someone, but she left you. What happened? Where is she?"

"It doesn't matter." He looked at her now. "You don't have to worry about it. I want you to be safe. I won't let anything happen to you."

She chewed on her lower lip and nodded. She didn't fear becoming a werejaguar. However, the possible you may die part caused her to pause. She already died once and she didn't like it.

"I have a plan," he said drawing her attention.

She looked at him, the big cat pacing. "You do."

"I'm breaking you out of here."

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## Chapter Thirteen

They both jumped when they heard the bolt pull back on the door. Gabriel shifted to human form, but his primal stance remained ready to spring.

Lucas walked in with a smile.

Gabriel's hand whipped out. The serving platter soared across the room clattering on the stone floor.

"What the..." Lucas turned with a curse.

Gabriel crashed into him. Lucas lashed out with a shoulder throw, slamming Gabriel against the wall. Before Gabriel could regain his balance, Lucas threw a punch.

Shay remained on the cot for about a second. She ran toward the scuffle. Like a sprung bear-trap, she threw herself at Lucas jumping onto his back.

"What are you doing?" Gabriel yelled over Lucas' screams.

Shay pulled Lucas' hair from the roots; Lucas' arms flayed above him, trying to grab her hands.

"Let me handle this," Gabriel told her. "Leave here while you can."

"What about you?" She wouldn't abandon him. His brothers would keep him a prisoner in his own home.

Lucas spun around. "Get off me!"

"I'll be fine." Gabriel insisted.

Shay catapulted off Lucas's back and Gabriel plowed his fist into his brother's nose, blood splattering everywhere.

"Not cool, Gabriel," Lucas screamed. "You broke my friggin' nose."

Shay didn't waste any more time and made a dash for the door. She turned back for a moment, not wanting to abandon Gabriel, but then his gaze met hers. He'd sacrifice himself for her.

"Be safe Shay," he told her.

She nodded. She turned and ran.

\* \* \* \*

Shay ran up the steps and down the hallway lined with paintings. Jaguars, large and beautiful taunted her escape.

Her keys and purse were still on the table in the foyer. Demetrius' confidence galled her. He didn't think she would escape.

She caught sight of the portrait above, another painting with lush foliage, trees and a river. The colors were rich and alive with a jaguar lounging peacefully. She took a step back to admire it, but it changed, like an optical illusion, the jaguar becoming the man's face. He had captured the essence of a were. "Gabriel's portrait," she said in awe, wishing she had time to see more of his work.

She grabbed her keys and purse.

Her car sat in the driveway waiting for her. Once inside she started it and threw it into reverse, but halfway down the driveway, she slammed on the brakes. Her seatbelt bit into her shoulder and chest. She stared up at the house, her prison. "I'm sorry, Gabriel, I can't leave you." She sped back to the house.

\* \* \* \*



Gabriel rose to his feet to lay into his brother again, but he heard a crash as ceramic splintered around his brother's head. Lucas' eyes rolled back and he crumbled to the floor. Gabriel looked up and blinked. Shay stood there holding half a vase. She gave him half a shrug.

He couldn't stop himself from smiling. "You came back," he stated the obvious, but his voice held a tinge of disbelief.

"Yeah, well what can I say? I missed you." She looked down at Lucas and cringed. "He'll be all right, won't he?"

Gabriel crouched down to check on him. He nodded. "He'll be fine." He glanced at Shay's clutched hand and what remained of the Tiffany vase. "Demetrius on the other hand may have a coronary. He paid a fortune for that vase."

"Oh." Too late now, but she put down what was left with the utmost care. "Then let's hit the road before Demetrius returns."

"I'm right behind you."

\* \* \* \*

On the way out, Gabriel threw on a pair of jeans and a T-shirt. He looked marvelous out of his clothes, but she had to say, he did fill out his jeans rather nicely.

Once in the car, Shay drove like a bat out of hell only to realize she didn't know where they were heading. She glanced over to Gabriel who leaned his head against the car window. He had a fat lip, one eye looked swollen and his knuckles looked raw.

"You don't look so hot," she told him.

"Yeah, well you should have seen the other guy." He gave her a weak smile, which made him wince. He touched his mouth.

"Here," Shay said as she leaned over and flipped her glove compartment open. "There are some napkins in there."

He leaned forward and took a few out.

"So where are we going?"

"Shay..."

She glanced at him. "What?"

"I'm grateful you came back for me, but it would be better if we split up. If I'm gone..."

"They won't need me," Shay finished for him.

"Yeah, something like that."

She knew no one would be at the preserve so she pulled into the parking lot. "At least let me dress your wounds for you."

"There's no need. Once I shapeshift, I'll heal."

"Oh." She stared at him, admiring his rugged beauty. She had the wild urge to throw herself into his arms, but she stayed on her side of the car. "It's a full moon tonight."

"I know." He looked out the window and swallowed hard. "It will end tonight."

In a moment he would open the door and walk out of her life. The sudden heaviness in her chest made it difficult to breathe. She had a fleeting crazy thought. She wished they'd never broke free. "Will I ever see you again?" she asked. He looked at her then and fire-bolts of desire coursed through her.

She thought she witnessed regret in his gaze, but if so, he replaced it with intent. He leaned over and planted a quick kiss. His placed his hands on her shoulders and rested his forehead against hers. "If it's possible, I will take you out on that date we talked about."

Shay pulled back. "We could meet at...." The words died in her throat.

Gabriel's broad shoulders hunched and a muscle quivered in his jaw. As if to hide from her heavy gaze, his lids slipped down over his eyes.

What wasn't he telling her? "Gabriel...?"

He reached out and clutched at her hand. "Don't."

"But...?"

Lightening fast, his lips covered hers. All questions vanished as his kiss sang through her veins. His mouth was warm and demanding, she leaned closer and his hand swept to the back of her neck. Her senses throbbed with the strength and scent of him. She wanted him to stay with her, but he pulled away and opened the door. With a shuddering sigh she watched him shift and the beautiful jaguar hidden within him emerged. He darted toward the foothills fast and sure. Shay touched her hand to her lips still swollen from his touch. She heard his painful roar in the distance. "Gabriel," she sobbed.

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## **Chapter Fourteen**

Demetrius showed up soon after Shay and Gabriel's escape to find Lucas leaning against the wall nursing a bloody lip.

"All you had to do is leave them a meal," Demetrius said, his hands on his hips as he took in the damaged room. "But no, you had to let them escape."

"I didn't let them. If you haven't noticed, Gabriel tried to beat me to a bloody pulp. He did a fair good job of it, too."

"I'm assuming Dr. McCormick finished you off." He whirled on him making him flinch. "Do you mind telling me how a human woman overpowers a werejaguar?"

"I have no idea. As far as I know, she left at Gabriel's insistence but someone came up behind me. Before I could turn around, I'm blindsided and I go down for the count."

"Yes, I can see how it went down." Demetrius' gaze landed on the broken vase, splintered beyond repair. He pierced his mouth together as his anger festered. "Did she have to pick my Tiffany?" he yelled as he pointed to the evidence.

Lucas stood, not acknowledging his brother's complaint. "Now what should we do?"

"Do?" He looked at his brother. "First, you need to shift so you can stop bleeding all over the place; second, I need to make a few calls to find out where the good doctor took off to. It shouldn't be too difficult since I have her license plate number."

"Why don't we leave them alone? Their attraction to each other has permeated the walls. If they stay together, they'll mate."

Demetrius' annoyance increased. "Does being out in the sun all day fry your brain? Since Gabriel has fallen for her, he will be sure to cut her loose. He won't take a chance with her life. He'll forfeit his. Who knows where he'll hide to wait for the change to take place. If we don't find him, he'll be lost to us."

Lucas had already shapeshifted and healed. "You don't think she went to the cops with this, do you?"

Demetrius considered it a possibility for a moment, then shook his head. "She may want to hang our asses out to dry, but she won't want to involve Gabriel. I say we find the good doctor and see what she can tell us."

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## Chapter Fifteen

Shay turned down Bly's street. Bly's house stood on a corner lot, a modest dwelling with a Southwestern motif. Shay parked at the curb. "I'll be safe here." She hoped.

She hurried up the walk and knocked.

Bly answered the door with the phone plastered to her ear. "I'll have to call you back," she told whoever she'd been talking to and clicked off. She grabbed Shay's arm, dragging her in the house. "Dios." Bly said as she took in her disheveled appearance and distraught expression. She broke into a string of Spanish, which Shay knew consisted of her swearing death upon her captors and blessings for her friend's safe return.

"English, Bly. English."

"Sorry. Here sit down." She led her to the sofa.

Bly decorated her place in rich earth tones of greens and browns. She had pictures of animals, mostly wildcats displayed on the walls, a bookcase in one corner for her Dean Koontz books. Her computer table sat near the window where she would benefit from the most light.

"I'm sorry to barge in on you, Bly. I didn't know where else to go."

"Don't be silly." She sat down next to her, their knees touching. Bly reached out and took her hands. "Where have you been?"

"Where do I begin?"

"The beginning," she encouraged with a nod.

Shay took a deep breath and began the outrageous tale, expecting Bly to have her committed as soon as she finished it. She started with the disturbing website and the video reels of death, then Demetrius' visit at the preserve and how he wouldn't take no for an answer. In her eyes, he kidnapped her. Though she supposed the police would see a slim line to the truth since she went with Demetrius on her own accord. She sugarcoated her time with Gabriel. She didn't want to share their intimacy with anyone. "And then I drove here." She ended.

"Did you call the police?" Bly asked.

Shay shook her head and rubbed the back of her neck. The tension radiated down her spine. "They wouldn't believe me. I don't believe it myself. Shapeshifters are real, Bly. Have you been listening to me? Gabriel, Demetrius, Lucas, and there's another one involved."

Bly stiffened and drew back. "Who?"

She shook her head. "I don't know, but another guy called the preserve before Demetrius. He could be linked to the website I mentioned. He somehow knew I had been viewing it. Let me show you. Where's your laptop." She went over to the table and pulled out the chair.

"Shay, it's okay."

Shay's fingers flew over the board. "No, look. I'll prove it to you."

Bly walked over to her and brushed Shay's hair behind her shoulder. "It's over," she told her, the tone of her voice soothing as she massaged Shay's shoulders, loosening the knots. "Don't think anymore about it. You'll be safe here."

She looked over her shoulder at Bly searching her face for some deception. Any moment, Bly would tell her she needed psychiatric help and she'd be forced to agree. She sounded so crazy, but she knew in her heart she spoke the truth. "Bly, you do believe me don't you? You aren't patronizing me?"

"Of course I believe you. American Indian, remember. I grew up on these legends."

"I'm not speaking about a legend." She shrugged free.

"I hear you, Shay. Look at me."

Shay turned and met her gaze.

"I believe you," Bly told her. Okay?"

"Okay." Shay nodded.

"Now, where did you say Gabriel went? It sounds like he may be in bad shape."

"I don't know." Shay knew she shouldn't have let him go. She should have insisted he come back here with her.

"Shay?"

"He took off toward the hills. I guess to wait this thing out."

"Hum."

"What?" Shay's brows furrowed.

"Nothing," Bly said as she patted Shay's shoulder. "There isn't much we can do if we don't know where he is. Let me brew you a cup of tea." She headed for the kitchen.

"Bly."

She turned to look at her.

"Thanks for not thinking I'm a nutcase."

Bly smiled. "Sit back and relax. I'll be right back."



"I don't have to worry," she mumbled to herself. "I'm safe here." So why couldn't she relax? Conflicting emotions assaulted her making her edgy. Shay stood and paced Bly's living room. She feared for Gabriel's safety, but why should she? Gabriel had escaped from his brothers' clutches.

Shay glanced up at the painting hanging above the couch. She almost dismissed it, but something caught her attention. Her head swung back, her gaze froze on the beauty of the piece. The stroke lines, the colors.... She took a step away. The illusion sprung to life revealing its secret. Her hand flew to her mouth. Gabriel painted the portrait. She eyed the other paintings and realized they were all his.

"Shay?" Bly questioned from the doorway holding a tray.

She whirled on her friend. "You were in on it," she accused as the realization of the betrayal slapped her in the face.

"It's not what you think." She put the tray down.

"Isn't it? My life is the true illusion. You're my friend. I confided in you. I trusted you." She pointed her finger. You had me kidnapped, Bly." Her eyes welled and she angrily brushed away a tear. "Are you one of them?" Shay ignored how Bly looked at her with regret..

"Let's sit down and I'll..." Bly began only to have Shay angrily cut her off.

"No. I'm out of here." She stormed toward the door.

"Please Shay. You need to understand."

"No I don't." Determined to be as far away as possible, Shay yanked open the front door. She gasped as she came face to face with Demetrius.

"Hello, Shay."

She backed up a step. "I'm not going back with you." She wagged her finger at him.

He ignored her outburst and invited himself in, closing the door behind him. "We need to talk."

"Now you want to talk." She laughed sarcastically. She came up short, realizing she had backed herself into a corner. She raised her chin as she crossed her arms defensively against her chest. She dared him to come after her because if he did, he would regret it.

"Shay," Bly began.

Shay pinned her heated gaze on her, silencing her. "Don't even. You sold me out. You know all about them." She let out a dry laugh. "No wonder you were so quick to believe my story about shapeshifters."

"Let me explain."

"I don't trust you, Bly."

"We don't want to hurt you," she said.

"We as in what? Are you a shapeshifter, too?" Bly didn't have to answer. Shay could see the truth in her eyes. "Oh my God, you are." Her arms came uncrossed as the realization sunk in. "Then why don't you volunteer to sleep with Gabriel and save us all the trouble."

"We aren't allowed to bond with another were," Bly told her. "It's against our laws. Because of how few we are, we must find a human, a soul mate if possible."

Shay laughed. "There are laws about all this?"

"We know what we put you through is difficult to understand." Bly tried again to explain.

"You have no idea." Shay wanted out of the nightmare. She looked to Bly then to Demetrius realizing they wouldn't let her go. She tried a new approach. "Listen, Gabriel is nice. I like him, but it doesn't mean I want to spend my life with him. Maybe when this all blows over, we'll look each other up."

"Is she for real," Demetrius said, his frustration evident in the way he ground out each word. "The Gabriel you met won't even exist."

Shay's brows furrowed as an uneasy tightening formed in the pit of her stomach. "What do you mean?"

Bly and Demetrius exchanged looks.

"Maybe he didn't tell her," Bly said.

"Tell me what?"

"It would be so like him." Demetrius agreed.

"Tell me what?" Shay shouted over their endless chatter about Gabriel's saintly character. She wanted answers and she wanted them now.

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## Chapter Sixteen

Through a pain-filled haze, Marcus followed his kidnapper's movements. The kidnapper set up a tripod and camera.

Marcus knew he had to escape. He tried to conjure up strength, but couldn't shapeshift to his human form. The silver collar, which was clasped around his neck singed his fur and now worked on his flesh. The bullet lodged in his chest had leaked poison throughout his system.

Death hovered.

Marcus hadn't heard Callie's whimper in awhile. He scanned the room for her, but already knew he wouldn't find her.

The kidnapper with his shadowed like stance approached. He spoke to him, but it took a moment to register what he said.

"You will soon become what you are—a monster. You'll beg me to kill you and end your miserable life, but not until I have proof." His large hand tapped the video camera. "I must show the world what your kind does." He moved closer and Marcus flinched at the kidnapper's intent. Marcus scrambled to the wall, turning his head away. The kidnapper plunged the syringe down, the needle hitting bone. Marcus howled in pain. His body rebelled and he began to shake.

"What did you give me, you bastard?" Marcus forced his human voice to surface.

The kidnapper chuckled. "Only something to push you into revealing your beast." He left for a moment only to return

pushing a large metal cage toward Marcus. Something in the cage growled and spit like a rabid animal. It kept charging at the bars as if it could break through them. Marcus' nose flared as blood hit his nostrils, tangy and sweet. What in the hell did he have caged? He forced his eyes to focus. He blinked and the horror of what he witnessed caused him to lean his head back and howl.

Callie, his sweet Callie crazed beyond reason. She remained stuck in-between a shift. Distorted human features mixed with the wolf form. "What did you do to her?" Marcus screamed.

The kidnapper laughed, enjoying his new game of torture. He held up the syringe. "Same thing I did to you."

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## **Chapter Seventeen**

Gabriel went back to the preserve hiding out at the construction site for the leopards' cage. He hid in the makeshift cave made of some sort of plaster resembling rock. His melancholy deepened. For a half a second he considered checking himself into a hotel, but knew he couldn't risk it. In the end, he settled against the far wall. He might as well learn to love the accommodations. If he survived, he may be living in a habitat like this one.

Exhaustion overtook him, drained him of energy and time passed with a procession-like monotony. It didn't help matters that he had done too much, changed shapes too many times. He would pay for it now. His eyes were sandy and his bones ached. He wanted to remain in cat form, but his body rebelled and sent him back to his human shape. He breathed an exasperated sigh and curled into a ball. Exhaustion forced him to close his eyes.

"Shay," he said her name aloud. A sense of comfort touched him as he remembered her. His brothers had kidnapped the feisty doctor and yet she came back to help him instead of making her escape. He had to admire her spunk. She was one heck of a woman. In all the years he had courted Sandra, he couldn't rely on her, but then trust went both ways didn't it. For some reason Shay trusted him, accepted him and he knew he could count on her. Too bad he hadn't met her a year ago, even six months ago. There would have been enough time to introduce the were DNA and for

her to know if she wanted to become his mate. His smile vanished, replaced by the dull throb of grief of what could have been. Their meeting had been too late.

He drifted to sleep, a restless lull taking him under.

Something called to him on the astral plane. Too weary to resist, he let the soul tug at him. His essence floated until a fog-like haze surrounded him, weighing him down.

Something joined him, slithering like a snake. Gabriel wanted to investigate, go closer, but in the grayness he heard a voice of desperation, a soul needing to cross.

Gabriel turned and used the despair like a beacon. He smelled the sharp contrast making him aware the soul had once been attached to a male werewolf.

Gabriel frowned. If threatened, werewolves fought to the death. They didn't cower in the shadows paralyzed in fear.

Gabriel coaxed the soul forward. His eyes widened. The werewolf contorted and elongated like a beast from a horror flick. Why did he transform himself into a fictional beast?

"My patience has proven true," the werewolf said trembling between snarls. "I waited here to warn you." He tore at the air with his razor sharp claw as if to ward off the predator. "He's out there. He hunts us."

Gabriel had to agree something watched them. The snake left a malevolence trail lingering behind it.

"Who hunts you?" Gabriel asked.

The werewolf shook his head, his fangs lengthening as he spoke. "I don't know. He made us hurt each other," he sobbed. "Callie..."

Gabriel scanned the area around him. He didn't sense another soul. Callie could have passed on peacefully. He hoped so. "Come on, you have to move on now. Let go of the hurt and pain. He can't harm you anymore. He's only creating an illusion."

The werewolf hesitated for a moment, not wanting to let go.

Gabriel knew the soul needed to relax to pass to the next life. If the werewolf remained tense and alert, he would linger in the in-between world of life and death, tortured for eternity. "Callie's waiting for you on the other side." He took a chance he told the truth.

The werewolf looked at him with hope.

"You have to go to her. She needs you there," he pushed.

Finally the beast accepted his fate. He shifted to what he must have looked like in his human form. He began to fade.

"What's your name?" Gabriel asked having an inkling he might need the information.

"Marcus McBain." He looked Gabriel in the eyes, his parting words chilling him to the bone. "Someone needs to stop him. He tortures weres to madness."

Gabriel woke up shivering. Whatever had been out there with them lived and fed off the pain of his victims.

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## Chapter Eighteen

Bly and Demetrius hadn't given her a straight answer. What did Gabriel hold back?

The knock at the door made Shay tense.

"It's probably Lucas," Bly said.

"Well, of course." Shay threw up her hands.

Bly went to let him in.

Shay waited until Lucas could join their little party. "I can't believe you had the gall to come here, too. I have a long list of offenses on all three of you. I'm sure the cops will love to hear them."

"When one is desperate, you'll do about anything," Demetrius said with a shrug, not looking one bit sorry.

"Are you going to kidnap me again?" she asked, knowing escape meant going through three werejaguars. The odds weren't in her favor.

"If it would do any good, I might," Demetrius replied.

"I think you need to stand aside and let me walk out of here." She stood taller and lifted her chin pretending she had a choice.

"Please hear us out," Lucas pleaded. "Let us explain why we're such idiots."

Demetrius snorted.

Lucas ignored his brother and smiled at Shay as he touched the side of his head. "By the way, you sure know how to throw a wallop. No one's ever gotten a jump on me before."

"Flattery will find you nowhere fast." But Shay's mouth twitched. She found it difficult not to like Lucas with his laid back boyish charm.

"You can walk away," Lucas told her, "but I don't think you will once we explain what is at stake here. I could be mistaken, but I don't think so. You care about Gabriel. Tell me I'm wrong and man, this conversation is so over."

Demetrius opened his mouth to interrupt, but Lucas held up his hand halting him. Lucas kept his gaze locked with Shay's.

Shay licked her lips wanting to tell him she couldn't care less, but everyone in the room knew it would be a lie. She may dislike the situation and the people involved, but Gabriel didn't ask for his brothers to interfere with his life. In all fairness, she couldn't turn her back on him.

She glanced at Demetrius who wore a smug expression. He knew all along she'd listen to them. She'd like to slap the grin right off his face, but instead she focused on Lucas. He wouldn't push and she believed he would let her go if she said the word. She trusted him, but it didn't exonerate him from holding her hostage for the last few days. She turned her attention toward Bly, who she believed to be a friend. Her betrayal hurt worse than what the Cruzado brothers combined had done to her.

She chewed on her lower lip. She should tell them to all go to hell, but she had these ceaseless inward questions—why did Gabriel and she share a connection? She'd missed an important piece of the puzzle and she wanted answers.

"Okay, I'm listening." Lucas opened his mouth, but she held up her hand to halt him. "This doesn't mean I'm agreeing to anything."

Lucas nodded. "Fair enough. Let me start at the beginning. Gabriel's change began months ago. He had chosen his mate and only waited for her to say yes to the final transition, but at the last moment she bailed out."

"Leaving Gabriel in a predicament," Shay finished. "I already know this part of the story."

"Yes, but there is more. Gabriel had less than two weeks to find someone to change and hope she wouldn't be allergic to the were DNA. It usually takes months to insure..."

"...you won't kill her," Shay finished for him again.

Lucas nodded.

"I see where I stood with all of you." She eyed each of them with the accusation.

Lucas sighed. "We didn't totally disregard your welfare. See, you were already exposed to the were DNA."

Her brows drew down into a frown. "Why do you guys speak in riddles? Give me a straight explanation, will you."

Demetrius took over explaining. "Let me refresh your memory. You died."

"Uh..." She opened her mouth and shut it again.

Bly slapped Demetrius on the side of the head, causing him to growl at her. "Tact would be good here," she told him.

Demetrius looked at Shay again and did his best to give her a clean explanation. "Gabriel heard a cry for help and he slipped into the spirit world hoping to guide the lost soul."

Shay's eyes widened and she shifted her weight before meeting Demetrius' gaze head on. "Go on."

"The change triggers chaos in a were's system and abilities become unpredictable," he continued. "Gabriel shouldn't have chanced it. Slipping between worlds caused the process to accelerate, making him weak to fight the change until he could find a willing mate."

Shay suspected Gabriel was the werejaguar who had appeared to her, but she still didn't understand what difference it made. "I told Bly my experience in confidence," she accused with a sideways glance at Bly. "And how does my little out of body incident prove I've been exposed to the were DNA?"

"Gabriel marked you," Demetrius announced.

"Excuse me." She couldn't stop the shrill of alarm in her voice.

Bly rolled her eyes at Demetrius. "Gabriel touched you," she hurried to explain. "He touched your soul. He appeared in his natural were state. Destiny brought you two together, Shay."

Shay remained silent as she took in the new information. From the moment she met Gabriel, she experienced a connection to him. She trusted him. Gabriel touched her soul in more ways than one.

The Cruzados and Bly stared at her with such desperation, silently imploring her to help them.

"Let me understand something," Shay said. "Gabriel saved my life so all three of you decided I should have sex with him. Sure I could mate with him, as you so elegantly put it, but

what is the need to rush things? Gabriel told me it would be over by tonight."

"Did you ever wonder what he meant by it would be over?" Demetrius asked with a note of impatience lacing each word.

Yes she had, but so far no one had given her the answer. "I have no clue. So why don't you enlighten me."

"If Gabriel doesn't mate..." He choked on his words.

The strange surge of affection Shay heard in Demetrius' voice frightened her. Without him saying anything, she knew something horrible would happen to Gabriel.

Demetrius cleared his throat. "If a were doesn't mark a mate by the time the change is complete..." He took a deep breath. "Let me put it to you this way. No one has ever survived and remained whole. He might succumb to the jaguar. Perhaps you could add such an animal to your home of cats. However, remaining a cat would be the kindest of the traits. If he remains intelligent as a human, he'll be a man trapped in a jaguar's body never able to transform. He would eventually go mad. His other option is to combust into ether or be stuck between worlds without anyone. The last, and if fate would be so kind, he will die."

"He didn't tell me." Her voice choked back a sob.

"He wouldn't," Demetrius bit out with impatience.

"But if he infects me with his blood, he told me I could die. Is that part true or not?"

"Yes," Demetrius answered. "It is preferable if we choose another were to mate with, but we are few and far-between and have been forbidden to do so. We must find a human,

preferably a willing participant. However, humans are fragile and must be introduced in stages.

"And how is the process done?"

"Kissing, small love-bites, making love, so when we give the final mating bite the human body doesn't reject the transformation. You're strong, Dr. McCormick and you're healthy, chances are slim you'll succumb from the bite. And you've been touched by Gabriel."

The way Demetrius stared at her, she had the impression he knew of all the places Gabriel had touched her. "We didn't sleep together," she blurted out.

Demetrius' smile didn't quite meet his eyes. "Yes, we know. However, Gabriel touched your soul. There is already a bond. Dr. McCormick, do you care for my brother? If you do, I beseech you to save him."

She covered her mouth and paced. She couldn't deny Gabriel stirred more than her blood. She looked at Demetrius. "I don't want him to die." Demetrius' sigh of relief caused guilt to weigh heavy on her conscience. She should have said so in the beginning.

"You'll need to go to him," Lucas told her.

"I would but I don't know where he is. He left me at the preserve."

"There's a way to find him in time if you're willing," Lucas spoke up again.

"Okay," she said slowly. "What exactly do I need to do?"

"You need to reach him through another realm. He heard you when you were lost and dying."

She held up her hand. "Wait one moment. I love him and all but, I'm not letting you kill me."

"Nothing so drastic." Demetrius inhaled and rolled his eyes. He paced the room.

Lucas approached her and took her hands, his gaze latching onto hers. "When we dream, we enter a realm where we're able to move freely. You could call to him. He heard you before and he may reach out to you."

"What if it doesn't work? Shouldn't we go out and try to find him?"

"We don't have enough time," Demetrius snapped. "This is our last hope."

Shay chewed on her lower lip.

"Now what?" Demetrius stopped wearing a hole in Bly's carpet to stare at her.

"What if he doesn't want me? It is his prerogative. He may send me away."

Demetrius smiled at her choice of words. They mirrored Gabriel's virtuous beliefs, a true soul mate. "My dear woman, his sacrifice to let you go is proof enough. He's in love with you, too."

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## **Chapter Nineteen**

Shay had kicked off her shoes and stretched out on the couch, but sleep eluded her. She sat up with exasperation. She rested her elbows on her knees as she hid her face in her hands.

"This is ridiculous!" Demetrius growled.

Shay's head shot up with her piercing gaze. "Your grumbling won't bring me to the brink of slumber." She rose from the couch too wired to sit still. "You are all staring at me." She swept her hand around the room. "How can I fall asleep when I'm afraid I'll be too late to find Gabriel. And let me remind you, it's flippin' hours before my bed time."

"If we all will..." Lucas began.

"Shut up!" Both Demetrius and Shay shouted. They looked at each other and glared.

Demetrius broke eye contact first, running his hand through his hair. "You know you broke my favorite vase," Demetrius told her. "I had it shipped from an antique dealer back east. I loved that vase."

"And you're telling me this because?" Shay hoped he didn't expect her to pay for it.

"So," Demetrius met her gaze. "I'm not too sorry for what I'm about to do." Demetrius sent a right hook to her chin. She went out like a light, eyes rolling back in her head. Demetrius caught her before she fell on her face.



"What the hell do you think you're doing?" Bly cursed and ran toward them. She helped Demetrius place Shay back on the couch.

Lucas shook his head. "I don't agree with Demetrius' methods, but she's out for the count. Let's keep our fingers crossed she reaches Gabriel in time.

\* \* \* \*

Shay sat up with a start, inhaling deeply. Her eyes narrowed as she took in the trees, the foliage, and the sound of a stream nearby. "How..." she touched her chin. It didn't hurt, but she was in a dream state. Once she awoke, she and Demetrius would have a little chat.

She met Gabriel for the first time in this dream-like world. Not here ... by the stream. She headed toward the water, but every step she took caused a distortion to ripple through the landscape. A nervous fluttering stabbed at her chest. She kept her guard up, not sure what to expect.

"Gabriel," she called to him and her voice echoed back like a perverse mimic. Eerie sounds gushed at her in every direction. Panic rioted within her and she searched for the cause. She didn't control the dream, someone else did. She hurried toward the water. "Gabriel! Gabriel, where are you?"

She reached the water's edge hoping he would be waiting for her, but instead a woman sat there. The green and orange of her sundress flattered her toffee-hued skin. Her hair the color of a raven's wing brushed her shoulders.

The rustling of the brush startled the woman to awareness. She took a ragged breath and scrambled to her feet. "Who are you?" she demanded.

"Who am I?" Shay tapped her chest. "Honey, you're in my dream and I don't have the foggiest notion why you're in it. Gabriel should be here," she said more to herself than to the young woman.

"Gabriel?" she questioned.

The way Gabriel's name rolled off her tongue caused Shay to take notice again. "You know him."

She nodded and her dark eyes pooled. "I should have been his mate by now. I'm Sandra Tupac."

Shay couldn't help but be curious about the petite woman who Gabriel had wanted.

"Where's Gabriel?" Sandra's eyes narrowed.

"That's exactly what I want to know," a deep baritone voice spoke.

Shay whirled around, her gaze fastening onto a man who stood as big as a tree trunk. Shay guessed his age to be about fifty with graying black hair. His skin resembled onyx and his eyes were just as dark. The man glared at her as if she committed some crime against him.

"Daddy," Sandra said taking a step forward. She wiped her tears away.

"I hate to break up the family reunion," Shay called their attention, "but what are you two doing in my dream?" Shay gulped back another retort when Sandra's father turned and pinned her with his gaze.

"Stupid girl." His nostrils flared as he inhaled. "The dream plane isn't yours to have."

Sandra's father sounded vaguely familiar but Shay couldn't place him. Surely, she'd remember meeting an intimidating linebacker.

"Gabriel isn't here." Sandra grabbed for her father's arm, but he shrugged out of her hold and took a step toward Shay.

"He will be."

Shay realized his intent and sidestepped, but his hand snaked out and seized her by the hair.

"Ouch!" Shay grabbed at his hand.

"Stay still and call him." He yanked again causing tears to spring to her eyes.

All her inner warning systems went off. She knew him or rather she knew the voice. He's the one who called her after she logged into the disturbing were website. Only she didn't know what the connection meant. "Who do you want me to call? Phone reception in here can't be good."

He pulled her hair tighter, his face inches from hers. "Don't take me as a fool." He raised his hand and a knife appeared out of nowhere. He placed it against her neck, pricking her skin.

Terror whispered down Shay's spine and she swallowed back the lump, thickening in her throat. Dream realm or whatever realm she stumbled upon, she knew she could be hurt or worse.

"Well?" He shook her again bringing tears to her eyes.

"Gabriel?" Shay squeaked. "What do you want with him?"

"Daddy, please," Sandra pleaded. "Let her go and leave Gabriel alone."

Didn't Sandra jilt Gabriel? Shay thought. Now she wanted to protect him and why did Daddy have a grudge against Gabriel?

"You will shut up, Sandra and do as I tell you," her father ground out. "That godforsaken creature will pay for what he's done to you."

"He didn't do anything, Daddy. I left him."

"And he'll come after you. They always come after those they've tainted." He turned his attention back to Shay. "Are you one of them?"

Did he really think she would answer him with a yes, when he held a knife to her throat? "I'm not sure what you're talking about."

She closed her eyes as the pressure of the knife increased.

"Daddy!" Sandra screamed. "If she'd been infected, she'd have made her move. Can't you see she's human?"

The knife came away, but not completely. "Maybe."

"Gabriel gave me his word, Daddy," Sandra said. "He wouldn't go back on it. He let me go."

"Little fool! Didn't I show you what they're capable of doing? Every last one of them couldn't maintain their humanity. They reverted to the beast within."

Shay remembered the video reel she watched on the website and gulped down the vile. It hadn't been a movie, but something horrible and real.

"Stop blaming every were. One shapeshifter killed Mama and you made him pay," she cried.

Shay's heart went out to the woman. Sandra and Gabriel never had a chance, not with a father who hated all shapeshifters with a vengeance.

Sandra's father ignored his daughter's pleas and turned to Shay. "Call him."

Shay wouldn't do it. In Gabriel's weakened state, he'd be no match for the giant. She wouldn't endanger him further by bringing him here. She took a ragged breath. "Go to hell."

"Why you little—"

"Let her go, Abe."

Shay's heart thumped against her ribcage when she heard Gabriel's voice. "Gabriel, it's a trap," Shay warned. "He wants to kill you."

Abe swatted Shay away as if she were an annoying fly. She lost her balance and slid to the ground.

"You need to listen to her, Gabriel." Sandra walked over to him grabbing his arm.

Gabriel didn't dare look at her. "Sandra, let me handle your father. Leave before you're hurt."

Sandra let her hand drop as she took a step back.

\* \* \* \*

Gabriel's heart stopped when Abe threatened Shay with the point of his knife. He had heard her first calls, but had ignored them not wanting her to see him as he lost control, but then something made him sit up and take notice. Fear knotted and writhed in his stomach as Shay's terror slammed into him. They were linked tighter than he had thought and once he entered the realm Shay had created he knew why.

She had been the soul he had saved, the one who accepted him as werejaguar. His gaze caught and held hers. He'd found his soul mate. He swallowed hard. He'd be damned if he would let her die.

He also recognized the sulfuric odor as he stepped onto the plane. It had been prevalent with the were souls he helped cross to the other side. Abe proved to be the threat, the monster torturing weres for his own demented pleasure. Well, it would stop here, now. "Let's keep our differences between you and me Abe," Gabriel said. "Let the women go."

Abe sneered and gripped his knife tighter. "They're tainted."

"Daddy," Sandra sobbed. "Gabriel didn't change me. I'm not like mother."

Gabriel looked from Sandra to her father wondering what she meant.

"That's right boy. Her mother let a shapeshifter change her and he ended up ripping her apart.

Gabriel knew a were didn't attack unless he'd been caged and starved to the point of insanity. "You bastard. You sent him over the edge."

"It didn't take much. Animals always show their true colors," he defended his actions. "We are shamans," he tapped his chest. "Not the naguals."

"Your revenge is all about who's the top honcho. Centuries ago maybe, but now ... Did your wife grow sick of your bullying ways and take up with a jag?"

"She did it to piss me off," he bit out. "She wanted to hurt me, but in the end it was I who taught her the lesson."

Tears streamed down Sandra's face. "You convinced me a crazed were killed mother. I wanted to overcome my fears. I sought a were to befriend. Gabriel's soft smile, his gentle ways drew me to him. He knew he wouldn't harm me, but I didn't trust him enough. I feared if Gabriel changed me, I would lose control. Now I realize the only monster is you, Daddy. You did something to affect the weres' DNA. You created the beast." She moved closer to Gabriel as if she chose a side.

Shay took a few steps toward Gabriel, but Abe blocked her escape. He grabbed her and held her hostage.

"Let her go," Gabriel said. The tick in his cheek increased as he clenched his teeth.

"I call the shots." Abe ran the blade down the side of Shay's cheek.

\* \* \* \*

Shay had been out cold for twenty minutes, but now her body tightened and she clenched her fists into a ball.

"There's something wrong." Bly looked at Lucas lounging on the oversized striped chair.

He sat up. "What do you mean?"

"She's tossing and turning. It's like she having a nightmare." Her gaze wavered between Demetrius and Lucas. "She shouldn't be stressed. We need to pull her out."

"How can we?" Lucas threw a disgusted look at Demetrius, who had taken a seat in front of the computer.

"She didn't fall into a natural slumber," Lucas accused.

"We have a problem," Demetrius answered back."

"That's what I'm trying to tell you, Dude," Lucas said.

Demetrius turned to look at Bly. "What made you log onto this site?" He pointed to the computer screen.

Bly frowned. "I haven't been on ... Oh wait, Shay babbled about some website she found, said it spooked her out. Some guy called her when she had signed onto it. Why?"

"I think she stumbled onto something big here. I've just witnessed Tony Vertiz's murder."

"What?" Lucas asked.

Demetrius rubbed his hands over his face. "Whoever had Tony killed videotaped the whole bloody torture. I don't know, but whatever happened to the kid, it made him freak out. He changed back and forth from were to human at an alarming rate."

At the same time, Demetrius and Lucas' gaze riveted to Shay, whose restless sleep became suspicious.

"Whoever killed Tony knows about Shay," Demetrius said. "And Gabriel mentioned an evil presence on the dream plane. There's a connection here. We need to wake Shay up now."

"Unless she comes to by herself there is little we can do," Lucas stated. "Unless I go in and find her."

Demetrius shook his head. "Too dangerous. Whoever is planning these murders won't let you waltz onto a dream plane and interrupt his plans."

"Do you have another idea because I'm all ears, Dude?"

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## Chapter Twenty

Gabriel clenched and unclenched his hands as he fought the urge to shapeshift. He knew if he did, he'd tear Abe apart.

"Gabriel, you have to leave." Shay broke the silence. "He's killed others. He displays the murders on his website like they're trophies. The video reels aren't a hoax or a low budget horror flick."

"Yes, they're all real." Abe breathed hot against her cheek. "None of the misfits were a match for a shaman."

Out of the corner of her eye, Shay caught movement and she locked onto it. Lucas threw her a smile and lifted his finger to his lips.

"You're supposed to use your magic for good." Shay distracted Abe, giving Lucas time to circle around. "Shaman's use their magic to cure the sick."

"They also use the magic to control events," he added. "I want to rid the world of weres and to do so I need to control the realm where they are most vulnerable. I keep them trapped there until they lose control and reveal the beast they hide."

"So make your move on me, shaman." Gabriel waved his hand to come get him. "Let's see what you have."

Abe shoved Shay toward him, making her stumble. Gabriel helped her to her feet and he whispered a message, "Your dream, Doc. You can control it."

Shay nodded and concentrated to take them out of here, but nothing happened.

"I see we have another visitor." Abe chuckled. "You might as well come forward Lucas. I can sense you."

Lucas walked over to join Shay and Gabriel.

"Looks like you're popular Dr. McCormick," Abe said. "Two weres for the price of one." Abe's mouth curved into a smile, sending chills down Shay's spine. "I promise it will be quick." Then with a puff of smoke, he disappeared.

Lucas ran to the spot where Abe once stood. "Hey what just happened here?"

Shay shrugged. "I'd like to say I zapped him out of my dream, but I didn't do anything."

Sandra spoke up, her dark eyes glancing at Gabriel as if asking him to forgive her. "Someone logged into the website."

Lucas nodded. "Remember Shay, you pulled up a website at Bly's."

Shay nodded.

"Demetrius viewed one of the videos." Lucas looked at Gabriel. "Abe's the one who's been killing weres. He murdered Tony Vertiz and it's all on videotape." Lucas turned toward Sandra. "So where did your father go?"

"The website is like a beacon and Daddy draws off the energy of it. He finds someone interested in shapeshifters. Nine times out of ten the person knows a were personally. Daddy will go to the source and torture whoever is there for information." She turned to Shay. "He'll want to finish you off while you sleep. The dream is only a lure to capture you. You need to wake up. You need to wake up now!"

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## **Chapter Twenty-One**

Lucas awoke first springing to his feet. "We're in danger," is all he managed to say before he realized Abe stood at the door.

Abe laughed and he brushed Bly aside and waltzed in. "Glad you could join us." He glanced at Shay who still hadn't risen. He smiled. "She's out cold."

"What the hell is going on?" Demetrius wanted to know.

"Abe killed Tony." Lucas revealed.

Demetrius' expression hardened with disgust. "And Sandra? Did she participate with your perverted scheme?"

"My daughter had visions of grandeur. She fancied herself in love with Gabriel, but she realized her mistake. She couldn't love a misfit of nature. She's a shaman and above the status of a nagual. It would be a disgrace for her to be changed into a were."

"Is eliminating Gabriel part of the plan?"

Abe's smile didn't reach his eyes. "I plan on eliminating all of you." He swiveled and threw his knife at Lucas hitting him in the shoulder.

Lucas let out a roar and blood spurted everywhere. Bly ran over to him and helped him to the floor, already gripping the end of the knife to pull it out.

Abe went after Demetrius slamming him against the table and knocking him into the wall. The computer toppled on top of them, bouncing off Abe's shoulder. Abe out weighed Demetrius by sixty or more pounds, but Demetrius had the

advantage of age. Being younger and quicker, he sprung back to his feet. He pummeled his fist into Abe's face. Abe fell back, but as Demetrius went after him, Abe threw his legs out tripping him. Before he could regain his balance, Abe pinned him and clasped a silver cuff on his wrist, locking it tight. Demetrius screamed in agony as the silver burned his flesh.

\* \* \* \*

Shay sat up inhaling deeply. She rubbed her sore chin. Her eyes widened as she took in the nightmare—Bly drenched in Lucas' blood, Demetrius' howls and the smell of burnt flesh hit her nostrils. She stood teetering on her feet. She forced herself not to gag as she hurried over to Lucas.

Bly looked up at Shay. "The knife's embedded in the bone."

"We need to stop the bleeding and fast," Shay said as she took in Lucas' gray pallor.

"The knife's silver. It's poison to preternatural creatures," Bly explained. "That's why he's still bleeding. If we don't remove it, he'll die."

Shay nodded. "Hold his arm," she told her. Shay stood bracing her foot on Lucas' shoulder and gripped the knife. She took a deep breath and pulled. Lucas threw his head back and screamed a guttural cry as the knife ripped through muscles and tissue on its way out.

"You need to shift." Bly told him. "Now!" She grabbed Lucas' shirt and shook him until his golden eyes focused. "You need to shift," she repeated.

Lucas' body transformed into one pissed off jaguar. With a roar, he leapt toward Abe landing on his back.

Abe threw him off and sprung to his feet, his gaze colliding with the cats. He realized he'd lost his upper hand. Desperate, Abe lunged at Bly and Shay. Bly on instinct turned into jaguar. Abe grabbed Shay by her hair dragging her against him in a death grip. His gaze darted to each jaguar. "I'll break her neck," he declared.

Fear rose in Shays throat chocking her, but she swallowed the lump. "Leave before he kills you."

"He'll kill you too," Demetrius rasped. The silver poisoned him and he couldn't force himself to his feet.

\* \* \* \*

Like a gust of wind, the door slammed against the wall and Gabriel burst in, his cat-eyes frantic as he scanned the room. Blood covered Shay's shirt. One sniff and he knew she wore Lucas' blood.

"I'm fine," Lucas called out, pacing on all fours, Bly next to him. Gabriel spotted Demetrius fighting to remove the silver cuff around his wrist.

"It took you long enough," Demetrius choked.

"Stay where you are," Abe threatened putting more pressure on Shay's neck. "One step toward me and I snap her neck like a twig."

"Daddy," Sandra soothed as she walked into the room. "You have to stop hurting people. It's wrong."

"I'll deal with you later," he ground out. "Now get out of here."

With Abe's attention diverted, Gabriel shapeshifted. He flew through the air. He locked his jaws onto Abe's arm. Abe bellowed, releasing Shay to stop the attack.

Man and jaguar rolled both trying to dominate. They came apart, Abe on his feet and Gabriel stalking him.

Sandra spoke again. "Daddy."

He raised his gaze toward her.

From behind her back, she pulled out a gun and pulled the trigger.

Abe's eyes widened in disbelief before his chest exploded. He went down.

Sandra dropped the gun and ran to her father. "I'm sorry, Daddy." She fell down beside him, holding his hand. "I had to stop you. All those murders. I couldn't let you continue." Tears poured down her face.

Shay approached to see if anything could be done to help Abe. Bly turned back to her human form and ran over to Demetrius.

"Here," Shay called to her and threw the keys she found tucked in Abe's pants pocket.

Lucas and Gabriel shapeshifted, too. Lucas stood with no ill effect from his close call with death, but Gabriel's hands shook. He stumbled and Lucas steadied him. Gabriel had done too much. Shay would deal with Gabriel later, but right now she turned her attention back to Abe.

Between tears, Sandra looked at Shay with hope.

With a quick examination, Shay knew Abe's wound proved fatal. "I'm sorry," she told her.

Sandra nodded. She held her father's hand until he slipped away. Then squaring her shoulders, she stood to face Gabriel. "For the crimes my father has exacted, I will follow through and become your mate, Gabriel. I won't let you die, too."

Gabriel shook his head. "Sandra, I don't begrudge you for your father's sins."

"But, you need—"

"I'll be fine."

Demetrius snorted, which had Gabriel throwing him a look to keep his opinions to himself.

They could all hear the police sirens in the distance. Bly had put in the call.

"Sandra," Gabriel continued, "Demetrius will help you. We'll all testify you acted in self-defense."

Sandra walked over to him, leaning close, she brushed a kiss on his cheek. "Thank you."

He squeezed her hand.

"I hate to break the party up," Lucas said. "But Gabriel needs to be out of here. The night is almost over." He stressed the point.

"I'll take him." Shay walked over to him and looped her arm in his. He looked down at her too weary to argue with her.

Shay met Demetrius gaze. "Don't worry."

A smile touched his lips. "I know you'll take care of him. Now go, before the police arrive."

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## Chapter Twenty-Two

A month ago, Shay had bought a house in a new development and the neighbors had yet to move in. Gabriel and Shay wouldn't be disturbed and they'd only be half a mile from the preserve. Shay convinced Gabriel she could keep him safe there. He would have argued, but he didn't have the energy.

Shay had walked up behind him and he turned to look at her. She was beautiful and courageous, all in one package. He thought. He reached out and touched her hair of burnished copper, twisting the curl around his finger. He wished he could promise her he would be all right, but his future looked bleak. His hand fell away to his side. "You should lock me in one of the back rooms," Gabriel told her. "Once the change is complete, I don't know what will happen. It might not be safe for you."

"Hum," she said as she stepped back. "I don't know about you, but I could use a shower."

"Shay, haven't you been..." the words choked in his throat when she removed her shirt, her bra came next. He licked his lips and met her gaze. She had an air of self-confidence as she stalked him. "I hope you know what you're doing?"

"Yes, I do." She smiled.

"Making love is not something you can try out and say later it isn't what you want. We mate; you'll change."

"I'll become a werejaguar. Yes, so I've been forewarned."

"It'll be forever."



"I'm not opposed to forever. I love animals. I've dreamt of being a wildcat roaming free. When I was a kid, girls my age played house. I pretended to be an animal. Becoming a jaguar would be like a dream come true. Besides didn't you tell me, "It's your prerogative?"

The dawning of her words sunk in and his gaze riveted to hers. "When did you realize?"

"I suspected you were the one who guided my soul, but Demetrius confirmed it. Your brothers searched for me because they knew you had already touched me."

"I marked your soul," he said, the revelation hitting home. "I recognized your essence when we shared our cell, but when I entered the dream plane I understood why."

"You saved me, Gabriel, and I plan on returning the favor."

"You don't owe me, Shay. You can walk away."

She'd reached him, backed him into a corner. She placed her hands against the wall, pinning him. "I know I don't have to and yes, I realize the risks. You've kissed me. You've touched my soul, Gabriel. I'm not sacrificing myself. You're a man of integrity. You're selfless in the face of death. You sacrifice comfort, your very life because another could be in harm's way. Those qualities alone made me fall in love with you. You talk about choices. I believe destiny's prerogative brought us together." She leaned against him and caressed the side of his face. "The question is: will I be enough for you?" She looked up meeting his hungry gaze.

He growled before he devoured her lips with a kiss.

\* \* \* \*

They left a trail of clothes as they headed for the bedroom. Gabriel kissed every inch of her allowing nothing to go untouched. When he entered her for the first time, pleasure spread like wildfire through his veins. He brushed her hair away from her face. His lips found hers again and their tongues mated as well.

She writhed beneath him wanting him to finish the sweet agony. He held her head and fixed his gaze on hers. "You're sure?"

She nodded and gripped his shoulders.

He leaned down nipping the soft skin near her ear sending a golden wave of passion and love through her. She clamped her legs around him and moaned with pleasure. He took her higher and she clawed his back for more. He knew the moment she went over the abyss to oblivion and he gladly followed her.

They lay next to each other, their bodies glistening with droplets of sweat. Gabriel reached over and took her hand, lifting it to his lips.

She rolled over on her side to look at him. "You'll be all right now?" she asked.

He leaned toward her, too. "Yes. Thank you. Amor de mi vida. You are the love of my life," he translated. "I love you."

"I love you, too." She kissed him before she pulled back to look at him.

"What is it?"

"You'll marry me, won't you?"

He smiled. "The marriage took place the moment I nipped you."

Her brows furrowed.

He touched the tender area behind her ear. "There is a moon shape scar right here. All weres will know you are my mate."

"And how will they know you are mine?"

He chuckled at her possessiveness. "Later if you wish, you can leave your mark." He kissed her nose. "However, you have already marked my soul. I am yours forever."

She moved into his arms with a smile curving her lips.

"Do you wish to have a traditional wedding, Shay?"

She turned to look at him, again. "Would you mind terribly if we did?"

"Not at all. I would be honored to marry you in front of witnesses."

She chewed on her lower lip.

"Something else is troubling you."

"When will I change?"

"Soon."

\* \* \* \*

She showed bravery when she told him she wanted him, but now the reality of what would happen to her, hit full force. She didn't regret her decision. She wanted to be with Gabriel, but ... "I'm a little scared," she admitted.

"I'm right here. I'll change with you and lead you. I won't let anything happen to you. You trust me, don't you?"

As she nodded her head, the first tingling whispered through her veins. "Hold me, Gabriel."

"I'll never let you go."

She choked back a cry fear knotting inside her, but then she heard his voice.

"It's all right." His large hands took her face and held it gently. "Stay with me. Relax, slow breaths."

She nodded and imitated his breathing.

"That's it. Let the magic run through you. Let yourself succumb to the change.

The light ripple slid down Shay's vertebrae then she shattered like a million glowing stars. She cried out only to have a roar emerge from her throat. The giddiness overtook her as new blood coursed through her veins.

All of Shay's senses sharpened. She knew Gabriel stepped behind her. The sweetly intoxicating musk of his body filled her. She turned her head. Gabriel had changed into his jaguar form too, beautiful, strong and powerful. Excitement lurched within her. "I did it. I'm a cat."

He chuckled and circled her. "You're a beautiful jaguar, tawny yellow with four spots on each rosette." His voice purred, nipping at her playfully. "Do you want to experience the wind feathering down your fur?"

She nipped back rubbing her head against him. "I want to experience everything in my new body," she issued her invitation as a passionate challenge

How could he resist?

Gabriel's gaze traveled over every luscious inch of her. "It would be my pleasure, mi amor."

He had left open a window knowing Shay would have pent up energy and would need to run. He looked at her again. "I

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love you for always. Come spend the rest of your life with me."

"I have every intention to."

Together, they leaped into the night and to a new beginning.

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## **Author's Note**

Shay McCormick is a fictional character working at a wildlife preserve. My inkling for Destiny's Prerogative came from my visit to a preserve in Rosamond, California, at the EFBC Feline Conservation Center, also known as the Cat House.

If you are a cat lover, this desert zoo and wildlife museum is amazing. Cat lovers of all ages will discover a variety of wildcat species. The preserve is dedicated to the protection and preservation of the world's endangered felines. They offer tours of the facility during the day and selected evenings. We attended the Twilight Hour Tour, which is offered one Saturday in the months of April, June and September. (The cats are more active in the evening.)

I have pictures of our visit on my website at :  
*[www.kmnbooks.com](http://www.kmnbooks.com)*

For more information about the preserve please visit their website. They have updates on their cats, a webcam and great photos.

Feline Conservation Center  
*[www.cathouse-fcc.org/](http://www.cathouse-fcc.org/)*

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## **About the Author**

Karen Michelle Nutt lives in California with her husband, three fascinating children, two dogs, Jack and Shakespeare, and three cats that have everyone well trained.

Her book *Lost in the Mist of Time* was nominated by New Books Review for 2006, Spotlight Best Fantasy Book of the Year Award. The *Object of Romance* Anthology feature's her novella, "Mr. O'Grady's Magic Box" and received P&E's Top Ten Readers Award. Her novella, *At the Stroke of Midnight* is available at Amazon Shorts.

She is the member of the Romance Writers of America (RWA.) and in her spare time, she reviews books for PNR—Paranormal Romance Reviews. An avid reader of history, romance, and the paranormal, she tends to combine the three in her writings. She enjoys travel, old movies, books, and the chance to weave a tale.

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Coming soon in 2008

A Twist of Fate—The World Card with Dark Tarot Publishing  
The Spirit of Love was selected for publication with  
Highland Press' anthology, *Second Time Around*  
Autumn Moon, Festival II Anthology with Tease Publishing

Destiny's Prerogative  
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Unconditional Love Anthology, "Moon Shifter" with Tease  
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