

ELLORA'S CAVE TWILIGHT



FIRST *Heat*  
JOCELYN MODO

## **First Heat**

*Jocelyn Modo*

Shifter lion Kissa Alassane has finally gone into heat and she has never been consumed by such raging lust. Too bad her lioness is demanding she mate with Venor Brun, a tortured and deadly male with a dark past.

Too bad she can't keep her hands, lips or any other part of herself off him. They must mate three times to complete their bond. Just once can't hurt, she figures, just once to soothe her aching need and clear her head.

When once becomes twice, Kissa flees to Austin, Texas, hoping to lose Venor and others tracking her in the big city. But a pride of rogue shifters is killing and turning humans in Austin, and Kissa finds herself thrust into a full-scale battle for survival. And while Venor may be the only male who can save her, he might be the biggest threat of all...especially to her heart.

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# ***FIRST HEAT***

**Jocelyn Modo**

### *Dedication*

To my sisters for being my best friends and biggest fans. I love you more than mint chocolate chip ice cream. To Poopie for always having my back—even when you know I’m wrong. To Sean for cheering me on. And to my awesome editor, Jilly, the best of the best. Thank you for all the lessons learned.

### *Trademarks Acknowledgement*

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## Chapter One

Kissa skinny-dipped in the large blue lily pond outside the temple, trying desperately to soothe the burning fire of her first heat. Miun, or shifter lions, loved the water, and right now appeasing her cat was her top priority. Normally her human and cat sides stayed well-balanced. All miun learned how to stabilize their dual natures by the time they hit puberty, but in times of high stress or when emotions raged too high, they had to fight to keep their cats in check. And Kissa's heat had unstrung her emotions and tangled them into knots.

Her muscles were in knots too. She breathed deep and dove down to the bottom, letting the cool water soothe her overheated skin. Being in the water reminded her of the many days she and Venor had spent swimming in the lake a couple miles away. She squeezed her eyes shut and kicked up to the surface. The moment her thoughts veered toward Venor, her eyes filled with tears.

She didn't know if the rumors held truth, didn't know if Venor had been disloyal. Cheating didn't fit what she thought she saw in him or what her heart told her, but in the last two weeks since he had supposedly left to visit his home pride in France, he had not answered one of the ten calls she'd made while cloistered in the temple. Why avoid her if he'd done nothing wrong? And why lie about where he was going?

He was *not* in France. Worse, she'd discovered this wasn't the first—or even the tenth—time he'd lied about his whereabouts. If he was going to lie, avoid her phone calls, then she simply could not trust him. She'd made up her mind, closed the door on Venor.

Letting the water wash away her tears, Kissa swam to the stone lip of the pond and pushed herself up out of the water.

Thank the Goddess for Tan. A friend since childhood, Kissa trusted him with her body, if not her heart. *He is a good choice in a bonded mate*, she reassured herself, letting the hot August sun dry her human body even while her mie—her cat—paced restlessly inside her, yowling her impatience.

As if he sensed her readiness, her sire, Latif, approached, her list of potential bonded mates rolled into a narrow tube in his right hand.

"I'm ready," she told him, even while shaking her head at the irony of her statement. Up until five hours ago, the last word she would have used to describe herself was *ready*. But that was before her first heat had wrenched her from fitful sleep. Now her mie clawed at her insides. Ready or not, she had to choose her bonded mate.

With a nod of his balding head, Latif left to usher in the group of single shifter males who waited in the nearby parking lot. Unable to sit still, she rose on trembling legs and began to pace. Head down, eyes closed, breaths short, she pressed one hand

over the pit of fire that burned low in her stomach, the other hand balled into a fist at her side. Her body screamed for release. Cursing, she clenched her pelvic muscles, trying and failing to clamp down on the relentless ache. The deep moan that escaped her lips was loud enough to cover the grass-muffled footsteps of the approaching males, but she could smell the group of twenty, smell their thick, almost suffocating sexual excitement as they circled her.

One male's scent called to her over the others, drawing her in, triggering visions of what they would be like together. Him thrusting into her as her body clamped down around him, milking him, drawing his seed into her ready womb. Feral heat spread through her already enflamed body, pulsing through her veins, contracting her muscles, taking her breath from her lungs, making her choke and gasp for air.

*Venor.*

What was he doing in the courtyard? His name was not on her list of potential mates. Kissa glared at her sire, though she knew he wasn't the only manipulator of this event. Her dam, Genet, had to have helped. Together they betrayed their only child. Latif faced her with unflinching certainty in his clouded, hazel eyes, unrepentant. She hissed, feeling her parents' manipulation stab through the walls of her heart. They didn't believe she could make the correct choice in selecting her bonded mate and the Oakview Pride's next mane miu, the next ruling male. Obviously, her parents had decided that they knew best.

*Typical.*

Refusing the tears that fought to film her eyes, Kissa searched the ring of males. They were all attractive—sleek-muscled, tanned skin, erect cocks—but none was as beautiful as Venor, who stood proudly before her, light brown hair skimming his strong shoulders, pale golden eyes stunning in their contrast to his rich coloring, a soft smile easing the hard angles of his face. Beautiful and heartbreaking.

She forced herself to look away.

Tan was notably absent. Fury built and broke past the haze of heat that clenched her muscles. Her parents had replaced Tan with Venor. She was left with the choice of nineteen males her mie would never accept or the one male she loved but no longer trusted.

Another wave of desire crashed through her. Doubling over, a yowl ripped from her throat. The harsh vocalization rang through the outer court, eliciting growls from the males as they drew closer until their body heat joined with hers to create a firestorm of lust. Oh Goddess, she wanted to drop to her hands and knees and be mounted.

The only thing she wanted more was retribution for her parents' betrayal, and she used that desire to conquer the other. She would not be manipulated. Slamming her eyes shut, she stamped down the flames of desire, then worked to regulate her heartbeat. Minutes passed, a lifetime elapsed before she could force her eyes open and face Latif.

"You have left me no choice," she said in a low, hate-filled voice.

Latif smiled as if confident in his control of her, certain that he had won.

Kissa raised her eyebrows and said, "I choose to let my heat pass without mating."

His face blanked then buckled under the weight of his anger. Eyes flashing, muscles jumping, he lifted his all but bald head to the sky and roared. His voice echoed through the outer courtyard, ringing in Kissa's ears.

She twisted her lips into a grim smile that exposed her teeth. A refusal to mate was unheard of, but she had the right. Now she needed to seclude herself in the temple for the next four to seven days so that the temptation to mate could not overwhelm her.

*Please be four days. Please be four.*

Lifting her chin, she turned to force her way out of the circle. One of the males ran his hand down her arm, an invitation. Her nails instinctively shifted to claws. She pivoted and ripped through his face. The male, Devon, stumbled out of the circle, clutching his torn cheek, hissing and spitting. She had a moment of regret—he was her friend—before her claws shifted back to human nails and the circle of males tightened, closing Devon out. Her sire stepped forward, one wild, bushy eyebrow lifting, a smile twisting his face. Whatever he was about to say, Kissa didn't want to hear it. She took a step back and ran right into the wall of Venor's immovable body.

"What is it, Kiss?" he whispered against her ear. "Are you frightened because it is your first time?"

His thick arms locked her against him as he gently cupped her breasts. Where Devon's touch repulsed her, Venor's felt completely natural, as if she belonged there in his arms. She gasped as memories flooded her mind and drowned her senses. Venor holding her hand on the way to a pride meeting. Venor pressing her against a broad tree trunk and feasting on her inexperienced mouth. Venor promising his life and love to her. *No*. Tears filled her eyes, making them burn. Her lower lip trembled and she had to bite down on it to prevent a sob from breaking free.

"Release me," she said, trying to keep her voice firm when what she wanted to say was, *Mate with me*.

"Please don't be afraid, *ma chaton*," he whispered.

She used to love it when he called her "his kitten", but he had no right to claim her. Not anymore.

"I cannot promise there will be no pain in our first joining, but I will take care to please you."

He rubbed his body against hers, marking her with his scent, claiming her, warning all other males away. She hissed at the feel of his hard body sliding against her slick, overheated flesh. When he pinched and rolled her nipples, her resolve weakened and broke. Instinct overtook her and she pressed herself against him, undulating with need, purring at the feel of his arms around her, the dense scent of his miu—his lion.

*No. Stop. Don't do this. Don't.*



But she didn't stop, and he hummed his satisfaction when she rolled her hips and went up on her toes so that the length of his erection filled the seam of her ass. The heat of his breath stirred her hair, sending pinpricks of pleasure over her scalp. Oh Goddess, she needed this, needed him. She'd never last four days. She couldn't last another four minutes. And if she were honest with herself, she would admit her need for Venor did not come only from her mie, but also from her all-too-human heart. She wanted him. Loved him. Despite her decision to reject him, no other male would do. Her little rebellion—telling Latif she wished to let her cycle pass without mating—had turned into nothing more than posturing.

Venor buried his face against the side of her neck and nipped her. The sharp sting made her mewl as if she were the kitten he'd called her. He released an arrogant chuckle. Obviously, he sensed the change in her, knew what she refused to say—she accepted him. Angry at his self-assurance, angry with herself for being unable to resist him, she jerked away...and got nowhere. But if he thought she would simply roll over for him, he had another thought coming. Wrapping her hands around his wrist, she raked him with her long nails, breaking the skin. Thick and hot, his blood coated her fingers and she immediately regretted her actions. She was acting like her dam, vindictive, violent.

He didn't flinch.

With a deep chuffing sound, he nuzzled aside her long hair, bit down at the base of her neck, then flicked his tongue over the tender skin he held firmly in his mouth. Lightning exploded behind her eyelids. Her hair stood on end as she shivered uncontrollably. Her world narrowed to Venor's mouth, his hands kneading her flesh. She drooped in his arms, her mind folding in on itself. Desire ruled her. Nothing mattered but this. Nothing mattered but him. She couldn't fight him and her mie at the same time. She was lost to her lust.

"You have reconsidered your choice," Latif said from somewhere nearby.

"Yes," she hissed, her eyes shut, her body open.

"You have chosen Venor Brun."

"Yes." *Yes. Yes.*

Latif grunted in obvious approval. She groaned, hating her mie, hating Venor, hating her parents. They would all pay for this, she most of all, but she would find a way to make them pay too.

Several unsteady heartbeats passed as the outer court emptied, leaving her alone with the man she did not trust. Kissa panted her desire. Everything inside her stilled. Her muscles tensed, her eyes went wide, waiting, wanting. Ever since she'd met him, she'd wanted him in her life and in her body. Her rational mind telling her not to love him, not to trust him meant little compared to her need. The mating ritual, the Ritual of Generation, required them to mate three times before their bond solidified. Surely she could mate with him just this once with no repercussions. Just this once and never again.

His teeth remained locked around the cluster of nerves at the back of her neck, demanding her submission. Wrapping a golden-skinned arm around her waist, he lowered them carefully to the cool, green grass. She was breathless in her arousal. Venor radiated desire, a brilliant, welcoming yearning for her that felt like love. And it didn't matter if his love wasn't real, didn't matter that rationally, reasonably she shouldn't want him. All that mattered right now was the press of his muscled chest against her back, the powerful flex of his long legs, the feel of his graceful fingers brushing the underside of her breasts.

While she was on hands and knees, her mie instincts overtook her. She arched her back, lifting her ass into the air, inviting him to mount her. Her nails sank into the soft earth as Venor sank into her yielding body. She was slick and more than ready. Still, he worked slowly and carefully to coax her body into accepting his. Cupping her breasts. Sliding his hand over the soft curve of her stomach down to her small nest of curls. Parting her lips and teasing her, stroking her, making her breathless.

He stretched her until pleasure bled to pain. *Oh Goddess, that hurt.* Hissing, she bucked beneath him, trying to throw him off. On instinct, her left hand partially shifted again and she twisted beneath him, swiping his side with razor-sharp claws. He clamped down harder on her neck. The sharp points of his shifted teeth punctured her skin, spilling her blood.

Kissa raked her claws down his arm, digging deep into his flesh, wanting to hurt him because he hurt her, wanting to regain control of herself, of him, of the whole situation. But he overwhelmed her, demanding she accept him. He pressed down on her smaller frame, insisting she submit to him, but she didn't surrender because he demanded it of her. Despite the pain, her body wanted and needed Venor. She *had* to mate with him. There was no other choice. Not in her body. Not in her mind. And not even in her traitorous heart.

Slowly, the pain of losing her virginity died, drowned in the pleasure of having him surround her with his body as she surrounded him with hers. He filled her senses and her mie calmed, instinctively crouching low, allowing him to push completely into her.

Fully seated, he retracted his sharp teeth, then licked and sucked at the small punctures to cleanse them with his saliva. A shudder overtook her, racking her body with perfect pleasure, relinquishing her mind to incessant need. He kissed her shoulder and nuzzled her cheek. She purred in response to his gentle touches. Her need grew and interlocked with his so that it became their need, just as their individual bodies now felt as if they were one. He slowly rocked their sweat-soaked bodies together, encouraging her to ease around him so that he could thrust. Goddess, it was a tight fit.

"I am yours, Kiss," he said, his French accent making it sound more like "Kees". His hands cupped her breasts with tender reverence. He molded her breasts, teased her nipples into peaks. "Yours until the day I die."

She knew he wanted her to make the same promise to him, proclaim herself his mate, but she couldn't give him the words. She was his for now, she reminded herself, his in this moment and then never again. He kissed her neck, the line of her jaw. Tears

watered her eyes. If he was the miu she thought he was, perhaps she could set aside her fears and insecurities and commit herself to him fully. But she wouldn't play the "if" game. She would fill her body and heart with him to overflowing so later, when she was empty and alone, at least she could recall these treasured moments in the outer court where they loved each other under Re's mighty sun.

Venor moved down her spine with lips and tongue, then clutched her hips in his elegant hands and straightened behind her. His thrusts were slow at first, more of a nudging, a request for acceptance. But when her body opened, he began thrusting in earnest. His hard sex filled her more than she thought she could take. Yet she moved with him, met him thrust for thrust, insatiable. He murmured to her in French, words she didn't know, couldn't translate.

With each plunge, small noises left her mouth, moans low and high, gasps of encouragement. She didn't want to want him, but he felt so right inside her, loving her, building her excitement, driving her toward release. Confidently thrusting into her body, though unknown to him until now, he mated with her as if he knew all her secrets. She was on the verge of fulfillment, wound in a tight ball of pleasure. Almost there. *Goddess, please, Venor. Please.* She dug her fingers into the earth, trying to ground herself when she felt as if she were spinning off through time and space.

Venor slammed into her. Again and again. She thrust back against him. Fast. Hard. Mindless with need. The sound of their mating—the hot slap of flesh against flesh—filled the empty outer court. Her toes curled. Her body tensed. She wanted to look over her shoulder, to see his face, but refused to give herself that pleasure. Instead, she breathed in his spicy scent and lifted her face to the bright afternoon sky. Full of light. Full of life. Her orgasm felt inevitable, like a huge and all-consuming force, reaching for her, running her to ground.

Her body convulsed and shattered. She screamed her release.

Venor lost his rhythm. He moved over her, grabbed a fistful of her hair, eliciting a cry of pleasure-soaked pain. She gripped him with her hot, tight sheath, demanding of him what he had demanded of her. His sex deep inside her, he nuzzled her cheek as he released a guttural moan. She clamped down on him. With a harsh growl, he came, his muscles tensing, jerking. He spurted off inside her, filling her, sending her body into uncontrollable aftershocks that left her muscles weak and shaky.

*So good.* They were so good together. She squeezed her eyes closed. Better than any of her fantasies. Better than she had ever imagined. Too damn good. She had to get out of there now, before her will weakened and she made promises she didn't want to keep.

He remained buried deep inside her for long moments. She tried to pull away but his fingers uncurled from her hair and moved to grip her hips, holding her flush against him. Then, panting still, he began to withdraw. She had forgotten that her heat would affect the very structure of Venor's miu anatomy—anatomy that was currently inside a very sensitive part of her. This was going to hurt. Closing her eyes, she braced herself, whimpering. The hundred or more spines on his now-flaccid shaft emerged, causing tiny keratin barbs to scrape her vaginal walls to induce ovulation.

Unable to bear his slow withdrawal, she jerked away, changing the sting to quick and sharp. The pain cleared her head, allowing her to remember why Venor was wrong for her, why she couldn't trust him. Kissa dropped her head and breathed through the emotional melee that stormed through her. She'd always believed in following her heart, but today her heart had proven false.

"Kiss?" Venor stroked her hair with a soothing touch, a touch she knew well. "What is wrong, *ma coeur*? Did I hurt you?"

He called her his heart, asked if he'd hurt her? He'd repeatedly lied to her, maybe broken his pledge, broken her heart. When he reached for her, she shied from his touch and struggled to stand on her trembling legs. Keeping her back to him, she simply said, "Yes," and walked away.

Inside the temple, the cool, incense-filled air relaxed her, calming her violently out-of-control emotions, soothing her *mie*. She took a deep breath and looked around. With its sand-colored stucco walls and domed skylight roof, the temple looked nothing like the ancient Egyptian temples that belonged to their long-deceased ancestors. But the twenty-foot-tall statue of the cat-headed Goddess Sekhmet that dominated the inner court would have made their shifter cat ancestors proud.

Her people, the *miun*, might be part lion, but they were human too. Human enough to worship the Goddess Sekhmet. Human enough to create and abide by laws that allowed them to live side by side their non-shifter brethren. And unlike the lions they resembled, the *miun* were matriarchal and, with few exceptions, monogamous for life.

Kissa plucked one of the blue lilies that lay at the gold-leafed feet of Sekhmet, the Lady of the Secret Way, and pressed the bloom to her nose. She always thought blue lilies smelled like bananas but her dam had laughed at that description, insisting they smelled more like hyacinth – one of the few fond memories she had of Genet.

Her dam's laughter echoed through the temple now, and Kissa feared she knew why. No way out of it, she must report to the council before she could wash Venor's provocative scent from her body and seclude herself in her room. Letting the lily slip through her fingers, she steeled herself to meet with the damn dams.

Dozens of ceremonial silk dresses made a blood-red pool on a tall table at the entryway to the inner temple. She snatched one up and pulled it on over her head. The silk molded to her body and clung to her damp skin. Plucking at the material, she pushed open the large double doors and stepped inside.

Representatives from all the U.S. *miun* prides had arrived in Oakview, Texas, yesterday for the Council of Dams to convene in order to discuss the rogue problem. But instead of walking in on the dams deep in conversation, feminine laughter intermingled with deep purring rolled over her as she entered the round room. Several of the dams lounged about in their *mie* forms, grooming each other. Others remained in human form, some in a cuddle puddle, some sprawled out on the floor giggling and talking.

Kissa chewed on her bottom lip as their attention turned to her. She curtsied to the governing dams who were breakfasting on Cleopatra's Lilies—blue lilies infused with red wine, giving them their purple color and changing their chemical content to produce effects not unlike those of Ecstasy—high-energy, touchy-feely peacefulness and bliss. *Great.* She had the pleasure of reporting her deflowering to twelve dams high on flowers. She bowed her head to cover a hysterical giggle that bubbled up her throat. And that's when she realized that the dams weren't just high on Cleopatra's Lilies. They were high on Serapis incense...and now so was she.

No wonder she felt so drifty. Serapis, the god of dreams, would be called on tonight to incubate the dams' dreams so that the dreamwalkers could interpret them in the morning. Kissa had trained to be a dreamwalker and would have participated in the ritual if not for her heat. Completing the mating bond took precedence over everything else.

"Kissa," her dam, the mane mie of the Oakview Pride, acknowledged her, then scented the incense-clouded air. The smug smile that curved Genet's face confirmed that she not only smelled Venor's scent on Kissa, but also had participated in manipulating her into accepting him.

The lavish room emptied of noise, leaving Kissa's ears ringing in the soft silence. She swayed as she stood to address the council, her vision blurring from the sting of the drug. *No, not true.* Blaming the tears that filled her eyes on the incense reeked of cowardice, and she was no coward. Defiantly, she allowed her tears to spill unchecked down her flushed cheeks. Soft emotions might embarrass her parents, but the only thing she was embarrassed about right now was her gene pool.

"Are you unwell, daughter?" Her dam's overplucked eyebrows lifted in question—as if she didn't know the reason for Kissa's heartbreak.

"You altered the list containing my selection of males. Why?"

Genet sniffed. "I did no such thing, daughter. A female's right to choose her mate is sacred law. If your list was changed, look to another." Genet stretched her long limbs. "However, I can't say I'm disappointed in your choice. You will soon be the mane mie of our pride. Venor Brun will make a fine mane miu."

How like her to blame Latif and take no responsibility for herself.

Emotions high, Kissa fought to contain her cat and keep from partially shifting. She lifted her chin in defiance, letting her dam see the anger in her wet eyes before lowering her gaze to the white marble floor. She knew that only patience and perseverance would lead her out of her parents' trap.

"He betrayed my trust."

Genet shrugged her narrow shoulders. "Betrayed? If you're referring to the rumor that he mated with another, that is hardly a betrayal. You had yet to claim him as your mate, therefore he was free to mate with whomever he chose. There was no betrayal, only your inability to satisfy a virulent male's needs while you waited to go into heat."

Kissa felt her eyes widen in disbelief. This, coming from a female whose mate was infamous for cheating on her with any and all willing females? Was she kidding?

"Regardless," she said, meeting her dam's unsympathetic gaze. "I had decided to choose Tancred Gabbard for my mate. Yet he was absent. Why?"

"You continue to accuse me of altering your list of twenty, but as I said before, I am innocent of breaking our laws."

Kissa wanted to scream but had to maintain the tenuous leash she had on her cat. Instead, she fisted her hands at her side and said, "Fine. I mated with the male of your choice and will now seek refuge in my bedroom here in the temple."

Genet's brow furrowed as she frowned. "You must retire to Venor's house, daughter. The Ritual of Generation is incomplete until you mate with him at least three times."

"I fulfilled my obligations to the pride. The Ritual of Generation is tradition not law. I am under no legal obligation to complete it." She gave a low, stiff curtsy, grinding her teeth in anger. "Is there anything else you require of me, Dam?"

Genet hissed but said nothing.

Kissa knew her dam was searching her memory for a loophole in the sacred text that would permit her to force Kissa to mate with Venor a minimum of three times, which would allow her eggs to grow ripe and her womb ready to accept his child, to accept him as her bonded mate. She held her breath, praying that her dam remembered no such ambiguity on the matter. It was strange luck or the will of the gods that had provided Kissa with the knowledge that she could refuse to mate. Only yesterday she'd come across a book containing the information that now saved her from completing the ritual with Venor.

"Your daughter is correct, Genet." Tan's dam, Lisa, chuckled quietly at the consternation twisting the face of her lifelong rival, though something in Lisa's eyes told Kissa that her laughter was inauthentic. It was more likely that she was just as angry—if not more so—about Tan's absence from Kissa's list of potential bonded mates as Kissa.

"I agree," Dam Belinda Butler seconded, her soft voice containing a whiplash of anger.

Kissa waited, swaying from side to side as if dancing in the arms of the drug that glided around her. At last her dam said, "If this is your decision, then I remain your guardian, and as such, I forbid you to leave the temple until I give you permission. Understood?"

Kissa gave a short, jerky nod. She would be a fool to leave the protection of the temple while still in heat. Her dam dismissed her with a wave of her long-fingered hand. Relief slowed Kissa's heartbeat and calmed her cat. She walked gingerly from the room, seeking fresh air and a bed to lay her fuzzy head on.

Down the hall and to the right, a row of red doors beckoned her. She counted the arched doorways, just as she had when she was a child, until she reached the seventh.

Her room, more familiar to her than her bedroom at home, calmed her. Genet had never been the motherly type and Latif had little use for her so Kissa had spent most of her childhood living in the temple, surrounded by others but always alone. Slipping inside her bedroom, she assured herself that she was safe in this tiny, windowless space by locking her door. The incense didn't reach this far, the governing dams could not force her from the temple and no males were allowed into the living area.

Pulling off the dress, she sank with a soft sigh onto the single bed. With one successful mating completed and the effects of the incense slowly leaving her system, she should have time to untangle her thoughts before her heat cycled up again and her symptoms returned in full force—time to plan her best course of action. No matter how appealing the idea, she couldn't hide in the temple forever. Her parents, the governing shifters of her pride, wanted her to accept Venor as her mate, but she would not bow to their wishes. Tan was her choice. He didn't come from a wealthy bloodline, but he possessed all the necessary characteristics to make a good mate and mane miu. Strength tempered by gentleness, confidence balanced by humility, passion moderated by intelligence.

She counted herself lucky that he had pledged his love and loyalty to her. A pledge *he* would keep. She just had to find a way to smuggle him into the temple and complete the Ritual of Generation with him before her parents could interfere further in their lives.

Anger-induced energy strengthened her resolve. She strode into the bathroom she was sharing with Anna Butler, Belinda's daughter and Kissa's counterpart in the Fort Collins, Colorado Pride.

Joan Jett's *I Hate Myself for Loving You* drifted out of Anna's room, mocking Kissa. She rolled her eyes and groaned. Wasn't that always the way? You go into an emotional nosedive and suddenly every song you hear is in tune with your crumbling life.

Anna really needed to turn off the stupid radio.

As if she'd heard her name, the petite seventeen-year-old nudged the door open and stuck her blonde head inside. Her pale blue eyes widened as she scanned Kissa's well-used body then looked away.

Anna's modesty was bizarre for a miun, a species who thought nothing of nudity, but Kissa was used to her odd behavior.

"Kissa?" Anna stepped into their bathroom, tugging the long sleeves of her white shirt down over her hands. "Oh, no, what happened to you?"

Kissa turned to look in the full-length mirror. She winced at what she saw there. Dried blood circled her neck like a rusted necklace. Bite marks marred the side of her throat and shoulder. Finger and thumbprints stained her hips and stomach. Cum-diluted blood colored her inner thighs. She was a god-awful mess, but shifters healed quickly. By tomorrow there wouldn't be a mark on her.

Kissa reached out but didn't touch the tears spilling down Anna's porcelain pale cheeks.

"Why?" she whispered, her voice cracking. "Why would your mate hurt you?"

Kissa winced at the innocent question. Anna had a shock coming her way when her first heat started and her mie instincts took over. Because the young blonde was a fatewalker, someone who could see into the future, her dam had sheltered her and she remained naïve about basic truths of their species.

Kissa felt sorry for her. She was on the cusp of her first heat and needed to know what to expect. Public mating was typical among the prides. Did her dam keep her away from such open displays, denying her common knowledge on purpose? Kissa sighed, realizing that most parents would try to protect their children from unpleasant truths—just not her parents. Ever. Instead, they ignored her or threw hard facts at her headlong, threw her at Venor because they wanted the strongest male as the pride's mane miu regardless of her feelings.

"He's not my mate. I will not be completing the Ritual of Generation with him. But he didn't hurt me. Not physically, anyway." Kissa wet a washcloth and skimmed it over her hypersensitive skin, noticing that her nails were caked with blood and dirt.

Anna choked on a disbelieving laugh. "He didn't...? I'm getting a healer. You should lie down." She took Kissa's elbow and pulled her into her adjoining bedroom.

"Here," she said, drawing back the gold comforter on Kissa's bed and spreading a towel over the midnight blue sheets. "Just try to relax while I go find a healer," she said. No phones were allowed in the temple.

Kissa sat on the bed with a deep sigh. "I don't need a healer. Besides, in a few hours, there won't be a scratch on me. You know that. I'm just a little sore, but that's to be expected after a first mating."

Anna's lips thinned into a bloodless line. Her large eyes looked wild against her pale face. "This...is normal?"

"Pretty much." Kissa folded the washcloth in half and moved on to cleaning her thighs. "I did resist more than is probably normal, but Venor didn't intentionally inflict damage."

Anna started wringing her fine-boned hands, her lean muscles tensed and her breaths came in rapid succession. For a moment, she lost control of her cat, her eyes and nose shifting. "Sekhmet help me," she said.

"Come sit down." Kissa patted the place next to her.

Anna took a deep breath, then another, and the uncontrolled shifting stopped. She shook her head and paced the room. "I can't do this," she said. "I can't...I don't even have a male in mind. What if I choose the wrong one? Someone violent? Someone who wants to hurt me? Then I'm stuck with him for the rest of my life? No."

"Why don't you fatewalk to find your mate?" Fatewalkers were rare so Kissa didn't know much about them. There were only two known others and Anna was the only one in the United States.



"I am blind to my own fate," Anna said, looking embarrassed. "All fatewalkers are. Besides, I haven't mastered my abilities yet. I can't direct my inner eye to see one specific thing. My visions are random and distorted."

*Oh. Well, that sucked.* "You can choose to let your heat pass without mating."

Anna stopped and turned to her, twisting her fingers together. "I can what?"

"Choose to let your heat pass. It's in the law."

"Wouldn't that be painful?"

"Yeah, but if I can do it, so can you." Kissa could already feel her heat cycling up again, and she hadn't had time to plan her next move. "Look, I need to shower and get some sleep."

She left Anna standing in the middle of the room, looking lost. The feeling was mutual.

In the small walk-in shower, Kissa decided she'd ask Anna to take a message to Tan in the morning when everyone would be distracted by the dreamwalkers' interpretations. What would her dreams tell her when she walked them tonight? Probably run, run as fast as you can.

After toweling off, she flipped the light switch, sending the windowless room into total darkness, and climbed into bed. Her body succumbing to the now-familiar burn caused by her heat, she rolled onto her stomach and stuffed a pillow under her head.

*Sleep*, she commanded herself. And thanks to years of training as a dreamwalker, her body and mind submitted to her demand.

She walked her dream—or, more accurately, she stumbled through her dark dreamscape, looking for Serapis, the Egyptian god of dreams, to help guide her.

There. A wavering green spark. Blinking. Twinkling. Growing brighter.

"I welcome your spirit," she said, dropping into a graceful curtsy, head lowered in supplication as he took human form.

"Daughter of Sekhmet." His voice made her think of the wailing of a million disembodied souls.

She shivered when his green-skinned hand touched her forehead, signaling her to rise. No matter how many dreams she walked, no matter how many times Serapis walked beside her, she would never get used to the dream god. When she met his dizzying snow globe eyes, he smiled, revealing large, blunt teeth.

"What do you search for?" he asked as he always did.

"The truth," she responded automatically.

He dipped his shaved head in acknowledgement and offered her his long-fingered, translucent hand, like green frosted glass, semitransparent, ghostlike. She took it and walked by his side through the dark mist of her dreamscape, searching for a vivid dream that she could incubate and interpret.

Calm clarity spread from his fingers up her arm and through her body, putting a damper on the side effects of her heat. The mist thinned. Cleared.

Serapis faded from her sight though she could still sense him nearby. With a deep, cleansing breath, she walked into her parents' redbrick, ranch-style home situated a few miles from the temple, a place she rarely even visited. The brown-sugar-cinnamon smell of sweet rolls filled her nose. Her dreamself, a barefoot child of five with a bruised heel, stood alone in her dam's pristine, apple-red kitchen, looking out the window of the back door. Still-blind white kittens slept in a coiled basket on the counter, a dream symbol meaning that deceit and danger loomed before her. The image of the injured heel was a dream symbol for vulnerability.

Apprehension snaked up Kissa's spine. The solidity of the details, the way she saw her dreamself, told her this was more than a simple dream. She had walked in on a recall dream, a forgotten, now-deformed childhood memory. Had she ever had a bruised heel or seen a basket of white newborn kittens? She doubted it. But standing in the kitchen, looking at something—no, someone—out the window, *that* she remembered.

She crossed the red-and-white-checkered floor to stand behind her dreamself and look out the window. There her sire pounded on the window with thick, insistent fists.

In a singsong voice, her dam merrily called from the living room, "Don't let him in."

Her dreamself stepped forward. And again. Until she stood, face inches from the window, in front of her sire, who raged, shouting, pounding, though no sound passed through the thin pane of glass. The sight of the soundless Latif reminded her of a tragic silent movie star or an enraged mime.

Dread seeped through her skin and sank into her bones. Her cat paced restlessly inside her, hissing and snarling. Kissa shuddered, trying to remember what happened next.

Too late.

Latif's right fist shattered the window, spraying glass in her and her dreamself's face. Blood blinded her, painting her face, spilling in thick rivulets down her neck. Hard breaths sounded from Latif. Quick footsteps clicked on the wooden floor in the hall. Then Genet shrieking, cursing, crying.

Kissa concentrated on separating her realself from her dreamself and regaining her sight.

Latif reached through the broken window and unlocked the door while Genet collapsed to her knees and gathered Kissa's dreamself into her arms. Kissa frowned. Her dam didn't even seem aware of the fact she was kneeling on shards of broken glass, that her legs were being shredded. And Latif. Her sire barreled into the kitchen. Ignoring the wide-open wound on the back of his hand, he scooped both Genet and Kissa's dreamselves up to cradle them against his body.

For once, her well-being trumped her parents' marital problems. For once, she was important to them, valid to them, a priority.

"Is this real?" she asked Serapis.

Serapis' disembodied voice filled the dreamscape. "Yes, these events occurred."

The scene dimmed. Mist filled the dreamscape once more, leaving Kissa disoriented, confused. Where had such a traumatic memory gone? Turning her inner eye to the details of her recall dream, she poked and prodded until the rest of the memory surfaced.

Her parents had taken her to the bathroom, pushed her onto her hands and knees and forced her to submit to them—to shift to cat form so that her transformation would accelerate the healing process. Wounded, frightened, the shift had been hideously painful. She remembered the humiliation of scenting her own feces and urine mixing with blood as her small body contorted, seized. The uncontrolled whimpers eating up her throat while she tried to connect to her cat, still a baby like her, still curled inside her like one of those blind white kittens in the kitchen. Miun were born able to shift but unable to control it. That took years of practice balancing their dual natures. She was too young to shift on command. Too young to shift while injured. But her parents had demanded and she'd had no choice but to submit.

She turned her inner eye away from the memory. No wonder she had buried the memory.

Strong arms pulled her against a solid body. Warm lips pressed a kiss against her neck. Serapis. Saving her from herself. Guiding her. Holding her.

No. That couldn't be right. Didn't feel right.

"Who?" she asked.

No one answered.

## Chapter Two

"So I take it absence doesn't make the heart grow fonder," Jayden quipped, wrapping Venor's torn side in sterile bandages.

Venor glared at his friend as he rinsed his bloody arms off with lukewarm bottled water. His injuries were minor. They would heal within a day, but his relationship with Kissa... What had changed in his two-week absence to make her walk away from him without completing the Ritual of Generation?

Jayden tied off the bandage and sat next to him on the stone lip of the lily pond. "Think it's politics?" he asked. Sometimes it seemed to Venor as if Jayden could see into his mind. A born hunter, his abilities to read situations and people had only grown when he'd been converted from human to miu. Was it possible for a made miu to have the gift of mindwalking, the ability to read others thoughts and emotions? Venor didn't think so. The ability was rare, and he'd only ever heard of born miun having the talent.

"No, not politics. Kissa follows her heart. Always." He washed the blood and cum from his groin, avoiding his friend's eyes. "I think I may have been too forceful...too...dominant in our first mating. She was skittish, fearful even, before she named me in front of her sire and the others. I should have practiced more patience with her. Moved more slowly."

"Huh." Jayden gave him a half-grin. "Who knew you were a bad lay? Should have come to me for advice, man. You know a brother knows how to please the ladies."

Venor stood and paced as if he were a cat in a cage, his miu wanting him to shift so that they could run through the woods. He suppressed the urge. Now was not the time to give in to his cat. He knew Jayden meant his comment as a joke, but what if he was right? What if his miu instincts had pushed him too far? What if he had failed to satisfy Kissa and that's what prompted her rejection of him?

No. That couldn't be the case. Their first mating had been violent, as was typical for miun, but he had seen to Kissa's needs before his own, ensured her pleasure like any decent male would do for his mate. Why then had she deserted him?

"Hey, V." Jayden rolled up his pant legs and dropped his feet into the lily pond, making a splash. "Calm your cat, man. She'll be back. I've seen the way she looks at you, talks to you, watches you when you aren't looking. There's no fucking way that a two-week separation or even a...difficult first mating could stop Kissa from loving the living daylights out of you."

Venor snorted, his sweat-soaked hair sticking to his face and neck as if clinging to him for survival under the wicked sun. He dumped the remaining water over his head and closed his eyes. Kissa's scent still hugged his body, her taste still kissed his mouth.

No amount of water would wash away his mate, and if she thought he was going to let her go, she had a surprise coming her way.

"Five months, Jay." He brought five fingers up and waved them at Jayden as if he was giving him the bird. "When I met her, I knew — *knew* the God Khonsu had created her as my mate. I courted her, her family and her pride for five months, a length of time that is unheard of in miun society." He clenched his jaw. "And it all fell apart in the two weeks I hunted with you."

"You need to talk to her." Jay swirled his bare feet in the water, creating twin whirlpools.

Venor stepped into the shallow end of the pond and sat down. The luminous water came up to his waist, cooling him. "No shit."

Jayden lifted a brow, smirking. "Pardon your French?"

"*Oui*." Venor snorted. He could always count on Jayden to bring humor into his life, no matter how dire the situation. The man had the temperament of a comedian and the talent of an assassin. Venor had secretly accompanied Jayden on his hunts running rogues to ground many times over the last five months, because the miun guard continued to send Jayden out to hunt alone, which was suicidal. He had not told Kissa that he was helping his friend, not because he didn't trust her — he did — but because he didn't want to add to her worries. She already lost sleep over assuming the position of mane mie in the pride, her dam's aggressive, obsessive behavior and the rogue problem for which the Council of Dams had convened. He thought that once they were bonded mates, they could work together to resolve the problem of born miun harassing made miun like Jayden. He respected and trusted Jayden above all others — except, of course, Kissa. "Can you offer a suggestion on how I am to gain access to the females' wing in the temple?"

"You need to talk to the dams."

"Sekhmet." Venor cursed.

"Taking the name of our Goddess in vain. *Nice*." Jayden scratched at the dark stubble on his jaw. "Question. What's the story with Sekhmet and the miun?"

Venor blinked. "You mean no one has ever told you our origin story?"

Jayden snorted. "No one tells me nothing. I've had to fight for every scrap of info I got since I was made."

Venor considered his friend. Jayden had been made miun over a year ago. "If you haven't received any assistance from the pride, how did you learn to balance your human and lion natures? Why did you not turn rogue?"

Shrugging, Jayden said, "Guess I'm just gifted."

And Venor thought he had problems. His pride had split when he was young, his parents killed in the fighting. The dams who had adopted him might not have loved him, but they had cared for him, brought him up with all the knowledge he needed to

succeed in miun life. But Jayden, it seemed, had not been afforded the same opportunities. This, at least, he knew how to remedy.

He ducked his head under the water and came back up shaking his head. "Lesson one," he said. "The origin of the miun."

Jayden raised his eyebrows but said nothing. Venor cleared his throat and switched to his storyteller's voice to recite the origin story most born miun knew from the time they were young cubs. "In the times of ancient Egypt, a bloodthirsty pharaoh ruled. One who reveled in his position as the 'Lord of the High Lands' but neglected his duty as high priest to the gods. He lived for war until he fell in love with a beautiful cat priestess. A young woman whose every smile was more precious to him than all his wealth and power.

"So enamored with his wife was he, that no request went unanswered, no demand unfulfilled. When she asked for her own pet lion, the pharaoh dispatched his servants to obtain a cub. The cub grew into a great lioness who his wife named Sekhmet after the lion-headed Goddess she once served, the patron of divine retribution, conquest and cats."

Jayden interrupted with a short laugh. "Why do I get the feeling this is about to turn ugly?"

Venor combed his fingers through his hair. "*Oui*, the lioness lived up to her name, when one day as the pharaoh's wife teased her with a piece of meat, the large cat turned on her mistress, killing and eating the woman instead. Stricken by grief and rage, the pharaoh not only slaughtered the lioness but also sent his servants out to kill every lion pride in his land and bring back the meat to feed his children.

"The Goddess Sekhmet was not pleased. How dare he, the gods' high priest, slaughter a sacred animal—her animal. In retribution, she took the pharaoh's human heart and replaced it with the heart of a lion, cursing him so that if he ever harmed another cat he would become wholly beast, and if ever harmed another human, his curse would spread through scratch or bite. No longer wholly human or truly lion, he was something the world had never seen—a shifter cat, a *miu*.

"Unable to reconcile his human mind with his lion's heart, the pharaoh lost the little humanity he had and attacked his children, cursing them as well. Together the pharaoh and his children left the palace to roam Egypt in lion form, following their instinct, seeking to create a pride of their own.

"Through the generations, their offspring sought and won favor from Sekhmet through supplication. Pleased with the piousness of her new species, she gifted an elite few with psychic abilities that allowed the prides to prosper in a world dominated by humans. Some could heal, some incubate and interpret dreams, others sense feelings and hear thoughts, still others had the ability to look into the future. With the Goddess' help, the miun learned to balance their dual natures, live once more among the humans and be fertile and grow."

Jayden clapped and then stuck two fingers in his mouth and whistled. "You should tell stories for a living, man. Not that you or any of the rest of the miun need to earn a living, what with all the wealth the prides have accumulated over the centuries."

Venor shrugged. "*Oui*, well, the dreamwalkers, mindwalkers and fatewalkers have all helped with money matters."

"I'll say they helped. My monthly allowance is more than I made in a year as a bartender." He kicked his feet, spraying water into Venor's face. "Thanks for telling me the story. Can't know where you're going until you know where you came from...and all that."

Venor wiped water from his eyes. "Wonderful. Happy to oblige you, my friend. Now, may we please return to the purpose of our conversation? I need your assistance."

"Right. The dams."

"They remain in seclusion discussing the rogue situation. How am I to gain access to the temple?"

Jayden's eyes widened as he stared past Venor. "Looks like you won't need to."

Venor turned to see that Genet stood under the arched entryway of the temple, watching him with eyes that echoed Kissa's in shape and color but not in spirit. Genet's green-gray eyes always looked cold, callous, as if the soft moss color of Kissa's eyes had hardened to stone. He stood and bowed low. Genet acknowledged him with a slight nod then motioned him to her side. With a deep breath, he approached her. He and his miu were wary of the dam. When her arctic eyes ran up and down his body, he wished he was wearing clothes. He stifled a shiver that tried to surface under her blatantly sexual appraisal.

"Venor Brun, I'm disappointed in you." Syrupy sweet. Nauseatingly so. "You've failed to secure my daughter as your mate."

His body tensed but he refused to let his annoyance show on his face or in his voice. "There are days left in her heat. I will succeed regardless of this setback."

"Succeed?" Genet snickered. "How will you succeed when she's cloistered in the living area within the temple?"

"With your assistance." Venor knew she wanted to play her usual games, but he had no patience for her favorite pastime. She would help him or she would not. Either way, he would succeed in completing the Ritual of Generation with Kissa.

"And why would I want to help you?" She reached out and smoothed a strand of hair from his face. "If my daughter remains unmated, I stay in full control of my pride."

"Yes, but for how long? You can't even manage your own daughter. How can you expect to retain control of your pride?"

Genet's wide smile narrowed to a thin pink line. "That's bullshit and you know it."

"Yet it's what those who wish to usurp your power will say."

She sniffed. "I think you overestimate their political prowess."

"Perhaps." Venor shrugged with a nonchalance he did not feel. "Or perhaps you underestimate their ambition."

"Do I underestimate yours?" Genet raked one finger down his stomach, her narrowed eyes following the path she made.

Venor stepped back, unconcerned that Genet would see it as a retreat and him as weak. Her touch sickened him, made his muscles knot and his stomach heave and roll. His miu agreed, hissing and spitting, wanting to claw the dam's eyes out. Devastating memories flashed before his mind's eye, but he shoved them back, buried them. "My only ambition is to become Kissa's mate."

"Your only ambition?" She laughed but there was no joy in the sound, only bitterness. "You may have seduced my daughter into believing you want her and not the title and power she can give you, but I'm not that naïve. The only reason you petitioned me for entrance into my pride was so you could convince my daughter to choose you as her mate, thus becoming Oakview's mane miu."

"Believe what you will." Venor ground his teeth, stifling what he really wanted to say to the dam. He had come to the U.S. in search of his mate, not in search of power or political gain, but Genet could not believe or even understand that. She was too entrenched in politics, too cynical about life and love—more cynical even than a Frenchman, and that was saying something.

"I believe what's true, Venor Brun." She stepped into him, pressing her red-silk-wrapped body against the length of him and rolling her hips.

He jerked away from her so fast he stumbled back and almost fell in his haste to remove himself from her grasp. "Believe this," he snarled, his miu surfacing, elongating his teeth into sharp canines, turning his voice harsh, guttural. "You have nothing to offer that would make me desire your touch."

Genet's hands landed on her hips. "That—"

"Dam Genet?" A miu guard approached them, his eyes averted, crimson embarrassment staining his pale cheeks, telling Venor that he'd seen their mane mie flirting with her daughter's chosen mate.

"What?" she snapped, turning her heated gaze on the guard.

He held his hands up in placation. "The final witness has arrived to testify. The dams are reconvening."

Genet looked past Venor to the lily pond. "Jayden Conaway, aren't you on the expert witness list?"

Venor looked over his shoulder at his friend but refused to give the dam his back—not out of respect, out of apprehension. "You're going to testify on the rogue issue?"

"Who better?" Jayden asked as he rolled down the cuff of his old pair of cargo pants and tucked in his black t-shirt.

Venor bit back his answer. There was no one more qualified to speak on the rogue problem, however, Jayden was not only an unattached male—a low position in the



pride—but also a made miun, which placed him firmly at the very bottom of the pride structure. That the dams would formally recognize Jayden and welcome his input showed just how imperative resolving the rogue issue had become to all of them. Perhaps his friend could find a way to use it to his benefit and finally receive some of the respect he had more than earned over the year since he joined the pride.

Venor could conceivably use the rogue issue to his advantage as well. “I hunted rogues with Jayden just this past week. Perhaps my input would benefit the dams as well?” He kept the desperation out of his voice. If this didn’t work, he would find another way into the temple.

Genet cocked her head to one side, considering him. “You may enter the temple and wait with the other witnesses. But I doubt we’ll need your testimony.”

Venor bowed at the waist. “I am happy to await your decision, Dam Genet.”

“Come.” She escorted them into the temple’s antechamber, her hips swaying with each step she took. Kissa walked like that—with a fluid, natural grace that provoked sexual excitement in every male who witnessed her feline gait. Venor winced at the sharp ache that seized his chest as if his rib cage had turned into a vise that clamped down on his heart. The physical similarities between dam and daughter only seemed to emphasize the vast emotional differences. Besides, his feelings for Kissa surpassed simple want. He needed her.

As soon as Genet disappeared into the inner room, Jayden grabbed Venor’s arm and pulled him away from the rest of the witnesses. “You sure you want *that* as your mother-in-law?”

“Kissa is not her dam,” Venor said as another dam—Dam Lisa Gabbard, he thought—passed him with a glare so searing it mocked Re’s sun. What had he done to gain her animosity? he wondered. And what did it mean that she would openly show her hatred in front of her peers? Nothing good.

Jayden cleared his throat, drawing Venor’s attention back to him. “Can you create a diversion that will occupy both guards long enough for me to escape unseen?”

Jayden shifted on his feet. “Why not? Can’t fall any lower in the eyes of the pride.”

Venor grimaced. He’d been so involved in his own problems that he’d failed to consider the potential consequences to his friend. Of course, the only chance Jayden had of distracting the guards would be to do something that the pride could use to disown him. It wasn’t as if his friend could simply talk to the other males. They despised him and therefore would not engage the former human in conversation. “I shouldn’t have asked that of you. I apologize.”

Jayden crossed his arms over his chest. “And why the hell not? Shit, V, you know I got your back, even if you are a cheese-eating surrender cub.”

Venor chuckled, shaking his head at the unusual slur. “You do have a way with words.”

Jayden thumped him on the back. “Go get your woman.”

With that, Jayden traversed the room to the guards who were speaking in low tones and punched the nearest one in the face. The other guard jumped him and they both went down. Venor didn't dare look back as he darted down the hall leading to the residential wing. Jayden could handle the two males. He outweighed and had outfought both of them. If it weren't for the fact that he was made instead of born miun, Jayden would be one of the top males in the pride. Venor would find a way to repay Jayden for his kindness. Just as he would find a way to restore love to Kissa's heart.

Around the first corner, another male guarded the entrance to the females' wing. Venor slipped silently behind a schist statue of the protective mother goddess Amaunet as the guard left his post to check out the noises from the fight Jayden had created in the antechamber.

Venor waited until the guard's footsteps faded before moving quickly and quietly down the hall, extending his miu senses to search out his mate. At each red door, he paused to scent out who inhabited the room. Many were empty, some filled with single mie visiting from other U.S. prides. Several doors down, he came upon Kissa's natural perfume enhanced by her heat and mingled with another female who smelled of citrus and roses. Kissa had occupied this room recently, but no more.

A male's footsteps approached from the northern hall. Venor quickly moved on. The next room was Kissa's. His miu rose through him, changing his vision to washed-out color and shades of gray. He closed his eyes to allow her essence to envelop him and call to his miu. His mate. *His*. The footsteps grew closer. Venor turned the doorknob. Locked. He twisted harder, broke the lock and slipped into the dark room.

## Chapter Three

Kissa's dream changed to Venor smoothing his well-oiled hands down her back, fingering each knob of her spine. She stretched as if she were a cat under Re's sun, arching up into his hot hands, keeping close to his touch, begging him with her body for more. The deep, woodsy smell of the sandalwood oil merged with Venor's sexy scent to saturate the room with a singular bouquet that ravaged her senses. His lips brushed her skin, his tongue tracing circles in the small of her back. Her need pulsed, a growing, living thing.

*Not a dream.* How had Venor snuck into the temple?

Her dam. Of course Kissa's dam would let him in. Not that it really mattered how he'd gained entrance to her room. She wanted to want him gone. He didn't belong in her bed or her heart. Instead, she couldn't bear the thought of him leaving.

"Venor," she whispered his name, a prayer, a curse, she didn't know.

He nipped at her hip then swirled his tongue over the small sting, his soft, shoulder-length hair feathering her skin, sending shivers through her body. "You are so lovely, Kissa. *Je t'aime de tout mon coeur.*"

She closed her eyes on her tears, wishing she could close her ears on his words. *I love you with all my heart.* He didn't mean it, had never meant it when he'd told her that he loved her, but Goddess help her, it didn't feel that way. Every part of her felt loved as he continued to worship her body with his hands and mouth.

Kneading the stiff muscles in her legs, Venor released the knots that had gathered there. He massaged her feet, paying attention to her toes as if each individual digit warranted his consideration. Then, gliding his hands slowly up her legs, he parted them, making room to kneel between them.

Anticipation had her panting, her heart pounding out her desire in the beat of love, lust and emptiness. She felt as if she were a vacant vessel, waiting, wanting, needing to be filled by him, only by him.

At last his hands found her and he cupped her butt, kneading her flesh, positioning her so that he could slide a single finger between her rim and pussy to stimulate the nerve ending-rich area there. She mewled and writhed, wanting more, wanting all of him touching her, not just a single caress. But she shouldn't want him at all.

As emotions climbed within her, she rolled onto her back. Venor was there immediately, intimately straddling her hips, pressing her back into the soft mattress. Her mie night vision allowed her to see him in the dark room. His light brown hair framed the hard planes of his face. His pupils filled his eyes so that only a thin ring of light gold iris glowed, as if they were the halos of twin angelic souls. But he was no

angel, no bright knight there to rescue the silly damsel—she was better than that and he, he was a liar—and maybe just there to claim her as his bonded mate so he could seize control of the Oakview Pride.

“Don’t be afraid, Kiss. I will be careful with you.” His hands found hers and he slowly brought them up over her head to wrap her fingers around the metal bedframe. “Hold on.” He licked the outer shell of her ear. “This time we will be gentle with one another.”

“Venor,” she breathed his name a second time, this time knowing she cursed him.

“*Oui, ma chaton?*”

She closed her eyes to block out the arousing image he presented in the dark. “I’m not your kitten. I’m not your anything.”

He pressed his soft, full lips to her neck, so soft, so tender. His kiss felt like love, blind and bewildering.

“Why would you say this?” he asked. “You are my everything.”

Kissa gripped the metal rods tighter, choking back her bitter response. What would be the use of arguing when her heart wasn’t in it? Later, when her body was replete, her mie satisfied, she would fortify her determination to deny Venor’s claim on her.

Much, much later.

He rubbed his body against hers, anointing her with his slick skin, purring as he did so. She wanted to writhe beneath him, wrap her legs around him, pull him inside. She admonished herself to remain in control, but when his mouth brushed hers, soft and slow, coaxing her to respond, she parted her lips to taste him. Her heart thrummed in her chest. Tears threatened her eyes. How many times had he kissed her just like this? As if the world would come to a stumbling halt if he didn’t taste her. As if she was all he wanted, all he needed. Hot tears spilled over and raced toward his mouth. Tasting them, he lifted his head.

“Kiss, what is it?” He cupped her face in his hands, brushing away her tears. “Tell me, *bébé*.”

“I hurt,” was all she could say past her emotions.

“Shh. I will make you feel better. I promise you.”

He lowered his head to her breast and she arched her back, pressing herself into him. His velvety-soft hair teased her skin as his rough tongue teased one of her nipples so that it hardened into a tight little bud, begging for more even though she refused to utter a sound.

His hand found her other breast and he duplicated the movements of his tongue with the flat of his thumb, tracing the outline of her areola, working in a slow spiral until he reached her nipple. He used gentle strokes to please her, reminding her of the reason she had fallen in love with him in the first place.

Despite his warrior's body and spirit, he had always treated her as if she were precious to him. With gentle skill, he seduced her, bringing her close—so close—to completion then backing off, letting her body unwind.

Mating meant procreation to her people, but this wasn't mating. This was lovemaking, and he was a master at it, she realized. He'd probably refined the art with that other female, the one he was mating with in the picture Tan had shown her. She slammed the door closed on those thoughts. When the chance presented itself tonight she would listen to reason and leave him, leave her pride, leave behind everything she knew. But now, for these brief yet unending moments, she would listen only to her heart.

He moved down her needy body, kissing her stomach, circling her bellybutton then stabbing his tongue into the shallow indentation, sinking lower to lap at the beads of moisture accenting her short, black curls. She opened her legs at his prompting, allowing him to insinuate himself between her already damp and trembling thighs. Goddess help her, she wanted him more than she'd wanted anything else in her entire life.

He gently spread her lips and circled her clit with two strong fingers. The tenderness of his touch made her oddly skittish. She shied from him, trying to hold herself back. But he refused to break the intimate contact, following her movement, stalking her.

In the courtyard, she had been driven by her mie, by anger and necessity. Now she was driven by her heart, by passion.

"Please," she whimpered, her hips involuntarily coming up off the bed.

Venor didn't hesitate. She needed. He provided. He ducked his head between her legs and kissed her, open-mouthed, tongue flat, eliciting her breathy moans. Then, sucking her clit into his mouth, he flicked his tongue over her hard little nub.

Just that fast, she came, biting down on a pillow to smother a scream that ripped from her throat. Gripping her hips, he grounded her while lightning struck her body and flashed before her eyes. He released a growl like rumbling thunder as he lapped at her cream, drinking in her pleasure, drawing out her orgasm, wringing her body of every last shudder and tingle of bliss.

When at last she calmed, Venor moved up over her, kissing his way to her mouth. He slid the tip of his tongue along the seam of her lips. The head of his sex probed her entrance, slowly pressing into her. She shuddered around him, gripping his hard shaft, drawing him deeper until he filled her completely.

He throbbed inside her. Not moving. Waiting for her to adjust to the length and width of him. There was no pain this time. Only profound, unrelenting delight as he adjusted his position and stroked that one beautiful place inside her that sent shivers across her skin. She wrapped her legs around his waist, digging her heels into his butt, urging him on.

Venor ducked his head and sucked a nipple into his mouth, drawing on it, gently biting down so that it pebbled against his tongue. Losing her grip on the bedframe, she slid her fingers through his silky hair to cradle his head in her hands as he suckled her. She arched her neck, her mouth falling open to pant her pleasure. He might not love her, but he knew how to make love to her. And today that was enough.

She mewled, her body tightening then shuddering. He moved up to her mouth to kiss her as she came for him again. She gripped him, claiming him as he thrust into her. Once. Twice. He growled her name as he tensed one last time and his orgasm overtook him.

If they could stay together like this, in this room with no windows, no light, no one else to intrude upon them, Kissa could be content, could forget about Venor's indiscretion, his broken promise. She could forget that her life was made up of politics and power plays. She could forget to be reasonable and instead follow her heart.

If they could stay like this.

Venor collapsed on top of her, pressing her down into the single mattress. His weight pushed the breath from her lungs. His heat combined with hers to make the air crackle with electricity as he slowly melted inside her. Rolling them to their sides, he kissed her as he slid his hand between their bodies to cup her mons. She arched into his palm, mewling when he slid his fingers between her labia and stroked her clit.

Slowly, carefully, he pulled out of her.

This time she barely registered the sting from the barbs on his shaft because of the pleasure he was giving her. That small bit of pain couldn't compare to the million sparks of fire burning up each nerve ending, couldn't compare to the feel of her heart racing toward the climax just up ahead.

*Another one.* She moaned her release as he worked her body until the tremors quieted and she lay weak and panting.

Venor tenderly rolled her over onto her stomach. Using her cum as lubricant, he teased her little rosette with his finger, circling, pressing against her puckered hole, but not penetrating. He planted kisses on the small of her back until her muscles relaxed and her mind drifted.

"Kiss?"

Her name on his lips jerked her back into reality. She held her breath, knowing by the tone of his voice that whatever he said next was important to him. And she probably wouldn't like it.

"You have lost your trust in me. What built this wall in my absence?"

Something inside her broke apart. Kissa jumped from the bed so fast she stumbled and fell to her hands and knees. The air shifted and Venor's scent blanketed her. She scrambled to her feet, not wanting to be in a vulnerable position while he played this game with her.

Another trap.

Her sire had used that same phrase, “built this wall”, with her dam so many times, and hearing it again coming from Venor, directed at her, had Kissa shaking, almost convulsing where she stood. Bloody scenes from her childhood engulfed her mind, making her feel as if she were eight years old, witnessing another scene between her dam and sire over his cheating. Panic poured through her like poison, sucking the air from her lungs, squeezing her chest, making her heart pound, making her mie rise to just beneath her skin once more, hissing to be let out. She couldn’t do this, couldn’t engage him, give merit to his lies. If she told him that she knew about the other female, he would deny it. If she told him she had proof that he’d repeatedly lied about his whereabouts, he would find an excuse, a way to place the blame on her. Her parents constantly had this same quarrel. They had always fought in public, often violently, humiliating Kissa beyond belief. How many times had she wished her dam had the courage, the self-respect to refuse to play Latif’s game? To walk away? Countless. Venor might be happy becoming like her sire, but she would not become her dam. She’d rather die than expose her own cubs to bloody violence between their parents.

Forcing her mie into submission, she flipped on the light and turned to face him. “You’re right. I don’t trust you. Not even enough to continue this conversation.”

Venor stood there, his side wrapped in bandages. She winced, trying not to feel guilty for doing so much damage during their first mating. *Serves him right*, she thought, even as she fought not to reach out and apologize for mauling him. A little voice in the back of her mind whispered to her that she was behaving irrationally, acting like a coward, but it wasn’t enough to overcome the nightmare of her childhood.

He studied her, his eyes sparkling as if they were citrine. She’d always thought his heart shone out of his eyes, big and bold, but now she knew she’d only seen what she’d wanted to. She waited him out and at last he nodded. Then, wrapping his hand around her wrist, he said, “Come back to bed. We will sleep. Perhaps in this holy place, your secrets will be revealed to me in my dreams.”

Kissa chose not to fight him. Misdirection was her best course of action. Let him believe she was submitting so that he wouldn’t realize he had already lost the game, had already lost her. The compact alarm clock on the nightstand said it was seven thirty-seven. The temple occupants should have already settled in for a night of dreaming, because morning ritual took place before dawnbreak. Venor switched the light off and drew her into bed. His large body spooned her smaller one, and it wasn’t long before he relaxed and his breathing slowed.

She waited for over an hour, tucked in his strong arms, warring with herself. Her head told her to run to Tan, get far away from the temptation Venor presented sexually – she couldn’t deny him, that much was clear. But her heart wanted to stay in Venor’s warm embrace, complete the Ritual of Generation, become his mate, forgive his lies and hope he would remain faithful to her once she made him a sire. But she couldn’t live like that, disappointing herself while hoping Venor wouldn’t disappoint her again and again.

She was better than that. Stronger. Smarter.

Her parents would force the issue—there was no way that Venor had gained entry into the females' wing without help from Genet. Nothing Kissa said or did would dissuade her dam or sire from trying to force her to bow to their wishes. She choked on her bitterness. Their political gain had always come before her personal well-being, and she was expected to put aside her hopes and dreams—no, more than that, her happiness—for the selfish want of her parents. She snorted. Bow to their wishes? That wasn't going to happen. Not in a million years.

Today she had relapsed, but tonight she would do what she must to live life on her terms. Sliding out from under Venor's arm, Kissa held her breath, praying he didn't wake.

Her prayer was answered.

Venor's breathing remained steady and he didn't stir as she slipped from her bedroom into the small shared bathroom. She took a deep breath before dropping to her hands and knees. But her mie didn't surface. She didn't shift. *What the hell?*

The cold linoleum floor sent shivers through her tired body. Was that it? She was too tired, too emotionally drained to shift—something she had mastered years ago and with little difficulty. Usually she had to leash her mie, not call her to the surface.

Releasing the breath she held, Kissa tightened and released her muscles, starting at her toes and slowly working her way up to her bowed head. Finally, her mie stretched, shifting and pressing against the walls of her human body, brushing her velvet fur beneath Kissa's skin, a soft, content caress.

Smug. Her mie was smugly satisfied as only a cat can be, basking in the afterglow of mating with Venor, which meant coming one step closer to completing the Ritual of Generation and claiming her mate. Her mie had no wish to shift and run away from what she wanted.

With a quiet groan, Kissa resigned herself to luring her mie to come out to play. As nocturnal beings, night was when her mie should have wanted freedom most. She sent her cat visions of the woods behind the temple, the lush scents and intriguing sounds.

Another deep breath. Concentrating on her inner lioness, Kissa reached inside and called her mie to the forefront of her mind. Her hair stood on end, then sporadically morphed into fur that sprouted and spread over her in uneven patches—too slow. Her skin burned, her head throbbed, her bones ached. Something was wrong. She clamped her lips together and ground her teeth to prevent herself from crying out.

Shifting rarely hurt, and when it did, it was usually a short burst of pain—not this long, drawn-out, bone-crunching horror that was clawing its way from the inside of her body out. In the rational, human part of her mind, Kissa knew why her change was taking so long, hurting so much. Her incomplete heat cycle and muddled mie emotions were interfering with her ability to shift. Plus, with much of her energy drained, she was having a difficult time convincing her body to expend even more. She also knew how difficult it was to force the change. Cats did what they wanted.

Another deep breath, this one shakier than the last.



*Shh. You're okay. You can do this. Let go.*

Several sweat-soaked minutes later, her mie finally cooperated and rose to the surface. Kissa embraced her cat, relieved to let her mie's strength and courage unlock her bones and elongate her muscles.

At last, she had fur instead of hair, paws instead of hands, claws instead of nails. As she listened for signs that Venor had woken, her tail twitched. His soft snore reached her ears, nothing more.

Good. He was still asleep. She tilted her ears toward Anna's room. She remained asleep as well.

Kissa rose from her crouch, muscles strained, ears turning at every slight sound, whiskers twitching. She nosed the door to Anna's room open and padded across the hardwood floor, pausing to check on Anna, who slept sprawled out on her stomach, blankets kicked to the floor.

Anna looked sweet and innocent, her nose tipped up at the end, her lips curled at the corners.

Kissa saw her as a friend. Kissa's mie saw her as a cub. Both she and her mie had the instinct to look out for Anna, protect her from a world she seemed to know little about, help her navigate the political labyrinth that her impending mating would create. But how could Kissa stay to help Anna when she was lost in a labyrinth of her own? No. Her only hope was to get out. Anna would have to learn to fend for herself.

She shook her head in regret. Hopefully the cub would make better decisions and find a mate who had her best interests in mind, a mate who would protect her as she deserved. Despite all the hope she had for Anna, Kissa felt little optimism for her own life. She couldn't trust anyone, not even her own instincts, which were screaming at her to stay with Venor. She must trust in her human mind. Run. Hide from her pride. Live her life with the male who had proven honest with her when no one else bothered.

Slinking through the wide temple halls, she was silent on her padded paws. Distant candlelight allowed her to see clearly as she made her way to the back exit. She stood on her hind legs and pressed the release bar to open the door. The night breeze hit her face and she sighed into the wind.

*Free.*

*No*, she cautioned her mie, *not free yet*. No doubt Genet had notified the guards that Kissa was not to leave the grounds.

A miu guard paced ten yards away, his eyes shining yellow in the darkness. One pointed ear swiveled back on his shaggy lion head. Alert. Listening. He was large, nearly nine feet long. His body rippled with lean muscle under lustrous golden fur. A lion in his prime.

Another two guards in human form talked in low tones about a science fiction movie they wanted to see. Kissa placed them around the corner near the front of the temple. She had the advantage over the ones in human form, but the miu meant trouble.

The shadowed tree line stood majestically a hundred yards away, bordering Gato Bend State Park. All she needed to do was cross the bare expanse of the temple yard without being spotted, then the pine woods would hide her escape.

She used her large forepaws and sleek head to close the door. Holding her breath, she waited to see if anyone noticed the soft click of the latch. The miu's ears twitched and he grimaced, revealing white, shiny fangs.

Holding as still as stone, Kissa felt her heart pounding in her ears. When the miu sat, twitching his long, black-tipped tail, Kissa let out a relieved breath. He seemed bored more than anything else. Determined not to relieve his boredom, she slunk across the bare yard, belly grazing the ground, alert to the slightest movement from the miu.

Not even a third of the way there, a chuff sounded in the darkness, then a deep, rasping roar. He'd either scented or spotted her. Not daring to waste time looking back, Kissa ran full-out. Another warning roar as the miu grew closer, shouts from the human-form guards. The trees loomed before her, a few scant yards away. She could make it.

Pushing herself harder, she bounded toward the cover of the woods. The miu took her down, his teeth piercing the scruff of her neck, his weight forcing her smaller form to the ground. She struggled, twisting beneath him. Luck favored her. Her paws found purchase. He lost his grip on the back of her neck. She clawed at his vulnerable belly until he released her with an angry whine. She wriggled out from under his heavy body. She was almost free when the miu swiped at her, raking his razor-sharp claws along her side, from shoulder to flank.

Whimpering, Kissa darted into the woods and continued to run despite the pain. The miu wasn't following but the human-form males were crashing through the woods, following her trail. She knew they wouldn't take the time to shift. Like most miu, they believed their strength and speed were superior to any mie—regardless of their form. The sad thing was, most mie agreed with them.

Shouts joined with roars to announce her escape. She cursed the wrenching pain in her torn side as she pressed forward. The wound was slowing her down and she was leaving a blood trail. Darting between trees and underbrush, she put distance between herself and the guards. A temporary reprieve. The woods had quieted. Not even the boisterous mockingbirds were singing. Kissa's heartbeat and the soft murmur of the Gato River were the only sounds that disturbed the unnatural silence.

The smells of exhaust and rubber told her that a car-filled parking lot loomed a couple dozen yards away on her right. If not for her injury, she'd try to shift and steal a car, but after her last insanely difficult shift, Kissa wasn't about to chance it. Her best prospect was still Tan.

A shriek of fear sounded right in front of her. Kissa skidded to a halt and almost stumbled into a lit fire pit. A human campsite. She'd been so focused on the parking lot and her escape, she'd failed to notice the obvious scents and sounds of the human

family who now cowered before her, their eyes wild with fright. She jumped the pit and kept on running.

Fresh scents from the rushing river tickled her sensitive nose and filled her with new energy. She crossed the arched bridge, leaving her pride's land behind to enter Gato Bend State Park.

A long, narrow strip of land, Gato Bend bordered the river it was named for. She only had a few hundred yards to traverse before she made it to Ocelot's Ridge Pass and then Tan's home. The knowledge that she was so close to salvation had her pushing her mie's muscular body to its limits. She streaked across the dirt road and onto Tan's property. His home, a pristine log cabin, stood proudly in a perfectly manicured yard, but tonight it looked like a fortress to her. Kissa raced up the steps and chuffed loudly at the front door.

"Just a sec," Tan shouted from inside.

She waited...and waited some more. Tan sure was taking his sweet time. Didn't he hear the urgency in her vocalization? She flicked her tail and chuffed again.

Tan opened the door. "Kissa? Wha—"

She pushed past him into the house and went straight to the bathroom so she wouldn't splatter blood all over his carpet when she shifted, even while admonishing herself for worrying over such a trivial thing when her life was on the line. As she nosed the door shut, she mentally prepared herself for the shift. *Relax. It will be okay.*

Tan stood on the other side of the door, asking anxious questions. Sometimes the male drove her crazy—as if she could really reply while still in her mie form. Only mindwalkers could do that. But his deep voice distracted her from her fear, weariness and pain, allowing her to shift with far greater ease than she had anticipated.

In human form, she gingerly wrapped a threadbare towel around her abdomen, stemming the flow of blood from the side wound that had partially healed when she shifted. The floor and walls were already spotted with her blood. "Get your keys. We've got to go now. The pride will be here any second."

No response.

When had he stopped talking? She hadn't noticed.

"Tan?" Kissa opened the door.

He was on her before she could throw up her arms to block his attack. Ripping the towel from her body, he shoved her to the floor. She yelped, trying to shove him off her. "What the hell do you think you're doing?"

Tan dug his fingers into the nearly healed teeth marks at the back of her neck and used his other hand to wrench her legs apart, lowering his head to sniff between her legs. "You stink of another male," he said, low, dangerous.

"My first heat. I'll explain in the car, but we've got to go now," she said in a rush.

His hot breath blew over her inner thighs and outer lips. Without conscious thought, she growled and jerked away.

"You belong to me." Tan slapped her ass with all his shifter male strength.

Her knees buckled and scraped against the cold bathroom tile. Still, he maintained a bruising grip on her neck. Her fingers tingled but didn't shift. Goddess, her energy must be low to not allow for even a partial change.

"Let go!" she yelled.

Ignoring her demand, he undid his pants and moved over her. She knew that he was acting on the instinctual need to mate with her so that the spines on his shaft could scrape away Venor's sperm. And she should let him—if she really wanted him as her bonded mate. But Kissa's instincts told her to fight. With a curse, she bucked him off. He growled a warning then tried to mount her again. She twisted away when he attempted to position himself to enter her. Kissa and her mie were in complete agreement. They would not accept him.

Tan wrestled her for control, trying and failing to mount her. She fought with all she had. At last, he emitted a frustrated growl and shoved her. *Hard*. Her head hit the base of the porcelain sink with a crack that echoed off the tiled walls. The black-and-white bathroom blurred to gray.

An accident brought on by her heat. It had to be. Tan would never hurt her otherwise...would he?

When her eyes refocused, Tan was towering over her, holding the picture she knew so well. The heartbreaking photo showed Venor mating with another female. She winced and looked away.

"Is this who you want? The fucker who betrayed you?" He flipped the photo at her averted face. The sharp edge nicked her skin, cutting a straight, red line below her eye. *Great, more blood*. At this rate, she'd die of blood loss before her dam could skin her alive for disobeying her. "Is he why you removed my name from your list?"

"We don't have time for this. The pride is after me. We've got to go."

With a snort, he stood and walked into his bedroom. "We aren't going anywhere. Go. You don't want me. You've made that perfectly clear." He slammed the door.

He was right. She didn't want him. Excuses aside, the moment he'd hit her, she'd lost all respect for him. She knew her heat must be affecting his mieu, but where was the man she knew? What had happened to him? Too much time wasted already, she pulled herself up on unsteady legs, wrapped herself in a fresh towel and grabbed his keys off the coffee table. Her head throbbing, she weaved on her feet, fighting to make it to the back door.

With determination and a lot of cussing, she made it to his SUV. She talked herself through what needed to be done, forcing herself to focus past her throbbing head and aching body. Key in the ignition. Shift to drive. Hit the gas.

At the end of the long dirt drive, the SUV's side mirror reflected Venor and a dozen other members of the Texas pride converging on Tan's house. Glad she hadn't turned on the headlights, she watched as Venor returned to human form in one smooth shift, then shoved open the front door. Unable to go forward, unwilling to go back, she held

her breath, waiting. Several seconds passed before Venor's roar filled the night air. He had smelled her on Tan and would fight, maybe kill him.

As Kissa turned onto the dirt road leading away from the state park, a mixture of anticipation and dread filled her, turning to bile that burned up her throat. She was a mie in her first heat, without the protection of her pride, and Texas had a rogue shifter problem.

Before hitting the main roads, she jerked the SUV over to search for Tan's emergency pack. Every shifter kept a bag in their vehicle that contained cash, clothing and first-aid supplies. Needing all three, Kissa dug through the piles of fishing and hiking gear that Tan kept in his SUV, but the only useful thing she found was a muddy pair of Sasquatch-sized hiking boots.

Cursing, she threw the boots on the seat beside her and shoved the heels of her hands into her eyes. Now what? She was in great shape if she wanted to do some fishing or hiking in the nude, which was generally frowned upon by the human world...wait. What was the name of that nudist park the pride visited in Austin a few years ago?

She smiled, remembering Happy Hollow.

## Chapter Four

Rocketing awake, Venor bolted from the bed in search of Kissa. Although her taste remained on his tongue, her scent had faded from the room. The bathroom proved empty as well.

Gone. *Again.*

If she continued to run off every time they made love, he swore he was going to develop a complex. Shouts and growls from outside the temple had him reaching for his miu and shifting. In cat form, he raced to the nearest exit, heart thumping in his throat, mind racing with disturbing scenarios of Kissa in trouble. An unmated mie in heat was dangerous, especially with so many young, single males in Oakview as escorts and bodyguards to the visiting dams. The younger the male, the less control he had over his instincts, and his instincts would compel him to attempt to mate with Kissa.

Several miu hit the door at the same time he did, sprinting into the back courtyard. He poured on more speed to outrace them to the tree line. A wounded miu lay on his side, hissing and growling, probably embarrassed over the fact that a mie had taken him down. Venor could smell Kissa's sweet and spicy scent on him, knew that she was the one to injure the large male. Satisfaction and relief stormed through his body. His mate could defend herself, even against the strongest among them.

A miu ran up to him, his mane dark and dreadlocked. With the scents of Kissa and fresh blood saturating the air, Venor had to study the pattern of the miu's whisker spots to identify him. Jayden. There was no one he trusted more at his back. He chuffed to his friend and took off through the woods, Jayden following close behind. Painted with her blood, Kissa's trail indicated that she had not escaped without incurring injuries of her own.

Worry twisted to fear. Venor and Jayden streaked through the woods, quickly overtaking a couple of human-form shifter males. *Idiots.* To go after a mie in human form. The pride's parking lot was just up ahead on the right, but Kissa's trail led away from the vehicles there. But why? Stealing a car would have been the easiest way for her to escape. The smell of humans hit his nose too late. He crashed into a human campsite and stumbled to a halt to avoid knocking down a small child. Jayden slammed into him, bumping him into the little girl. The blonde-haired, blue-eyed toddler landed on her back between his large paws. *Merde.* He sniffed her and looked for any injuries. She seemed fine. Her large baby doll eyes goggled at him as if she couldn't decide if he was a monster emerging from the dark woods or a kitty cat grown too big.

The girl's mother struggled to her unsteady feet and screamed at him, waving her arms. Jayden chuffed, a laugh, and bumped up against his shoulder, telling him through body language that the girl was okay. They should leave before the humans

became brave and did something that would jeopardize all their lives. With one last look at the toddler, Venor scented Kissa's trail and left the humans behind.

Other miu had caught up to them while they were occupied with the humans, but they had circled around the campsite, avoiding his ridiculous mistake. Determined to overtake them so that he would find Kissa first, Venor chuffed at Jayden to run faster. The night birds silenced their song as the miu traversed the woods. With the moon, hidden by a thick covering of clouds, they were no more than shadows. "Gold gods of the night," one of their poets had once described them. When they hit the river, Venor knew beyond a doubt where Kissa's trail led. She had run to Tancred Gabbard's house, had run from Venor to another male.

Kissa's blood trail pooled at Tan's front door, prompting Venor to shift back to human form. Always a fast shifter, he went from miu to male within several gut-wrenching seconds. The door was locked, so he turned sideways and threw himself, shoulder first, against the weathered knotty pinewood. The frame buckled, releasing the door from its hinges. Venor shoved the door to the side and stormed inside. Jayden, back to human form as well, followed him into the house. Kissa's scent permeated the small living room but the strongest concentration came from the bathroom. He shoved open the bathroom door to find Tan, naked, stepping into the shower. Venor's body convulsed at the smell that coated Tan's body. The male smelled intimately of Kissa.

Roaring in rage, Venor locked his hands around the male's throat and slammed him against the tiled wall. Tan's head ricocheted, breaking tiles and garnering a blunt grunt from the male. His hands turned to clawed paws that blurred in their movement to slice at Venor's arms. Venor held fast to Tan's throat, oblivious to the pain of having his arms shredded. Attempting to breathe, Tan looked like a fish out of water, the interior of his mouth turning a bluish gray.

"Not that I care, but you're killing him," Jayden said, deadpan, from just behind him.

After the several seconds it took to register his words, Venor found he did care. Kissa was gone, that much was obvious, but Tan may know where she went. Besides, he was someone she cared for and Venor didn't want to create another wall between himself and Kissa. Forcing his fingers to relax their death grip, he released the male just as several miu pushed their way into the bathroom.

"Where is she?"

When Tan did nothing more than slump down into the grime-ringed tub, Venor reached down and pulled him back up to pin him to the wall. "Where is she?" His voice shook with the low growl of his miu, his vision wavered from human to cat then back to human.

"Don't know," Tan wheezed. "Took my car."

"What do you drive?" Jayden asked almost conversationally.

"Ford. Black. SUV."

"Did you —" Venor found he couldn't complete the question, though he desperately needed an answer.

As if he sensed Venor's inner turmoil, Jayden stepped up to the male and asked with quick efficiency — as if he were pulling off a bandage, "Did you mate with Kissa?"

Tan's gold eyes filled with crimson sparks of flame. Clenching his jaw so hard that veins bulged wormlike beneath his skin, he refused to reply. Venor growled a warning so instinctual and possessive he shocked himself. Tan cowered, his gaze dropping, his body shivering in Venor's hold. Still, he said nothing.

"Respond." Venor shook Tan like a limp dishrag, his nails turning to claws to pierce the stupid male's neck.

"Venor Brun."

Venor jerked his head to look over his shoulder. Dam Lisa stood in the bathroom doorway, naked but for a silver and turquoise choker necklace that looked too tight, her mouth pinched into a bloodless line, hands fisted in ferocity. "Release. My. Son."

She held a seat on the council and a high position in the Oakview Pride. Still, he hesitated. "I am questioning him regarding the whereabouts of my mate."

She cocked a lush hip and planted a spindly, spiderlike hand on her generous curve. "The Ritual of Generation remains unfinished. You have no mate. Release Tancred now."

With a curse, Venor allowed Tan to sag down into the tub. "Kissa chose me to complete the ritual with. Your son has interfered with a sacred right."

"Has he?" She shoved Jayden aside to kneel before her son. "Did you ask Kissa to come here, Tancred? Did you ask her to abandon her chosen mate?"

"No," Tan croaked. He cleared his throat and said, this time with a raspy but steady voice, "She came to me by her own free will with no interference by me."

"No interference?" Jayden bent down to retrieve a picture half-hidden beneath the sink. "I think this picture, along with the right lies, would go a long way to interfere with a female in her first heat's relationship with her chosen mate."

Venor stared at the picture, suddenly locked into a nightmare scene from his youth. Goddess, how young had he been there? Thirteen? Fourteen? He didn't look that young, his body had matured at a rapid rate just as his sire's before him, but he was little more than a cub then, forced to mate with a female almost triple his age because the dams of his pride thought his youthful virility might increase the chance of pregnancy in the more mature females. The experiment had failed, the licentious female remaining without cub, but the dams had accomplished one thing — the loss of Venor's innocence.

Burying his miu, his human emotions took control of his body instead, and he doubled over the sink and vomited. Bile burned his throat and nose like acid. His eyes watered to combat the sick swarm of emotions that stung him like poison-tipped darts. The worst memory of his childhood had surfaced to be used against him. His mate, his



*love* believed him adulterous. Goddess, no wonder she had hesitated in choosing him, no wonder she had run. He had thought her fear of mating and motherhood were the culprits but now he knew she believed him a liar and a cheat.

"We'll find her, V," Jayden bent close to his ear to whisper. "We'll find her, and you'll tell your mate what really happened in that picture."

With shaking hands, Venor turned on the faucet to rinse out his mouth. He didn't dare look up to meet Jayden's eyes in the ugly oval mirror above the sink. His friend had read his response and knew he had not mated with that female by choice, knew that he had submitted not out of need or passion but out of fear and weakness. What must Jayden think of him?

"Come on, man," Jayden said, thumping him on the shoulder. "Kissa's putting distance between us. We need to pull our shit together and hit the road."

Venor relaxed at how normal Jayden sounded. Straightening, he turned off the water and took in a shaky breath. At last he found the courage to meet Jayden's gaze. His friend gave him a one-sided smile. "Ready to get gone?"

"Oui."

Jayden forced a path out of the bathroom and through the living room. The house was filled to capacity with miu and mie, males and females of the U.S. miun prides, and Venor stared down each as he passed them—determined not to let his moment of weakness translate into a lowered status within the pride. When they stepped outside, Venor turned to Jayden. "The picture?"

"Got it." Jayden held out the picture to him facedown.

Venor took it, folding it in half. "*Merci beaucoup*," he said. Then, knowing he owed his friend more than simple thanks, he added, "She was before Kissa and not my mate."

"Know it," Jayden replied with straightforward loyalty.

They started back to the temple at a fast pace, avoiding pits in the ground, prickly brush and fallen branches as easily as if they were in miu form, but Venor no longer felt like a gold god racing after his errant mate. Instead, he felt as if he were a male cursed by love and loss and emptiness. *Merde*. Like damp leaves, his mood sank wetly and heavily to the earth beneath his feet.

The wind blew from the west, sending the smell of wild onions to make his nose twitch. He sneezed.

"Bless you," Jayden said.

"Thanks."

"V?"

"Oui?"

"You think I don't get it, but I do."

"How so?" Venor asked reluctantly, worried what his friend might say.

"I didn't ask for this, didn't ask to be turned." He hesitated, opened then closed his mouth and shook his head.

They walked for several minutes in silence, Venor quiet because he knew Jayden had more to say and was hunting for the right words. When they crossed the rushing river, Jayden continued with a dark timbre of pain in his normally light voice. "I was converted by a rogue. He...forced me. There was nothing I could do." His voice broke. He cleared his throat. "I was human then. And he was a fucking monster. So I submitted and I survived."

Venor brushed his shoulder against Jayden's in a show of support. "There is no shame in that."

"I know it," Jayden said, looking down at the picture in Venor's hand, "but I don't feel it."

Pressing his hand over his heart, Venor rubbed at the sudden ache there. He had no words to express what Jayden's admission meant to him, but he felt the bond between them grow into something akin to brotherhood.

They approached the temple grounds, empty now but for one guard, and stood hidden in the tree line. They could make it to the back door without being seen. Easily.

"What now?" Jayden reached down to pick a leaf from between his toes.

"Kissa's never traveled farther than Austin. I think that's where she will go. But I would like to speak with her friend, Anna, to see if she has any insight into Kissa's destination. Austin is a large city."

"Good. I'll round up some gear and meet you in the parking lot," Jayden said. "Thirty minutes?"

"Yes, I'll meet you there."

Jayden gave Venor's arm a firm squeeze before leaving in the direction of his house. Through smell, Venor placed the guard in the front outer courtyard and dashed across the open ground and into the temple.

The door made a small snick when it latched. Venor waited, listening, scenting for guards inside the temple, but here—the same as outside—the guards had left their posts because of Kissa's escape. Down the dark hall to Kissa's room, the way was clear, his bare feet made no sound on the marble floor. The spicy musk from their lovemaking still permeated the bedroom, causing him to shudder at the memory of holding her in his arms and worshiping her body.

"What are you doing in here?" Anna asked from the bathroom doorway.

Venor bowed to his mate's friend. When he straightened, he noticed a hot blush burned her neck and face. Had he done something to offend her?

"I wished to speak to you about Kissa," he said, trying to meet her eyes. But she refused to look up from her hands, clasped tightly against her stomach. "Have I offended you in some way, Anna?"

Her blush grew darker, creating marbled splotches on her fair skin. "N-no. I'm not accustomed to meeting privately with males."

Her blue eyes fluttered down his naked body like a butterfly just birthed from its chrysalis, and that's when Venor realized his nudity was making her uncomfortable. He pulled a blanket from the bed and wrapped it around his hips like a towel. How a born shifter could be uncomfortable with nudity he didn't know, but the last thing he wanted to do was frighten the girl. He needed her help.

"Kissa chose me as her mate but has since left me twice now. Do you know why?"

"You were too rough. You hurt her." Her shy eyes narrowed then dropped again to her hands.

"She told you this? That I hurt her?"

Anna grimaced, the pretty rose of her mouth drooping. "No, she said it was normal. That you didn't... But I saw the bruises, the blood. And she decided to let her heat pass without finalizing the mating bond. You were too rough."

Twin emotions warred within him. Horror at the thought that he'd harmed Kissa and relief that she had decided to let her heat pass. He'd expected Anna to tell him that Kissa had changed her mind, no longer loved him, and instead wanted Tan as her mate.

"When I came to her tonight, she was well. She responded to me as a female responds to her chosen mate."

Anna choked then coughed, her hand coming up to her throat. "I-I don't know anything about that. I just know what I saw."

"Do you know where she would go?"

Anna's eyes snapped up to meet his. "She got away then? She made it?"

"Yes. Do you know where she's going?"

"No."

"She's in heat and alone, Anna. There are rogues out there. You know that. She could be in danger. If you know where she—"

"I don't," she said in a small voice. "Her dam already asked me, but I don't know."

"Have you ever traveled with Kissa? Gone anywhere?"

She shifted back and forth on her slippered feet. "To Austin."

"Where did you go? Where was her favorite place?"

"We..." Her voice drifted off. She took another step back, placing herself fully inside the bathroom. "I don't know. I'm going back to sleep. Goodnight."

With two strides, Venor crossed the room, grabbed the door Anna was closing and pulled it open. "Please. I would never hurt her. I swear this is true. Please, Anna, tell me where she is."

Tears drowned her eyes. She made a high-pitched squeak in the back of her throat and backed away from him. "She doesn't want to be mated, doesn't want to be a dam. Not yet."

Venor dropped his head into his hands and rubbed his face. *Merde*. Sighing, he lifted his head. "Her first heat has come. She must mate. Take her place as a dam and the mane mie of her pride."

"Why?" Anna lifted her pointy little chin. "Because some outdated, thousand-year-old book says so? It's 2010. The laws need to change. A female should not have to mate and become a dam in order to be able to make her own decisions. Live her own life."

"Now we are talking about you."

"No." She stamped her foot, her slight body quivering in obvious anger, her long, cotton nightgown rippling with her movements. "No, I'm talking about all of us. We shouldn't have to choose a bonded mate until we're ready."

"Your bodies decide when you are ready. Anna —"

"We are more than our bodies. We are more than our wombs."

Venor closed his eyes and sighed. "This argument, this discussion belongs between me and my promised mate. And I swear to you, Anna, we will have this conversation, but I need to find her first."

"Before you touch her again," she said. "You will talk to her about this before you lay another finger on her?"

Venor's heart slammed into the wall of his chest. "Never have I—or would I—force Kissa to do anything against her will. Months before she went into heat, she accepted my proposal to become her mate and professed her love for me. If she loves me no more, if she no longer wishes to complete the Ritual of Generation with me, I will accept her decision."

"Promise?"

"I swear this to you on my life."

Slowly Anna's mouth softened, lips curling up to create a tremulous smile. "Happy Hollow. I think that's where she'd go."

\* \* \* \* \*

After the torturous ten-hour drive to Happy Hollow, Kissa ditched Tan's SUV in a thick covering of trees at the side of the road then rinsed the dried blood from her body with a half-full bottle of water she'd found in the backseat. She ached, but not from her injuries. Her wounds had healed except for the long gashes still visible on her side, but even those just looked like deep scratches now. The ache she felt came from her heat, but at least the instinct to mate had lessened. Probably because there were no miun males around and she had accepted Venor into her body twice now.

Her mind clouded with fatigue, she had to force herself to concentrate on her goals as she pulled on Tan's large boots and snuck past Happy Hollow's entrance and ranger station. She needed clothing, cash and a new car. Fast. Her pride couldn't be far behind. She had to get to downtown Austin where she could hide among the large population.

Running full-out through the woods, she almost made the mistake of intruding on a couple making love on a blue and purple quilt. Her quick cat reflexes kept her from turning a twosome into a threesome. Stopping at the edge of a small clearing before she was noticed, she couldn't help but spy on the couple with jealous need. They probably thought that this far in the woods no one would bother them. Every deep kiss, every soft touch spoke of their love for each other.

Kissa watched entranced as the strawberry blonde kneeled in front of the brunette and, eyes lit with passion, kissed her hand then ran light kisses up her arm until she reached her long, slender neck. The brunette slowly sank back into the rumpled blanket, drawing her lover with her, kissing her eyes and nose and lips, hands caressing her thighs. A prickling sensation preceded goose bumps. Kissa shuddered. This was love. Real and sweet and impassioned.

"Please, Stacie." The brunette wrapped her well-toned legs around Stacie's hips, cradling her against her body. "Love me."

Stacie breathed the brunette's name so that Kissa barely heard the yearning in the woman's voice, but it was there, a melodious tone, the beginning note to a lasting love song. "Brooke."

Kissa could feel the couple's adoration, their passion for one another press up against her, embed itself in her skin as if their feelings had the strength to take on physical form. Entwined in each other's arms, lips pressing then parting, bodies cradling and caressing, breaths sighing out words of love coupled with their names, their unadulterated joy in coming together beneath the canopy of trees was a palpable, enviable thing. She'd never witnessed the mating of a same-sex couple, had never thought to even wonder what their expression of love would look like, but here, now, in the midst of her escape, she could only stand spellbound, completely entranced by their lovemaking.

In a graceful, dance-like move, Brooke rolled so that she was suddenly on top of Stacie who laughed, throwing her head back in delight as Brooke ran her fingers through Stacie's long blonde hair and smugly smiled.

"Always got to be on top," Stacie said, teasing in her voice.

"Love the view from up here." Brooke licked and kissed her way to Stacie's heavy breasts. Plumping them in her hands, she ducked her head and took one then the other nipple into her mouth and sucked. "You taste so damn good."

Stacie arched into Brooke's mouth, her body bowing off the ground, her fingers raking at the blanket. Her feet arched to mirror her body. She moaned her pleasure, the noise slipping into the woods, blending with the chirps of birds and chatter of squirrels, another sound of nature.

Rubbing her body against Stacie's, Brooke hummed her appreciation against her swanlike neck. "I love you."

"Oh god, babe, I love you too," Stacie whimpered as Brooke smoothed her fingers down Stacie's pale stomach.

When Brooke reached the cluster of curls, Stacie placed her hand over Brooke's as she slid her fingers through the wetness. Kissa bit her lip, pressing her thighs tight together as she watched Stacie tense and moan, her head falling back onto the blanket, her hands coming up to her breasts to pluck at her nipples. The deep, animalistic growl that emanated from Stacie's mouth when Brooke pushed two fingers deep inside her reminded Kissa of a vocalization a mie would make in the throes of passion—a sound she had made just last night while making love with Venor.

"Like that, baby?" Brooke asked, pumping her fingers in and out while planting kisses on Stacie's mouth and face. Stacie met her thrust for thrust, her body almost immediately tensing then breaking under waves of pleasure. Smiling in delighted surprise, Brooke asked, "You coming for me already?"

Stacie bucked, her head thrashing back and forth, her long, curly hair making wild waves around her flushed face. She laughed and cried her orgasm in joyful release. Her long, toned legs quivered as they fell open, allowing her honeysuckle scent to reach Kissa, who breathed her in, heart pounding in her ears. She didn't want *them*—they couldn't relieve the torment of her heat or heart—but the sight and sound and scent of them so impassioned, so in love, made her want to mate with a shifter male desperately.

*Venor.*

Kissa shoved him from her mind and wrapped herself in the beautiful scene before her. These two women made love look easy. For the first time in her eighteen years of life, Kissa wished she were human and able to love whomever and live however she pleased. A soft moan sent shivers through her body.

Recovering just as quickly as she'd come, Stacie pulled Brooke up her trembling body, locked her arms around her back and kissed her fully on the lips. Eyes closed, breasts pressed against breasts, legs tangled together, they explored each other's mouths with lips and teeth and tongues. They broke from the kiss, Stacie rolling them and sliding down Brooke's body with little nips until she reached her shaved pussy. Stacie's tongue peeked out between her teeth as she lifted her head to smile at Brooke.

"Good enough to eat," she said, running her hands up and down Brooke's legs.

Brooke pushed herself up and braced herself on her elbows to watch as Stacie lowered her face between the brunette's thighs. With delicate fingers, she parted Brooke's plump outer lips to taste and explore. Brooke collapsed on her back, her mouth open, panting. Kissa leaned to the left to find a better view as Stacie teasingly kissed and licked until Brooke writhed beneath her and Stacie had to clutch Brooke's thighs to keep her in place. When Brooke's body started to tremble, Stacie narrowed the point of her tongue and pierced her.

Brooke's shout wrenched Kissa out of her reverie, making her do a little hop where she stood partially hidden by trees and brush. With a shaky breath, she backed away unseen, but she stepped on a twig, snapping it. The pretty lovers jerked out of each other's arms to look at her with guilty pleasure riding their faces.

Damn giant boots. She'd never have taken the misstep otherwise. She gave what she knew had to be a pathetically sad smile. Sekhmet help her, she envied them. *Love. Lust. Trust.* Each one easy to obtain alone, but she had failed to secure the trinity that made a relationship worthwhile. She wanted what they had, badly, and that wasn't just her heat talking. Shaking her head at her own morose thoughts, Kissa refocused on her goals. *Cars. Clothes. Cash.* Maybe these two women could help her.

"Sorry." She stepped forward so they could see her clearly.

"Uh...no problem," Stacie said, untangling her legs from Brooke's. "You're not going to report us, are you?"

Kissa wrinkled her nose. "You can't have sex here?"

Stacie giggled. "We can. We're just not supposed to."

"Oh." Weird. Shifters had sex outside all the time, maybe even more than indoors. Humans had such strange rules about sex and nudity, but she'd thought that since Happy Hollow was an eighteen or older nudist park, the rules wouldn't apply here.

"This your first time?" Brooke asked, getting to her feet then helping Stacie up as well.

"Second. But the first time I came with family and friends and we didn't stay long."

The girls both slipped on their flip-flops while studying her with curious eyes. Kissa stepped fully into the clearing in an attempt to ease their worry over her. "Here. Let me help with that," she offered as they shook out the blanket. Taking a corner, she was helping fold it into a neat square when her hand slid across a wet spot. Stacie saw it and stilled. Her eyes widened as she stared at Kissa's wet hand.

"What?" Brooke asked, her forehead crinkling in confusion over Stacie's reaction.

Stacie pointed to Kissa's hand, her mouth opening and closing like a kissing fish, making Kissa want to laugh. "It's okay. I'll just...uh..."

"Here. Here." Brooke grabbed Kissa's hand and wiped it on her softly rounded stomach. "All good. You're good."

Stacie choked and turned her back on them, her shoulders shaking, her cute little butt jiggling as she silently laughed. Kissa couldn't help but smile, then her smile turned into a laugh. Holding her hand up away from her as if she had touched poison, she felt good laughing, relieved to have some of her anxiety alleviated even for a brief moment in time.

"What?" Brooke asked, raising her eyebrows at Kissa. "What did I do?"

Stacie whirled around, tears rolling down her face. "What...did...you do?" she choked out between laughs, pointing again at Kissa's hand.

Brooke scowled, her kiss-swollen lips making it look more like a pout than a frown. "What? I panicked, okay? Jeez, it's not like you did anything to help. You just stood there with your mouth hanging open."

"Better to do nothing...than to wipe her hand on my belly."

Rolling her eyes, Brooke stuffed the blanket into a large canvas beach bag. "I'm Brooke, by the way, and this is Stacie."

"I'm Kissa," she said, offering her hand then pulling it back when Stacie snickered.

Frowning, Brooke cocked her head to the side and studied Kissa's side. "What the hell happened? You have a run-in with Wolverine?"

Kissa pressed her arm over the scratches on her side. "Cat," she said.

"Must've been a big cat." Brooke raised her perfectly arched eyebrows, her brown eyes wide.

Kissa made a noncommittal noise, shrugging. Time to change the topic. "Do you know where a restroom is?"

Brooke wrapped an arm around Stacie's incurved waist, her fingers cupping Stacie's hip. "We need to head there too. Come on. We'll lead the way."

Kissa followed them through the woods, careful not to step on their heels though the pressure to find what she needed and get out of Happy Hollow had returned full force. She had to blame her heat for becoming so spellbound by the couple that she'd lost track of why she was there in the first place. Tan's boots weighed her feet down, making her clomp through the woods like Bigfoot while Brooke and Stacie found better footing even in their flip-flops.

The smell of tangy suntan lotion and fresh lake water enticed her to follow the women to a narrow dirt path that snaked wildly toward a slender beach filled with naked humans basking in the morning sunshine. The clothing-optional park was as she remembered it. A mix of naturalists, exhibitionists, voyeurs and bushwhackers.

By the time they reached the bathroom, she knew someone was watching her. Stopping, she discreetly sniffed the air but caught no scent. Still, even a rogue would know to stand downwind, and her gut screamed that a miu was stalking her. Heart thrumming, she turned and scanned the wooded area she had just emerged from. A bushwhacker stood at the tree line, clearly visible and clearly enjoying the sight of her naked body. Clothied but for his undone pants, his fist slid up and down his erect cock in a rapid motion.

Relieved that it was just a human man, Kissa gave him the stank-eye and turned her back on the little perv. Despite her heat, the sight of the degenerate did not turn her on. Her mie called for a miu, not a human man...and definitely not some creepy voyeur.

"You coming?" Stacie looked back as Brooke went inside the women's restroom.

"Yeah." Kissa lumbered forward to catch up with Stacie who had noticed the bushwhacker and turned up her little pug nose at him.

"Ugh. I hate gawkers. Do you know they come here after work to stand in the bushes and jack off? Why don't they go to a strip club and stare at women who want to be stared at?" She took Kissa's hand and pulled her into the restroom, which was old – curls in the worn linoleum floor, dents in the metal stall doors – but thankfully clean.



After washing her hands, Kissa had to tilt the stall door at a hard angle to latch the stupid thing. Brooke and Stacie chatted—easy with each other's company—as she stood in the stall trying to plot her next move. If she could just think past her exhaustion. She closed her eyes and rubbed them. From the brief glimpse she'd seen of the beach before Stacie pulled her into the restroom, she'd noticed that the men outnumbered the women at least ten to one. And none of the women, except for her, were there by themselves.

In the booth next to her, the beach bag belonging to Brooke and Stacie thumped to the floor close enough for her to grab and run. At the very least, the bag had to contain keys and clothing, probably money, too, but the thought of stealing from the two women—even when she was so desperate—made her feel like a parasite, a user. No. She couldn't do it.

"Ready to do a little sunbathing?" Brooke asked, knocking on her door.

Kissa wrestled her door open to find Stacie and Brooke holding hands, smiling at her. "I think I'm going to do a little exploring first." She offered them her hand again and this time they each took it in turn. "Nice to meet both of you."

"You know, that pervert in the bushes is one of many. It's not exactly safe for a woman to be here on her own," Stacie said.

"She's right," Brooke said, adjusting the strap of the beach bag on her slender shoulder. "Stick with us. You're more than welcome, you know."

"I can take care of myself, but thanks for the offer. Any other day I'd take you up on it." She cleared her throat and gave them an embarrassed smile. "I'm, uh, sort of on a mission to find a man."

Stacie snorted. "Good luck with that. The men here aren't exactly boyfriend material. And I'm not just saying that because I dig chicks."

"Chicks, man." Brooke brought Stacie's hand up to her mouth and planted a kiss on her knuckles.

Kissa's toes curled in Tan's boots. They were so sweet together, so freaking cute. "Speaking of chicks, you two are a couple of the coolest chicks I've ever met. I hope I see you again next time I'm here."

"Ahh, us too." Stacie tugged Brooke out of the restroom, leaving Kissa to mentally prepare for mugging a man without getting caught.

As soon as her boots sank into the soft sand of the beach, a herd of men surrounded her, trying to act nonchalant even while their hard-ons waved obnoxiously at her. Perfect.

Why prey on one of the few women in the park when there were so many men eager to get her alone? She scanned the ever-expanding and ever-hardening group of men and picked the biggest, creepiest of the group. A predator for sure. She smiled at him. He leered back, his bleached white teeth contrasting sharply with his bottle-born tan. He was just right.

"Hi, I'm Cassie." She stepped closer to him and flipped her long hair over her shoulder, flirting the best she knew how.

"Blake." He didn't offer to shake her hand...probably because one of his hands was inching toward his cock and the other held a gray and blue backpack.

"Want to walk the nature trail with me, Blake?" she asked suggestively, forcing herself not to look at his backpack. *Clothes. Car. Cash.*

Blake's blond head bobbed up and down as he gave her a cocky grin. He wrapped his steroid-induced, muscled arm around her back, and they headed up the concrete steps, leaving the rest of the men in their wake. As soon as they reached a bend in the path, Blake pulled her into the woods and pushed her roughly up against a thick tree trunk.

"You want this, babe?" He pressed his bodybuilder bulk against her much smaller body and swiveled his hips.

Sickened by his touch, Kissa swore and shoved him off her. "No," she said, "not even a little bit."

His narrow mouth turned down into a frown. "Too bad." He dropped his backpack and came at her, arms outstretched to capture her, eyes angry.

She punched him. His nose made a sick crunching noise as it collapsed under her knuckles. His eyes rolled back in his blond bobblehead. When he fell, Kissa had the insane impulse to shout "timber". But she kept her mouth shut and instead scooped up his backpack.

His t-shirt and shorts swallowed her small frame. No matter. As soon as her fingers caught on his crowded key ring, she slung the backpack over one shoulder and ran east to the parking lot, hitting unlock on the keyless remote. A low-to-the-ground, silver sports car chirped and flashed its lights. She threw herself into the bucket seat and slid the key into the ignition. The engine started with a growling purr. Relief took her adrenaline down a notch. She forced herself to calm before backing out of the parking space and driving toward the exit.

The hair on the back of her neck stood up and goose bumps raced to cover her arms. Her mie paced, caged within her body, silent, searching for an unknown threat. Again, she sensed that a miu watched her, hunting her as prey, but the rearview mirror showed no one suspicious and the park ranger simply nodded at her as she eased past him—no double take, no suspicious look, thank the Goddess.

## Chapter Five

The anxious squeal of police sirens along with the panicked chatter of nudists greeted Venor and Jayden when they arrived at Happy Hollow. Underlying the chaos, the pungent, almost fungal scent of rogues blended with the thick metallic smell of freshly spilled blood to pollute the air. Sometimes being ultrasensitive was as much a burden as a blessing.

"*L'odeur de la mort.*" Venor wrinkled his nose after a uniformed cop turned them away at the ranger station. When Jayden gave him an annoyed look, he translated. "The smell of death."

"Sounded more like you were talking about perfume." Jayden stripped off his clothes and loosened the laces on his sneakers in case he had to kick them off to complete a quick shift. "But I guess everything sounds like perfume in French."

Venor knew that Jayden was trying to keep things light, and he appreciated his friend's effort, but his mind was on a loop, two words cycling, *She's okay, she's okay.*

Jayden sighed, rubbing at his forehead. "Looks like your girl might've led us right to the rogues. Figures that she'd head for Austin."

"My fault," Venor said, looking for a spot to pull over and hide the truck. "I should have told her about hunting here with you."

"Shoulda, woulda, coulda," Jayden said, bumping up against his arm. "You did what you thought was right at the time."

"I lied. Omitted the truth. Lost her trust. She's in danger because of me."

"She ran because Tancred convinced her that you had cheated."

"*Non.* She called me." Venor scanned the side of the road, looking for a place to pull over. "While we were hunting, she called and I didn't know because I turned my cell off to avoid her dam, who was calling a dozen times a day."

"Genet is one huge control freak," Jayden said.

"Agreed, but if I'd left my phone on or just checked in with Kissa, I would've known there was a problem. Instead I let the hunt take priority over our relationship."

Less than a mile down the road, he spotted Tan's abandoned SUV camouflaged by a canopy of trees and pulled to the side of the road. *She's okay.* He rolled up the windows, jerked off his clothes with suddenly shaky hands and stepped down from the cab wearing only his shoes and carrying his backpack.

When Jayden tried the door to Tan's SUV, he found it locked. "Keys are on the front seat."

Keeping out of sight, they followed the fresh trail Kissa had made through the woods to the deserted beach. The cops were interviewing most of the nudists in the parking lot, but gawkers lined a paved pathway on the far side of the park. They reached the area and were blocked from going farther by two bored-looking officers. The carnage was clearly visible from the path where they watched as paramedics carried a blonde and a brunette woman out on stretchers.

"Attacked by a rogue," Jayden murmured while the paramedics loaded the women into an ambulance.

"There is a human still in the woods. Male. Dead," Venor said.

Jayden paced the pavement, attention on the women instead of the body. "The paramedics think they'll both survive."

Venor hadn't heard them say so, but he didn't doubt his friend. Jayden often "heard" what others did not. Besides, Venor was more concerned with the fact that he could smell Kissa not only on the women but also all over the dead man, which meant she might have left other clues behind that would lead the cops to believe her responsible for the attack.

He needed Latif's help. Even though he did not trust Kissa's sire completely, the older male knew Venor was secretly hunting with Jayden and had never told the dams. Latif also knew that he and Jayden were hunting Kissa now and had misdirected Genet's guards to search anywhere and everywhere except Austin. Pulling his cell out of his backpack, he made the call. Latif answered on the first ring. "You found her?"

Venor grimaced. "No, but we have a dead man and two mauled women. Rogue attack."

Several seconds of silence met this information, then, "I'll send a recovery team for the women. Where are you?"

"Happy Hollow."

Latif grunted. "The pride has some police contacts around there. I'll get a hold of them. We'll bring the females back here and make sure the man's death is reported as a big-cat mauling. Do you have a lead on Kissa?"

Jayden spoke up. "Looks like she might've taken the dead man's car. I've got the make and model."

Venor couldn't help but sigh in relief. "Did you hear Jayden?"

"Yeah."

Another weighted silence. The tension from Latif radiated through the phone and made Venor's miu come to the surface. He stifled a growl. *She's okay.*

"Bring her home, Venor," Latif said.

"I will find her."

Latif disconnected without saying goodbye, and Venor released the growl he'd been holding back. He *would* find her. And if she no longer wanted him as her mate, if she preferred Tan...no, he would not think of that, would not think of finding her only

to lose her again. Not now, not with death lacing the air, thick and heavy, not with her life on the line. Because of him.

"You can play the blame game and wallow in guilt later, V. Right now we need to track the dead dick's car." Jayden motioned with his chin that they should leave.

They walked slowly, unhurried, to keep the eyes of the cops off them even while Venor's heart raced. *She's okay.* When the woods surrounded them on all sides, Jayden held up a hand and sniffed. Venor smelled it too. A rogue. Close. Too close. He cursed himself for wallowing—as Jayden called it—instead of remaining alert.

His instincts roared and he turned. The rogue miu lunged from where he had been hiding in the brush, his jaws wide. The miu hit him full force, driving him to the ground, slashing open his chest with sharp claws. Jayden, already shifted, pounced on the rogue, flipping him off Venor.

Venor kicked off his shoes and willed himself to shift. Fur rippled up his body, starting at his toes and flowing like water to cover his partially changed head. Jayden and the rogue circled each other, harsh vocalizations rumbling up their throats. Jayden was larger, a more practiced fighter, but the rogue had clearly lost any sense of humanity and was fighting on pure cat instinct.

The rogue launched himself at Jayden, using his muscular legs to drive into him like an eighteen-wheeler. Fully shifted, Venor jumped into the fight. He clamped down on the lion's nose, trying to force him to retract his claws from Jayden's punctured belly. The rogue whipped his head from side to side, but Venor's tactic worked. The male tried to break free by rolling off Jayden's body. Refusing to let go, Venor followed him, rolling with him, raking his claws down the lion's stomach. The rogue twisted, exposing his throat for a brief second. Venor went in for the kill.

\* \* \* \* \*

Several miles up the road, Kissa sank her hand into Blake's backpack to find his slim leather wallet. The half a dozen credit cards were worthless. The cops could track them and more importantly, so could her pride. She had no doubt both groups would get an earful from good ol' Blake. The cash on the other hand...she counted the money, her anxiety lessening with each crisp bill. Over two thousand dollars. Blake had bank!

Sirens sounded in the distance. She needed to ditch the car, find another ride. Up ahead on the right squatted a busy convenience store, white paint peeling, gas pumps looking like ancient monsters. Kissa pulled around the back and parked the car behind a hulking, rusted-out dumpster. The cash went in her pocket. She wiped down everything her fingers had touched before locking the keys inside the car and skirting around the building to stand casually near a rack of propane tanks. She needed a lift into downtown Austin where she could get lost inside the large city.

Several couples went in and out of the store before a single guy—maybe seventeen or eighteen years old—strolled out wearing a baseball jersey, a large soda in one hand and a candy bar in the other. He smelled harmless enough and looked like a church

boy, clean-cut, apple cheeks, honest blue eyes. Confident in her ability to read people, Kissa approached him in a submissive manner. Eyes downcast, slumped shoulders, slow steps, hoping to appeal to his protective instincts—hoping human men had protective instincts.

It worked. He looked up, saw her and smiled. "Hello."

She stopped and forced herself to hesitate before responding. "Hi."

"Something I can do for you?" He tilted his head to the side, studying her.

She knew what he saw. A shy girl in too big men's clothes who looked lost. At least that's what she hoped he saw. "Yes." She hesitated again. "Do...are you heading into Austin?"

"A suburb right near it." Now he was the one to hesitate. Kissa held her breath, waiting.

He cleared his throat. "Need a lift?"

With a tentative smile, she said, "Yes, if it's not too much trouble."

"No trouble at all." He stuffed his candy bar into the front pocket of his well-worn jeans and offered his hand. "I'm Harley."

With a soft grip, she shook it. "Kissa." She should've given him a false name, but he was a good guy. She felt that through and through and couldn't bring herself to lie to him.

"Never heard that name before," he said, unlocking his truck and opening the passenger side door for her. "It's pretty."

"Thanks." She took his proffered hand and hopped up onto the bench seat. Just as Harley shut her door, the smell of an aroused miu hit her like a baseball bat to the head.

Through the rearview mirror, she watched in shock as a strange male appeared. The male slammed Harley's head against the truck. The cab shuddered with the impact. He flipped Harley's limp body into the truck bed.

She reached for the door handle, her fingers trembling. Too quick, he slid behind the wheel and locked the doors. She breathed past her panic as the engine roared to life and they pulled out of the parking lot.

The male had been fast. Fast enough that the humans, preoccupied with their lives, probably hadn't seen his actions. Now back on the road, Kissa took shallow breaths, trying to prevent the male's musky scent from suffocating her human mind. If she gave in to her mie instincts, she would attack him. No way could she win a battle with him. Not only was he in his prime, he had the distinct smell of a rogue.

With the correct guidance, a human could transition into the life of a shifter and find a balance between his miu and his human mind, like Venor's friend Jayden had done. Without guidance, the cat mind overpowered the human mind, leading to what Kissa's people called a rogue—a shifter who'd lost his humanity.

The rogue's hand cupped her knee then slid up her inner thigh. She jerked away. Hissing, she plastered herself against the truck door.

With a short laugh, he said, "You're mine. Ten minutes. You're mine."

Surprised that he was even capable of speech, she studied him out of the corner of her eye. He was large, well-groomed with a clean-shaven face and dark stubble on his head as if he'd just buzzed his hair off. If he cared about his appearance, perhaps he still had some humanity left in him. She had to convince him that mating with her was not in his best interest. Step one, she decided, was to get him talking.

"I'm Kissa Alassane from the Oakview Pride," she said.

"You're mine," he repeated.

Goddess help her. Was that the only thing he was capable of saying?

She tried again. "What's your name?"

In response, he jerked the truck to the side of the road, wrapped his big hand around her head and pulled her against his feverishly hot body. Instinct had her struggling against his hold. Like a snake, he struck, sinking his cat canines into the side of her neck. The metallic smell of her blood mingled with the musky scent of his arousal. She gagged and fought her mie for control. Shifting—attacking him—would only get her killed. His human mind was lost, buried beneath his miu's instinct to mate. Knowing that she couldn't appeal to his humanity, she appealed instead to his miu nature.

She forced her body to relax, submitting to him. His grip on her neck didn't immediately release. She waited as her blood spilled down her chest to stain Blake's white t-shirt crimson. He must have nicked a vein. At last, he responded to her submissiveness and retracted his teeth from her neck. Pain pulsed out from the wound, shaking her.

As she trembled, the rogue smacked his bloodied lips as if relishing her taste and pulled back onto the road. Moving slowly, she pressed the palm of her hand over his bite to stem the flow of blood.

Out the window, trees gave way to homes, then homes gave way to buildings. They entered downtown Austin, speeding past the moneyed part of the city to the poorer part of town where homeless people held signs at intersections and druggies slept in alleyways. The rogue pulled the truck around the back of a tall, redbrick apartment building and parked in the empty lot beneath a dying oak tree.

She breathed through her panic, trying to maintain her composure as he jerked her from the truck. His fingers dug into her arm, an unbreakable grip. She whimpered but refused to struggle. The rogue grabbed Harley and flipped boy's limp body onto his wide shoulder. Kissa listened for a breath, a heartbeat from Harley and found both strong and steady. Thank the Goddess, he was still alive. She couldn't live with herself if the boy died because of her.

The rogue unlocked the back door and shoved her into a dimly lit hallway that stank of at least a dozen unknown shifter cats and...oh Sekhmet, no. She doubled over, gagging on the scent of rotting human flesh. The rogue grabbed her arm and dragged her down a flight of steps into the basement. Acid spilled up her throat. Her mouth

filled with bile. The rogues had not only created their own pride but they were hunting human prey. The situation was far worse than her pride believed. They had waited months to convene in Oakview to discuss the rogues, so much time wasted while innocent lives were stolen and more rogues were made.

Halfway down the dark hall, a group of rogue miu appeared around a corner, growling and chuffing. The rogue jerked Kissa into a small apartment and slammed the door. The small living room looked like a cross between a crime scene and lion's den. The only light in the place came from a couple of narrow, nailed-shut, paint-blackened windows high up on the walls. Too small to fit through. Blood stained the carpet in dried brown splatters and wet, red puddles, gnawed-on human bones littered the tables and counters like leftover pizza at an unmated male's house and the smell...unbelievably the smell was even worse here than in the hall. She dry-heaved, eyes and nose running.

Roars sounded from the hall. The flimsy door shook as miun scratched at it. The rogue dragged her over to a corner in the living room. Her arm felt as if it were being pulled from its socket. She bit back a cry. He dumped her shaking, heaving body in a pile of crumpled paper towels and dirty clothes.

The sounds of human-form and shifted miu grew louder, more intense. They wanted in. The rogue heard them too. He stilled, his head cocked to one side, listening.

"Stay," he said, his dark eyes demanding that she obey him. "You're mine."

Kissa ducked her head and breathed through her mouth. Her mind raced with fear and her mie shook with the need to run or fight. Running would be her best chance at survival, but she couldn't leave without Harley. It was her fault he was in this mess, would be her fault if he was eaten or made miun.

The rogue set Harley's unconscious body on the oblong coffee table as if the boy were takeout dinner, then went to the door. He looked her way, his lips peeled back from his teeth, his hand rubbing at the obvious bulge in his jeans.

"Stay." He opened the door just wide enough for him to slide through sideways and then slammed it shut.

As soon as the door closed, Kissa crawled over to Harley's pale form and picked up his limp hand that dangled off the table. In her hurry, her fingers fumbled for his pulse. The kid was a trooper. Still strong and steady. She needed to wake him, needed to get him ready to run. The sounds of vicious fighting right outside the door momentarily grabbed her attention before she took his head in her hands and pushed into his mind.

Violent images immediately inundated her. With no time to call and connect with the dream god, Serapis, she struggled to walk his dreams alone. Disorientation and the sharp prick of extraneous emotions ripped at her mind. Relying on her years of training at the temple, she shifted through the blurred images, allowing his emotions to flow over her and through her. *Don't fight. Accept*, she repeated to herself and breathed through the chaos of an external dreamscape.



Gently, she shifted through the mist of dreams, searching for Harley's consciousness without scaring him away from her foreign presence. At last she located the black-and-white dream that contained his shining essence in the form of his child self. He looked about nine or ten years old. His wide, blue eyes glistened with fear and his plump lower lip quivered with trepidation. Fear burned through the dream like a backdraft in a house on fire. She'd walked in on a recall dream, perhaps a childhood trauma he had yet to resolve, like the dream she'd had—Goddess, had her dream only been last night?

As a dreamwalker, she could help him work through the pain. But not right now. She needed to focus, to find a way to wake him. His life depended on it.

Pulling substance out of the whirlwind of dreams, Kissa created a visible form that his dreamself could see and stepped into his nightmare. At the sight of her, the child Harley yelped and stumbled backward, his arms pinwheeling to keep him falling. She could have been more subtle, waited to find an entrance into his dream that would feel natural to him, but she hoped that the surprise of a foreign psyche might shock him awake. He landed on his butt. His torn t-shirt sagging over one narrow shoulder, his breath hitched with silent sobs. But they remained securely encased in his dreamscape.

"Harley!" A masculine voice boomed through the small bedroom, echoing off the nail-hole-freckled walls.

Kissa turned toward the intimidating voice to find a behemoth of a man blocking the open door. He and Harley shared a nose and mouth but the man's eyes were brown and narrow. His father. Had to be.

"Let's get out of here." She offered Harley her hand.

He shook his head, sending his baby-fine hair into a tangled mess.

"Come on, Harley. We've got to go. Don't worry. I'll protect you," she encouraged. If she could just get him to trust her and willingly take her hand, she could pull them both out of his head and into reality.

Harley whimpered. Bringing his knees up, he dropped his head and huddled on the floor near his unmade bed. *Well, crap.* It looked as if she had to do some healing dreamwork after all if she wanted to get them out of there. Circling Harley's dreamself, she sat behind him and pulled him onto her lap.

"Look at your father," she whispered in the pale shell of his ear.

He looked up, quivering so hard it felt as if his small frame would break apart in her arms.

"He can't hurt you. I won't let him." She tightened her arms around his too thin body and gave him a little squeeze. "Tell him to go away, Harley. Tell him to leave you alone."

His breath stopped completely for several seconds then he gasped, his rib cage expanding against her arms. "Can't," he whispered. "He'll kill me."

The dream altered. His father morphed into the rogue in human form. Kissa stood and pushed Harley behind her. Time to end the nightmare in Harley's head as well as the one in the physical world. She shifted into her mie and launched herself at the rogue. Harley didn't know the rogue could shift too, so he didn't. Kissa took the rogue down with ease. He screamed high and long. In one fierce move, she ripped out his throat. His screech turned to a gurgle. His eyes bulged in his blood-spattered face. His arms flailed like broken wings then stilled. Kissa couldn't look away from the spectacle, though she wanted to. Life faded from him, his eyes glazing over, his face going pale and slack. She'd never killed before. Not in reality or in dream.

Hoping this dream wasn't a premonition, she shifted back to human form and shuddered in horror. But before the dread could consume her, Harley placed his small hand in hers and squeezed. When she looked at him, his form changed to match the reality of his age. He smiled the same smile he'd given her at the convenience store. Kissa couldn't summon a smile to return to him so she just nodded and asked, "Ready to get out of here?"

"Yes."

"Then wake up."

The dream collapsed in on itself like a soggy cardboard box, pushing Kissa from Harley's head. The quick expulsion disoriented her. All the harsh scents and sounds of the physical world overwhelmed her. She dropped her head to her knees to keep from passing out.

"K-Kissa?" Harley sat up on the oblong coffee table and gingerly touched her shoulder.

"Whisper," she said, then, "I'm okay. Just give me a sec."

"You were in my..." he hesitated, his soft voice petering off at the end. "Where are we?"

"In trouble." She lifted her head to meet his eyes. "We were carjacked. Remember that?"

"Yeah." He looked around, his Adam's apple bobbing in his throat at the sight of the death and depravity the room held. His eyes wide with panic, he said, "We've got to get out of here. The...the guy's a cannibal!"

"Shh. Quiet." Kissa stood and helped him up off the table. "That *cannibal* is right outside the door."

Harley finally took notice of the sounds of battle out in the hallway. "What? What is that? It sounds like animals."

He had taken two steps toward the door when a loud moan sounded, not from the outside hallway but from inside the apartment. Kissa turned, cocked an ear.

"I think it came from there." Harley pointed to a closed door to their right.

Afraid of what they would find, Kissa closed her eyes for a brief moment before crossing the room and turning the loose doorknob. Behind the battered door was a dim

bedroom where a woman tucked into the fetal position rocked back and forth, her face buried against her legs, her long hair matted with blood, her clothes torn and stained. Infected. Transitioning. Kissa could sense the change in her, smell it on her. The woman would soon be a made mie.

"God help us," Harley said.

Kissa wrapped her arms around herself and breathed through her mouth, taking shallow breaths, trying not to taste or smell the rot in the death-infested room. Harley took a hesitant step forward then glanced over his shoulder at her. In his eyes, she saw courage fighting fear.

"Wait by the door," she whispered so as not to startle the woman. "After what she's been through, I think it might be better if a female tries to talk to her first."

He wiped the palms of his hands on his jeans. "Okay."

Kissa crossed the blood-soaked carpet, thankful for Tan's boots even while they made sick sucking sounds with each step she took. Squatting beside the girl, she listened to the soft spill of incomprehensible words that spoke of terror and pain.

"Hey," Kissa said, moderating her voice so that it was gentle but firm. "I'm Kissa and my friend is named Harley. What's your name?" A stupid question but she didn't know where else to start.

The woman quieted and quit rocking, a mouse caught in the sights of a cat. Hesitantly, Kissa reached out and brushed the hair from her face. The girl flinched but rolled her eyes up at Kissa. "He's coming back," she whispered. "He's coming." With that, she squeezed her chocolate-brown eyes shut and began rocking again.

Kissa stood and walked back over to Harley. "Stay in here with her. Lock the door."

"What are you going to do?"

"Kill him. The only way we're getting out of here is if he's dead."

Harley studied her face, his breathing hard and uncomfortable. If she concentrated, she could hear his heart pounding out a fear-filled beat.

"I'll help," he said.

"No." She wanted to accept his offer. Goddess knew she was terrified, but the rogue was all miu and acting on instinct. He would see Harley only as prey, but would see her as a fertile female, which gave her a little leverage. "He wants me. I can use that to my advantage."

"Are you crazy?" He pointed at the cowering woman. "Look what he did to her."

"I'll be fine. Just stay here." Kissa closed the door behind her. As soon as she completed her shift, she waited for the rogue behind a large overturned chair, crouched low, listening to the fight outside crescendo. Her cat could tell by the resentful but submissive chuffs from the others that whoever had challenged him had lost. Their leader remained dominant. No change had come to their pride today.

At last, the rogue stepped into the apartment. She peeked around the chair to see that he had shifted back to human form—probably in preparation to mate with her.

Miun preferred to mate while human and since he was newly made, Kissa guessed the male had no experience mating in lion form. Shutting the door behind him, he inhaled deeply then turned to look at the chair she was hiding behind.

Kissa remained frozen in her spot. He had smelled her, but she had smelled him too. And for the first time, she scented something on him that rocked her center, shook her soul.

*I'm wrong, she thought. Can't be right.*

The rogue, naked and bleeding from long gashes in his side and legs, crossed the room to peer over the chair.

"Shift. Back," he said. "Human form. Mine."

*He's tired, she told herself. And injured. I have the advantage. I can take him.*

When she didn't shift, he walked around the chair and bent over her, fearless, unable to see her as any sort of threat with the scent of her heat so strong. She tensed. Waited. Ignored the horror of his underlying scent and what it revealed to her.

"Shift!" he shouted in her face.

She leapt at him, going straight for his throat, but he dropped his chin and twisted so that her teeth sank into his shoulder and her claws ripped down his back. He threw her off him and stumbled back into a small kitchen. She rolled to her feet and launched herself at him before he had a chance to recover—or so she thought. His hand came up, brandishing a long, serrated knife. Too late, she tried to turn away. The knife caught her in mid-leap and sank into her chest.

## Chapter Six

With Venor pinning him down, threatening to disembowel him, the rogue finally submitted.

"Shift to your human form," Jayden demanded as soon as he regained human form himself.

The rogue whined but complied, his fur slowly receding. His neck shortened and narrowed, forcing Venor to adjust his grip on him. After a couple of minutes, the rogue completed his shift and Venor stepped back. The rogue had suffered a great number of injuries, some severe. Days would pass before he healed. Not that he had days left to live.

"You're not the one who mauled those women and killed that man," Jayden said. "But I can smell the rogue who did on you. Where is your friend?"

His pale eyes flicked from Jayden to Venor then back. "Den."

Jayden grabbed the rogue's broken arm and pulled him to his feet. The rogue whimpered but didn't fight. Venor closed his eyes and relaxed into shifting. When the transition was complete, he stood and approached them. "You will take us to your den."

Jayden raised his eyebrows. "You sure she's there? She coulda gotten away."

Venor pressed his forearms over the already healing gashes in his chest and stomach to staunch the flow of blood. "Every rogue we have hunted over the last few months, every rogue we have killed has been male. These two, male again. I don't know why that is, but I do know rogues act on instinct. And the rogue that mauled those women and killed that man did so because they smelled of Kissa, a mie in heat. The rogue saw them as a threat to mating with her and so attacked them. He will do anything and everything to mate with her, fulfill the Ritual of Generation because his miu instinct demands it. He has her. I know this, Jayden. I feel it."

Jayden handed the rogue over to Venor as if he were passing a bag of trash over to him. He hesitated then buried his nose in the rogue's hair behind the ear and inhaled. When he lifted his face and looked at Venor, muscles ticked in his jaw and his hands fisted. "You smell it?"

Venor sighed, not wanting to deal with that problem right then. "*Oui*, and we will handle it. Later. Now we go to the rogues' den."

Jayden nodded and they both found their shoes and toed them on. Jayden pulled his clothes from the backpack and dressed first, then took custody of the rogue while Venor dressed and found his keys.

Sitting between them in the cab of the truck, the rogue gave one- or two-word directions as they drove. "Turn here. Right. Next light. Left." In this way, he led them to an old redbrick apartment building in downtown Austin.

Venor could smell Kissa's unique scent as soon as he stepped down from the cab. He followed it, not hesitating, not looking back when he heard Jayden break the rogue's neck, wrap him a blanket and throw him into the covered truck bed.

Jayden caught up to him inside the building, halfway down the stairs. "This place is more than a den, V."

"I know," Venor said. "They've made their own pride."

"Well, *someone* did."

Venor stopped at the bottom of the stairs, choosing to ignore Jayden's comment. "We should shift. There are more than a few rogues here. Too many to fight while still in human form."

They stripped off their clothes and shifted one at a time so each could guard the other for the few seconds their shift made them vulnerable. Fatigued, injured and frightened out of his mind for Kissa, Venor knew that it would be a struggle to shift back to human form any time in the next few hours.

As soon as they came to the first apartment door, chuffs and growls reverberated up and down the hall. The rogues were aware of their presence. Three doors down, the first rogue emerged in miu form, ready to defend his territory and his leader. He limped, favoring his right forepaw. His ears were tattered, his nose bisected by a deep, red cut from a recent fight.

Relieved that the rogue was in a weakened state, Venor launched himself and slammed into him, immediately gripping his throat. He almost felt sorry for the male as he ripped out his throat with ease. Young, inexperienced, wounded. He hadn't stood a chance.

Venor lifted his head to count the lions advancing on them. Nine. Some injured. Some not.

Jayden sidled up to him, head high, growling low. One of the rogues whined and hunkered down, belly to the floor, submitting to Jayden's dominant display.

*Two down*, Venor thought wryly.

The sound of a fight could be heard from a few apartments down. A door banged open and a woman smelling of the change took off down the hall in the opposite direction. Jayden's body stiffened, his eyes grew possessive, his breathing rapid. Was she Jayden's fated mate? He watched his friend lunge after her, but one of the rogues tackled him and then another jumped on him as well, preventing Jayden from reaching her before she fled. Venor let loose a roar and plowed into the fray, joining his friend, claws extended, lips pulled back to expose his long canines. Fear and fury shredded his control. They circled, struck, took one rogue after another down with the speed and agility of practiced hunters.

Dead and half-dead rogues left in their wake, Venor and Jayden ran into the apartment where Kissa's scent was stronger. What they found brought them to a quick halt, their claws extending to provide traction so they could stop before plowing into Kissa, in mie form, who stood over a rogue in his death throes.

Venor chuffed softly to gain her attention. Her small, golden head lifted and her green eyes met his, glistening like precious stones. Her tail twitched and she collapsed next to the corpse of the human-form rogue. Whimpering, she placed her head between her paws and closed her eyes. Blood pooled beneath her rapidly.

Venor shifted without warning. He was miu and then he was human, or at least that's how his shift felt to him—as if no time had passed, no pain had reached his mind as he changed from one form to the other. So much for having trouble shifting. He just needed motivation.

"Kiss." He ran his hands down her back and sides and found superficial wounds only. Gently he turned her on her side and inspected her chest and belly. There. A knife wound. Two inches long and deep. Too deep.

"Shift, Kissa. You need to shift to heal." Was that his voice? Raspy with panic?

Pulling away from him, she whined and curled in on herself. Giving up. Dying.

"*Non, ma coeur, non.*" He pressed his hand over her wound and ducked his head to hers. "Close your eyes, Kiss. Remember the feel of our bodies coming together as we made love. Remember the feel of your mie blanketed by your human form. Listen to your mate, *ma coeur*. Listen to me. Your mie must recede in order for you to live."

"Dominate her, V," Jayden said, having returned to his human form. "Her mie will respond to you as her mate and submit to your wish for her to shift if you push the right buttons, and I'll work to heal her as she shifts."

Venor forced her on her stomach and pressed his body over hers. She hissed but didn't even have the strength to take a swipe at him. *Goddess, please let this work.* Fear and fatigue riding his body hard, he pushed everything else out of his mind and concentrated just on his teeth. His gums tingled. His teeth shifted to sharp canines.

"Shift." He sank his teeth in the scruff of her neck and let her feel his full bodyweight against hers.

Slowly, painfully her shift began. He felt every pop of her tendons, every crack of her bones. Tears gathered in his eyes but he didn't release her, didn't move off her until she completed her change. Finally, her pitiful whine turned into moans as her human vocal cords returned.

He released her neck and gathered her in his arms. Jayden leaned over and whispered words—ancient Egyptian healing words. Soon the knife wound no longer gaped and wept. Now a narrow pink line marred her otherwise perfect chest. Venor looked up at Jayden, his brow furrowed in confusion. He knew that his friend possessed some small healing ability, but this was first-level bodywalker work.

"Later," Jayden said. "We need to get out of here. It's likely there are more rogues in this 'pride', and we need to get gone before they return to their den."

Venor scooped Kissa up in his arms and held her gently to his chest. "Let's go."

Jayden walked behind the couch and picked up a limp male body. Venor sniffed. Human. Injured. Made? Probably. "He smells of Kissa."

Venor grimaced but said nothing.

Jayden led the way out of the apartment building. As they went down the hall and up the stairs, he finished off any rogues they passed who were still holding on to the thin thread of life. Pausing at the outer door, he made sure the parking lot was empty before leading them to the truck.

"Safe house?" Venor asked as Jayden started up the truck and pulled out onto the road.

"Yeah, it's less than ten minutes from here."

They drove in silence, Venor listening to Kissa's rapid heartbeat and unsteady breathing. Her eyes remained closed, her skin pallid and clammy from shock. When they reached the safe house, he carried her in and wrapped his body around hers in the bed.

"Call Latif. But make sure the dams know nothing of this."

Jayden left the room to make the call. He returned a few minutes later with Venor's backpack, nodded and left the room. Venor knew his friend well enough to interpret his nod. He'd spoken with Latif. The dams were in the dark. He had the situation well in hand.

Kissa calmed and he pulled a blanket up over them and closed his eyes, happy that she lived, happy that she rested in his arms. Where she belonged. He only had to convince her of that.

Hours passed, what felt like an eternity, before Kissa's breathing changed and she shifted in his arms. Awake. Whole. In heat.

"Kiss?"

She jerked away from him and tumbled off the bed. He let her go, not following, giving her space, giving him space. Her scent called to him. Now that she was healthy, his miu instinct insisted he mate with her and complete the Ritual of Generation. Taking shallow breaths, he watched her stand on unsteady feet and look down on him.

"You lied to me." She pressed her hand over the nearly fatal wound that Jayden had healed.

"*Oui*. To protect you." He forced himself to remain on his back, neck and belly exposed. A vulnerable position for a miu. A submissive, apologetic position. "I failed."

Tears gathered and spilled from her eyes. Gods, how he wanted to leap from the bed, gather her in his arms, make love to her, bind her to him. He could too. She was weakened both emotionally and physically. He could take advantage of that, force her to submit. Easily.

He closed his eyes against the thought. He had betrayed her trust once. He would not do so again. "I am sorry, *ma chaton*."



"Where did you go?" Her voice cracked. She took a deep breath. "What were you doing all those times you lied to me?"

Venor opened his eyes, faced the broken look on her face. "I was hunting rogues here in Austin. With Jayden."

"Why didn't you tell me?" Her voice was, bitter and sharp. "I was so sure that you were honest...loyal to me."

Unable to stay still any longer, he climbed out of the bed and crossed the room to her. Panting, he buried his face in her hair and breathed in her sweet scent. "Never have I acted disloyally. I promised you my fidelity and I have kept that promise." He took in an unsteady breath. "That picture that Tancred Gabbard showed you was from years past."

She leaned into him and inhaled, probably trying to smell if he told the truth. When he moaned at the feel of her pressing against him breast to chest, she jerked away as if she hadn't meant to touch him at all. "Who was that female in the picture? She was in heat when you mated with her. I could tell."

He was in hell. Her pain and misery clawing at his heart. Her mie calling to his miu. His past rising up like a viral flu, eating at his stomach, sending hot shivers up and down his spine. In hell...but she was there with him. And it was up to him to get them out. Meeting her eyes, he said, "The dams of my pride forced me to mate with several mature mie in an attempt to strengthen the pride through numbers. They wanted more cubs and thought a young, virile male would increase the chances of pregnancy in the older females." Shame burned through him. Afraid of her repulsion, her rejection, he dropped his gaze and fisted his hands at his sides. Shaking. Waiting.

When she hugged him to her, he jerked in surprise.

"I'm sorry they did that to you," she whispered. "I'm sorry."

He dropped his head to her shoulder and allowed tears he'd never cried before to spill down his cheeks. She spoke to him, soft words, words of understanding and comfort, words he felt and understood but didn't really hear. He could still feel her anger, sense that it writhed just below her compassion for him. She had not forgiven him, but all that mattered now was that she hadn't turned away, hadn't seen him as something wrong, less, damaged. She loved him and he had betrayed her. Lied to her. Doubted her love.

Kissing her shoulder, her neck, her face, he told her over and over again, "*Je t'aime*. I'm sorry."

She rubbed against him, whimpering with want, showing that she needed him with her body and vocalizations even though she didn't completely trust him yet, even though she had not forgiven him.

He picked her up, wrapped her legs around his waist and pressed her against the wall.

"Ven—"

He rocked into her, thrusting into her hot body. Keening, she grabbed his shoulders and pushed him back. "No, I don't want to complete the ritual. Ven, I don't want—"

He wrenched himself away from her to stumble across the room, legs trembling, balls aching. Bent over, he panted his frustration, his pain. *Fuck*. He wanted to be inside her. Wanted her like nothing else before. She sank to the floor, choking back sobs, pressing her hands against her stomach. "I'm sorry but I can't, won't bind myself to you. Not when I can't trust you. Not when you don't trust me enough to tell me the truth. I won't become my dam."

Everything stilled inside him. His miu instinct to mate. The shame of admitting his past. The pain of her rejection. His mind went quiet and separated from his body as if her words had broken him in two. "What do you mean?" Was that his voice? Quiet and controlled. Low and deadly. "Do you have something to do with making the rogues?"

Her head whipped up. Her eyes flashed fire at him. "I have nothing to do with it. How could you even think that?"

He could breathe again, think again, move again. Sinking to the floor a few yards away from her, he sighed his relief. For one brief moment, he had thought that the scent he and Jayden had smelled on the rogues—the scent of their maker—had belonged to Kissa. But he heard the truth in her words, heard her hurt as well. "Then what did you mean by 'you will not become your dam'?"

Kissa growled, low and sexy. "I *mean*, mated to a male who is untrustworthy. Confronting him with his lies only to be lied to again and again. No, I will not live that life. I will not force my cubs to grow up surrounded by anger and violence between their parents. Even if you didn't cheat on me, you have lied to me repeatedly ever since we met."

"I meant to protect you."

She glared at him, her body rigid.

"Truly, Kiss. If you knew I was hunting with Jayden and we were found out, you would suffer the same punishment from the dams. I didn't want to risk your status within the pride. You are to be their next mane mie—"

"I was to be your *mate*," she hissed. "Not your cub. Not your subordinate. Your mate. I don't need your protection. I *need* your honesty, your loyalty, your love."

"You have all three." He crawled to where she sat and smoothed his hands down her arms, trying to soothe her. She was in pain because of her heat. Her instincts had to be overwhelming her as much if not more than they were besieging him. "You're right. I made a mistake. I should have trusted you and told you what I was doing. I swear on my life, *ma chaton*, I will never lie to you again."

She studied his face, panting her desire even while she kept her need in check, a true sex kitten if he'd ever seen one. "Then promise me this. Promise me that you won't try to complete the Ritual of Generation with me until my next heat."

*Merde*. He ground his teeth, fighting his instinct, fighting to give her what she wanted, what she deserved. His miu roared for his mate, demanding that he complete

the ritual to bind her to him. Sitting this close to her, touching her when she refused to let him inside her body, was nearly impossible to bear. He drew her into his arms and nuzzled the base of her throat, nipping her there, marking her so others would know she was mated even if that wasn't true. He didn't know how he could stand it, but he would try.

He picked her up and carried her to the bed. "I promise."

Kissa stared up at Venor as he set her on the bed and studied her face. He was gorgeous in his unselfconscious nudity, his muscles well-defined but not bulging, his strength apparent but not pretentious.

"Do you trust that I will keep my word, *ma chaton*?" Venor eased two fingers into the wet core of her body even while knowing he was playing dirty by attempting to seduce her into "yes".

Kissa's body arched off the bed as he kissed her, overwhelming her as he ate at her mouth. She needed this. Needed him. Goddess did she need him. But did she trust him? Trust he would keep his promise?

He rose to look down at her, his eyes shining in the dark room. The sun had dropped low in the sky but with their nocturnal eyesight darkness didn't matter. She could see him and she loved what she saw. He was beautiful in an entirely masculine, dominant way. He studied her, waiting for her answer.

A whimper escaped her lips. "Yes."

With what sounded like a relieved groan, he kissed a scorching path down her throat to suckle at her breast, laving at her nipples until they became hard little pebbles in his hot, hot mouth. She buried her fingers in his silky hair and held him to her, twisting and arching beneath him, unable to remain still.

He moved lower, caressing the undersides of her small breasts and then kissing down her tummy until he reached her bellybutton. There he circled the slight indentation with his tongue, swirling around the ticklish skin, making her shudder. At the same time, his fingers pumped in and out of her. Lost. She was so lost. If he plunged his sex into her body now, there was no way she could deny him.

But he didn't. Instead, his long hair feathered her thighs. Lost in sensation, Kissa sighed, reveling in his control, his ability to deny himself what she fought not to beg for. Venor slowly withdrew his fingers and cupped her sex in the palm of his hand. His thumb circled her desire-plumped clit and she bit her lip to stifle the scream that tore up her throat. Heat flushed her skin, blazing through her, setting her on fire as if she were burning up from the inside out. With teeth and tongue, he built her desire, taking her higher.

When Venor's finger sank into her creamy channel once more and then withdrew to circle the tight rosebud of her ass, she cupped her knees, pulled her legs up and spread them wider, completely wanton, completely out of control. She was his and he could do whatever he liked.

At her invitation, he added more pressure but still did not penetrate her virgin rosette. Goddess damn it. She needed him inside her, needed to feel their bodies joined as one. And this was the only way for that to happen without completing the ritual. Frustrated by his slow pace, she let out a deep, demanding growl.

"Patience, *ma chaton*," he said, refusing to let her rush him. "I will give you what you need. What we both need."

Resigned, Kissa dropped her head back on the bed and let him tease her for what seemed like hours. Finally, he gently pushed one finger past her tight rim to work her body's natural lubricant into her ass. She moaned, unable to stifle the pained sound. He stilled.

"Do you wish for me to stop?"

"No." She winced at the wobble in her voice. "Please don't stop. I need..."

"Calm, Kiss. I'm not going anywhere. We have time to do this right."

She sighed and tried to relax as minutes passed while Venor slowly coaxed her body into accepting his invasion. When she readily accepted him, he added a second well-lubricated finger. Slowly, tenderly he opened her to him.

The intensity of the pleasure-pain mix had her thrashing on the bed, eyes squeezed shut, hands shifting and shredding the sheets. There were so many sensations to process, and then he ducked his head to lick and suck at her clit while carefully pumping his fingers in and out of her ass. She moved against him, against his mouth. She had to move, had to get closer. She was so close. Almost there.

"Ven, please..."

He buried three fingers deep inside her, stretching her, readying her for his cock. Reflexively, she pulled back with a whimper of pain. Stilling his fingers, he grazed his teeth over her lips and nipped her clit. Her back arched. Her thighs clenched. He pressed a finger inside her pussy and rubbed her G-spot, slamming her over the edge. Clenching around his fingers, she screamed her release until her voice gave out and her body went limp with satisfaction.

While the aftershocks of her orgasm still rippled through her, Venor positioned her on her side and spooned her. The warmth of him, the weight of his body against her back sent fresh shocks through her. His *miu* called to her *mie* as he ground his hips against her ass, his arousal evident.

"Need to be inside you. Now," he whispered against her ear.

Another slow grind and her response became lost in a quick gasp. Venor sucked on her neck, his hand finding and gently massaging her breast. Kissa slid her hand down his side and tried to press him closer. But he twisted away to grab something out of the bedside table drawer.

"What are you doing?" Her voice sounded wobbly. She was surprised she could think, let alone talk.

He flipped open the lid of a small bottle of lotion, his gaze burning through her as he slicked the lotion over his cock. "I need to be inside you, *ma chaton*."

Kissa bit the inside of her cheek, stifling a moan as he palmed her ass and pressed his erection against her opening. Her eyes stinging and watering, she held her breath as he entered her. He eased his way in, moving slowly, allowing her body to adjust to his intrusion an inch at a time. Fully seated, he stilled, kissing her, stroking her hip and thigh. When she pushed back against him, showing him she wanted more, he began to move and pleasure shot through her, sending tingles up and down her fingers and toes even as tears streamed down her face from the fierce friction of his measured digs.

"You are okay?" Venor's voice was so rough and low she hardly recognized it.

"Goddess, yes. Please..."

He cuddled her against him, kissing her shoulder, her neck, holding her in place as he pumped, slowly picking up the rhythm. Her breath caught in her throat as waves of pleasure and pain crashed through her. She grasped his arm and held on to him as if he was her salvation.

*Oh Goddess. Goddess, please.*

"Can't go slow," he panted. "You are sure you are okay, *bébé*? Do you want me to stop?"

"Yes. No. More." She thrust back against him, her hips having a mind of their own, her desire spiraling out from her belly.

"More? You are sure?" Moans fell from his lips with each thrust.

"Yes." She groaned. "Deeper. Please."

He worked in a rhythm that had her crying his name as he drove in and out of her, pushing her to her breaking point. Her hands shifted once more and her claws pierced his skin and bored into his flesh as he sank his teeth into the back of her neck. Marking her. Owning her. His fingers found and parted her damp folds. She thrust wildly against his hand, at his fingers going deep. Slick with sweat, her orgasm hit and lights flashed before her eyes. Her ass clamped down, milking him. And with a shout, Venor's cock jerked. He stiffened and came in long waves that left her weak and breathless.

When their breath slowed and their hearts stopped pounding, he pulled out of her, slowly, gently, as if he feared his withdrawal would hurt her where his hard thrusting had not. His spines had not emerged, his body somehow recognizing there was no chance of impregnating her.

Claws retracting, she rolled over to collapse against his chest, spent and more than sated. As she drifted off to sleep, he held her tightly against him and whispered softly, "*Tu es la mienne*."

Tomorrow she would have to remember to ask him what that meant.

## Chapter Seven

For the first time in his life, Venor awoke with the gratifying sensation of his lover sleeping beside him. Bless the Goddess, Kissa hadn't run away from him this time. With regret, he slipped silently from the bed, grabbed his backpack and closed himself in the bathroom before he could break his promise and bury himself deep inside her soft body, completing the Ritual of Generation. He would not break trust with her just when she was beginning to believe in him again.

He should have locked the door.

In the shower, beneath the spray of water, he went rigid when her hands, soft and slender, slid up his back and around to his chest. She pressed herself against him, purring. The steam seemed to intensify her scent, overwhelming him. He braced his arms against the cold, tiled wall, trying to take shallow breaths, cursing his *miu* for thrashing beneath his skin, crashing in his mind, shattering his restraint.

"Can't. Kiss. *Bébé*. My control—"

She stepped back and he let out a sigh of relief. Too soon. When she jerked him around to face her, he closed his eyes on the sight of her. She was wet, desire riding her slim, naked body and filling her intense gaze, and he couldn't remove the image from his mind.

"Shh. Ven, I'll take care of you," she said, her voice rough and sultry.

He groaned when she grasped his hips to steady herself as she went down on her knees before him. Hesitantly, she gripped and slowly stroked him.

"You like this?" she asked.

"Gods, yes," he encouraged.

She swirled her tongue around the tip of his dick and sucked him into her mouth. His eyes flew open. His hips bucked, pushing his shaft past her slick lips. She hummed and he groaned, fingers diving into her hair and tightening. The pressure, the wet heat of her mouth, took his breath away. She licked him up and down and he bucked again, almost overwhelmed by the need to thrust into her hot, sweet mouth.

He couldn't believe she was on her knees, giving him head. Her actions, giving but receiving nothing in return, had to be hard while she was still in heat. "*Ma chaton*, come here." He tugged at her hair, trying to pull her up to him, wanting to offer her some relief even if it killed him to restrain himself from completing the ritual. But she resisted him, nipping at his hip. "No, I want this. Want you to come in my mouth."

She returned to licking and sucking him. His panting breaths echoed off the tiled walls, sounding loud to his own ears. "Fuck," he groaned.

She grabbed his ass, her nails shifting and sinking into his cheeks. With another curse, he lost control and thrust fully into her mouth. He held her still as he took her mouth, growling with each strong thrust. He loved the wet sound of her lips as she engulfed as much of his length as she could, the low purr that resonated up her throat.

She reached out and rolled his balls in her hand. A shout escaped his parted lips. He thrust once, twice more and then came, his dick seizing, shooting his cum into Kissa's beautiful mouth. His eyes closed as decadent shudders rocked his body. He released her to brace his hands on either side of the wall, holding himself up when his legs felt as if they were ready to fold beneath him.

Finally, she backed down him with a hard suck, drawing his sated cock away from his body before releasing him with a small, wet pop that echoed through the room. Her gaze met his, full of lust and maybe love. He stared, transfixed by her grace as she rose to her feet, licking her flushed, swollen lips. He had always loved her mouth, but now he thought he might become obsessed with it.

"Water's getting cold." She took his hands and pulled him out of the tepid spray.

A hard rap sounded on the bedroom door. "V, Latif's here," Jayden called, his voice strained.

"We'll be right out," Venor called back, his voice rough.

Kissa jerked away from Venor, her eyes filling with shock. "You called my sire?"

He grimaced. "*Oui*, he assisted us in our search for you. Jayden called him last night to update him."

She stepped out of the shower and he followed her, pulling a towel from the rack and wrapping it around his waist. "We can trust him. He will not tell the dams."

"We can trust him?" She snorted. "Maybe you can trust him, but I sure as hell can't."

He pulled another towel from the rack and handed it to her. "Why do you say this?"

She made quick work of drying her small frame and flung the damp towel in his face. In the bedroom, he watched her choose a blue long-sleeved shirt and jeans from the variety of clothes they kept in the safe house. "You weren't on my list."

"What?" He pulled on some clothes, not noticing what he grabbed.

She turned her back on him, combing her fingers through her long chestnut hair. "When I found out you'd been lying to me, maybe cheating on me, and I couldn't get you to answer your phone, I took you off my list of eligible mates. I replaced you with Tan. Guess who changed my list."

A strange buzzing sounded in his ears as he tried to process this information. She hadn't expected him in the courtyard, hadn't wanted to mate with him at all. And he—he had walked in believing that he was her only choice. He cleared his suddenly tight throat. "You were planning on completing the ritual with Tancred Gabbard?"

"That's not the point," she said, finding socks and sneakers and pulling them on with quick efficiency.

He buttoned the fly of his jeans and sat at the end of the bed, seeing the last couple of days in a completely new light. "You ran to him. Do you still want him as your mate? Is he why you won't complete the Ritual of Generation with me?"

Kissa rolled her eyes to the ceiling. "No. He—no. I'm glad I didn't end up mating with him, but that doesn't excuse what my sire did."

"Then why did you run to him? To wreak vengeance on me?"

"No, I ran because...I was afraid. I ran to him because I thought he would help me. Because I thought he was the only one I could trust."

"Why did you fear me? Even if you thought I had broken my pledge to you, surely you didn't think I'd ever hurt you, force you to do anything against your will."

She sank into an old rocking chair and stared down at her hands, trembling in her lap. "I wasn't afraid of you. I was afraid of me. Afraid that I would forgive you for what you did—what I thought you did. Afraid that I was turning into my dam. I didn't want to be that. Didn't want to become mate to someone who would spend his life betraying me. I couldn't..." She blinked back tears.

He crossed the room and sank to the floor before her, taking her hands in his and giving them a gentle squeeze. "I love you, *ma chaton*. I have never, will never break my pledge to you. I swear this on my life."

Tears spilled down her face. She laughed shortly. "Seems like we both have trust issues."

He clenched his jaw, needing to ask but afraid of her answer. "Did you mate with Tan?" His voice wobbled and he dropped her hands as his shifted, claws springing from his fingertips then retreating. His gums tingled, burned. He ground his teeth, concentrating on preventing the partial shifts.

"No." Kissa reached for his hands, ignoring the scrape of claws against her wrists. Blood ran, dripped on the soft, pale green carpet.

He could breathe again, think again. She hadn't mated with Tancred. He concentrated on regaining control of his form, retracted his claws and wrapped his hands around her wrists, stemming the blood flow.

"Venor, listen to me. I ran to Tan but I did not offer myself to him. He went into a rage when he smelled you on me. He attacked me, tried to force my submission, but I didn't submit."

Fury flashed through him. "He meant to take you against your will, to rape you."

"He was acting on instinct but that's no excuse." She took a deep breath. "And there's no excuse for what my sire did. Right or wrong, the choice of mate is mine alone."

"I agree, but your sire misled the guards so that I could track you... But your dam." He didn't want to tell her about Genet, didn't want to break her heart. But she was



right. If she was to trust him then he could not omit information, even if his intention was to protect her.

Another rap at the door, this time more urgent. "Kissa?" Latif shouted through the door. The doorknob turned back and forth, but Venor had locked it sometime in the middle of the night. "Venor?"

"One minute." Venor stood and pulled Kissa up with him. He drew her into his arms and whispered in her ear low enough that he wouldn't be overheard. "I know you are angry with him and you have every right, but there are more pressing matters right now. And we need his help."

She pulled away from him and straightened her shirt with quick, short movements. "You don't need to tell me what my priorities are. I'm not a complete idiot."

"Never have I thought you an idiot, Kiss."

They left the front bedroom for the living room where Jayden and Latif waited impatiently on a plush brown loveseat. Her eyes immediately going to the plastic-wrapped corpse of the rogue from Happy Hollow now resting in the corner of the room, Kiss stopped and asked, "How's Harley?"

"The human boy from the rogues' den?" Venor asked.

"Yes."

"He's asleep in the back bedroom," Jayden replied.

"He's okay?" Her voice contained a high, hope-filled note.

"He's been made."

She closed her eyes on the news. "My fault, damn it."

"When we found him, it looked like he'd fought the rogue with you."

"I told him to stay in the bedroom with the woman, but he didn't listen." She pressed a hand over the place where she'd been stabbed. "Guess I should be grateful for that. He distracted the rogue long enough for me to take him out."

"How are you doing?" Latif asked, standing.

She glared at him but otherwise ignored his question. Jayden interjected, the bags under his eyes making him look like a druggie, "The woman. Do you know her name?"

Kissa sank into a chair, rubbing at her temples. "No, she was already made before we arrived there. She was traumatized by the rogue, unable to communicate at all." She hesitated. "Although maybe Harley got her talk after I left the room."

"No." Jayden took a seat as well. "I already questioned him about her."

"She's not here? With Harley?" Kissa asked.

"No." Jayden's muscles looked as if they'd been cut from stone. "She ran. And a rogue ran after her."

"Enough about these humans. We have more than enough made miun to occupy us, with the women from the nudist park and the boy here. What we should be focusing on—"

Kissa gasped and jumped up from her chair. "Women from the nudist park?" She turned on Venor. "Was it Brooke and Stacie? Were they attacked?"

Latif replied dryly, "I believe those are their names. I sent a couple of my guards to pick them up and take them to another safe house until all this is worked out."

Kissa sat down, her face blank, her hands clasped tightly in her lap. Venor stepped in, trying to get the conversation back on track. No need for Kissa to concentrate on the things she could not change. "We need to discuss the rogues and their maker."

Latif's bushy eyebrows rose high on his forehead. "You know who their maker is?"

"You only need to smell the newly made rogue. The maker scent is strong on one so young." Jayden nodded at the plastic-wrapped corpse.

Venor offered Kissa his hand to help her up as Latif walked over to the rogue and unwrapped the body. She shook her head. "I already know. Recognized the scent." Her voice sounded sad, small.

Venor sat on the arm of the chair and rubbed her back, trying to comfort her while Latif bent over the rogue and sniffed. His head reared back and he fell on his ass, gasping. He turned, his eyes looking wild. Sputtering, he said, "Genet. That depraved bitch."

"Shut up!" Kissa shouted, the cords of her neck standing out. "How dare you call her that when you're the one who probably drove her to it? It's no wonder she went insane after being mated to you for so long."

Latif crossed the room to tower over her. Kissa stood and Venor with her, ready to strike.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Latif growled.

Kissa snorted. "As if you don't know."

Latif's jaw worked. Finally he said, "If this is about your list," his eyes slid to Venor then back to Kissa, "you should be thanking me. Your dam didn't care either way, and Tan only wanted you for the position you could give him. He's a sniveling little cub still under his dam's paw. If it weren't for me you'd be mated to that moron."

Kissa hissed, her eyes shifting to all cat, her teeth elongating. "I don't give a good goddamn about Tan. I care that my sire betrayed me, just like he's betrayed my dam a hundred times before."

Latif took another step forward, crowding her. Venor stepped between them and shoved Latif back. The older male stumbled and turned his angry eyes on him. "You're defending her? She dropped you as soon as you left for a couple weeks. And I can smell that she still refuses to complete the ritual with you. She's not even your mate."

"You don't know what you're talking about." Venor stared him down. "And my relationship with Kissa is not your business."

Latif stalked across the room. "That's gratitude for you," he said, probably trying to cover the fact that he'd backed down.

Standing over the rogue, he shoved his hands in his pockets. "Good thing I kept this hunt quiet. Genet's guards are still in Round Rock, looking for Kissa. I doubt any surviving rogues know how to contact her."

"Agreed," Venor said, taking Kissa's hand in his. "The element of surprise will serve us well in resolving this situation."

"We need to unseat her," Kissa said, her voice resigned. "The only one who has the right to do that is me."

"What she has done requires the death penalty, Kiss," Venor spoke quietly, wishing he could soften the blow, though she knew pride law as well if not better than he did.

"The law also requires that I be the one to mete out the punishment. And I'm not going to kill her."

"You will not be involved," Venor said. "She is your dam. The council will understand that. Besides, you will be safer if you stay here with the human boy."

"Has everyone lost their minds?" She paced, taking care to avoid her sire. "No one is killing my dam. And if I don't unseat her, whoever does will take control of the pride. That's not going to happen, Ven."

"I agree," Latif said.

"No one cares what *you* think," Kissa spat.

Jayden cleared his throat. "Right. V, I understand that you want to protect Kissa, but—"

"He knows better than that." Kissa looked at him, raising her eyebrows in question. "You *do* know better, don't you?"

Venor stifled a groan. The very last thing he wanted was for Kissa to be in the middle of this mess. If Genet didn't back down, she would have to fight her dam, and Genet was not only known for her fighting skills but for her viciousness as well. Kissa was a dreamwalker not a fighter.

"Ven?" Kissa prompted.

"I understand your need to take care of this situation. Can you understand my need to keep you safe?"

"Yeah, I can." She bumped up against him, shoulder to shoulder. "Now get over it. We're in this together."

Venor liked the sound of that but knew it wasn't going to be that easy. Still, he nudged her back, showing affection before launching into all the reasons she should allow him to handle this situation for her.

\* \* \* \* \*

After arguing for way too long, Kissa put an end to the useless bickering by grabbing Jayden's keys and walking out the front door. Stupid males, always posturing, never seeing the big picture.

She saw the big picture and it scared the crap out of her. No way would Genet quietly step down. Venor seemed to think that they could negotiate a nonviolent resolution, but she knew better. There were two surefire ways to take the pride from Genet. Complete the Ritual of Generation with Venor and succeed her dam or prove herself the more dominant female through one-on-one battle.

Surprisingly, Venor had not even hinted that he saw option one as a viable solution. And for some deranged reason, she wanted to resent him for that, though she knew she was being unreasonable. She was the one who had insisted that they wait for her next heat to complete the ritual, after all. She wanted to trust him but wasn't quite there yet. Still, it would be nice if he at least tried to sell her on option one. *Grass is always greener*, she thought, adjusting her seat belt as she sped down I-40 toward Oakview.

They had left Latif behind with Harley on the pretense of needing him to coordinate the fallout of Happy Hollow and the rogues' den, but the real reason she didn't want her sire with them was that she did not trust him to have her back. Latif took care of Latif. That's how he'd always operated—it was the one thing she could count on with him.

The longer they were on the road and the closer they drew to home, the more worry burrowed into her brain like a carnivorous worm. *You're doing the right thing*, she reassured herself, changing the radio station for what had to be the hundredth time.

"There's our turnoff," Jayden called from the backseat. Early on in the trip, he had stuffed his nose with tissues and cracked a window to diffuse the smell of her heat.

"I see it." She turned on her blinker and moved into the far right lane.

"Not long now," Jayden yelled as they exited the highway.

"Shut it," Kissa yelled back.

At least Venor had the intelligence to keep his mouth firmly closed during the drive—either that or he was really worried. She glanced his way. Tight jaw. Stiff posture. He was worried.

Maybe he wasn't buying the BS he was trying to sell her. Maybe he knew as well as she did that she would have to fight Genet.

When Kissa hit the gravel road leading up to the temple, Jayden yelled, "Slow down, girl. You're ruining my paint job."

She tapped the brakes and glanced at Venor again. His five o'clock shadow made him look tough, woodsy. Trying to keep it light, she asked, "What's going on in your furry little head?"

He forced a tight smile. His face looked as if it were about to crack apart. "If negotiations fail, I don't want you to fight her."

She pulled past dozens of parked cars—Latif had called an emergency meeting for them—into a vacant spot around the back of the temple and cut the engine. "No choice."

"We could complete the ritual." He'd finally said it, made the suggestion she had already rejected. "If you could only put your trust in me, Kiss, there would be no reason to risk your life."

She pulled the keys from the ignition and passed them back to Jayden. "Don't you think that's a little dramatic? A battle for dominance is more posturing than actual fighting."

"No one's ever accused Genet of being more talk than walk," Jayden interjected. "Your dam has a killer's instinct."

"And you're saying I don't?" Kissa turned to face him and found it was hard to take him seriously with tissues crammed up his nostrils. "I killed that rogue."

He yanked the tissue from his nose, sniffed and opened his door. "Killing a rogue in self-defense and killing your dam for the good of the pride are two very different things, darlin'."

"Who said anything about killing her?" She looked back and forth between the two males, finally settling on Venor. Having a killer instinct was one thing, killing was another matter altogether. "Is there something you're not telling me?"

"She has been making rogues, Kiss," Venor said gravely. "It is likely that she has become power-crazed."

She shrank from his words, pressing back against the door. A power-crazed cat was just as dangerous as a rogue was. "That doesn't mean she would kill her own cub."

"We've got company." Jayden nodded toward the front windshield.

Two of Genet's personal guards approached the truck. Nude in human form, they looked no less intimidating than if they had been wearing full body armor and weapons. As they grew closer, their cocks grew harder. *Great. Just great.* She hadn't even thought about the problems her heat would create when she returned to the pride unmated.

Venor growled, long and low, an unmistakable warning to the males to keep their hands—and more importantly their cocks—to themselves. Relief flowed through her veins at the thought that at least she was going in fully clothed. The temple rules required that she strip after she entered the building, either going naked or dressed in one of the red silk dresses that honored Sekhmet, but for now, she took comfort in the fact that any male wanting to mount her would have to work past her jeans first.

"No time like the present." Jayden stepped down from the extended cab and grabbed the plastic-wrapped corpse of the rogue out of the covered bed of the truck. Venor raced around the truck and took her hand before she could get a foot on the ground. The guards didn't say anything as they fell in line, escorting them to the temple. Genet liked her males quiet, another strike against the always verbal Latif, not that he needed any more strikes against him. Not in Genet's mind and not in Kissa's either.

"Breathe, Kiss," Venor whispered to her as they entered the temple.

She gasped, not realizing she hadn't been breathing. Jayden slapped her on the back with his free hand, the other hand steadying the rogue he carried firefighter style. She stumbled forward a little but kept her footing with Venor's help. She suddenly felt shell-shocked, walking past the mane mie and miu of the American prides, preparing to confront her dam.

"We got your back," Jayden said as they pulled off their clothing and walked through the antechamber into the inner room nude, ready to shift if need be.

Genet stood on the middle dais, the highest point in the room, her hip cocked to one side, her arms crossed underneath her bare breasts. Murmurs rippled through the crowded room of males, females and cubs, mie and miu communicating in human and miun language. Her dam inhaled deeply, raised an eyebrow and said, "You are still unmated. You don't have the right to lead the meeting."

"I didn't call this gathering. Latif did." She kept her eyes trained on Genet, trying to ignore the deep musk the unmated males produced as her heat scent filled the room.

"And where is your sire?" Genet made a point to look past them as if searching for him, though she had to know by scent alone that Latif wasn't with them.

"Cleaning up your mess."

Genet stepped down from the dais with fluid grace, her muscles loose as if Kissa posed no threat, as if she were perfectly confident and innocent. "What mess?"

Kissa swallowed past the tightness in her throat and stepped forward, though she wanted more than just about anything to step back, or better yet, run. "You have been making rogues in Austin."

The room stilled, filled with charged energy. Her words had given them a shock.

Genet didn't even flinch. "I suppose you can back this accusation up?"

"Yes."

Jayden heaved the rogue to the floor and quickly unwrapped him. The stench of death still hadn't grown strong enough to overpower Genet's maker scent. The assembled miun didn't even have to approach the body to smell who the rogue belonged to.

Throwing her head back, Genet released a long, shrill wave of laughter and pounced on the corpse to sniff and lick at his face. Kissa trembled. Her dam was mad, completely and totally, one hundred percent insane.

When Genet leapt to her feet, Kissa stumbled back and would have fallen if Venor hadn't caught her. Genet smiled, her mie gleaming from her eyes. "You discovered my secret. Bad, bad cub, bringing him back here," she said in a singsong voice.

Kissa took an unsteady breath. "You must step down, Dam, and admit yourself into the care of our healers."

Faster than she could follow, Genet's right hand shifted and raked claws across Kissa's collarbone and breasts. Venor let out a roar that reverberated through the room

and shifted. Jayden followed his lead. Genet jumped back, her body rapidly shifting into her cat form as well.

Trembling, Kissa waited for Jayden and Venor to complete their shifts before stepping behind them. Injured, her shift would take a little longer. They would protect her while she was in the vulnerable in-between stage. All she could think while her bones cracked and realigned and her muscles stretched and grew was that she and Venor had both been wrong. Negotiations? What negotiations? And Kissa didn't kid herself into believing that her power-crazed dam would do anything other than go for her throat.

Fully shifted, she stepped past Venor and Jayden. Venor chuffed and took a step forward, but Kissa pressed her side into his and bumped him with her head, telling him clearly that this was her fight and to stay out of it. She waited, trying to keep Genet in her peripheral vision but focusing on Venor. He chuffed again, this time in resignation, and stepped back. Kissa ducked her head in thanks, turned to face her dam—and Genet blindsided her.

She spun across the floor, her dam's teeth sinking into the scruff of her neck, claws tearing at her flank and rump. Genet was aiming for the kill while Kissa was still trying to wrap her head around the fact that she was fighting her dam at all.

The gathered miun backed away, giving dam and daughter a wide berth, plastering themselves against the walls. Kissa wrenched herself away from Genet, gaining her feet, circling, looking for an opening to strike. She didn't feel any pain, or even fear. Her mie demanded blood for blood, but Kissa held back as her dam pounced on her again. Twisting, Kissa evaded Genet to blanket her back and set her razor-sharp teeth in her dam's neck. She hunkered down, forcing Genet's belly to the marble floor, praying her dam would submit.

After several tense seconds, miraculously, Genet relaxed beneath her and mewed like a cub. She smelled of blood and deceit. Every instinct in Kissa roared to take advantage of the position Genet was in and finish her, take her life. But Jayden was right. She couldn't kill her own dam. Her heart won out over instinct, over intelligence, over loyalty to people and pride. She may not really know her dam, she may not understand her, but as her cub, she still loved Genet.

Slowly, carefully, Kissa took her weight off Genet's body. She kept her teeth locked around the back of her dam's neck until she had a wide, stable stance over her. Genet had submitted. Kissa had won the right to unseat her dam and lead the pride. She stepped back—and Genet sprung. Not at her, at a young, human-form cub who stood apart from his parents.

Genet latched on to the male child's neck and dragged him into the middle of the room as shouts and roars echoed through the room. Crouched low, she kept the cub between herself and Kissa. Rage like nothing Kissa had ever felt before stole through her, killing every other emotion. She became cold, her mind and body focused on one goal. Cat and human instincts in perfect agreement, Kissa crept closer, head and belly low to the ground.

Genet's eyes held smug laughter at Kissa's submissive display. Her posture relaxed, her grip on the toddler-aged male loosened. Kissa launched herself through the air, hitting her dam, tumbling them away from the cub. With a roar, she found Genet's exposed neck and ripped out her throat.



## Chapter Eight

A clean kill. Venor knew the term should apply, but watching Kissa stand over her dam's still form, blood dripping from her muzzle, *clean* was the last word that came to mind to describe the scene before him. He could smell her rage turn to regret as acutely as he could see her muscles unclench, her posture changing from victorious to horrified.

Shifting quickly, Venor thought through what he would say to her when he had a human voice. Nothing seemed sufficient. Feeling completely inadequate, he stood on two legs and crossed the silent room. No one moved. No one said anything. Even the Council of Dams remained eerily silent.

"Kiss." He bent down in front of her, drawing her eyes away from the limp, bloody body of her dam. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

She closed her large cat eyes and nuzzled him, seeking comfort. He dropped his head to her neck and inhaled the sweet scent of her heat mixed with the sour smell of her kill. He needed to remove her from the temple, which was filled with judgmental eyes and weeping erections.

He lifted his head and spoke loud enough for everyone to hear, "Kissa Alassane is Oakview's new mane mie." He held his breath, waiting to see if the pride would accept her even though she was unmated.

The rescued cub's parents were the first to kneel, and the rest of the pride quickly followed suit, miun pressing bellies to the floor, their diamond-shaped heads between their outstretched forelegs, human-form shifters dropping to their knees and bowing low. A procession of shouts and roars went up, rattling the large bay windows, reverberating through Venor's body. She was theirs, but soon he would make her his.

Three months until her next heat. Three months until he would know if she would accept him as her bonded mate.

They left the temple, Kissa remaining close by his side, her shoulder brushing his legs with each step they took. Jayden followed in human form once more. He scooped up his keys and their clothing on the way out.

The drive to Venor's home was a quiet one. Subdued and still in lion form, Kissa rested her head on his lap as he checked her over for injuries. Minor. They would heal as soon as she shifted. When they pulled into the long circle drive leading up to his neo-Victorian-style house, Jayden said, "I'll call Latif. Let him know he can bring the made miun back to the pride."

What he meant, of course, was that he'd tell the mane miu that his bonded mate was dead and he was mane miu no more. Thank the gods Jayden had enough

sensitivity to refrain from voicing this in front of Kissa. She knew. No need to throw it in her face.

He led her to his bedroom and opened the dark-paneled door. "Do you want me to stay?" he asked as she crossed the master bedroom and entered the bathroom that he'd built with her in mind.

She nodded her blood-splattered head and shut the door using her shoulder. Venor sat on the bed and listened to the sounds of her shifting, which quickly changed to sounds of her sobbing. He crossed the bedroom with quick strides. When he opened the door, he found her in human form, curled up in the fetal position on the cold, tile floor. He quickly ran a bath in the large whirlpool bathtub, scooped her up and sank down in the hot, bubbly water with her in his arms.

Eventually she quieted, wrapped her arms around his neck and rested her head over his heart. Quietly reaching over her, Venor grabbed a washcloth and washed the blood from her body. He wished he had words to soothe her. But what was there to say? She had made the correct choice. If she had left Genet alive, the cub's parents would have had the right to seek vengeance in the form of three days of torture ending in a brutal death.

Eventually, Kissa's breathing changed, her heartbeat slowed to a steady thump. Asleep.

Venor flipped the lever for the drain with his big toe and left the tub, careful not to jostle her. She had only slept a few hours the night before, and who knew how long she'd gone without sleep before that. He dried her long, straight hair, running his fingers through the silky strands, then patted them both dry.

Caring for her like this was such an intimate act, one he wanted to repeat for the rest of his life. Now that she was mane mie and he a newly adopted member of the Oakview Pride, he was even more unsure of his place in her heart. Surely he had proven himself trustworthy today. Every instinct, human and miun, had demanded that he defend his prospective mate, fight by her side. But he had held himself in check, refrained from interfering in the fight.

Would she see it that way? Or would she resent him for standing by while she was forced to kill her dam?

Kissa moaned softly and stirred in his arms. Goose bumps dotted her skin. He needed to tuck her into bed. Placing her in the center of the mattress, Venor climbed into bed and spooned her shivering body. She sighed and snuggled up against him. Pulling up the covers, Venor gritted his teeth, fighting for control when her lush bottom rubbed up against his hardening sex.

*Sleep, he told himself, she needs sleep.*

Closing his eyes, he forced his muscles to relax. He needed sleep too.

\* \* \* \* \*

Seconds or hours later, a waking dream unfolded around him. He was back in his Paris Pride, in the outer court of the Temple of Khonsu. Shaped like a crescent moon, the temple looked as if it were frowning at him from where he kneeled in the grass.

Panic seized him. He jumped up and spun around, looking for the mature mie who meant to force him to mate with her. He felt her presence, knew she was near. But the courtyard stood empty. Silent. Not even the wind whispered through the golden yew trees. For all its medieval beauty, Venor hated this place, hated dreaming of it. Why was he here?

"Ven?"

He whipped around, searching the grounds for Kissa's disembodied voice. "Where are you?"

"Behind the gate." Her voice glided over his skin like a warm, supple breeze. "Leave this place. Come to me. You don't belong here anymore."

She was walking his dream, and she knew what this place represented to him. Could she hear his thoughts? Feel his emotions? The most skilled dreamwalkers had those abilities. Shame filled him once more.

"Don't," she said. "What they did to you is their sin, not yours."

"You know my mind." He walked slowly toward the gate, his feet feeling heavy and unsure.

"Yes. Your thoughts and emotions are open to me."

"What do you see?" He reached the gate and studied her beautiful, naked form between the old steel bars. Sadness moistened her green, green eyes but strength and determination gave her a confident posture, shoulders back, chin lifted. Perhaps his kitten was stronger than he thought.

"I see you." She smiled, but there was pain in her posture.

"How do you see me?" He asked the question even though he was unsure whether or not he wanted her answer.

"I see you as you were, as you are, as you could be. I see an honorable male, one who I trust." She wrapped her fingers around the bars of the gate. "All you have to do is step through and take my hand. I can take us somewhere else. Somewhere...pleasant. Trust in me."

"I do trust you. With my life."

"Then open the gate. Come to me." Her hair sparkled with golden highlights, giving her a halo effect. A large green light twinkled near her right shoulder. The dream god? he wondered.

"You look...different."

"It's my natural dream form." She smiled and it quavered but she held on to her grin, as if determined to fight back her grief. "Quit stalling. Open the gate."

Venor didn't know why he stood, rooted to the spot like one of the golden yew trees. Fear? No, not anymore, not with Kissa standing before him like a gold goddess. "I think I'm stuck," he said, feeling dense.

"Why are you stuck?" She took another step back. The forest surrounding the temple seemed to creep forward, closing in on her, stealing her away from him.

What did this dream represent to him? He was stuck in the past? Afraid of being made a victim again as he had been when still a cub? Afraid that Kissa would never learn to trust him enough to complete the Ritual of Generation?

Venor shouted as the trees reached for Kissa, their knobby, leaf-covered branches wrapping around her arms, waist and legs. Wrenching the gate open, he cursed his indecision as he ran for her. He would not lose her just when he'd found her again.

He shifted his hands to claws and shredded the branches, cutting them away from her body. Covered in small pieces of bark and bruised leaves, she fell into his arms. He retracted his claws in time, barely missing cutting her.

The forest dissolved. Paris faded. He held Kissa tightly, listening to her heartbeat as they sank into darkness so deep and black that his eyes were blind. "Where are –?"

Light returned and he blinked hard, trying to focus.

"Home," she said against his chest. "We're home."

He looked around his bedroom, the same but somehow different, as if someone had entered the room while he was gone and polished everything to a high gloss. Fresh and new. Warm and bright.

Kissa stepped out of his arms and shook her head, releasing the bits of brush to fly from her hair. "That dream shouldn't bother you anymore," she said. "You freed yourself from it."

"You freed me," he said, hoarsely.

"That's not how it works." She pressed herself against him. He grew hard, his breath ragged as she immersed him in her scent. She nipped at his neck. "I'm only a guide. You choose the path."

"Thank you for guiding me." His voice had turned guttural, his miu growling for his mate.

She smoothed her hand over his hip, slipped it between their bodies and wrapped her fingers around his dick. He jerked and thrust into her hand, moaning.

"Mate with me." She pumped her hand up and down and kissed along his collarbone.

*A dream. It's just a dream. Here you can take her. Mate with her and still keep your promise. Here she would accept him because there would be no consequences. Just a dream.*

The dream shifted. He was suddenly kneeling on his bed, Kissa on her hands and knees in front of him. Plumping her cheeks with his hands, he lowered his head between her legs. She mewled and squirmed as he laved at her clit, starting out with

light, teasing flicks, taking his time, working her over until she begged, her voice strained, "Please, Ven, please."

He grasped her thighs, spread her legs wider and pierced her with his tongue. She came, shuddering and screaming her release. *Beautiful*. When she came for him, she was the most beautiful female in the world. She calmed and he dragged his tongue over her clit, setting off little tremors in her lithe body.

"Do you want me inside you, *ma chaton*?" He positioned himself behind her, pressing his cock at her slick entrance.

She looked over her shoulder at him, panting. "Yes."

He gripped her hips and thrust into her, growling her name. She retreated from him, her back bowing up, her hands shifting. Before she could take a swipe at him, he collapsed his bodyweight on her smaller frame and gripped her fur-covered wrists. She hissed, twisted beneath him, but he remained seated in her wet heat. Nipping at the back of her neck, he pressed into her, as far as he could go. With short, deep thrusts, he mated with her, wanting his seed to fill her womb, even if it was just in his dream.

Close to coming, he followed his instinct and bit the base of her neck, holding her still so he could pound into her as his *miu* demanded. His bite triggered another orgasm from her. When her inner muscles gripped his cock, he slammed into her, coming with her, calling out her name.

Still inside her, he gathered her in his arms and rolled them to their sides so he wouldn't smother her with his weight. Aftershocks still rippled through her body as he pulled out of her. She didn't whimper or even flinch when he withdrew. Maybe she didn't have to feel pain inside dreams if she didn't want to. He didn't ask. The pain he felt for her was more than enough for the both of them.

\* \* \* \* \*

Kissa spent the night walking Venor's dreams, mating and making love. Better than facing her dreams of blood and death, of killing her dam. When she awoke in the morning, fully rested and sated, she was determined to complete the Ritual of Generation with him. Enough running. Enough hiding. Time to grow up, become the female she was meant to be.

Venor blanketed her back with his body. His rigid sex filled the seam of her ass. She thrust against him, but he didn't wake. His soft snore filled her ear. She rolled over and pushed him on his back, a plan developing in her mind. With soft kisses, she traversed his broad chest and narrow stomach. When she reached his sex, it was as heavy and full as she'd known it would be.

She used her mouth to get him wet then stroked him with slow, pressured glides of her hand. Venor woke, moaning her name. She kissed the broad head of his cock then rose up and straddled his hips, hovering over his erection until he opened his pale gold eyes and looked at her. Slowly she pressed down, impaling herself on his large shaft.

He grabbed her hips and lifted her off him, his eyes flashing at her. "You have become a tease?" he asked bitterly.

"No." She leaned down to kiss his lips but he turned his head away. She kissed his unshaven jaw instead. "I...want to complete the ritual with you. I want us...to be bonded mates."

He set her on the bed and sat up. "I hear your words, but I feel your hesitation. Your fear. I promised to wait until your next heat and I will keep that promise."

"Why?" She pressed herself against his back and nuzzled his neck.

"How can you ask me that, *ma chaton*?" He pulled away from her, stood and walked across the room to look out the large window displaying the vegetable garden in the backyard. "You killed your dam yesterday. Today is your first day of being the Oakview Pride's mane mie. Don't you see that you are attempting to use me as a crutch? A distraction from all that you have done and must do?"

"Is that what you think?" Kissa jumped off the bed and stood, shaking. "That I'm a coward? A user?"

"I think you are frightened and grieving."

His words ripped through her. There was truth in them, but her fear and grief didn't change the fact that she was ready and willing to mate with him the third time. She knew her own mind. "So you're just going to make this decision for me. Decide what's best because you think I'm a scared little *kitten* who is mourning her dam."

He let loose a heavy sigh and turned to look at her. "I am going to keep my promise to you. I am going to maintain your trust."

She turned her back on him and brushed away angry tears. "Who's the coward now?" she asked, and stomped out of the room, slamming the door behind her even while knowing she was acting like a temperamental child.

Out the back door and into the woods, she ran until she found a small clearing. There she went down on hands and knees and shifted. In her cat form, she ran as fast as she could, giving her mie full rein. Like a broken record, Venor's words played repeatedly in her head.

She didn't know where she was going until the temple loomed before her. In the outer courtyard, Brooke and Stacie kneeled naked next to each other, talking. Kissa padded up to them and chuffed, happy to see them alive and, hopefully, well.

"Um, hello," Brooke said, sitting back on her haunches. She turned to Stacie and whispered, "Can they understand us when they're in cat form?"

Stacie shrugged. "Let's find out. "If you can understand what I'm saying, blink twice."

Kissa blinked twice. Brooke clapped her hands and giggled. "This is fun. Ask her something else."

Not in the mood for games, Kissa shifted. When she looked up at them with human eyes, their mouths were open, a dazed look on their faces.

"Wow." Stacie gasped. "Just wow."

Brooke splayed her fingers out like a fan and pressed her hand to her breastbone, her eyes watering. "Kissa?"

"Yeah," she said, "I'm glad to see you guys. When did you get in?"

"Last night a couple scruffy-looking guards brought us here," Stacie said. "That...shifting thing is amazing. We've been trying to do it all morning."

"So far no luck," Brooke said.

"I take it you've already been through orientation. You seem to be adjusting very quickly. Who's working with you?"

"If you think we're not freaking out on the inside, you'd be wrong," Brooke said. "Belinda and her daughter Anna are showing us the ropes. They've agreed to accept us into their pride in Fort Collins along with that guy, Harley. You know them?"

"Yes. I understand why you wouldn't want to join our pride right now. The Fort Collins Pride is stable and Belinda and Anna are more than capable of guiding you through your transition. But if you ever want to move back to Texas, you will always be welcome in the Oakview Pride." Kissa sat and crossed her legs Indian-style with a sigh.

"You okay?" Brooke asked. "You seem... Is it man trouble?"

Kissa's stomach tightened. "Am I that obvious?"

Stacie winced, looking embarrassed. "Uh, there are lots of rumors going around. About you and..."

"The French dude, Venor," Brooke said. "Everyone's saying you were supposed to mate with him but changed your mind."

Kissa sniffed. "Well, I changed my mind again. Now he's the one who doesn't want to mate me. I don't even care anymore. He's a fool. So what if he doesn't want me anymore? He doesn't want me? I don't want him. And I sure as hell don't need him."

"Okay." Stacie sat back on her heels. "Nice rant."

"It's obviously all crap though," Brooke said.

Kissa sniffed again, trying not to cry. "He thinks I want to use him as a crutch. That I'm scared of leading the pride alone. He's wrong. When I told him I wanted to wait until my next heat—"

"Oh ick. We learned all about that," Stacie said.

Brooke smacked her arm. "Go on, Kissa. What did you tell him?"

Kissa ran her fingers through her hair. "I was unsure before, but I'm confident now. Why won't he listen to me?"

"You just need to convince him," Brooke said. "We can help with that."

Stacie smiled and winked at her. "You've come to the right girls."

\* \* \* \* \*

After Venor checked to make sure Kissa hadn't left pride territory, he went through the motions of his day. Not even Re's shining sun could brighten his dark mood. He'd done it again – chased her away.

In the evening, when he returned to his home, Jayden was in the kitchen mumbling to himself and making coffee.

"Decaf. Won't keep you up." Jayden handed Venor a cup, eyebrows raised. "I saw Kissa take off toward the temple. Girl looked pissed. What'd you do this time?"

Venor took a sip and sank down at the kitchen table. "She wished to complete the ritual. I denied her."

Jayden gave him an incredulous stare. "You're shitting me. Why'd you do that?"

"I made a promise to her. If I am to regain her trust then I must keep my word."

"Nah, man. You got it all wrong." He poured himself a cup of coffee and leaned up against the kitchen counter. "This ain't about mating or waiting."

"Then what is it about?"

"You really want to know?" Jayden flipped a chair around and sat, his legs straddling the back. "Or you happy doing the 'ignorance is bliss' thing?"

Venor scrubbed his hands over his unshaven face. "Do I look happy to you?"

"V, man, I love you like a brother from another mother, but sometimes I just don't know about you." Jayden smirked at him. "The point is that you listen to the girl, that you talk so she can hear you."

Venor closed his eyes. Jayden was right. Once more, he had handled a problem poorly with her. Anyone else, any other situation, he would have stepped back from his emotions and thought through the consequences. But with Kissa, his reason and rationality walked out the door. And he couldn't blame his lack of *savoir faire* on her heat – difficulty in decision-making where Kissa was concerned had plagued him since their first meeting.

"Get it?" Jayden asked.

"*Oui*." Venor stood and poured his coffee down the drain. "I'll go after her."

"Nah, man. This time give her the opportunity to come back to you. She needs to choose you all by her lonesome, not have you running her to ground every time you have a disagreement. Hear what I'm saying?"

Venor sighed. "How long do I wait?"

"You need a distraction." Jayden grimaced. "Unfortunately, I got a good one for you."

Venor straightened. "What is it?"

"Latif's disappeared."

"I thought you talked to him yesterday. Asked him to bring the made back to the pride."



"Nope. I called yesterday. No answer so I left a message. A few hours later, Genet's guards show up with the made miun but no Latif. Now he's turned off his phone."

*Merde.* "He has lost his bonded mate. He should be with our healers."

"Know it," Jayden said. "Without help, he could lose his mind to his cat. Go rogue."

"Does Kissa know?"

"Yeah, Erin Maher has been assigned—at least temporarily—as her personal assistant. I told her to give Kissa the info ASAP."

"Then she's taken care of it as is her responsibility both as his daughter and as mane mie." If he could, Venor would take this burden from her. To have to send guards to hunt her sire the day after she killed her dam... He did not envy the position she was in.

The sound of the back door opening and shutting caught his attention. Kissa's sweet scent reached him, along with the scent of two other females—the made women from Austin. He began to stand.

Jayden grabbed his arm and pulled him down. "Let her come to you. Remember?"

Venor growled but remained seated. Jayden smacked him on the back. "Strip poker?"

That startled him into a short, sharp laugh. Sometimes he wondered if a little rogue hadn't crept into his friend's mind despite attention from the pride healers. Jayden definitely had a twisted sense of humor. "I think I'll go to bed. Read a book while I wait for her."

Jayden snorted. "Right. Night."

"Good night, Jayden."

## Chapter Nine

"Mie don't really do lingerie." Kissa exhaled and held her breath as Stacie had instructed her.

Stacie cinched the waistline, pulling the satin ribbons tight in the back of the strapless corset they had insisted she wear for her bonding night. "Yeah, well, that all changed the moment Brooke and I became mie. We own a lingerie shop. Think we'd pass up the chance to play dress-up with Texas' mane mie?"

"Okay, you can breathe," Brooke said, plucking at the pale violet trim at Kissa's suddenly voluptuous bustline. "Too tight or just right?"

Kissa took a breath, goggling at her new hourglass figure. *Holy crap*. She had curves. "Just right."

"Once the word gets out that the mane mie is wearing Personal Passions, mie from all over will be lining up at our door."

"Technically I'm not the mane mie yet. The ceremony hasn't been completed." She nervously slid her shaking hand over the boning of the corset that was working miracles on her figure.

Brooke snorted. "Who cares about some stupid ceremony? And there's no way Venor will say no once he sees you in this little number. So you'll be a double dam."

Stacie snorted at that. "A 'double dam'. Nice. Does that mean you'll be preggers too?"

"No," Kissa said. "Not necessarily, but the possibility will be there and that's what matters."

Turning in front of the bathroom mirror, Kissa admitted that Brooke had a point. She looked...hot. Venor's agreement to allow her first heat to pass without completing the Ritual of Generation had seemed like a good idea before, but now...she wanted more than anything to become his bonded mate.

Now. Right now. She loved him. Trusted him. *Wanted* him. Why wait any longer?

"What if I do a partial shift? I don't want to ruin the corset. It's so pretty."

Brooke's mouth dropped open. Stacie gasped then started giggling. "A—a partial shift? Do you, um, do that often when you're...mating?"

"Laugh all you want." Kissa planted her hands on her hips—hips she'd always wanted. Round and womanly because of the corset. "Just wait until you go into heat, then you'll see how hard it is to keep your mie under control."

Brooke's eyebrows inched upward. "What parts shift exactly?"

Stacie gasped and did a little booty dance. "Do you ever sprout a tail?"

Brooke's mouth quirked into a half-smile. "Now *that* could be sexy. Weird, but definitely sexy."

Kissa would have rolled her eyes but they were still admiring the shape of her body in the corset and she didn't want to dim their happiness. "Our mie instinct is to make the miu work for it...so, for example, my hand might shift to a claw to swipe at him."

Stacie wrinkled her nose at her in the mirror. "Sounds bloody."

"My point exactly. The lingerie could be ruined."

"It's a gift, hon." Brooke pulled out her makeup kit and touched up Kissa's lips with a pale mauve-colored lipstick. "As long as it gets the job done, who cares if it's ruined in the process?"

"Do you really think this is going to work? Venor is determined to do the honorable thing and allow my heat to pass. Once he makes his mind up about something, it's hard to change it."

"Kiss?" Venor knocked on the bathroom door, sending Stacie into another bout of giggles. "Are you coming to bed, *ma chaton*?"

Kissa crossed her arms over her chest, nerves making her stomach roll. "Yes, I'll be right there."

All three of the women quietly waited until the sound of his footsteps faded down the hall. Stacie kept her hand over her mouth to smother her laughter while Brooke stared at Kissa in the mirror, her eyes wide with mischief. Kissa realized that they seemed unfazed since they'd become miun. Really, they'd adjusted to their new lives with remarkable ease, as if being made miun was just another adventure they were on. Until she'd put the corset on and seen just how good the lingerie made her look, she'd resigned herself to doing Stacie and Brooke a favor, but now she realized that they were the ones doing her a favor.

If all went according to plan, tonight would be the first night of her bonded life with Venor. Her new friends were right, the occasion warranted something special, and the beautiful corset and thong panty made her look the part she planned to play tonight. Now if she could get her nerves under control and gather up enough courage to leave the bathroom, everything just might work out the way she wanted it to.

"Hey, are those tears?" Brooke asked, grabbing a tissue and blotting at Kissa's watery eyes. "You don't have to do this, you know."

Stacie squeezed her shoulders. "Maybe Venor's right. Maybe you should wait to make this decision until after your heat has passed."

Kissa bent to adjust the garters that held up her sheer nylon stockings, giving her time to rein in her feelings. "It's just my hormones messing with my emotions." She straightened and cleared her tight throat. "Thank you for doing this for me. I feel like a million bucks, I really do. You two have been so kind, such wonderful friends to me. And I know that I don't deserve it. If it wasn't for me..."

Stacie sniffled. "Ah, now you're going to make me start crying. Quit it."

Brooke laughed, her eyes sparkling with unshed tears. "Yeah, quit it. It's not your fault that bastard attacked us. If it wasn't for you and your boy toy out there, we would've turned rogue."

Stacie slapped Kissa on the butt. "Now, go out there and get your man—or male—or miu—or whatever. Just go get him."

"Make us proud," Brooke said, opening the door with a broad smile.

Kissa gave them quick hugs and then rushed down the hall to Venor's bedroom—their bedroom—before she lost her nerve. Never had she felt so vulnerable. If Venor denied her wishes, what did that say about their relationship, what did that say about her? She wanted them to be on equal footing, for him to listen to her as she listened to him, so if he was determined to make decisions that affected them both without taking into consideration her input then their relationship simply would not work. Equals. Working together for their good and the good of their pride. No more of this matriarchal system. No more of the constant backbiting and political intrigue. Their relationship should reflect the new direction the pride was taking. Equality between the sexes. Equality regardless of whether you were born miun or made miun.

Outside the bedroom door, Kiss straightened her shoulders and took a deep breath—not too deep, though, because the corset wouldn't allow it. *Here I go*, she thought. *Trust in Venor. Trust in yourself. Everything will be all right.* The doorknob was cold beneath her palm. She shivered as she opened the door and took a step forward.

Inside the bedroom, the bedside lamp illuminated Venor, who had propped up pillows behind his back so that he could read a book. His head came up and his pale gold eyes scanned her from head to toe. Kissa stood frozen in the doorway, unable to go in, unwilling to run away. Venor's breathing turned rapid, his bare chest rising and falling, half-hidden beneath the white sheets.

"Kiss?" He set the book aside and discarded the top sheet, revealing his magnificent nude body.

The response of his cock, hardening before her eyes, gave her the courage to step inside and close the door. Her plan was working. She'd taken him off guard. Now all she needed to do was make him lose his formidable control. No small job there. She licked her lips and struck the sexy pose Brooke had taught her, hand on hip, legs just so, head up, chest out. Venor swung his legs over the side of the bed and opened his arms to her.

"Come here to me, *bébé*."

On wobbly legs, she crossed the room and fell into his arms. His reaction—while good—wasn't what she wanted. He was supposed to run across the room, snatch her up and mount her, mate with her, offer her the bonding words so that she could offer him hers. Instead, he smoothed her hair aside and pressed soft kisses up her shoulder and neck, murmuring to her words of love. "*Ma coeur*, you are beautiful in your lingerie. A lovely violet flower come to grace my bed." He framed her face with his

hands. His thumbs stroked her cheekbones and jawline, sending decadent shock waves through her body, making her shudder and sigh.

She sat in his lap and wrapped her arms and legs around him, burying her head in his neck. His soft hair felt like fur against her skin. Closing her eyes, she breathed him in. He smelled so good, an intoxicating mix of moss, spice and sandalwood. "Mmm."

Venor rolled them over on the bed, taking care to keep most of his weight off her. "Look at me." He waited for her to look up into his eyes. "You believe tonight is the last night of your heat, *oui*?"

"Yes." Oh Goddess, he was going to tell her again all the reasons they should wait until her next heat to bond.

Venor's brow furrowed and he frowned. "There is fear in your eyes. Why?" He rose up on his forearms to look down at her. "Do you think I will press you to bond on this night when I have sworn to you that I will wait?"

"No." She arched up to kiss him, her mouth meeting his, her tongue licking his lips, asking for entry.

He pulled away, sitting back on his haunches so that she could no longer reach him with her mouth. "What is it, Kiss? No more will I assume I know what's in your heart. I made that mistake on the day of our first mating. I will never do so again. You must tell me what is on your mind."

Kissa squirmed under his intense gaze. His eyes bore into her like a fatewalker looking into her soul, penetrating her darkest secrets. *Crap*. She was going to have to spill and risk total rejection from him. *Why couldn't anything be easy?* She was terrible at this, expressing herself through words. Her thoughts became tangled in her head and ended up a jumbled mess when they came out of her mouth.

"Talk to me." Venor scooted back on the bed, putting more distance between them.

"I don't want to wait." She squeezed her eyes closed, blowing out a long puff of breath. "I know I messed things up, but I don't want to wait anymore."

Venor slid his hand down her foot to cup her heel. There was so much caring, so much sweetness in that small touch that Kissa opened her eyes to look at him. What she saw locked her breath in her lungs, made her heart thump madly in her chest. He knelt before her, his eyes gentle, smiling encouragement even while his sex pulsed with the beat of his racing heart, while his breaths came in short pants. She noticed then the small bead of sweat crawling down the side of his face, the sheen of moisture above his plush lips. He wanted her body, she realized, but he wanted her heart more, because there he sat waiting her out, holding back his passion, his need so that she could express herself.

"We both made a mess of our relationship. The problems we've experienced do not rest wholly on your shoulders. I had thought—hoped—we had moved past them, but there is something still bothering you?"

"Yes," Kissa said weakly. *Just spit out already. How can he stand you? How can you be the next mane mie if you continue to run away from the hard things? Trust him. Trust yourself. "I want you."*

Venor tilted his head to the side. His hair slid to cover half of his gorgeous face but it didn't cover the expression transforming his face from patience to confusion. "I want you too, *ma chaton*."

"No." She pushed herself into a sitting position and tightly clasped her hands over her stomach. "I really want to bond with you tonight."

Scooting up between her legs so that he could take her hands in his, Venor studied her face. "Why?"

She collapsed against the headboard, knocking her head against the wooden slats and not giving a good goddamn about the shock of pain that splintered her head. This time he hadn't denied her flat-out, as she had feared. Instead, he'd opened the door for her declaration. "You're the one I want to bond with, have cubs with, lead the pride with."

His hands jerked then tightly squeezed hers. She squeezed back, unable to say more. He paused, taking a deep breath. "I don't want to postpone bonding with you either. But after all we've been through, I still think it's best if we wait until your next heat to complete the Ritual of Generation."

"No. I don't want to wait three months."

"The pride will be fine, Kiss. I will help maintain peace, and there are no dams strong enough to take control."

"I don't care about the pride. This isn't about the pride."

"Then what is it about?" Venor rubbed her arms, soothing her.

"You and me. Fixing a mistake. Choosing to be together because we're meant to be together. Not for my parents. Not for the pride. For us."

Tears gathered in her eyes again and she cursed her heat for the annoying hormones swarming through her body, hijacking her emotions. Goddess, she would be happy once it ended. To feel like a normal person again, to walk into a room of males and not feel threatened—she'd never take these things for granted again. But her heat was a blessing, too, she reminded herself, because it meant that she could bond with Venor if he would have her.

"Shh. Do not cry, Kiss. If this is what you truly wish then I will happily oblige. I only want you to be certain that your mie is not influencing your decision in any way. I do not want you to ever regret your choice in me."

Kissa laughed, tears wetting her perfectly rouged cheeks. "I was afraid you didn't want to bond with me anymore. That you'd agreed to postpone the Ritual of Generation because you weren't sure—"

Venor leaned in and kissed the nape of her neck. She shivered, trying to regain her train of thought. "Ven..."

He buried his face in her hair, inhaling her scent, then lifted his mouth to her ear. "Last year I participated in my old pride's quarterly dream incubation and translation. In my dream, the God Khonsu presented you as my bonded mate." He licked the outer shell of her ear, making her gasp and hold on to him tighter. "I left Paris the next day, knowing only that you lived somewhere in America. I traveled, going from pride to pride, searching for you, and when I came to Texas, when I saw you for the first time, I recognized you as the female Khonsu had made for me."

She pulled back to look at him in shock. "Why didn't you tell me?"

Venor smoothed his thumbs over her cheeks, wiping away her tears. "You deserved to be seduced properly, not manipulated into a relationship because of dream prophecy."

*Damn.* How could she ever have doubted him? How could she have become so lost to her own fear that she couldn't see what a wonderful male he was? She kissed him, long and hard, hooking her arms around his neck, pressing her satin-clad body against his hard-muscled body while working her tongue along the ridges on the roof of his mouth, just the way she knew he liked it.

Venor grasped her hips and slid her down beneath him, returning her kiss with a low, passionate moan. She mewled in return. The feeling of truly belonging wrapped around her heart like sweet warmth that spread out from her core.

"You'll complete the ritual with me tonight?" she asked against his mouth.

"*Oui*," Venor said. "Nothing would bring me more pleasure."

She kissed her way down his neck to his well-defined chest. She loved his pecs, not too pumped, not overdone like some of the males who were into bodybuilding, just...perfect in her estimation. She licked and nipped at a nipple before sucking it into her mouth and flicking the little pebble with her tongue. He murmured his approval, cupping her head with his hand.

"I love you," she said, laying kisses over his heart.

Venor buried his fingers in her hair and gently tugged her up so that they were face-to-face when he said, "I love you, *ma coeur*."

Her heart did a happy little skip in her chest as Venor nipped at her bottom lip. He smoothed away the tiny sting with lips and tongue and she groaned her appreciation.

"I will love you always." He nibbled his way along her jaw, down her neck and across her shoulder blade, leaving goose bumps in his wake.

"No more secrets?" she asked.

"No more," he agreed. "We will be bonded. We will be as one."

Kissa fought to catch her breath. "Make us one right now, Venor. Gods, I want you inside me."

"Patience, Kiss. This is our bonding night, I want it to last as long as possible."

He moved slowly, stoking her fire with his hands, shaping her corset-enhanced waist and hips, his tongue teasing the plush crests of her breasts. She responded by arching off the bed to press the length of her body against his.

He groaned. "*Bébé*, while I adore the amazing décolletage the corset has created, nothing compares to the sight of you *nu*."

"Nude?" she asked breathlessly.

"*Oui*." He hugged her to him and tugged at the ribbons that laced up the back. "I need you naked in my arms, *ma coeur*."

"I thought you wanted to go slow." She bit his neck, sucking his hot flesh into her mouth, wanting to leave her mark.

His breath hitched and he made a little strangling sound. "Slow, yes, but this satin barrier between us feels like sackcloth. I cannot abide it."

She pushed him back and lay down so she could see his response as she teased her fingers down the front of her body. "There are eyehooks in the front." She popped open the first three at the top. Her breasts spilled out of the corset, exposing her hard, little nipples. "See. Easy peasy."

As she hoped, Venor ducked his head and took one nipple into his mouth as he rolled the other one between his fingers. She closed her eyes, absorbing the erotic sensations he created. Lifting his head, he worshiped her breasts, massaging and cupping them, circling her nipples with the flats of his thumbs. She shifted restlessly on the soft, cotton sheets, unable to hold still. At last, he pulled the sides of the corset together and up, unhooking the long row of hooks in one deft move. She took a deep breath, reveling in the sudden freedom he'd given her—not just by removing the lingerie, but by trusting her to make the decision to complete the mating bond with him tonight. This was going to work. *They* were going to work.

He struggled with the garters, cursing under his breath, and Kissa gave a joyful laugh before helping remove her stockings and panties.

"You are happy, Kiss?"

"*Oui*," she said, teasingly.

"I promise to keep joy in your heart for the rest of our lives."

She bit her lip, tears filling her eyes. "I promise that I'll try to make you happy too."

Smiling, he knelt to hover over her mouth. "You make me happy in everything that you do...except when you run from me."

Kissa cupped his handsome face. "I'll never run away from you again," she said. "From now on, we tell each other everything, talk things out even when we're angry or afraid."

"Agreed." He kissed her then, seducing her mouth with lips and teeth and tongue.

She loved how he alternated between long, deep, breathtaking kisses and short, sensual nips that left her lips tingling. She loved him. And the knowledge of the pure, unadulterated acceptance of their relationship made her happier than she had ever been



in her life. Slipping her hand between their bodies, she cupped him and gently squeezed. His mouth broke from hers and he groaned, deep and guttural. Her mie could feel his miu rising to the surface, demanding that they complete the Ritual of Generation, and she gloried in it.

Wrapping her legs around his hips, she pressed up against him so the head of his cock nudged her entrance. "Inside me. Please, Ven. I need you to mate with me. Now."

He growled, pulled back and flipped her over so that she was on her hands and knees. He tested her readiness, pushing two long fingers into her wet heat. Before she could catch her breath, he withdrew his fingers and thrust into her balls-deep. She yowled, her mie responding to his dominant behavior, instinctually twisting beneath him. Testing his strength, his claim on her, she hissed at him and tried to buck him off. He bowed over her, chuffing. She pulled away, nearly unseating him, and he bared his teeth before gently locking them around the back of her neck, racking her body with little lightning bolts.

*Yes. Like this, just like this.*

His teeth pierced her skin, appealing to her mie's need to be dominated. She lifted her ass, pressed back into him in a submissive offering of herself. Venor purred his satisfaction, the vibrations of his vocalization reaching her core and creating mini shock waves inside her, her inner muscles flexing around his sex.

He released her neck to lick and suck at the indentation of his teeth marks that she could feel like a marriage band embedded in her skin. His love bite tingled and throbbed, echoing the response of her sex. He thrust deeper, pressing into her as far as he could go, claiming every inch of her. And she welcomed him, welcomed the invasion, even while her body worked to accommodate his length and width.

"Gods, Kiss," he said in a low voice. "When you grip me like that I could come right now."

"Hard and fast," she pleaded. "Please, Venor, I want—"

"I know what you want, *bébé*. I want it too."

Straightening behind her, he gripped her hips, his nails sinking into her flesh. She moaned. Her muscles bunched and knotted beneath her enflamed skin, breathlessly waiting for him to move.

He withdrew slowly until just the head of his cock remained inside her. "I am yours, Kissa Alassane. Bonded to you heart, body and soul. Yours until the day I die."

Choking on tears, she returned the ritual binding words. "I am yours, Venor Brun. Bonded to you heart, body and soul. Yours until the day I die."

Venor slammed into her, stealing her breath. Filling her. Owning her. Again. And again. Hard and fast. Just how she wanted him, needed him. Her arms gave out and the upper part of her body collapsed on the bed. *Yes, Ven, yes.* Her hands shifted and she buried them in the bedding to prevent herself from reaching back and raking him with her razor-sharp claws. His hands maintained their hold on her hips, keeping her exactly

where he wanted her as he slammed into her, going deep, hitting her G-spot, making her writhe.

Uncontrollable tremors racked her body. She grabbed a pillow and bit down on it to muffle the screams of pleasure that tore from her throat. As she plummeted toward her release, she turned her head to watch Venor straining toward his own fulfillment. His lean muscles bunched beneath his golden skin, the cords of his neck stood out as his mouth opened to release a deep growl. *Magnificent.*

The sight of his pure pleasure pushed her over the edge. She released the pillow to scream his name. Her voice echoed through the room, a pledge, a warning to all others that he was hers and she was his. She came hard, harder than she ever had before, her body shuddering, shattering as she felt him empty himself inside her, filling her with his hot seed.

Anchored inside her, Venor held her close against him, not an inch of air between their bodies. Nothing and no one would come between them again, this she knew without a doubt. They were bonded—or would be as soon as he withdrew. Not wanting to wait another second, Kissa pulled away from him. He released her and the spines on his shaft did their job, stimulating ovulation for the third time, bonding them together as mates for life.

Ignoring the sting of pain, she rolled onto her back and opened her arms. Smiling his singularly brilliant smile, Venor scooped her up and held her against his chest. All he-man like, she thought.

“Mine,” he growled, kissing her.

“Yours,” she said, looping her arms around his neck to snuggle into him as she returned his kiss with all the love and desire she felt for him.

“Hey, V, you up?”

Venor broke the kiss to glare at the door as Jayden pounded on it hard enough to wake the dead.

“He was up a minute ago,” Kissa called. “And I plan to get him up again real soon.”

Venor laughed, shaking his head. “*Ma chaton*, I am up for you anytime.”

“Umm.” Jayden noisily cleared his throat. “It’s important.”

Groaning, Venor set her on the bed, snatched up the top sheet to cover her and went to the door. “It better be, my friend.” He opened the door and lifted his eyebrows.

Jayden looked past him to Kissa. She waved at him, unable to hide her silly smile. For the first time in her life, she felt giddy, as if nothing and no one could breach her happiness.

When Venor growled, Jayden averted his eyes. “You’ve completed the mating bond?”

“Yes,” Venor and Kissa said in unison.

Jayden met his eyes. “Congrats, man. I’m really happy for you.” He risked a glance at her. “For both of you.”

"Thanks. We're happy too."

Jayden nodded. "Well, I guess this will be your first decision as the pride's mane miun." He cleared his throat and crossed his arms over his chest. "I've got a lead on our escaped rogue and...the woman. I want to request your permission to go after them."

"What did you find?" Kissa sat up, holding the sheet to cover her breasts because Venor seemed in an endearingly possessive mood.

"A big-cat mauling outside Austin. A young married couple was attacked. The husband killed on-site. The wife missing."

"Why would the rogue make another mie if he still has the other female?" Venor asked.

"Maybe it's a different rogue," Kissa said.

"Yeah, maybe." Jayden shifted his feet and tucked his hands in his pockets. "The miun guard want to send a team after them."

"I haven't heard of this." Venor turned to Kissa. "Have you?"

"No."

"I think it would work better if one hunter went. He'd draw less attention than a team," Jayden said.

"You mean *you* would draw less attention," Venor said.

"What is the female to you, Jayden?" Kissa asked.

"My mate," Jayden said, surprising Kissa with his bluntness. She had suspected as much, but did not think he would readily admit it.

Venor turned to her. "What do you think?"

She smiled, happy that they were making this first big decision together. "I think that I love you."

He returned her smile and they remained like that—like a couple of goofy teenagers staring into each other's eyes—until Jayden coughed loudly, breaking the spell.

She felt her face reddening, embarrassed that someone other than Venor was witness to her softer side. She was the mane mie now. She needed to gain her pride's respect, and acting as if she were a tween with a crush was not the way to go about it.

As if he somehow sensed her thoughts, Jayden said, "I got nothin' but respect for you and V. Honestly." He pressed his palm over his heart.

"What do you think about sending him out to hunt alone?" Venor asked.

"You have experience in hunting, I don't, so the choice should be yours." She bit her lip. "But I'm concerned about his safety. You secretly hunted with him before because you believed it was too dangerous for him to go it alone. Has something changed?"

Jayden spoke up. "Normally I'd want backup, but there's nobody I trust to have my back other than V, and he's all tied up."

All sorts of dirty thoughts flew through Kissa's mind at the mention of Venor tied up, but she kept her mouth shut – barely.

"Do you believe you can handle this hunt on your own?" Venor asked.

"Wouldn't have asked you otherwise," Jayden said.

Venor nodded. "I'll give you the same advice you gave me a few days ago. Go. Get your mate."

Jayden thumped him on the arm. "Thanks, man."

"Come home safe," Kissa added.

"Will do. I leave tonight."

"Good luck, my friend."

Jayden left them, his footsteps fading fast down the hall. Kissa waited for Venor to shut the door before saying, "I hope he finds her."

"He will." He crossed the room and lay down beside her, taking her hand in his.

"How do you know?"

"I found you." He brushed his lips over her knuckles. "And I certainly don't deserve you. Jayden deserves to have love in his life."

Kissa snuggled against him and hooked a leg over his hip. "Hmm. Maybe you're right. Maybe you don't deserve me at all, but you know what I deserve?"

"What?"

Pushing him on his back, she smiled. "My mate to lie back and let *me* dominate *him* for a while."

With a contented sigh, Venor did just that.

## About the Author

Jocelyn Modo grew up infatuated with science fiction and fantasy, reading everything she could get her greedy hands on. Later, when she discovered romance, it only seemed natural to combine the genres. She lives on the planet Earth but travels frequently to other worlds, always remembering to bring her badly beaten laptop with her.

Jocelyn welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her [author bio page](#) at [www.ellorascave.com](http://www.ellorascave.com).

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