

ELLORA'S CAVE TWILIGHT

*On
Vixen*
Jocelyn Modo

ELLORA'S CAVE *Quickies*®

On Vixen

Jocelyn Modo

Who knew a party planner would be such a party pooper? Luscious Serene Bleau is all business, especially when it comes to her client Kin Fina. At least she tries to be.

Kin, a shifter lion, is determined to seduce Serene into recognizing that there are some things you just can't plan for. Like falling into the arms of—and over the desk and against the shelves with—your destined mate. Even if you scurry away afterward. Thank the goddess Christmas is just around the corner, because Kin is going to need a miracle to win Serene's heart.

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On Vixen

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Chapter One

Enthralling. Her smooth, rich tone tripped Kin's heart and caught his breath. Only one woman's voice could call his lion—his miu—to the surface of his skin so that he had to fight to maintain his human form.

His mate.

Miun, or shifter lions, recognized their life-long mates by their body's physical response and their heart's spiritual response. Ever since Kin had met Serene, his body raged for release and his dreams exploded with visceral visions of mating.

Visions of Serene claiming him, submitting to him, burned through his mind and hardened his body. He fisted his hands and ground his teeth, banishing the erotic images, fighting the urge to shift into his lion form.

She was human. Fine-boned. Delicate compared to the females of his race, and unable to complete the Ritual of Generation to bind them together as mates.

"It broke the budget but Santa's Workshop will make the children's Christmas," Serene said to his sister, Idony, from across the newly decorated room. "You're handling the caterer. The gifts and reindeer costumes I purchased will arrive tomorrow, and I confirmed with the rent-a-Santa company this morning. Everything's running smooth as silk."

Damn. She could even make party planning sound sexy. At least to him.

Idony, a rare mindwalker—a mind reader—turned and frowned at him. She might feel his lust for Serene and hear a wayward thought or two, but their familial bond made walking his mind difficult for her.

Kin sighed. Claiming Serene while she remained human was impossible. Turning her—making her miun through bite or scratch—would change her life forever. But if he wanted to claim her without interference, he needed to make her miun and mate with

her as soon as she went into heat so he could introduce her to the pride as his bonded mate.

Thank the goddess Idony had no idea how serious this situation was for him. As far as she knew, he simply enjoyed flirting with the human female. Nothing more.

Bracing himself for the rush of unadulterated need that flooded his body every time Serene was near, Kin crossed the room—following the snaking path through the winter wonderland of fir trees and stuffed animals that she'd created—to the blonde-haired, blue-eyed object of his desire.

For the last month she'd helped them plan the Christmas Eve party at the community center. They'd adopted the center as a project to ingratiate the pride into their new neighborhood in Colorado Springs. For the last month she'd rebuffed his advances, pretending indifference when he could smell her desire, feel her need calling to his.

He'd never heard the word *no* so many times.

Kin had been snared by a human woman who didn't trust anyone—especially a male who was determined to win her—heart, body and soul. Time after time her actions had suggested that she saw him as a threat to her independence and if there was one thing he had learned about his mate it was that she didn't take threats lightly. But he couldn't walk away. He needed her. Wanted her in the way only a miun could want his mate. A need as basic as food and water and air in his lungs.

Idony studied the large room their pride had nicknamed the Lion's Den. "Looks good," she said. "You transformed it into every child's Christmas fantasy. Thank you."

Serene shrugged, seeming uncomfortable with the praise his sister gave her. "Many of the decorations are collapsible for easy storing. Almost everything can be used again next year. Except the ribbons." Her lovely, soft blue eyes darted over his face then quickly away. "They'll have to be cut from the banister and doors but they can be used to wrap gifts next year, so they won't be a total loss."

“Your attention to detail is amazing, Serene,” Kin cut in, placing a hand on her slim shoulder, unable to keep from touching her. “You went far beyond our expectations.”

She shrugged away and he let his hand fall to his side.

Stubborn, but then, he was used to stubborn women. His species was ruled by tough, pragmatic females. Females who would just as soon shift their hands to claws to rake out his eyes than allow him to look at them. His mate was gentle and cute compared to his former lovers.

She stepped forward, presenting him with the graceful line of her neck. The sweet curves of her hips and ass complemented her slender yet muscular legs. A vivid image of her legs wrapped around his waist clouded his vision. He jerked his hands behind his back to stop himself from cupping her hips and pulling her against his growing erection.

He’d controlled his instinct to claim her for a month and four days. But every day his control slipped further from his grasp. Soon he would have to reveal himself to her and convince her to become miun.

A week ago her indifferent façade had slipped and he’d taken advantage of her momentary weakness to capture her tempting lips in a kiss unlike any he’d experienced in his thirty-one years. Fate had come to his rescue when his dam, Felicia, had called Idony home to use her mindwalking ability to interview a male who wished to join their pride.

* * * * *

Kin was alone with Serene in the newly organized supply closet and the confined space made him bold and her vulnerable. He’d positioned himself in front of the door to prevent her from leaving. Notebook clutched to her chest like a shield, she stood absolutely still, like prey attempting to evade the detection of a predator.

He stepped forward. She stepped back. But the fully stocked shelving unit prevented her from retreating farther.

“No, Kin. This isn’t—”

“A kiss. Just a kiss,” he promised her...and himself. But he was prepared for more, his back pocket holding condoms he’d purchased with his human mate’s needs in mind. Miun could not contract STDs and pregnancy was impossible unless the miun female was in heat, which prompted the male’s flaccid cock to produce spines when withdrawing from the female’s body. Still, Kin believed Serene would insist on practicing safe sex, and he wanted to be ready.

She relented, her lips parting on a sigh. The soft moan of pleasure that stole from her mouth with the first light caress of his lips caught him by surprise and broke his carefully maintained control. He slipped his tongue into her Chai tea-flavored mouth, pressed his body against her soft curves.

She struggled, halfheartedly pressing the palms of her hands against his chest and pushing. He pinned her hands over head with one hand and used the other to cup the back of her head.

Her resistance morphed to a wild need that matched his own.

Serene’s eager mewls followed one after another as she rubbed her body against his then hooked one of her amazing legs around his left hip and pressed her sex flush against his. He growled at the feel of her, the smell, the taste.

Willing, wanting woman. His mate in his arms at last.

Leaving her mouth, he released her head to kiss his way down her throat and unbutton her cream-colored blouse to reveal a white lace bra.

Growling, he jerked down the cups and lowered his head to capture a tightly budded nipple between his lips. Serene’s gasp and halfhearted struggle hardened his body even more. She trembled and tried to twist away from him. Latching on to her sweet little bud, he suckled and licked until she arched into him, then he moved to lavish his attention on her other breast, nipping and licking until she writhed against him, her head lashing back and forth, her sex rubbing against his.

He thrust against her, their clothing an excruciating barrier. The shudder that ran through her lithe body had him unzipping her pants and sliding a hand inside her matching lace panties, reaching for the triangle of damp curls. He slipped a finger between her slick satiny lips, buried it deep inside her and circled her clit with his thumb.

She shrieked, immediately coming for him, breaking apart, quivering around his finger, against him. Her response to his ministrations told him better than words that he hadn't been the only one suffering when she repeatedly refused his requests for a date.

His teeth shifted to the sharp canines of a lion in preparation to mate. This was it. He could have her. If he positioned her on her hands and knees on the new linoleum floor she would submit to him, accept him as her mate.

He wanted that more than he wanted his next breath—to earn her submission, make her miun, make her his mate. But to do so without her knowledge of what that meant, to take her human life from her without her consent, this he would never, could never do.

“Kin? Serene?” Idony called from the other side of the building.

By Serene's relaxed posture, Kin knew she hadn't heard his sister. Miun senses far exceeded human abilities. His sister's voice came again. This time more urgent. “Kin! Where in Sekhmet's name are you?” Could she sense his emotions, hear his thoughts of taking and turning Serene then and there?

Shit.

Kin had released Serene's hands and tried to help straighten her bra and button her shirt. But she'd pushed him away and made short work of putting her clothes right and masking her emotions with a look of uninterested professionalism so that by the time they met Idony in the hall, his sister saw nothing suspicious. Still, he'd felt the not-so-subtle slide of Idony's mind against his and received a brutal tongue-lashing from his little sis later that night on the dangers of taking a human lover.

"You know I'd do anything for you, Kin," she'd said, "but if the mane miun hear about this, you know what they'll do to you."

* * * * *

Now, a week later, he'd made no further progress in seducing Serene. The kiss in the closet had been their first and last. His sister was one efficient cock-blocker. Not that Serene needed any help.

"Then you will sign off on the work I've done for the party?" Serene turned to ask.

Kin lowered his gaze to look at her lush mouth. She noticed and grimaced but her soft, generous lips made her frown look more like a plush pout.

He schooled his expression before meeting the false indifference filling her blue-blue eyes. "Yes, it's exactly what we wanted."

The first time they'd met, he'd asked her out. The immediate bracing of her shoulders and straightening of her back had told him that he should have practiced patience, seduced her slowly. She'd told him in no uncertain terms that she did not date clients.

Ever.

Her rejection had stung but he soon appreciated her policy when men from the various decorating vendors hit on her. She slapped them down so fast Kin hadn't had a chance to lose his cool and beat the crap out of his competition.

After that, he appreciated her conservative wardrobe. Not that she dressed mannish in any way, but she always wore serious business attire, nothing soft, frilly or sexy for his mate, not even when she joined him on the pretense of an emergency after-hours meeting. She'd shown up at Pete's Bait Shop, a sports bar, in her uniform of navy slacks and white, long-sleeved button-down top.

He'd love to see her in a sexy dress with the knowledge that underneath she wore titillating lingerie that he could rip off her before blindfolding and tying her spread-eagle to his bed.

"I admit to worrying over the deadline but you came through for us," Idony said with what appeared to be a strained smile.

Damn it. He'd allowed his thoughts to wander into a dangerous area again. How long before Idony knew the full extent of his attraction to Serene?

He forced a grin and said, "I had no doubt she would meet our deadline."

"I'm happy that you find my work satisfactory." Serene tucked her notebook under her arm. "No doubt your party will be a big success."

"Actually, I need to talk to you about the party. May I meet you at your office later today?"

"No, I—"

"It's important."

Kin watched as professionalism warred with self-preservation in her wary blue eyes. She didn't want to be alone with him again after what happened last time and was probably afraid that he'd bully her into another kiss...and more.

Finally, she said, "I have an opening at one," and hurried from the room.

"You need to stop this." Idony leveled a look of feminine frustration on him. "She's human, Kin, and not attracted."

"You're really not much of a mindwalker if you think she's not attracted to me."

"She's attracted but has no intention of acting on it." Idony sniffed. "Always thought you were a better male than to play with a human female when all you'll end up doing is hurting her."

"She's my mate." *Fuck.* Had he just said that? He snapped his teeth together, cursing under his breath. What the hell had he done?

"She's..." Idony's hand fluttered up to her throat. Her dark brown eyes widened and shone with gathering tears. "No."

"Yes," he ground out. Too late to back down now. "And I will claim her. Without interference from you or the rest of the pride."

“B-but you can’t complete the Ritual of Generation with a human. You can’t form the mate bond.” Idony hugged herself, shaking her head so that her long brown hair obscured her frightened face. “And you can’t turn her. She has a life, a career. You have to let her go. For both your sakes.”

“Can’t. Won’t. She’s mine.”

Chapter Two

Serene shoved aside a tangle of sample Christmas ribbon, dropped her head to her wide oak desk and groaned as Kin pulled into the snow-dusted parking lot. First his long legs emerged then his six-foot-plus, athletic body unfolded from his sports car.

One o'clock on the dot.

She hadn't thought he'd make it. Her plan to schedule the meeting so soon after his request had backfired. Now she didn't have time to brace herself against the animal magnetism Kin overwhelmed her with at every turn. What was it about him that made her want to cancel with her other clients and spend the day in his bed?

"Stupid," she mumbled to herself.

"If you're talking about your constant refusal to date me, I agree," Kin said from the door. "Otherwise you have proven yourself to be a brilliant woman of excellent taste."

She whipped her head up off the desk in time to see his golden-brown gaze lower to her lips when he said *taste*, leaving no room to misunderstand his double entendre. Her mouth watered. She swallowed and cleared her throat as he ran his fingers through his dark, wavy hair. "Please...you can't keep doing this."

"Doing what?" The innocent look he slapped on his gorgeous face didn't fool her. In fact, his guiltless façade made her choke on a laugh. She tried and failed to cover her amusement with a cough.

His eyes twinkled as he slouched into a chair across from her. *Comfortable*. In his skin. In her office. In her heart.

Yes, Serene could admit—at least to herself—that she was falling for him. How could she not? He embodied the characteristics that she admired the most.

Compassion, intelligence, honesty, humor...and it didn't hurt that he looked like a Greek god.

Lord in heaven. What was she doing? Listing his qualities as if he was her Christmas list?

Pull yourself together. She would not trust a man who hunted her like prey.

"Your flirting has to stop. It makes me look unprofessional. Colorado Springs is a small, conservative town. People talk. You're going to hurt my business."

Kin straightened in his chair. "Never once have I done or said anything in front of anyone that could be construed as unprofessional."

"Really? So your sister has no idea that you're trying to get into my pants."

He came out of his chair in one smooth move, crossed the office and planted his hands on her desk, towering over her. "Idony has nothing to do with us and she sure as hell isn't a gossip."

"Nevertheless, I do not date clients. How many times do I have to say no before you give up?"

He growled and the sound reminded her of the time they spent together in the supply closet. Nothing in her sexual experience compared to that one brief liaison with Kin.

Nothing.

"I respect your rule of not dating men you work with. You told me to back off and I did. But in a couple of days I'll no longer be your client. But I'll still be yours."

Desire ignited in her chest and burned down to her belly. She squeezed her legs together. *I've got to get him out of here.* "Please just tell me why you wanted this meeting."

"I'm here because there's something special between us. Don't deny it. Your response to our kiss—"

"A stupid mistake. One I won't be repeating."

"A mistake? How can you be so stubborn?" He walked around the desk and pulled her up from her chair, clutching her shoulders.

Serene glared into his face. "How can you be so pigheaded? So...arrogant?"

"I know what I want. You want me too."

"No. You're wrong. I don't want this...you."

He winced as if she'd hit him. "You don't want me."

"No. Is that clear enough for you?" She felt like a total bitch. And a liar. But she had a terrible track record. Eventually he would hurt and abandon her like everyone else. She couldn't trust him.

He released her, stepped back.

Relief warred with regret. This is what she wanted—for him to give up. Go away. *Wasn't it?*

Before she could strengthen her resolve, he took her hand and met her eyes. She knew what he saw there. Uncertainty. Need.

He bent his head and took her mouth.

Hunger rushed through her body, making her whimper as he slid his tongue into her mouth. Their last kiss had not been an aberration. He tasted better than she remembered. Like the promise of hot sex with a man who could call down heaven.

The kiss deepened. He stroked her tongue with his, seducing her. And she drank him in, wanting more. Wanting everything he could give her.

Serene knew she should stop. Protect herself. Protect her heart. Instead, she gave herself over to him, groaning, pressing her body into his.

Without breaking the kiss, he cupped her ass, lifted her and set her on her desk. His hands slid down her thighs, parting them so that he could stand between her legs.

At the feel of his erection, she tore her lips from his and shoved at his wide shoulders. A kiss was one thing...but if she let him inside her. God, she'd never get him out. Never be able to summon the strength to refuse him again. Never —

"Oh no you don't." Kin snatched up a red sample ribbon and made quick work of tying her wrists.

The sight of her bound wrists, the feeling of surrendering control, flipped a switch inside her head. She was so tired of having to manage everything. Tired of being alone.

Her body responded like liquid fire. He brought her arms up around his head and dropped his mouth to her neck, kissing the spot below her earlobe, nipping and licking his way down her throat until the top button on her shirt stopped him.

Parting her collar, he kissed her chin then yanked the material apart, popping buttons, tearing seams. Serene's body bowed up off the desk and he took her reaction as an invitation to peel down her bra and kiss first one breast then the other.

Unable to keep her bound hands where he'd placed them, she unhooked her arms from his neck and buried her fingers in his hair.

He lifted his head, releasing a nipple with a *pop!* that sent shivers down her spine. "I've done it your way for over a month, Serene. Now we're going to do it my way."

He grabbed a pair of scissors from the corner of the desk, stretched her arms over her head, and used the scissors to nail the ribbon to the wood. She couldn't believe it. He'd just gouged a hole in her desk!

Struggling to sit up, she hissed at him. A feral look came over his face, his eyes narrowing to slits, his grin morphing into something of a snarl.

"Mine," he said and his teeth appeared long and sharp before his lips hid them away from her.

Shock rippled through her. Who knew she'd be turned on by such a dominant, predatory display? Not her. But when he pulled her slacks from her body and peeled down her panties using his teeth, all she could do was pant her desire.

This was what she wanted. Had always wanted. But had never known.

He clasped the backs of her knees, lifted them over his shoulders and knelt between her hips. She squirmed, impatient to feel his mouth on her.

“Stay still.”

She whimpered and scooted closer, unable to stop herself.

Kin stood. Her ankles, still hooked on his shoulders, brought her bottom off the desk. The first slap to her bottom stunned her, the second, third and fourth shook her to her core.

The heat of his hands as he spanked her, the sting that spread like a slow burn, only made her want him more. By the time he finished and dropped between her legs once more, she felt so close to coming that she knew his first touch would break her.

When at last he opened her to his mouth and tasted her, she shattered. Her eyes slammed shut, her head thrashed back and forth, her arms strained against the restraints as she screamed his name. Then he rolled on a condom and was over her, inside her, thrusting into her body, kissing her lips and breasts. Nipping at her neck. Taking her impossibly higher, drawing out her orgasm until the tremors threatened to tear her apart. Liquid heat spilled into her body.

“Fuck.” Kin stiffened, came with one last deep thrust.

Serene felt like a rag doll. Limp. Boneless. Slipping into sleep. Only Kin’s hands on her – cleaning her, dressing her, untying her – kept her semiconscious.

What opened her eyes and brought her up off the desk was a murmur of feminine voices from outside her office, probably heading to the weight loss center in the back of the building. Hearing the women, she leapt off the desk, glaring at the clock. 1:28. Her next appointment was at 1:30 and she was completely topless. Kin had replaced her shoes and pants but her bra and shirt were nowhere to be found.

Ruined no doubt.

She whipped open her bottom drawer and pulled out a fresh bra and shirt she kept on hand for when she worked through the night and didn’t have time to make it home to change.

Clothes on, hair smoothed, she turned to Kin—who had his back to her—and said, “I have a one-thirty. You’ve got to go. Now.”

She expected resistance but he turned, met her eyes and simply said, “This isn’t over.”

She watched him leave, her sight dropping to his fine ass then up to the width of his broad shoulders. As soon as he shut the door behind him, she drooped into her chair and groaned. What kind of woman ignored the afterglow to throw out her lover for a follow-up appointment with Larry from Hairy Larry’s Car Dealership?

But she’d never trusted anyone, and she wasn’t about to start now. Not for hot sex with a man she might be falling for—not for anything.

The ringing of her office phone made Serene do a surprised little hop in her chair. She cleared her throat and answered. “Life of the Party. Serene Bleau speaking.”

“Hey there, little lady. Hairy Larry here.”

Serene rolled her eyes at the clichéd nineteen-fifties-car-salesman-persona Larry liked to play. She’d been planning his New Year’s Extravaganza for two months and not once had he broken character. Still, Larry had proven to be a serious businessman and a good client despite the cheese-ball act he played.

“Hi Larry. Don’t tell me you’re going to cancel on me again.” If he did, it would be the third time.

“I’d love to tell you different but Larry is as honest as the day is long. Sorry about this, dolly, but I’ve run into a snafu with the little woman and gotta head home for another argument.”

Serene giggled. She couldn’t help it. Larry’s “little woman” seemed to cause him no end of grief.

“I understand. Should I reschedule with your office?”

“Please. I know we’re getting down to the wire. But, well, say a prayer for this old man that he doesn’t end up on the couch tonight. My back can’t take much more of the

doghouse. But when you're right, you're right. And Hairy Larry is right. Just got to make Clare see reason."

"I'll reschedule," she said. "And Larry?"

"Yes, dolly?"

"Wouldn't you rather be all right than right? I mean, no matter what you did or didn't do, a woman like Clare, she's worth an apology, don't you think? Besides, it's Christmas. Peace on earth and all that."

Larry sighed. "Can't say you're wrong."

Serene hung up the phone with a smile on her face. Her mood had turned. Maybe she hadn't avoided the afterglow like she'd thought. Maybe it had just been delayed.

Her body buzzed, her blood pounded in her ears as she grabbed her purse and walked the short hall to the bathroom. There the mirror reflected a woman with kiss-swollen lips, dilated pupils and flushed cheeks—a woman fully sated by her lover. She hardly recognized herself.

Rule one broken, she thought as she reapplied her Christmas Kiss lip gloss.

Last week in the closet, she could pretend that she'd only bent the rule. But today, feeling empty because he was no longer inside her, there was just no way to deny that rule one—never sleep with a client—had shattered when he'd pinned her to her desk and thrust into her body as if she belonged to him...and him to her.

She closed her eyes in defeat, unable to face the picture she made of a wholly satisfied woman. What was it about Kin Fina that tempted her beyond reason?

Shoving her lip gloss into her purse, she gave herself a stern look in the mirror before stomping back to her office. Forget that he was the most delicious guy she'd ever seen, let alone tasted. Forget his electric smile, rock-hard body and perfectly sculpted ass. Yeah he was a hottie but she'd dated hot guys before. There was something different about him, something special, something that shifted her insides and invaded her dreams.

Too bad Serene wasn't some doe-eyed dreamer.

No way in heaven or hell would she allow this to continue. She was in control of herself and her life. Not some outsider. The word *outsider* made her think of him *inside her*.

Serene groaned.

She shouldn't have accepted the job to plan his Christmas party at the community center but she'd wanted to help him and his family find acceptance among their neighbors and to do something good for children she had a lot in common with.

Serene knew better than anyone what it felt like to be on the outside looking in. She'd spent her whole childhood there. Moving from foster home to foster home, waiting, hoping for a family to adopt her. But she was different. And no matter how hard she tried to hide it, somehow her foster families sensed that she'd never be part of their family.

At fifteen, she finally faced reality, killed her dream, and worked her ass off – going to summer school, taking college courses in business and decorating – so that she could graduate early, find a job and petition the court for emancipation at the age of sixteen.

Four months after her sixteenth birthday she'd walked out of the Illinois courthouse with most of the rights and responsibilities of an adult and driven straight to the local printers to order fliers for Life of the Party, then set her business and marketing plan into effect.

Eight years later, she would not allow some man to seduce her into believing that she belonged with him. This was her life. She could only trust herself. Still, she hoped the party worked, hoped the rumors that Kin and his family were nudist, cultist freaks would abate and the town would accept them as one of their own. Because no one deserved to feel as though they weren't wanted.

Kin's passion-filled face clouded her vision.

No! She wouldn't go there. Ever again.

She shoved the scissors he'd used to pin her to the desk into her bottom drawer and picked up the ribbon to throw it away, but she couldn't trash it. She sat there petting the supple strip of fabric, remembering his soft lips, his hard strokes.

Dropping her head in her hands, she whimpered. Damn, she couldn't believe how much she wanted him—a man who she barely knew and hardly trusted.

* * * * *

"Who would've thought that a party planner would be such a party pooper?" Idony asked over the loud, drunken patrons of Pete's Bait Shop the next night. "Really, your business is named Life of the Party!"

Taking another sip of beer, Serene blocked out the dozens of flat screens showing every sport invented and gave Idony a grin. "I'm a planner not a partier."

"Okay. Then look at it this way." She pointed one manicured finger at the ceiling. "Your client needs you to do one more thing so her party is a success."

"I am not dressing up like a reindeer to be in Santa's posse."

"Oh, come on. Please! We have the other eight. I'm Dancer. It'll be fun."

Serene had never seen this side—the drunk side—of Idony. The woman had always come off as about as much fun as a Brazilian wax job—something Serene had tried once and would never do again.

Speaking of never, she'd never thought that Idony would be the type to drink her under the table either. When she'd received Idony's call, Serene had agreed to meet at the bar with the expectation that the detail-oriented woman had found one more facet of the party to worry over. Now she felt like a deer in the headlights.

Idony was going to wear one of the sexy reindeer costumes and wanted her to do the same?

"According to your brother, you have a dozen cousins. Can't you convince one of them to play Vixen?" Serene asked, deliberately neglecting to say Kin's name. Ever since he'd left her office yesterday, she couldn't get him out of her mind.

"No one else—'cept Kin—sees how important the party is. If we can't get Colorado Springs to accept us, we'll have to move. Again. I'm tired of starting over." Idony rubbed her eyes, smearing her eyeliner. "Besides, I like it here. Please play Vixen. For me?"

Serene related—more than Idony could ever know—with pulling up roots, never feeling as if she had a home. Besides, Idony was right. Her family had a lot riding on this party. "Look. I would. Really. It's just that—"

"It's just that you don't want to see Kin again. Right?"

Serene winced. "It's unprofessional." She glanced up from her frosted bottle, lifted an eyebrow. "Thought you agreed."

Idony shrugged. "Did. But that was before..."

"Before what?"

"Kin's not going to let you go. So I can either stand in his way like everyone else or I can have his back. I've decided to help him...even if this is insane." Idony fished into her oversized purse and slapped a stack of paperwork on the table. "I've signed off on the party. Dropped the check through the mail slot at your office. We're no longer your clients. Which means you, my lovely Vixen, no longer have that excuse to use against my brother."

Damn. She was in trouble if Kin had Idony on his side now. Her mind fumbled for other excuses, but she was fuzzyheaded from the alcohol and not exactly motivated when the simple thought of him dissolved her resolve and evoked a heat that spread through her body like a fever.

There should be some sort of vaccination against Kin. A pill she could take to make her immune to his charms. Something that would make her blind, deaf and dumb.

Idony loudly cleared her throat. "Right. So here's the plan. You play Vixen. Wow Kin in your sexy reindeer costume. Jump his bones. And profess your undying love."

Serene goggled at her. "Have you lost your mind?"

"Maybe." Idony threw back another shot of tequila. "But the real question is have you lost your heart?" She leaned across the table and chucked Serene on the chin. "The answer is yes."

Serene grimaced. "That's not the question."

"No? Then what is?"

"The question is do I trust him? The answer is no. I've worked so hard to be independent. To take care of myself. And if I let him in, I know he'll just take over and then when he's gone —"

Idony laughed in her face. A throaty, sexy laugh that turned heads and had the men at the table next to them smiling in response. "He's not going anywhere and you know it." She tucked her long brown hair behind her ears. "You don't trust yourself. If you did, you'd be with him right now. Coward."

Serene slumped back in her chair and chugged the rest of her beer. Idony slid a shot across the table. Then another. Serene slammed them down, thinking.

Idony was right.

Serene wanted Kin like she'd never wanted anything or anyone.

"Yep," Idony said around a lime.

Serene frowned. Tequila trickled into her bloodstream. A coward? She'd based her whole identity on the belief that she was a strong, independent woman who went after what she wanted.

Damn. She'd better start acting like it.

"I've been an idiot, haven't I?"

"A complete moron," Idony said.

"Right." She took a deep breath. "So does Kin like reindeer?"

Idony gave her a Cheshire cat smile and nodded. "Damn straight."

Chapter Three

The reindeer costume Serene wore for the party made Kin hesitate as he approached her where she stood near Santa's sleigh. The short skirt gave a glimpse of her pale, perfect thighs, evoking memories of him pinning her to the oak desk. Wayward images invaded his mind, torturing him with her remembered taste, the feel of her gripping him, milking him, her nipples blooming beneath his tongue.

The reindeer collar she wore gave him ideas for new memories to create, memories that would never be made if he didn't come clean soon. When they'd made love in her office, he'd been close—too close—to biting her, marking her as his, making her miun.

He was running out of time.

Then he had Idony to worry about. She'd been suspiciously evasive ever since she'd met Serene at the bar last night. All he could get out of her was that she'd convinced Serene to attend the party as one of the reindeer. But he could read his sister well enough to know something was off.

No, tonight had to be the night. Looking around at the tipsy adults and sugar-high children filling the winter wonderland Christmas Eve party, Kin knew that destiny had intervened on his behalf once more. The smell of fresh pine, alcohol and desserts scented the air. He inhaled deeply and smiled. The sound of excited chatter and holiday music filled the once-empty community center. They had worked this magic together—he and Serene.

Magic.

What better time to introduce Serene to miun magic than Christmas Eve, the most magical night of the year in the human world?

Just as he took a step toward her, Idony stepped in front of him. "You. Kitchen. Now." She wore the same reindeer costume as Serene, faux fur strapless dress, antlers

and a collar with tiny jingle bells, but the hands on her hips and the frown marring her face negated the sexy, sassy look Serene possessed.

Kin smirked at her. "I take it hiring the caterer yourself instead of letting Serene do it was a mistake?"

"Don't say I told you so. Please just help."

He glanced over at Santa's sleigh. Serene laughed at something Santa said. "Fine. But you owe me."

Idony blew him a raspberry. "Yeah, yeah. I owe you big-time." She shooed him.

Kin tried to make eye contact with Serene on his way to the kitchen but she remained enthralled by jolly old Saint Nick. Just as well. He should wait to talk to her until after the party had ended and the guests had gone. Then he would punish her for flirting with someone else until she begged for more.

That last thought put a smile on his face, until he entered the chaotic kitchen and blinked at the caterers running back and forth, yelling and cursing at each other. His little sis wasn't kidding.

"Can I help you?" A short, freckle-faced woman breathlessly asked as she pulled a pan of delicious-smelling chocolate chip cookies from the oven.

"I'm here to help you. Idony sent me. What can I do?"

Removing her red oven mittens, the woman said, "Walk-in refrigerator. We need all of the pies and cakes out here now."

"Got it." He avoided being trampled, dodging the catering staff on his way to the back.

Cold air hit him as he opened the door and flipped on the light. Once empty, the tall, metal racks in the walk-in fridge now held row upon row of desserts and finger food. He balanced the pies and cakes three to an arm and brought them out until only two lemon cream pies remained.

"Almost done."

The redhead ignored him, yelling at her staff to “Move faster!”

Back inside the fridge, Kin had just turned the corner of one of the shelving units when he heard the door open and close. The lights turned off.

“Hey! I’m in here,” he yelled into the darkness.

No response.

She pounced before he could scent the air. Slamming him up against the shelves.

Fuck that. He twisted, grabbed her by the throat – and froze.

Everything stopped. His breath, his thought, his heart even stuttered.

Serene.

Before he could restart his brain and body, she bound his wrists, jerked them over his head and anchored them on a metal post belonging to the shelving unit behind him. He stretched forward against the leather restraints to breathe her in.

Serene...was stalking him?

His heart tripped.

“How do you like it?” she whispered against his ear, her breath hot and tantalizing in the cold room.

Brain sluggish, he tried to make sense of her question. He couldn’t form thoughts let alone words.

“I love having you at my mercy.” She pressed her body against his when he tested the restraints – had to be her leather reindeer collar. “No. Don’t you dare break free. Not ‘til I say. Promise.” There was a wicked smile in her sweet voice.

He groaned at the feel of her. Soft and warm and wanting.

“I swear it,” he rasped.

She ripped his shirt open. The tear of fabric and pop of buttons hitting the floor sounded loud in the sealed room. His memory flashed back to their encounter in her office.

“Turnabout fair play?” he asked.

She silenced him with a scorching kiss. He groaned as she took his breath, sucking his lower lip into her mouth and nipping it.

His belt went next, slapping the floor, then her nimble fingers flicked open the button and unzipped his slacks.

She kissed, licked and nipped her way down his throat, his chest, his stomach. Damned if he didn't fight every impulse—human and miun—to stay where she placed him. He could easily snap the collar, easily take charge, but he felt her need for control. Besides, it was best to keep his hands, which were shifting back and forth from human to lion, out of the way.

She reached for him, sliding her hand inside his boxers and cupping him. Skin to skin, he hardened further. And when she drew him out and into her hot mouth, he felt as if his body had turned to living stone.

Every muscle grew taut, every nerve ending screamed as she licked and sucked and swirled her tongue. Then suddenly she left him hanging, abandoned to the cold. He felt her move a few feet to his right and bit back a curse. She wouldn't leave him here like this. Cruelty like that did not belong to his mate.

Vacant seconds passed. He shivered, doubting himself.

A rustle of plastic wrap and the smell of cold lemon cream pie mixed with hot mate filled his senses as she returned to him. Her finger grazed his cheek, leaving a sticky fingerprint before she found his mouth. His lips parted. The sweet-tart taste of lemon cream pie exploded in his mouth. She gasped as he swirled his tongue over her finger.

"I want a taste too." She withdrew her finger and knelt before him.

"Too cold," he said, thinking that she planned to slather him with chilly cream pie.

She didn't.

Her mouth enveloped him once more, this time filled with warm cream.

"Mmm," she said around him.

The vibrations of her delight shook him to his core. Before he realized what he was doing, his razor sharp claws shredded the restraints and he had her beneath him on her hands and knees.

He had time and the presence of mind to thank the Goddess that his mate wore a skirt before rolling on a condom, shredding her panties and plunging into her.

One fast stroke. Hard. Deep. Into her own sweet cream. Slamming into her so that she slid forward a few inches on the slick floor. He moved over her and wrapped his mouth around the back of her neck to hold her to him, dominate her in the most primal miun way.

With each deep plunge, she made little mewling noises that incited his cat, calling his miun to the surface. Blissful, excruciating minutes passed as he fought his instincts.

Until he lost the battle.

His teeth shifted to canines. She whimpered. He released her but not before he pierced the delicate skin on the back of her neck, marking her. His fingers—now claws—skittered across the floor, seeking and finding no purchase. He went up on his knees but, fearing he would hurt her, he refused the instinct to clutch her softly rounded hips to anchor her to him. His eyes shifted, letting him see in the dark as Serene thrust against him, meeting him stroke for stroke.

The sight sent him over the edge.

“Fuck.” He forced his hands to shift back to human, slid his fingers over her hip, down her stomach. She shuddered. Then shattered when he used two fingers to caress her most sensitive flesh.

He came with her, Serene’s body milking his, her screams of release drawing out his orgasm until they collapsed together on the tile floor, a heap of heaving bodies.

Whimpering, she squirmed beneath him. He rolled to his feet and offered her a hand up. She blinked, unseeing in the darkness, which made him realize his eyes were still shifted lion. He blinked hard, shifting them back to human, then felt for her shoulder. “Here, take my hand.”

She did and he pulled her flush against his body. "Marry me?" The words just popped out of his mouth of their own volition.

Serene gasped, dropped his hand and stepped away. "What's wrong with you?"

Kin ran a frustrated hand through his hair. "Me? You're the one who jumped me in a walk-in refrigerator." He growled.

"And that means we should get married?" she shouted at him in the dark.

The refrigerator door slammed open, spilling light into the room. Serene took off down the aisle.

"Kin?" Idony called. "I need you manning the door, making nice with the locals."

Kin cursed his sister's timing. He didn't know what would've come out of his mouth next but he wanted the chance to say it. Idony's miun senses had told her exactly what she'd walked in on. She probably believed she'd rescued him.

Serene's heels tapped away as she ran for the door.

"Oh hey, Serene." Idony casually said then called to him again. "Kin?"

"Yeah, I'm on it." He put himself back together, leaving off his ruined shirt.

Idony flipped on the light and met him halfway up the aisle, a frown on her face, a shirt in her hand.

"Here." She handed over the forest-green dress shirt.

He donned it and headed for the front doors without a word. His lion roared at him to force Serene's submission. She was his mate. He'd marked her, made her. The least she could do was accept him in the way humans claimed their mates. Kin knew he wasn't thinking clearly, knew that his instinct had taken over and when his lion receded he would regret changing Serene without her consent or knowledge. But for the moment, his instinct overwhelmed his conscience. He passed Serene in the main room but she ignored him.

One step forward. One hundred steps back.

At the entrance the humans filed in with holiday grins and excited children in their arms. Kin felt simultaneously sated and unnerved.

He greeted the guests, introducing himself, welcoming them. Most of the people genuinely welcomed him in return. The party was working. Colorado Springs just might make a suitable home for his pride after all.

A balding man with a bulbous nose shook his hand. "This is my wife, and the love of my life, Clare. I'm Larry Tobias but most people know me as Hairy Larry."

"A pleasure." Kin nodded to the couple then reached for the hand of the next person in line. "Welcome."

"You been working with that dolly, Serene, on this party?"

Kin's attention jerked back to Larry, who stepped out of line while his wife made a beeline toward the open bar. "Yes. You know her?"

"Course." He leaned forward so that only Kin could hear what he would say next. "Not only is she a hell of a party planner, she gives some damn good advice in the love department."

"Oh? Anything you care to pass on?"

Larry's eyebrows rose to his receding hairline. "Woman trouble?"

Kin glanced at Serene who was chatting up the rent-a-Santa and gave a short nod.

"Well then, she told me to decide what's more important—to be right or to be all right with my Clare. And you know what?" He grinned like a little boy. "Dolly knows her shit. First time in years the wife and I have made it to Christmas Eve without one of us threatening divorce."

He slugged Kin on the shoulder. "How 'bout I man the door while you go make it right with dolly?"

Kin frowned. If he didn't know better, he'd think Larry was a mindwalker.

"You think I didn't see the way you looked at the girl?" Larry smirked. "Go get her."

Larry was right. Kin needed to find a way to apologize to Serene for biting her. She may not understand the consequences of his actions now but she would soon and Kin couldn't bear the thought of the look of betrayal he knew would grace her face when she realized what he'd done.

Halfway across the crowded room, Idony blocked his path again. "Where are you going? Who's that greeting our guests?"

"Larry's manning the door. And I'm going to make things right with my mate."

Idony's antlers slid forward as she shook her head. With a frustrated flick of her wrist, she straightened them. "Wait 'til the end of the party. Someone from the pride should be here any minute. Now's not—"

That made him hesitate. "I thought the mane miun said we were to handle this venture on our own."

"Not the mane miun. Our dam." She winced, ducked her head. "I—please just trust me. Wait. The party's important and Dam—"

"You told—" Kin's teeth shifted to canines and he had to take several deep breaths to regain control of his cat and remain in human form. Finally, he asked, "What did you tell our dam?"

Idony ducked her head. "I didn't think...you know I can't hold my liquor. On the way home from the bar..."

"What did you tell our dam?" he shouted.

"Hey!" Serene ran up to them. "What in the world? Do you want everyone to hear you fighting?"

Kin inhaled. His scent clung to her, marking her as his—just as much as his bite at the back of her neck would warn other male miun away. Unfortunately, the rent-a-Santa was not miun. The young man—padded with stuffing—walked up next to her and threw an arm around her shoulders. "Need some help here, Serene?"

Kin's cat roared to fight off this male and claim his mate. Miun instinct warred with human intelligence. Only a lifetime of training held him in human form. Idony, sensing he was about to snap, grabbed his arm and dragged him from the room into the back office area of the community center. His lion only allowed it because he saw that Serene followed.

When the door clicked shut behind them, he lost control, dropping to his hands and knees as the change took over. Fur spread over his skin, contorting his body in a swift golden wave. Bones popped. Tendons and muscles stretched and re-formed. Clothing tore at the seams and he kicked and wriggled out of them. In a matter of seconds, he morphed from human to lion.

He waited to see horror on Serene's lovely face, hear screams of terror. But she simply stood there, rooted to the spot, staring at him, every muscle in her body tight, waiting, ready to spring into action.

Idony was babbling, explaining in a manic manner who and what miun were. When his sister ran out of words, Serene kept her eyes locked on him then trembling, slowly backed toward the door, her delicate hands reaching, feeling for the knob.

He stepped forward.

In a burst, she was out of the room. The door slammed shut behind her. Footsteps echoed as she raced down the hall.

Kin closed his large lion eyes and concentrated on controlling his cat. He needed to shift back. Now.

After what seemed like forever but was probably just a few long seconds, he completed his shift. Idony slid his emergency pack—one that all miun kept nearby—across the room. He selected a T-shirt and a pair of jeans and dressed before asking again, "What did you tell our dam?"

Her face crumpled. Tears spilled down her flushed face.

The door slammed open. "Everything!" Their dam stormed into the room. "And by *text message!*"

Kin tucked in his shirt and toed on his shoes. "The fault is mine."

"Obviously," their dam said, tilting a wide hip and tapping a toe. "Now the mane miun are discussing the option of disowning both of you for keeping such a dangerous secret. You will be outsiders. Rogues."

"We won't be rogues." Kin tried for calm when all he wanted to do was move his dam away from the door and go after Serene, but his dam would probably attack for the display of disrespect, wasting more of his time. "She is my mate. I bit her. Made her miun. And if the pride disowns me for claiming *my mate* than I'll disown them for idiocy."

"Me too," Idony said, surprising him.

The pupils of his dam's eyes narrowed, her hands shifted to claws, but instead of threats, she said in a voice that broke, "I-I can't lose you. Both of my cubs..."

Idony stepped forward, her eyes still glistening with tears. "They won't turn their backs on us. They can't. Serene belongs with him. I've walked both their minds. I know they are fated. That's why I changed my mind and have been trying to help Kin win her. Besides, my mindwalking ability is too valuable for the pride to disown me."

Their dam sniffled and crossed her arms over her chest. "You could've told me. Trusted me. I'm your dam for Goddess' sake. I love you."

"And I love you," Kin said. "But I need to go after Serene. She just saw me shift for the first time. I have to find her. Explain."

His dam frowned. "You better make it fast. The mane miun sent guards to bring her to our den for questioning."

Chapter Four

Serene locked her car doors and raced out of the parking lot. Her mind raced over each encounter she'd had with Kin since they'd met, searching for missed clues. Signs that should've told her what he was.

Oh, she'd known he was different, that he possessed a quality that both repulsed and attracted her. But how could she have missed that he was a killer?

Turning onto Elm Street, she realized she was automatically driving to her office. The first place he'd look. A stupid mistake.

"Focus," she shouted at herself. A deep breath, two. *Think this through.*

"Okay, does he know where I live?"

Her instinct said yes but she had a head start.

She made a U-turn. Traffic was thin on Christmas Eve night so she made good time. Of course, yielding instead of stopping at red lights helped too. When she pulled into the lopsided driveway of her rented two-bedroom home, she had a plan—pack the necessities in one suitcase and get out in under five minutes.

Doable.

Unless the two strange men who sat on her front porch had something to say about it. As she parked, Serene flipped open her phone, dialed 9-1-1 and held her finger over the Send button. The men didn't move. Not a muscle twitched under their T-shirts or jeans—the only movement came from their puffs of breath that fogged the winter air.

Weren't they cold? It was the middle of winter in Colorado for Christ's sake. Then again, she was never cold. Even now, in her flimsy costume sans panties, she was warm. Maybe they were just warm-blooded like her.

She stepped out of her car. The men smelled like...aggression. She held up her phone. "I've got the cops on speed dial."

"We just want to talk," the one with the shaggy blond hair said, lifting his hands up in the universal sign of peace. "No one's going to hurt you."

She snorted at that. Her first instinct screamed *run*. Normally she would but tonight a second instinct warred with the first, demanding that she stand her ground.

She was sick of running. Tired of moving from city to city, state to state. Starting over — looking over her shoulder. Never trusting. Always feeling like prey.

The other man had a bulky body and a small head that made him look like a tick. His size and quiet manner made him more intimidating than the shaggy-haired one.

She took another deep breath, told her frantic mind to reason beyond the fear. "I don't have time. Call my office to schedule an appointment."

"We're here on a personal matter regarding Kindred Fina."

Kindred? Was that Kin's given name?

An odd sense of betrayal swept through her. She didn't even know his real name. An insignificant detail compared to everything else. Still, it burned.

Tickhead stood and found his voice. "Ms. Bleau, you need to come with us."

She backed toward her car.

Screw reason. Screw the necessities.

She opened her car door. Tickhead slammed it shut, suddenly in her face. His teeth shifted, grew long and pointed. He grimaced, moonlight flashing on canines that would tear her apart so easily.

Her cell hit the pavement. Her breath came in gasps. Her body trembled, contorted, shifted, telling her that her worst fear was about to come true. After several bone-cracking, muscle-ripping seconds, her change completed and she stood on the four long legs of the animal she could shift into since birth.

Deer.

She didn't know why or how she turned into a deer, didn't know anyone else who could shift into an animal—until Kin and now these two men—but she knew instinct. And now, in deer form, her instinct told her she was prey to the two males who had dropped to their hands and knees and were shifting to lion form.

Run!

She wriggled out of her ruined dress and bounded behind her home, racing for the dark wooded area beyond her yard. She felt more than heard the lions behind her. Running her to ground. Close. Their breath on her hindquarters.

Too close.

Teeth and claws hooked into her flesh. Flipped her to the ground. She struggled. Useless. Still, she tried for freedom, her head flailing, her front legs kicking, digging into the frozen ground, searching for purchase.

A roar. And the lion's jaw released. She miraculously sprang free. Then her hind legs crumpled beneath her. She was lame.

Serene turned to see death standing over her. A third lion. Bigger than the other two. Eyes flashing yellow in the moonlight. Mane a golden-honey color.

He lowered his big head and...nuzzled her?

Serene's heart and breath slowed.

The lion moved to her hindquarters and lapped at her wounds. She relaxed under his ministrations as if she were under a spell. The lion wasn't hurting or eating her but somehow soothing her shredded flesh.

She watched as he licked her injuries away. The ragged gashes grew thin. The puncture wounds grew shallow. Her legs grew strong.

"Holy crap, Serene, you're a deer!" Idony stood over her, mouth hanging open. "How did I miss that when I walked your mind?"

The lion chuffed.

Idony looked from him to Serene. “Uh...don’t worry. You’ll be okay. Kin’s almost finished healing you.”

Kin?

He looked up to meet her eyes. Her heart did a little hop of recognition.

Her mind leapt from one conclusion to the next. He didn’t see her as prey, had protected her, saved her from the other lions. How was that possible?

“You’re his mate,” Idony said as if she’d heard Serene’s question. “He loves you.”

Lying in her backyard wounded, surrounded by lions, the truth of Idony’s words embedded themselves into Serene’s heart.

Kin couldn’t have proven himself more. Her instinct told her to trust him, had always told her to trust him. Now she was listening.

* * * * *

Kin chuffed at his meddling, mindwalking sister. He should be telling his mate these things not her, goddamn it.

Idony held up her hands. “Just trying to help.”

Apparently she was getting better at mindwalking him. Either that or she had always downplayed her ability to do so.

Finished healing Serene, he took a few steps back, giving her some space. She made a beautiful deer, almost as beautiful as when she was human. Idony was right. Serene was his mate. And even though she was in deer form and he in lion form, he still didn’t see her as prey.

Gingerly, she gained her footing to stand before him, her large doe eyes looking into his. He expected her to dash off into the woods. Instead she folded her legs beneath her and shifted to human form. Kin watched, mesmerized by her courage—a prey animal shifting while surrounded by predators.

His heart slammed in his chest. He was more shocked now than when he'd first seen her as a deer. She trusted him. She had to trust him to make herself even more vulnerable before him, which made him feel guilty.

He had betrayed her by giving in to his instinct to bite her, change her. Not that it had worked. Still, he felt undeserving of such a display of trust when he had meant to force her into his world.

He hunkered down and shifted as well, quickly returning to human form, wanting to be the man she needed – everything she needed – wanting to apologize.

Human once more, he lifted his head to find a pair of strong, graceful human legs standing in front of him. He looked up the line of Serene's long, elegant body to her sweet face. Her eyes twinkled in the moonlight as she offered him a hand up.

"Hi," he said, taking her hand, all other thoughts suddenly forgotten.

She helped him to his feet, a soft smile playing at her lips.

"Hi," she said.

"You two are hopeless," Idony grouched and stomped away, mumbling under her breath about love turning reasonable, rational people into idiots.

"She's right," Serene said breathlessly. "This is idiotic."

"What is?" He cupped her cheek and brushed his thumb over her lips.

"You and me. A deer and a lion. Ridiculous. It will never work."

"Not true." He kissed her flushed cheeks then sampled her mouth. "We're perfect for each other. Fated."

"No, she's right," his dam said, walking up to them. "I'm sorry Kindred but you can't complete the Ritual of Generation with a shifter of another animal group. You can't become a mated pair."

He closed his eyes. Inside his lion furiously roared to bond with his mate.

"Kin?" The fear in Serene's voice broke his heart.

He opened his eyes, smiled at her. "Doesn't matter. I don't need a ritual to bind me to you."

The worry lines that creased her brow didn't smooth out at his words. "It's important to you, this ritual. I can tell."

"You are the most important thing to me. Everything else comes second."

"The mane miun won't accept an unmated shifter deer into the pride," his dam quietly said.

"We'll make our own pride."

"I'm in!" Idony shouted from across the yard.

Shaking her head, Serene crossed her arms over her chest, covering her breasts. "I won't let you give up everything for me," she said, taking a step back.

"I'm not giving up anything I want." Kin lifted her chin so she would meet his eyes. "Trust that. Trust me. Please."

"I do. But—"

"Do you love me?" He rushed on. "Because Idony was right. I love you."

She kissed him but didn't answer.

He pulled back, worried by her silence. "Serene?"

She looked up at him, her heart in her eyes. "Yes."

"Yes, you love me?"

She laughed. "Yes."

He picked her up and hugged her to him. "Finally. A yes."

* * * * *

Breath fogging her backdoor window, Serene watched the members of Kin's pride leave her backyard. So much had happened in such a short time, her head swam. But her heart soared, telling her that being with Kin was right. For her, if not for him.

"You're safe," Kin said, resting his hands on her tense shoulders. "I swear I'll protect you."

He thought she was afraid of his pride, she realized. What she was really scared of was disappointing him. Sighing, she said, "I wish I could give you what you want. What you need."

"I told you," he said against her ear before giving the lobe a gentle nip. "I want you. Need you."

"You wouldn't have bit me if you didn't want to bind us together. Right?"

He grimaced, feeling guilty once more. She had accepted his confession of trying to change her, hadn't been angry at all. It was becoming more and more evident that he didn't deserve Serene as his mate. "I don't care about the mate bond. I care about you." He slid his wide palms down her back and up over her ribs to cup her breasts.

Her nipples reacted, instantly coming to attention to pebble against his warm fingers. "All we need is love?" she asked breathily.

"Laugh if you want –"

"Who's laughing?" Her head fell back on his shoulder, exposing the line of her neck. He took advantage of her response and kissed his way down the column of her throat. She shivered in his arms and he froze. When he didn't resume his seduction, she looked up at his face. His eyes had shifted to lion. His whole demeanor had done a one-eighty.

"Um, K-kin?" Her voice cracked.

He released a deep shuddering breath before meeting her eyes with an intensity that sent chills down her spine. "According to everything we know, a shifter can only carry one animal within them."

Confused, she pulled out of his arms and turned to face him. "What happened to 'all we need is love'?"

His lion eyes burned a path from her head to her feet and then back up to rest on her face. In that moment, Serene didn't know if he wanted to mate with her or eat her. Maybe both.

She backed up against the door and took a step to the side. He gripped her shoulders, trapping her. "You're scaring me." Her words came out in a high-pitched whisper.

He inhaled long and slow. "You smell like a lioness who has gone into heat."

"What?"

Faster than she could follow, Kin dropped to his knees, nudged her legs apart and buried his face between her thighs. Her hips jerked with his first long lick. She shuddered and sighed.

Looked as though he wanted to mate *and* eat her, she thought, hissing with pleasure. Her body burned. Hot chills ran up and down her spine. Her skin tingled as if preparing to shift.

Damned if she didn't feel like she imagined a lioness in heat would feel.

Kin ran his hands up her calves, her thighs, to grip her ass. Her legs shook, her knees grew weak with desire. Anticipation made her muscles quiver at his touch. She threaded her fingers through his hair, holding him to her as his swirling, delving tongue did delicious things to her.

Relentlessly he worked her body, lapping at her juices, purring in satisfaction when she bucked against his mouth. Her breathing turned raspy. Her muscles jerked and tensed. He sent her over the edge. And she flew high. Higher than she'd ever gone before.

"Fuck. Kin." The words preceded a hiss of satisfaction.

He sank his fingers into her hips while he drank her pleasure, extending her release until her knees gave out and she sank down in front of him, gasping for breath, grasping for him. She collapsed against his chest. His arms came around her and he

held her to him. The pounding rhythm of his heartbeat matched hers. He rubbed her back in a circular soothing motion. But her body and mind refused to calm.

She trembled in his strong arms with the sudden overwhelming impulse to bite him. Her gums itched with the need. Instinctively she nuzzled his neck before nipping, then biting him. He tensed. His hands stilled on her back. Her teeth sank deep and he roared his satisfaction.

Her teeth retracted and she lapped at the bloody puncture wounds she'd made. Her actions were surreal, unreal but felt completely natural in the moment—until the moment passed and she pulled away, confused by what had just happened, by what she'd done.

"I bit you," she whispered.

"Mmm." Kin leaned forward and took her mouth. His tongue delved past her lips and licked along her teeth—her shifted teeth. She gasped at the knowledge that her human teeth had not shifted to deer but to lion.

"How?" she asked when Kin came up for air.

He cupped her face and smiled. "I don't know and I don't care."

"But you said —"

"Apparently we got it wrong or you're the exception to the rule." He closed his eyes and inhaled deeply. "I can scent your lioness inside you."

Serene turned her inner eye and saw doe and lioness standing side-by-side, equal parts of her, aware and unfazed by the other. She opened her eyes and slid a finger over Kin's smiling lips. "Does this mean we can complete the bonding ritual your dam was talking about?"

Kin nipped her fingertip. "Yes." Joy filled that one word to overflowing so that Serene laughed in wonderment. It didn't matter what the ritual entailed. Didn't matter if the bond was unbreakable. As much as she had fought it, Kin had become as essential as breathing to her.

He seemed to sense what she was thinking, feeling. A slow, predatory grin spread across his face. "Bond with me." A demand, not a question. Still he waited for her reply.

"Yes." Bonding. Marriage. Whatever he wanted. She was his.

He growled low in his throat. "Another yes after so many nos."

She dropped her gaze. "My fear made me stupid," she admitted.

"Not stupid. Never stupid. Just stubborn."

He eased her down on the kitchen's cool linoleum floor. She shuddered.

"Too cold?"

"Are you kidding? I'm burning up. We could make love outside and I'd still be warm."

He grimaced and his long lion canines peeked out at her between his lips. "You're in heat."

Her eyes remained riveted on his sharp teeth. "So you said."

"You're my mate." He crouched over her, caging her beneath the long length of his body.

"And you're mine." She wrapped her legs around his hips and locked her ankles at the small of his back, showing him that she was unafraid of his shift in mood.

He hovered over her, his body tense and trembling. The cords in his neck stood out. His breathing became labored. Serene stayed with him, refusing to pull away from his intensity. He wouldn't hurt her no matter what instinct had taken over his body. She could feel his love for her overriding all else.

As if afraid he'd hurt her, he kissed her carefully. Soft and sweet, he planted kisses on her lips, her face, her neck, moving lower to her breasts where he licked and nipped at her nipples, drawing them into tight little buds. She writhed beneath him, her nails shifting to claws and tearing into the linoleum floor as he worked his way down her body to sink two fingers into her throbbing sheath.

"I'm ready," she reassured him. "Please. I need you inside me now."

He took Serene at her word, stalking up her body. The slide of his skin on hers overwhelmed her senses. The intense look on his rugged face sent shivers through her.

"I don't know how much longer I can hold back," he said gruffly.

"Why are you?"

The moonlight filtering through the window showed a muscle in his jaw ticking. "I don't want to hurt you."

She reared back. "This is because of my deer. You think I'm weak."

"No. I..." He held himself up on his forearms and looked down at her. "Miun mating is rough. Our hands and teeth shift. We scratch and bite at each other."

Serene wrinkled her brow. "I already bit you. My hands have been shifting for the last few minutes. I guarantee that I'll give back as good as I get."

She undulated beneath him. At last he settled the weight of his body over her. Never mind that she'd just had the most intense orgasm of her life. She wanted more. She wanted him. And the hard length of his cock nestled between her legs told her that Kin wanted the same.

"Bite me. Scratch me. I don't care." She pulled his head down to hers for a kiss. "Make love to me. Fuck me. Bond with me." She wrapped her arms around his broad shoulders, welcoming him. "I trust you," she said against his ear.

He groaned, nipped at her neck then plunged his full length inside her in one swift stroke. Heat flared between them, engulfing them in passion. Serene whimpered at how good he felt inside her. Perfect. Now if he would just move.

She arched beneath him and pressed her breasts to his chest. "Move. Please."

Her words broke him. He threw his head back, hips pumping. She met him thrust for thrust. Shifted hands piercing his back, his shoulders. He growled, pinned her hands over her head and sank his shifted teeth into the supple curve of her breast, right over her heart.

The sharp bliss of his bite sent her screaming over the razor edge of pleasure-pain. Her body shook with the force of her orgasm. Sobbing, laughing, she came for him, gripping his cock, begging him to join her in her release.

“Fuck. Serene.” He came hard and fast, slamming into her quivering body, his final thrusts uncontrolled and powerful, his cock and teeth and claws embedded in her soft, willing body.

She expected him to collapse on top of her but Kin gathered her in his arms and rolled so that she lay on top of him, her head pillowed by his chest, his spent cock still inside her. She sighed in contentment as he brought her bloodied wrists to his mouth and healed the pinprick punctures he’d made.

“You okay?” he asked gruffly, sitting up so that he could heal the bite over her heart.

“Never better.” She wrapped her legs around his back and rocked against him, loving the feel of him inside her. He was thick and long, even at half-mast. “Does this mean we’re bonded – a mated pair now?”

He lifted his head and met her eyes. “The ritual requires that we mate three times in order to become a mated pair. Do you think you’re up for it?”

She smiled and kissed him. “Yes.”

He returned her smile. “My favorite word.”

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.

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