



Alison's Pride

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Chapter One

It was his smoldering, hazel eyes that drew me in first. He caught me glancing at him over my magazine. Immediately my gaze returned to the printed words, but I could barely focus. My eyes drifted over the top of the page again. I worried my lip and prayed he wouldn't notice me checking him out once more. He lifted his coffee cup to his lips and took a sip. He slowly savored the brew and then sat it down on the saucer. My gaze fixated on his mouth. His sensuous lips already had a slight sneer embedded in them. The top lip curved, and a dimple appeared in his chin when he frowned at the woman who brushed past him, knocking over his bag. The woman turned and apologized. He didn't respond but reached down to the floor to pick his bag up and return it to the chair next to him. His eyes rose from what he was doing and found mine. They narrowed. Then that luscious mouth turned into a small smile. In that gesture, my heart doubled its pace. I could barely draw breath from being caught by those eyes. Those deep eyes that peered into my soul and all I could do was duck behind my pages and hope that he didn't detect me. The columns of words were gibberish. I tried to read them, but my heart was beating erratically. I bit my lip a little harder and tasted the blood on my tongue. I drew in a deep breath and smelled the scent of fresh earth. It filled my nostrils, and I couldn't shake it. Whatever it was, it made me wet. My hand shook while I picked up my cup and took a sip. The hot chocolate was lukewarm, but silky, sliding down my throat. I savored the dark chocolate and licked my lips.

He cleared his throat and then glanced back to the book he was reading. I took the chance to observe him further. Copper hair curled around his ears. The artificial light brought out the bronze highlights that ran through his tresses. Darker eyebrows lined his high brow. His nose was perfect, with a slight curve on the end. He had a square face, but high cheekbones. Stubble shadowed his cheeks. So much that I wanted to run my hands over it and see if it was rough or scratchy. He wore a dark blue shirt that was fastened with small black buttons. The top two were left undone so I saw the sparse hair

on his chest. I never appreciated kissing a man's chest and coming away with a piece of hair stuck between my teeth. That ruined the mood right there. He was studying a text on philosophy, which meant he enjoyed reading about the subject or he was trying to pick up women. I didn't think he had any trouble in that department. His legs were stretched out underneath the table. I took him for a tall man. *Probably taller than me.* His frame was lean, but I suspected there were wiry muscles underneath that dark blue shirt waiting to be put to some good use. I couldn't confirm if he was a boxers or briefs man. I hoped he went commando.

Another woman walked by. He glanced up from his text when she brushed his shoulder. Her fingers lingered a moment on his upper arm feeling those muscles I longed to touch. They exchanged a few pleasantries. Her smile widened. *Bitch thinks she's getting somewhere with him. I doubt he'll take her up on whatever she's offering.* I flipped a page in my magazine. I couldn't even concentrate on the vibrant ads and the too-skinny models who needed fat shot into their asses and boobs to give them a semblance of a good figure. When I looked at Miss Hopeful, she was bent a little farther over, showing off her cleavage. I glanced down at my shirt. It was unbuttoned only one button. I'd come from work and needed a chance to relax before going home to my empty house. I turned another page and then looked at them again.

He leaned back in his chair. Arms were crossed over his chest. From an interpretation of his body language, I knew he wasn't interested in her. *Why would he be? She's just some trashy skank trying to get into his pants.* I ran my tongue over my lips, tasting the last bit of chocolate mixed with the blood. A hiss rose in my throat as I thought about him going out of the door with the bitch. I swallowed it before it left my lips. *This is crazy that I'm obsessing about him when I don't even know him.* It wouldn't be good letting the cat out of the bag in public.

I tapped my foot against the rung of the chair next to me and tried to rip my gaze from them. It wasn't good of me to be eavesdropping on their private conversation. *If she wanted privacy then, she shouldn't be slowly running her toe up the inside of his leg.* Normally, I didn't let my eyes rove. Tonight was

different. The whole day had been different. I was tense. I had a slight headache, and my muscles were tight. I doubt any good masseur could work the knots out of my muscles. After a few moments of the table shaking, I realized that I was drawing attention to myself from the sidelong glances of the other patrons. He, however, hadn't noticed and was still talking to her. He nodded after she said something, but he hadn't reacted. The woman leaned farther over the table, sliding her finger along the man's coffee cup. She wrapped her fingers around the porcelain and started to bring it to her lips. He grabbed her wrist roughly and then snatched his coffee from her hand. He said something. Her eyes narrowed. She said something and then backed away. She waited to see if he would respond. When he didn't, she left. He spun his coffee cup around, probably thinking about his latest encounter.

His luscious mouth curled again into a smile. He picked up his book and began to skim through the pages again. The tension in my body drained away, but knots still tightened my muscles. I arched my neck and turned it sharply to feel the crack of my bones. The release felt good. I rolled my shoulders and tried to read the words on the page yet again. My gaze roved back to him. His cup rested against his bottom lip, but his eyes were locked onto mine. I felt the blood warm my cheeks, but I didn't break away this time. I couldn't. I could feel his dare in his smoldering stare. I arched my eyebrow, accepting whatever the unspoken challenge was. All I needed was to go over and speak to him. If I could do that, then things would've been so much easier in my life. But I was taught to keep my mouth shut, forced to hide in the darkness and be the pariah of the family. I had no friends. Not even ones at school. That was the past. No one kept me in the dark anymore. I was by myself. Maybe that was my problem. I'd been alone too long.

I took another sip of my hot chocolate not hiding the turning up of my lips. He chuckled and shook his head. Once he set the coffee cup down, he pushed out the chair next to him with his foot and waved for me to sit next to him. I glanced around the small café in the bookstore. No one else was looking. The glare from passing headlights blinded me for a moment. I cringed from the sudden brightness. I turned my head away quickly. My

muscles stiffened as I readied to spring if something came at me. *There's no one waiting in the shadows ready to attack. No one is going to challenge me here.* I breathed in a few times and forced myself to relax. I had a good thing about to unfold before me. I didn't want to blow it by acting stupid. *Why is this happening now?*

Once my sight cleared, I noticed the woman who had hit on him had her face pressed against the window. Her hands cupped her eyes so she could see in. The look on her face was one of pure murder. Every instinct I had screamed for me to pounce on her, but I held that in check. I needed to focus on my prey first. *The luscious man is going to be mine.* I would claim his body and then make him mine. Satisfaction washed over me with that idea. That was what I needed, someone to join me. *Maybe he would survive the change. That's what I've been feeling!* A feverish chill had been running through me these past couple of days. It was the longing to have a companion, a mate who would understand me. I'd always been told no one would want me because of what I was. *Damn them! They have no idea.* I'd lived under the yoke of my stepfather's pride for so long that it caught me off guard at times to realize I was on my own. It had been a lonely road.

I stared back at the woman and smiled at her. Her expression darkened even more. I shrugged and then focused back on the man. His table was empty. A momentary jolt of panic surged through me. I glanced around the coffee shop and adjoining bookstore. He wasn't there either. *Shit. Shit. Shit.* It was then I felt a light touch on my shoulder. I spun around, a growl forming in my throat. He was there. His hazel eyes peering deep into mine. Those succulent lips turned up at me. His bag was slung over his shoulder. His dark hair had fallen across his forehead. I was so close to him now the musk of his skin overwhelmed me, earthy and mixed with cloves. I turned my face a little so my lips were inches from his. Already the pull between us turned me on so much that my inner kitten wanted out to play with him. *Does he know the power he has over me at this very moment? Will he be the one?*

"Hi."

"Hello," I answered.

“I couldn’t help notice you eyeing me.”

Everything in me yearned to run my hand along his cheek and feel the subtle fuzz of his stubble. I held back. I didn’t need to pounce just yet. “You seemed awfully lonely for a minute. Then that woman sat next to you. I assumed she was your girlfriend.”

He chuckled. “Ex. Actually. No need to worry about her. We didn’t jive well together. While she was talking, all I could think about was you. Your beautiful face and voluptuous body. Those intense blue eyes hiding under your auburn bangs. The way you smelled. What you would sound like calling my name when I fucked you.”

My eyes widened at the comment. I hadn’t expected him to be so forward. *Maybe he is feeling the pull between us.* I tried to hide my surprise and compose myself before I answered. If he liked curves, then he would have enough with me. I wasn’t a Skinny Minnie like most girls. I was above average, wearing a size eighteen. Another reason my parents hid me away. How could I be their child when all my brothers and sisters were lean and mean like the rest of family? His words made me hot. His close presence dampened my panties. I leaned in a little closer, almost brushing his lips. “You sure you can handle me? I’m a screamer.” I crushed the magazine in my fist, trying to remain calm.

His eyes lit up. Then he captured my lips with his in a quick kiss. With the instant contact of his mouth on mine, I knew he was like me, another shifter. Another big, powerful cat. I knew now why I had fixated on him. I arched up to return the kiss. He tugged on my top lip before he released me.

“I like screamers. What do you say we get out of here? My place isn’t far.”

I licked my lips, tasting him. I wanted more. “I’ll follow you.”

He smiled again and took my breath away. I gathered my things and watched his ass while he walked. Those round buttocks were firm and damn fine in the slacks he wore. He stalked through the store, parting the people around him. I imagined he was a lion or a tiger. Would it matter to him what I was? It didn’t matter now. All I wanted was to fuck him and relieve this

urge wound up inside of me. I wasn't looking for a relationship. Companionship, yes. Friends with benefits, maybe. I crossed my fingers and hoped this would work out. When he reached the door, he held it open for me. I walked out before him and felt his hand brush my ass. I glanced back and gave him my best cat smile. He gestured toward his car. I went to mine and waited. This was turning out to be a very productive night.

And this was only in the first ten minutes of meeting him.

Chapter Two

As I trailed behind his sleek, black Lexus, I wondered if he was a panther. Midnight black with stripes of purple through his pelt. He led me through main roads and backstreets I never traveled before until I was surrounded by the night and woods. He drove to the end of the road and then pulled into a driveway next to a large field. A solitary farmhouse stood in the distance, but no lights shone in the residence. After I parked behind his vehicle, I got out and looked at his home. It was large enough to house several people. He relaxed against his car and gazed at me. In the moonlight, his eyes glowed amber. As I met that smoldering gaze, I arched my eyebrow. He held out his hand to me.

“Cat got your tongue?”

I giggled. “Not at all.” I slid my hand into his, feeling the silky smoothness of his palm. Once our skin connected, another zap of electricity snaked through me and turned into pleasure. My inner kitty wanted to claw its way through my skin to touch him. I leaned in and ran my tongue over his lips. My eyes never left his. A hint of coffee clung to his mouth. My muscles tightened. The shift in them signaled the cat was going to come out sooner or later. If I gave in completely, then he would see what I truly was. He snapped his teeth down on my tongue, exerting a little pressure. I slipped my hands down his belly and cupped his growing erection. If he was this large and expanding, then we were going to have some fun. I squeezed, and he released my tongue.

“You don’t play fair.”

“Never said that I did.” I inhaled. His musky smell was stronger now that I was close to him and we weren’t around so many people. I pressed against his sinewy body and stood on tiptoe to rub my cheek against his. The feel of his stubble against my skin was heavenly, soft, and scratchy all in one. He quivered when I pushed closer and ran my cheek in the opposite direction. He groaned when I stopped centimeters from his lips. The tension between us was thick. My desire to fuck him grated on my insides. Unspent desire and

frustration had built up inside of me for so long now that I needed the release. It'd been a long time since I'd been with another shifter. I'd had sex with men in the past few months, but fornicating with humans wasn't the same. I had to be careful with them. One scratch or bite and they were infected. With him, I didn't have to worry.

He started to pant. "Don't you want to go inside?"

The muscles were corded in his neck. His body temperature was rising. His struggle to hold onto control amazed me. *He has to be an alpha.* Any lesser male would've had me on the ground, his cat coming through. I'd been so used to keeping mine caged. I was an alpha, too. My stepfather never assumed that. "We can. First tell me who you are. I like to know whose name I'm shouting when they're fucking me."

He chuckled. "You really lay it on thick."

I shrugged. "Give me some credit. I'm Alison."

"Alicat. I like that. I'm Shea White. So, should we go inside?"

I swept my tongue along his lips. "No one's called me that in a long time. Inside sounds good to me." I backed away and let the breeze cool me. My heart pumped against my chest. The thunder of my pulse filled my ears. I ran my tongue over my teeth and found them to be a little pointier. Now my control was falling away. The last shifter I had been with . . . we had come together just to mate. It lasted a week while I was in heat, but there were no emotional attachments. This time, the pull between Shea and I was more than just the release of tension in my body. Hearing my old nickname threatened to pull up a lot of memories that I pushed down. I didn't want to deal with the past now.

You're imagining things. He isn't going to want you for a mate. No shifter in their right mind will. My stepfather's voice popped into my mind. I shoved him out and back into my past, where he belonged.

Shea walked to the door. His sexy stride made my mouth water. I yearned to bite into his ass and feel the soft flesh between my teeth. Run my hands over his toned abs and have him between my legs. He opened the door for me and held it again. I shook my head. It seemed chivalry hadn't

died. Once the door shut, he turned the lights on. The house was immaculate. Before me, stairs led up to a second level. The walls were white in the hallway with a large window above the door. A chandelier hung in the foyer. Pictures of the wilderness adorned the walls. After getting over the awe, I sniffed the air. Two other shifters lived here. Each scent was distinct. Shea's was earthy. Another had a dash of cinnamon. The third was more animal, with a hint of citrus.

"Who else is here?" I asked. I undid the clip that held up my multicolored hair. Everyone at work thought I had highlights put in. The truth was my hair was auburn, with stripes of black, red, and blonde through it. It fell to the middle of my back, and other than my eyes, I hailed it as my best feature.

"My brothers are gone for the night. We have the place to ourselves. Would you care to go upstairs? Or have something to drink first?"

Brothers. Wonderful. A male-dominated house. If they're like the other lions I've come across, then they'll fight for supremacy. I won't fall into that trap again. I shuddered to think about my mother. My stepfather never let her forget her indiscretions with his best friend. "So, where's the rest of the harem?"

Shea's jaw hardened. "I'm not like the other males. Neither are the other men here. We don't feel that women should be subjected to the old ways. They should choose who they wish for a mate. Collin and William are outcasts from their families. They saved my life. We've been best friends ever since, brothers. Does any of that bother you?"

"No. I'm sorry. I have no right to judge. We all have our secrets." I glanced down at my feet. The black heels were starting to kill me. The lust cooled the more time I had to think about what I was doing. *Maybe this is a bad idea. I was stupid to think he'd want me.* My lack of self-confidence was eating me up again. The very monster I'd fought for years.

"Hey." He lifted my chin. The touch of his fingers burned my skin. I tried to focus, but I could barely keep myself together when I looked into his eyes. He made me shaky more than any other man had done before. "I know that look. No beating yourself up. I should've told you about my roommates,

but this happened so quickly. I wasn't expecting it. Or you. Maybe we should stop and do this right. But, damn, it's taking everything in me not to rip your clothes off and make love to you. I've never been pulled to another woman this way before." Shea ran his fingers down my cheek. The confusion in his eyes was apparent, but so was the passion I stirred in him.

The feel of his fingers comforted me. I couldn't deny the longing I had to be near him. My mother had often spoken about what it would be like to find a mate. She had said at the first touch you would know. At one point before I left, she confided in me that the one night she and my father had spent together was the best of her life. She wished that moment of happiness for me before I walked out the door.

"Don't you feel it, too?" He cupped my face in his hands.

I shook my head. "I-I don't know. Maybe I—"

Shea brought his lips to mine. In that instant, I was enveloped in bliss. My nerves sang from his sweet, luscious lips on mine. The spark between us ignited. I rested my hands on his chest and felt the erratic beat of his heart. I could barely concentrate from the intensity of the subtle pressure of his lips on mine. The cat inside me bellowed to be set free. I inhaled and smelled his desire. His cock poked into my belly. My nipples ached to be touched. When he broke the kiss, his hand wound through mine, and he led me upstairs. I didn't hesitate to follow. I barely noticed my surroundings. We walked down a long hall. His scent was all over the air and the carpet. At the end of the hall were double doors. Two other rooms were off the hallway, but their doors were closed. He opened the double doors and led me into a massive bedroom. In the middle was a king-sized bed. Above that was a painting of an African landscape with lions lounging in the sun. The bed was thrown together. Some clothes were piled in the corner, overflowing from a hamper. His walk-in closet was open, with racks of suits and shoes on the floor. *I wonder what he does. Banker? Stockbroker? Con artist?*

"Excuse the mess. I didn't have any plans on bringing anyone home."

I crossed my arms over my chest. "If you did, then I'd expect soft music. Candles. Flowers of some sort. Anything to set the mood." I crept closer to

him as I felt the courage I had earlier settle back into my nature. I bit my lip and began unbuttoning his shirt. My bright purple nails clashed against the color of his shirt. I got to the last button and tugged the rest from his pants. I stepped out of my heels, which made me another inch shorter, so my head came to his shoulders. Shea had to be at least six two. I loved tall men. I ran my hand over his flat stomach, feeling the indentations of his muscles. I planted my lips on his chest, then slid my tongue along his pecs until I found his nipple. I drew it between my teeth and nibbled on it, getting a taste for his skin. Salt mixed with earth and the slightly acrid taste of his sweat. He slipped my jacket from my shoulders and trailed his hands down my arms. I nipped at his flesh a little harder and heard him cry out.

“Do you want flowers? Music? Chocolate? Name it, and I’ll get it for you.”

I flicked my tongue over his neck and tugged on his ear. “Not at the moment. Right now, I just want you.”

Once I said that, it was on. Shea’s hand slipped under my skirt and kneaded the flesh of my ass and upper thigh. His lips sought my throat, where he bit me lightly. Each nip was heavenly; it sent shocks of bliss through my body. My clit throbbed with need for him. All the pent-up anxiety I’d had was going to be burned off tonight. I wasn’t sure what the connection was between us. Was it a matebond? Was it just the attraction I had for Shea? But it didn’t matter. His mouth sucking on my neck mattered. Shea shoved my stockings down to get to the flesh underneath.

I fumbled with his belt and finally got the buckle to come loose. Once I did, I unzipped his pants to find he wore briefs. The top of his cock peeked out from the waistband. I brushed my fingers over the soft head and was rewarded with a deep rumble in his chest. His nails pressed into my ass. I glanced at his eyes and saw they were a deeper amber and the pupils were slits. I covered his mouth again with mine and ran my tongue over his teeth. His canines were sharper. He broke the kiss and stepped back. I advanced, but he put up his hand and drew in a breath.

“It’s hard to be in control with you.”

"I take it that's never happened before with you." I began to unbutton my blouse. It matched my nails. Once I had it off, I dropped it to the floor and unzipped my black skirt. I stood before him and waited for him to reject me because of my size. If that happened, sexy man or none, I was gone.

"So beautiful. No. I *never* lose control."

The way he emphasized *never*, I figured something had happened in his past. Maybe that was why he was banished from his pride. I took off my hose and then went over to him. I picked up his hand and brought his finger to my mouth. I licked its length and then slid it between my lips. I enjoyed watching him tremble. I encompassed his whole middle finger, wrapped my tongue around it, and then skated it between the dip in my cleavage.

"I don't mind if you lose control with me. Whatever happened before, I'm sure I can handle it." I released his finger.

He cupped my breasts in his hands and delved his face in the V. His thumbs poked my nipples before encircling my chest and undoing the straps. He was being careful, which I admired. He dropped the bra on my shirt. I pulled off his shirt to look at his tanned skin. His teeth had left indentations where he bit down over my nipple. He flicked his tongue over the hard bud. With his free hand, he twisted the other one. I kissed his chest and dug my hands under the waistband of his briefs and embraced his dick. I yanked the underwear down. Shea broke away and undressed. In that sexy saunter of his, he crossed the room and knelt before me. He kissed my stomach and squeezed the roundness of my belly. He slipped my panties down and then buried his head in my patch of curls. Once his tongue touched my wet slit, a jab of unbridled desire wound through me. A small roar left my throat that I couldn't contain. Shea's tongue stroked my throbbing clit, drawing out the pleasure with each lick. I threw my head back and screamed when he increased his speed. He gripped my hips with both hands. I wound my fingers through his hair. It was thick and silky. I liked a man who cared about his personal hygiene.

Shea plunged his tongue deep inside my pussy. I bucked against him. The encroaching orgasm was going to push me over the edge. He was imbued

with ardor, which made my blood run hot. The more passion he stirred, the more I felt the bond between us developing. The urge to touch him and be with him gripped me. A scream tore my throat raw from the intensity that washed over me. I couldn't stand it anymore. It was hard to focus. I was beyond the physical world, soaring into one of sheer delight. My grip on his head and the subtle pressure of his hands on my hips were the only things that kept me anchored to myself. He left my pussy and ran his tongue along my clit again until I could hardly stand. Everything was alive inside of me. My inner cat yowled for satisfaction. If I shifted now and he saw I was a hybrid, I might lose the opportunity to be with him because I didn't know how he felt about the mixing of species. And I wanted him inside of me.

"Shea . . . need you," I panted.

Before I could protest, he picked me up in his arms and lustily threw me on the bed. He stared into my eyes. "Tell me what you are." He ran his cheek along mine. I shuddered while his hand dipped between my legs again. I arched from the bed and wrapped my leg around his waist. He breathed into my ear sending tiny tremors along my skin. The hair on my neck rose. He licked the spot under my ear. The sandy texture of his tongue was apparent now.

I closed my eyes and cried out. It came out as a loud roar. I dug my claws into his back. "Please."

He licked my neck again and slid his cock inside of me, but only part of the way, torturing me. "Tell me what you are, Alicat. I know you're strong and powerful. I sensed that in the café. I know you're cunning and an alpha like me. You're a big cat. Jungle queen. My queen. Reveal your true nature, and I'll give you all you desire." He inched inside of me a little more to let me expand just enough around his cock I felt the hardness and girth. I ground my hips against him.

I wrapped my arm around his neck and drew him close. I could barely find my voice. "Tigon. Hybrid."

Once I uttered those words, he slid his cock all the way into me. I clutched his shoulder. He drew me up to him and began to plunge into me. I

kissed his throat. The blood underneath his flesh smelled wonderful. He thrust into me and held me to him. He kissed my neck and then nipped at my throat. The moment we connected, I sensed the bond between us. My nails raked his back, and I cried out again. He held in a groan when I scratched him. I gnawed on the meat of his shoulder but didn't break the skin.

"Mark me for yours, Ali. Claim me for your mate."

I couldn't think of what to do because he drove into me, and I came when he hit my clit. My nails broke his skin again. He howled and then held me to him as he kissed my hair and murmured to me. I was out of breath and sweaty. Contentment ran through me, a contentment I'd never experienced after making love with another creature. At that second, we were meant to be together. I couldn't deny it. I couldn't deny him. He cupped my face and made me look at him. He was out of breath, too. His eyes were tawny in the light, warm and inviting.

"You shouldn't discount what you feel. Don't you sense the magnetism between us? Don't you want me for yours?"

I shook my head. "I don't know. It's all too new. I've never felt this with anyone. No one has ever accepted me for what I am. Who I am. You're the first shifter that hasn't balked at me telling them I'm a hybrid. The last man I was with . . . our relationship was purely physical. I was in heat. I was raised to never think I would ever have anyone. I—"

Shea kissed me gently on the lips. "It's okay. Our society frowns on mixing of the species. They're too locked in the past to look beyond their own nose. How about we take this one step at a time? Get to know one another for a little bit. Honestly, I didn't expect to come home with a mate tonight either. I sensed your interest across the room and figured we could have some fun. But when I touched you, I had to have you."

I was flattered by his words. He gazed on me with pure truth. I appreciated that. "Getting to know one another would be great. Thank you."

He kissed me again and then separated from me. Shea slid under the covers and patted the space next to him. I glanced at him and then at my

clothes. It would be wiser to go home. But I wasn't ready to be parted from him yet. I nestled in the crook of his arm and listened to his heart. His fingers trailed over the scars on my back.

"What are these? I didn't notice them before. Too preoccupied."

I cringed when he fingered another one. They were sensitive to touch. The memories were too buried for me to remember them clearly. "Punishment. My stepfather had a silver whip made with fine chains. He used to beat me."

Shea growled. His grip on me tightened. "No one did anything to stop it?"

I shut my eyes and shook my head. "No. They just laughed."

"I'd rip their heart out. Don't you—"

"Can we not talk about it? Please, Shea."

He kissed my shoulder. "Okay."

I didn't respond. I felt the tension in him. He hugged me closer. I tried not to think about the past. I didn't need it in my life anymore. I had left it all behind, and the memories were too painful to dredge up, especially now when I had finally found something in my life to be happy about.

Chapter Three

“Yo, bro. Who the hell is blocking the driveway? Come on, man! What the fuck?”

I opened my eyes and clutched the sheet to my chest. Shea wasn't in the bed with me. Someone banged on the door. I was surprised at the sudden sound, and then the double doors swung inward. I jumped again, not sure who it was. I also wasn't sure what had happened last night had really happened. I listened harder and heard the shower running.

“Whoa! Excuse me. I didn't realize that Shea had someone over.” The other man stood in the doorway. He was a large African-American male, dark-skinned and shimmering in the sunlight. I inhaled. His scent was like citrus. His hair was shaved short to his head. Three parallel scars ran from the top of his right eye to disappear around his head. He took me in. His eyes were blue like mine. His cat skulked underneath the surface of his flesh. When he smiled, his teeth were a little sharper than they should have been. Humans wouldn't have noticed, but I did. He was built like a body builder. He was powerful. His hands were big. One would cover my face. He could easily overpower me, a large cat that silently stalked the night and could kill anything. He stuck out his hand and crossed the room to where I sat on the bed. I held the sheet a little closer to my body.

“I'm Collin.” When he smiled, it brightened the meanness given to his expression from the scars.

“Alison.” I glanced at his hand and then back to his eyes. His smile widened. I got lost in his gaze, and some of my self-consciousness fell away. I took his hand. Once our hands connected, another jolt went along my arm. The same as it had been with Shea. Collin cocked his head to the side. His intense stare caught my breath. He took another step forward until he was inches from me. I knelt on the bed, feeling the draw between us. I turned my face to his. His hand left mine, and he cupped my cheek. I drew in a breath and quivered. His skin was warm. The citrus smell enveloped the both of us.

“What are you?” he asked.

His voice was a low baritone that touched on my inner core and resembled a purr. I couldn't help but purr back and rub my cheek along his palm. The kitty inside wanted to lick him all over. It felt the attraction to him in a different, darker way than it did to Shea, but both were strong. Both of them were ones I couldn't ignore. The shower shut off. I jumped to reality and pulled away from Collin.

“What are you?” I asked.

“Panther.”

“I-I'm a tigon. A hybrid.” I looked down.

“There's no reason to be ashamed of who you are. So, you're with Shea?”

I nodded. The shower door slid back in its track. I glanced at the bathroom. Panic gripped me. What would happen when Shea saw me with his friend? “Ahh, yeah. Did you park behind me?”

“No. My hog's off to the side.”

I nodded, wrapped the sheet around me, and began picking up my discarded clothes. I felt Collin's eyes on me while I moved. I pulled on my panties underneath the sheets. I grabbed my skirt and wiggled it on. My keys and my purse were across the room. I threw my shirt on and buttoned it up quickly. I didn't care what Collin saw. I had to get my head back on straight and figure out what was going on with me. My blood said to tackle this new man and fuck him on the floor. It did the same when I had seen Shea last night. And I ended up making love to him. I slipped my jacket on, hooked my fingers through my shoes, and ran down the hallway, downstairs, and outside. My heart thumped erratically. I had to get back to some semblance of normal. I opened the car door and slid in. I almost ran into the motorcycle, but I swerved to avoid it at the last moment. I sped through roads I wasn't too sure on. It was early enough there wasn't a lot of traffic on the streets. By some higher power, I got back onto the main road and stepped on the gas pedal with the hope that I wouldn't get caught by a cop. I wasn't in the mood to explain my present state. I searched the seat next to me for my cell phone. Everything remained back at Shea's. I didn't even

want to contemplate turning around and going back. Panic was setting in. *Minerva can help.* First, I had to go home, take a shower, and call in sick to work. There was no way I was going in today.

Thirty minutes later, I was back at my house. I unlocked the door and was greeted by Lucky, my brown and white tabby cat. Normally cats didn't like cat shifters, but with me being the odd one out, it seemed he had decided to make friends with me. I scratched him behind the ears and made a beeline for the bathroom. Once there, I stripped off my clothes and got under the hot water. Soon I calmed enough to think straight. *I never should've run out like that. What do they think of me now? Why am I thinking about both of them? Should I just be focused on Shea?* I shook my head and rinsed the rest of the shampoo out of my hair. *Minerva will have the answers. She always does.* She was my guru, best friend, and mentor.

I went into the bedroom and pulled on a pair of jeans and an oversized flannel shirt. From there, I went into the kitchen, grabbed a bowl of cereal, fed Lucky, and went to eat breakfast when I noticed I hadn't put milk in the bowl. With a sigh, I looked in the fridge to discover the milk was bad and I had nothing else to eat. So I munched on the dried cereal. My eye caught the calendar; it was Saturday. At least I was off the hook for work. I took the phone and hit the speed-dial button for Minerva. I knew she would be up early. She always was.

"Hi, Alison." Her sweet voice came over the other line. Sometimes I hated that she was psychic because there was no way my number had come up on caller ID as it was unpublished.

"Hi, Minerva. I really need to talk to you." My voice cracked. The panic I'd been feeling caught up to me. I didn't know how to handle any of this. I wasn't expecting to find Shea the night before, and with what I felt with Collin, I couldn't process it. Shea had made me feel special. He called me beautiful. He didn't care that I was a hybrid or about my appearance. He just wanted me. I shook my head. I needed guidance. Minerva had found me three months after I had left my family. She said she had a dream about me and my shabby apartment. I clung to a waitressing job back then. She helped

me get my life on track and had said we were going to be friends for a very long time. Of all the shifters I had ever met, she was rare. A swan who had seen four centuries, and she didn't look a day over thirty. I'd never met her mate, Siegfried. He was overseas with their children, in learning the ancient knowledge of their flock. Minerva was always hush-hush when I asked her about it. All she would say is that the swan shifters had a long tradition of magic within their bloodline, and all the knowledge was kept by the main bevy in Europe. She was one of the few swan shifters in the city, but there were enough that they had formed a small bevy.

"I know, sweetie. I had a dream about you last night. You were surrounded by three different cats. You seemed pretty content. They all support you and were keeping away a common enemy. I didn't see who that was, though."

Common enemy. What in the world? Must be that chick I saw at the bookstore. Shea's ex. "Well, that sounds like a good dream." *Does three mean that Shea's other roommate is going to show up, too?*

"Now, what's bothering you? You're positively in a tizzy. What happened?"

I sniffled and wiped the tears from my eyes. "Something screwy's going on. I met a guy last night. I saw him at the coffee shop—and instant connection. I figured we could have a good time for the night. But when I touched him, I felt this jolt."

"Did he feel the same thing?"

"Yeah. He said that he did. He wasn't expecting it."

"And you went home with him and had the best sex of your life, didn't you?"

"It was pretty fucking awesome. But is it a matebond? I've never felt that before. Hell, I've never assumed I'd find a mate being what I am."

"You gotta get over being a hybrid. There are more out there than you know. Trust me. First of all, you have to calm down. You don't want to force a shift. Second, things will work themselves out. You know when we first meet another shifter and touch them, we have that immediate recognition.

Matebonds are different. After the first whiff of your mate, all you can focus on is him. One touch, and you know. It's a zap and a magnetism that's so strong we forget about the world around us. All that matters is that one person. Everything you think and feel is turned upside-down. It's instant love. They will die for one another. After the initial bonding period, then you can have a normal life."

"How long is that?"

"It varies."

I closed my eyes and tried to relax. She was right. If I didn't calm down, I was going to slip my skin and the kitty would come out. Lucky rubbed me, butting his head against my hand. I scratched under his chin until he purred. His soft rumble calmed me, but it also reminded me of Collin and his deep voice. So deep it sent chills along my spine and made me wet when I thought about it again. I focused on our meeting, and the lure blazed through me. The pull had been there. I had touched him, and I had the same reaction I had when Shea had touched me at the bookstore. "So, it's possible to have more than one mate?"

Minerva sighed. "It's rare, but it can happen. What else occurred this morning?"

"After having my mind blown last night, I woke up to one of Shea's roommates pounding on the door. When he came in, he introduced himself and shook my hand. Instant connection. I wanted to throw him on the floor and fuck him right there. This is more than being in heat. I go a little crazy when I'm like that, but this was different. I-I don't know. It was too overwhelming, so I grabbed my things and ran."

"Oh, sweetie, you didn't."

"I freaked. I didn't know what else to do. What would I have said if Shea walked in on me and he found me making out with his roommate?"

"You need to go back there and tell him what you felt. You have to be honest with him."

I laughed. "Yeah, that's not going to be easy. You know your dream about the three cats? Well, there's a third roommate I haven't met yet. How

does that work out? Am I going to end up with three mates? Three completely different guys that I'm attracted to and can't keep my hands off of? Minnie, I don't know what to do."

She squawked on the other end because I had called her *Minnie*. "What you need to do is take a breath. You can work it out. Look at it this way. Out of the deal, you get three amazing guys who will do whatever you ask them to do. They'll worship the ground you walk on."

"I don't need to be surrounded by men who think they can boss me around because I'm supposed to be their woman. I won't be a servant."

"You won't be. I can't see what exactly your life will be like, but I know you well enough to know that you won't end up in the same situation that your mother's in. You're a strong enough cat that you know what you want. If those men cross you, you'll turn your tail on them and go the other way until they cool down. Matebonds are not something you can disregard. Trust me. It happened with my first mate before he died. We met. I ignored the signals. I was young. I didn't want to settle down and have hatchlings. For three months, I avoided acting on the bond and cementing it. It drove me crazy. I dreamed about him. It got to the point I couldn't eat because I fought against it. It was painful. Don't let it get to that point. With Siegfried, I knew better the second time around."

Wonderful. "I won't. I just don't know how to handle this."

"One hunky guy at a time. Now relax. I think you're going to have a busy night ahead of you."

Before I could ask her what that meant, she hung up. I mulled over what she had said. *Is it possible to have three mates? Can I deal with that?* My mother never had a relationship with my biological father, just the one night. My stepfather claimed her and treats her like shit even to this day. I didn't sense that Shea would treat me badly, although I craved his touch again. The same way I pined for Collin's. And there was his other roommate, William. What kind of a cat was he? I shook my head. Lucky meowed. I couldn't stay in the house. The walls were closing in around me. I needed open air. I needed to

be around people to remember that I was also mortal and not just a shape-shifter. I needed ice cream and shopping. *Guess I'm heading to the mall.*

I glanced at the clock. The mall wouldn't be open for a while, but I could still get out. I put my shoes on and took my keys. I had some cash stowed away for a rainy day. Today was that day. I slipped it into my pocket and got back into the car. It didn't matter where I was going before the mall, just as long as I was out of the house and not thinking about men.

Chapter Four

By the time I returned home, it was dark. My stomach was growling. I had splurged and went to *Victoria's Secret* and bought a few items. When I walked by and saw the lingerie, my mind immediately went to Shea and Collin. I wanted something pretty for them. *Not that it's going to matter because when I tell them what's going on, neither is going to want to be with me.* Once I pulled onto my street, I slammed on the brakes when I saw Shea's car in the driveway. *Shit.* I glanced behind me. I could back up, hightail it out of there, and hope he'd leave, or I could face what had been on my mind all day. As I rested my head on the steering wheel, I drew in a long breath. *I can do this.* Last night I was the cocky, sexy cat. Tonight I'm the scaredy-cat, the one who's insecure and keeps wondering why those two gorgeous men would want me for a mate. *Fuck it! I'm not going to turn tail and run.*

I parked alongside the curb, took out my packages, and went around Shea's car. No one was inside. I inhaled and caught two scents, his and Collin's. I heard voices coming from the backyard. If they've been waiting for me, then they can wait a little longer. Inside, I placed my bags down and looked around for Lucky. Those two probably scared him off. Not that I blamed him. Taking a moment, I brushed my hair out really quick. Today it was redder than blond which was fine with me. After I gathered up the courage, I walked into the backyard. Shea and Collin were sitting at my picnic table with my purse propped up against the umbrella pole. Both of them were drinking a beer. I said nothing. They looked at me and set their drinks down on the table. I pulled up a chair across from them but still kept my distance. I studied their faces, but I couldn't read their expressions.

"Hi, guys." I looked at my flaking purple nail polish and began to pick at the corner of my thumbnail.

"Are you okay, Alison?" Shea asked.

"I'm fine."

"You ran out this morning like a hyena was on you," Collin noted.

"Yeah. About that." I glanced at Shea.

“Did I do something wrong last night that you don’t want to see me again? I know we discussed what we both felt and you weren’t sure.”

I shook my head. “No, it’s not that. Last night was amazing. It’s just—” I glanced at Collin. His mouth was set in a grim line.

Shea reached across the table and took my hand. Once he did, I began to relax. I had the urge to go to him and make love to him all over again, but I kept my head. “This is about what occurred between you and when you shook his hand while I was in the shower?” Shea asked.

I nodded. “I don’t know what to make of it. I-I—”

“We discussed it this morning. It’s okay,” Collin answered.

I gave him a questioning look. “How can it be okay? Aren’t you jealous? Don’t you want to cast me away because of what this could mean between him and I? Or you and me? What if there’s another man who comes into the picture that could be another mate? What do we do then?”

“I grew up in a pride where my mother had four mates and shared them with another woman. It can happen that there is more than one mate for us. I have seven brothers and ten sisters. It didn’t matter to me growing up who was my father because I loved them all. They divided up the household duties and the two women. They made it work because they knew they had to. If not, there would’ve been no harmony in the house. My mother always told me, I’d know from a touch who my mate would be. I’ve been alone for many years and never thought I’d find a woman to be with. And when I touched you, Alison, I knew immediately you were the one for me. After you left, we talked.” Collin took my other hand. When he did, that instant connection I had with him awoke.

His deep voice made me wet. The dark-skinned man leaned farther over the table. As he did, I heard the creak of his leather jacket. I saw the tight jeans encasing his well-muscled thighs. He slid his fingers into my hair while his palm cupped my cheek. I groaned from the soft caress and tasted his desire on my tongue. His citrus scent enveloped me. I wrapped my hand around his arm and felt the hard muscles there. He was denser than Shea and taller. Collin’s thumb swept across my lips. I shut my eyes to stay focused but

enjoyed the gentle sensation. I shivered in my seat. I heard Shea swear and then the scrape of the chair. That broke me from my reverie. I went after him. He stood with his back to me, fists clenched at his sides. The muscles were bunched in his back. Shea wasn't happy about this. I touched his shoulder, and he didn't budge.

"I knew this would happen. That's why I left. I couldn't stand to see you like this. I couldn't stand to think I'd hurt you for something I couldn't control. I know I barely know you, but to think of seeing your face if you walked in on me and your roommate. I just couldn't do it." I tried to hide the pain in my voice. The pent-up emotions I'd had crashed over me. They choked me up and came out as tears. I sniffled and tried to stop the sobs I was descending into.

Shea turned my face to his. "No, Ali. It's not your fault." His eyes showed nothing but forgiveness and understanding. "None of us can help who we're mated to. Collin's right. Even though I don't want to share you, I don't have a choice. I can be grateful that it's my brother and not a stranger. It's difficult to see you with another man. I can't watch it. That doesn't mean I don't want you. On the contrary, I want you more. I was hoping we could spend the day together so we could get to know you better. But you have to act on what you feel." He captured my lips and caught me up in his arms. Once I was enclosed in his embrace, I didn't want to leave it. What I felt for him, that animal magnetism, returned. It was right to be in his arms. His fingers trailed down my back and clutched my ass. I groaned when he held me close. He broke his kiss. "Spend tonight with Collin. Come over tomorrow if you want. We'll talk. I'll cook you dinner."

I nodded and placed my hand on his chest. I had to tell him what Minerva had said. It wasn't fair when he was hurting inside, and I never wanted that to happen. "I have to tell you something before you go."

"What is it?" His amber eyes drew me in. I almost forgot what I was going to tell him. He caressed my cheek and wiped the tears away.

"I have a friend. She's a psychic. Her name is Minerva."

He chuckled. "I know of her. She's very hard to get a hold of and very well revered in the shifter world. Her legend precedes her. What did she tell you?"

"She had a dream about me last night. I was surrounded by three cats. If she's right, and she normally is, I have another mate. She has a hunch it might be your other roommate." I waited to see his reaction. His eyes narrowed. But he ran his knuckles down my cheek.

"Well, we'll just have to see what happens. If it's true, William will be the hardest one to convince about having a mate."

"Why?"

"The first woman he loved was human. She overreacted to his shifting and ran away from him. She ran but fell and hit her head. She died. He went back to his pride. They said he was tainted for cavorting with a human. He tried to abide by the laws of the pride, listen to the head male. But it got to be too much. Evidently, the alpha was a bastard. Treated women like they were dogs. Anyway, he left. He's never fully recovered. Maybe you can be the balm that opens his heart again. We'll see. If it's true, we'll work it out. I'm not going to lose you because you're doing what's natural. I'm not a chauvinistic asshole who wants pussy when he can get it. If I wanted that, then I could get it every night."

"Full of yourself, aren't you?" I kissed him again. He cupped my ass and then released me.

"Kinda goes with the whole being king of the jungle thing. Now, go with Collin. I know you want to. We'll have our time to spend together." He bit my neck lightly and then walked over to his friend. I watched their exchange.

Shea stretched out his hand. Collin took it and pulled him into a brotherly embrace. "I'll treat her right."

"You'd better, or I'll kick your ass."

"In your dreams, bro. I best you every time when we wrestle."

Shea laughed. He stepped back from Collin. I saw the longing in his eyes, but he didn't act on it. Instead, he walked around the house and went back out to his car. He revved his engine, and then I heard the squeal of his tires.

Once he was gone, I faced Collin. My head spun as I thought about what had just happened. What I had finally admitted to myself and to the two men. I had the potential to have three mates. Here I was about to consummate the relationship with another man I barely knew.

“Would you like to go inside and sit down? Maybe talk awhile?” Collin asked.

I blinked and realized he was right in front of me. I didn’t see him move. I nodded. “Okay.” While I walked ahead of him, the tension between us started to twist inside my body. My muscles were bunching again. I rolled my shoulders and twisted my neck. The sudden snap of my bones realigning helped to ease some of the anxiety I felt. Once I closed the door, my stomach growled. I had eaten at the mall, but it was later than usual. “I’m going to order a pizza. Would you like anything?” I eyed him while picking up a menu from the organizer I had on the fridge. He seemed like he could eat a large horse without any effort.

“Veggie one, if you don’t mind. Large with extra cheese.”

I eyed him.

“I’m a vegetarian.”

I couldn’t help but laugh. No shifter I had ever met was a vegetarian. It was in our nature to crave rare meat. There was no way the big, burly man survived on rabbit food. “Seriously?”

“Yeah. I find it helps keep my darker side under control. It’s a long story.”

“Okay.” I dialed the number and ordered the large veggie with extra cheese for him and a large meat lover’s with extra cheese and two side orders of onion rings. It was going to be at least forty-five minutes.

Collin kept his distance, but I sensed that he didn’t want to. The attraction between us fevered my body. I turned to the fridge and got a bottle of water. I lapped it up in a couple of swallows. Once I was done, I saw he had his hands clenched at his sides. His eyes were squeezed shut. He drew in short breaths. His muscles were taut. The cat was close to the surface. My cat yearned to rub against his body and hear him meow. My teeth shifted some.

His nostrils flared when I took a step closer. I reached out, giving in to the intensity between us, and brushed my fingers along the top of his hand. He hissed out his breath and gazed at me. His blue eyes burned with the inner fire of the change, turning them hazel with a hint of that electric blue. I felt the ripple of his muscles underneath the flesh. One wrong move, and he would shift. I'd seen it before, growing up. One of my brothers always lived with the cat near the surface.

"It's hard to stay in control around you. Especially when I smell your desire."

"What does it smell like?"

He stepped closer and sniffed the air between us, but didn't touch me. I didn't move my hand from his. His teeth were sharper than before—enough that a human would notice the difference. "An exotic spice. Jasmine and saffron. Like India and Africa mixed together."

I cocked my head to the side. "How do you know that? Those smells."

"I've traveled to many different countries. Seen and done many things. I was a Navy Seal. At least that was what they called us. The military knows about shifters, along with other creatures. They use us for special missions. I've been to a lot of places that I'm not supposed to talk about. Top secret and all."

I nodded, trying to understand some of the things he had seen and what he had done. I couldn't imagine killing anyone. I brushed my fingers along the parallel scars that ran along his head and was rewarded with a shiver. "Is that where you got these? From doing some of those missions?"

He closed his eyes and sighed. The muscles in his face rolled from fighting his transformation. I heard the click of his bones shifting. His cheekbones were higher and more slanted. Collin cracked his jaw and tried to remain still. "No. I got these from fighting among my tribe. I was going for leadership and was defeated. I was shunned. I had nowhere else to go. I was contacted and then enlisted. I didn't have another choice. It's a long story." More bones creaked in him. Collin grabbed my hand and brought it close to his mouth. His lips moved along the inside of my wrist and sucked in my

skin. His teeth nipped on the delicate flesh of my wrist. He flicked his tongue right over the sensitive bundle of nerves. I let out a small gasp. I gripped the edge of the counter and tried to keep my own cat contained.

“Why is this happening to me?”

“My mother said it takes a very special soul to attract multiple mates. The gods wouldn’t allow it if it weren’t possible. She is a wise woman. She instructed all of us on how intense the matebond would be. I never assumed it would be so hard to stay under control. How much I want to fuck you and claim you for my own. But that’s not me.” He bit my flesh a little harder.

I shook. “Then why don’t you tell me about yourself? How did you meet Shea? What do you do for a living? What’s your favorite movie? Food?”

He bit me a little harder and flicked the tip of his tongue along the center of my palm, pulling in my middle finger. His lips enclosed it and made me hot. I purred all over again. His tongue ran along the underside of my finger. My eyes fluttered shut, and my knees went weak. I could barely stand. The pleasure of it reminded me of my daydreams of Shea. What I would do to him when I had my way with him. I needed to feel Collin against me. Have his body sliding along mine. He wrapped his other large arm around my waist and caught me. My eyes opened. He released my finger.

“You taste like apples with a hint of jasmine. I love apple pie. I bet all of you tastes like apples.”

“Good thing I know how to cook. What about Shea?”

“He hates dessert.”

I giggled. “No. I mean. How did you meet him? He said something about you saving his life. What was that all about?”

He groaned and dropped my hand. “Do you really want to talk about Shea now? When I want to rip your clothes off and make love to you on the floor.”

My stomach growled louder than normal. “Yes, I really want to talk about him now. Because I was hoping to pass the time while we waited for the pizza. After we eat, we could move on to dessert. Please, Collin. I need a little bit of normalcy before I jump into bed with another man in less than

forty-eight hours. This is all happening so fast.” I laid my hand on his cheek. He took in a deep breath and nodded. I felt him rein in the cat. His eyes normalized.

“You drive a hard bargain. If you were anyone else, I don’t know if I could pull back the cat. Being in the military, we were trained to keep the beast near the surface. It’s made me a little explosive.”

“I’m used to that. I didn’t exactly grow up in a very stable household. My stepfather had a horrible temper. He hated me and my mother. He claimed my mother for his own, saying she was his mate, but she never was.”

“And she listened to him?”

I nodded. “She grew up in the prides. She did what her father told her to do and went along with the system. I was the product of a one-night stand with her true mate, a tiger shifter that was my stepfather’s best friend. He was killed not too long after my stepfather discovered the affair. He beat my mother to get her to lose me. But she never did. He hated me growing up, but she’d never give me up. He hit me at times, too.” I stared past Collin as I remembered some of the horrible nights of screaming I heard from my mother while she was beaten. The words my stepfather would call me. *Bitch. Whore. Half-breed. Meat.* He would shift on a dime and come at me. My mother never intervened. The only one who did was a boy my stepfather had begrudgingly allowed into the pack as a favor.

“And no one ever stood up for you? No one else in the pride? Your aunts or cousins? Uncles or any of the other adults?”

“No. I was the odd one out. I was shunned in the family. Shoved into the closet when anyone came over or locked away in my bedroom. I was the black sheep of the family. There was one boy who my stepfather allowed to join the pack, who stuck up for me when he could. He’d sneak me food. He was older than me by four years or so. I had the hugest crush on him. But he was weaker than my brothers. They would pick on him. He was there for three years. After that, he just disappeared. He was eighteen and cocky. My brothers called him Yellow-Bellied Bill because he never fought back. I always called him Bill.”

Collin stroked my face. "What happened to you as a child was wrong. You never should've been treated that way. It sounds like this boy was the only saving grace you had. How did you escape?"

I ran my fingers down the outside of his hand. His skin was smooth. Being in his arms, I was comforted and the past was all a bad dream. "When I turned eighteen, I stood up to my stepfather. He came into my room one night and wanted to have sex. He figured I was old enough so why not be good for something because I was never going to get it elsewhere. I fought him off and found I was stronger than him. He could hardly believe it. I shifted and lunged at him. Gouged his stomach and his face. He was scared bad enough that he backed off. I switched back and packed my things. My mother stopped me on the way out and gave me some money she had saved. I walked to the bus station and bought me a ticket to get out of Dodge. Eight hundred miles later, I ended up here in Charlotte. That was twelve years ago. I've never been back."

He pressed his lips to mine and kissed me. Collin had relaxed some, but he was still bunched up. He swept his tongue across my lips and waited for me to respond. His full lips covered mine once I stood on tiptoe to reach him. He slid his hands along my back and cupped my ass. I wrapped my arms around his neck and yelped when he lifted me up and set me down on the kitchen counter. He broke the kiss and stared at me. I began to feel self-conscious under his scrutinizing gaze. I blushed and looked away. He turned my face back to his.

"You never have to feel insecure with me or Shea. We might not like the idea of sharing you, but we love you unconditionally. That's part of the matebond. It overtakes reason and instinct. You're the perfect woman for us. Besides, you're the kinda woman I go for. Curvy. Dead-sexy. Fearless."

I laughed. No one had every called me fearless or dead-sexy. Hearing that pass his lips was energizing. It was true. The matebond overrode reason, and it didn't matter what the men looked like. To me they were perfect. Having been with both Shea and Collin, I knew they both had attributes that I needed in my life. They were both amazing and loving. I still had to discover

more about them, but I could already sense that we were going to be wonderful together. “It’s nice to hear that from someone. No one has ever sat me down and told me those things. I’ve never had great self-esteem.”

He ran his hands over my thighs and pressed his face against my belly. He kissed the fabric of my shirt and then placed another between my breasts. “You’re beautiful. No matter what. Always believe that. I can’t wait to see you. Touch your lovely breasts. Taste your smooth skin. Make love to you and worship you as a goddess. But I think we have to wait because the delivery guy has just pulled into the driveway.”

Chapter Five

Collin paid for dinner even though I protested. He set the pizzas on the counter and fished out the onion rings. He grabbed a large ring and swallowed it whole. I jumped down from the counter and got the ranch dressing I dipped my onion rings in. I took another bottle of water out and handed him one. I led him into the living room, where I plopped down on the sofa. I set the pizza and the onion rings on the coffee table, and we ate in silence. Collin glanced around the room. I had no pictures of myself and a bookcase full of books. I had a small fireplace that I hadn't used this season. It was something I looked forward to, but now with the different circumstances, I didn't know how my life would change with these two men and the prospect of three.

I enjoyed the meat lover's pizza, but my stomach churned as the night wore on. After three pieces and most of the onion rings, I was done. I got up and began to pace. "So, how did you meet Shea?"

"I was out in a bar hanging with some buddies. Shea was completely wasted. This was before he got it under control. He and Will started picking a fight. They were buds before I knew them. They got into it real bad about something stupid. Over a woman I think. They were at each other's throats. Shea broke a bottle and went after Will. He started to shift. We were in a human bar. I dragged him outside and calmed him down. Once he sobered up, we got him into a program. Will apologized, and the next day Shea didn't remember a thing. He drinks on occasion now, but he's never lost his cool. That was eight years ago. We've been friends ever since. I needed a place to live. Shea and Will were already buddies and lived in a different place. We've been there now for five years. No one bothers us. We own the land all around us and the farmhouse." He moved my hair out of the way and placed a kiss along the bend of my neck and collarbone. Collin's hands roved over my stomach until one was above my heart and the other around my waist. He began to sway back and forth. "I love jazz, and I love to dance. I have an affinity for horror movies and a closet obsession for chick flicks. I blame that

on my mother. I'm an okay cook. I love to use my hands on things. I'm a welder by trade, and I abhor stuck-up humans who think they can rule the world because they have enough money to do it. I enjoy camping deep in the mountains, and I lift weights to burn off the aggression. I'm no longer on active duty, but there's always the possibility I could be called up again. My favorite food varies on my mood. I like ice cream and bananas. I love Chinese scallion pancakes and mashed potatoes."

He kissed me again, but sucked the skin between his lips. One hand slipped under my shirt and across my belly. I rested my head on his broad chest and stared into his eyes. Collin smiled and kissed my nose. I giggled. The sound of his heart eased some of my fears. My stomach began to calm from the rocking we were still doing. Being in his arms, I noticed the cat wasn't near the surface the way it had been before.

"Thank you for telling me all that."

"You're welcome. There's a lot more to discover, but we have time for that. What about you?" His fingers snuck down the waistband of my jeans and slid over my panties. I curled my toes. The urge to tell Collin to rip my clothes off sat on the tip of my tongue, but he was going slowly, which I appreciated.

"Not much to tell. Been single a long time. Had a handful of lovers, human and shifter. My best friend is a swan shifter and a powerful psychic. I work way too many hours as an accountant. I have a cat who doesn't like strangers. I can kill a half-pint of ice cream if I'm in a bad mood. I like movies, and I read a lot. Kinda boring."

Collin pressed his thumb against my clitoris and began to massage me in slow strokes. A long breath left my lungs. He was building the pleasure and not rushing me. His tongue plunged into my ear. I raked my nails along his thighs and ground my ass against his erection, which pushed against my buttocks. It was his turn to hold in a groan. He began to fondle my buried bud harder. The sudden passion that swept through me wound my muscles tight.

"Come for me, baby," Collin whispered in my ear.

I turned my head to meet his lips. "Sure of yourself, aren't you?"

I brushed my tongue over his lips and bit down on the bottom one. I tasted the pizza on his mouth and the citrus that he was made up of. It only made me hungrier. With my free hand, I began rubbing his cock. After a moment, we were both grinding against one another and moaning. I could barely concentrate on what I was doing because the orgasm was going to sweep through me. I tried to keep the rising tide of ecstasy down by focusing on my breathing, but he was getting the better of me. He continued to work my clit and slipped his long fingers inside my slick pussy. I lost my grip on his dick then. I became his slave. He was my master, and I would do anything for him to continue the elation that threaded through me.

"You have no idea." Collin pumped his fingers inside of me while his other hand clutched my breast. My nipples were already hard from the need of him, but they contracted painfully when he squeezed one between his thumb and finger.

"Fuck!" My claws shredded his pants. I couldn't control my inner kitty. She didn't want all the way out, just enough to experience this with him. I felt the subtle shift of my cheekbones and my teeth. Collin's hips pushed against my ass. He nipped my shoulder harder than Shea had done, but the pain was exquisite. At that exact moment, I couldn't hold back the tide anymore. The orgasm washed over me, and I cried out. I could barely draw a breath when he began manipulating me more. Only this time he wasn't taking his time.

"Call out my name."

"N-no." I wasn't going to give in to him that easily.

"Then this can go on all night." He grasped my breast and pinched the nipple again. The pain was so wonderful that it alone brought me over the brink. I shrieked and began grinding my ass against his cock. Collin stiffened. I heard him suck in a breath through his teeth. A low rumble started in his throat. He was going to come soon, too, if I didn't stop.

"I don't think you can keep that bad boy locked away in those jeans. Not without me leaving you seriously wanting. I need you inside of me."

I turned and nipped his cheek. The thunder in his chest came out as a low rumble. I growled in return and tugged on his skin. Collin untangled from me and had me back against the wall, caught between his arms. His lips worked furiously on mine. His hands dug under my shirt and unhooked my bra. Once that was undone, he began to unbutton my jeans. I kissed him back, but put my hands on his chest and pushed him away. I still had to catch my breath. He hissed at me. His eyes had gone amber again, and the pupils were black slits. He could shift at any moment. I placed my hands on the side of his face.

“Breathe, Collin. I’m not turning you away. You just have to let me have a little fun, too.” I unzipped his jeans and peeled them down his well-muscled thighs. His shaft sprang out from the tight jeans. I pushed his shirt up a little way to feel the toned muscles underneath. I flicked my tongue over his flesh, tasting the citrus. I sucked in one of his nipples and bit the hard bud, which made him purr. But I didn’t stay on it long. I wanted his throbbing length. I sunk to my knees and cupped his balls in one hand. With a quick glance, I saw him smile when I began to lick his cock. Already small pearls of pre-come glistened on the head. I sucked them down and enjoyed the salty taste of him.

“You shouldn’t be doing this. Have to pleasure you.” He wove his fingers through my hair and touched the side of my face.

I let go of his cock and took his balls into my mouth. I swept my tongue over them and sucked on them until his hips were rocketing forward. *I guess he enjoys that.* I went slower, torturing him while I embraced his shaft, sliding my fingers up and down his length. The faster I went, the quicker he thrust his hips. His claws pierced my shoulder. I smelled my blood. At that moment, I let go of his balls and took his cock between my lips. The suction created a vacuum. I wrapped my tongue around his rod and traced the large vein underneath. Collin moaned. I drew him in until my lips hit his pubic bone. I drew him out again and then went back, keeping it slow, but he was taking control of the rhythm between us.

“Fuck your face. Fuck you-ahhh—” he cried out.

His hot seed spilled into my throat, and I swallowed him all down. When he slowed, I released him. His body glistened with a slight sheen of sweat. I sat back on the floor and gazed up at him. We were both out of breath. My inner kitty yowled for more of him. His head was thrown back, and his eyes were closed. I slid my body along his as I got up. He opened his eyes. His cock stirred again.

“You taste wonderful.” I pressed my lips to his. He plunged his tongue into my mouth to taste the last vestiges of his seed.

He kissed my cheek and bit my ear. “I need to fuck you. I need to cement our matebond. I need you to claim me for your own. Taste of me while we mate.”

He pulled my shirt over my head and slid my bra off. Cupping my breasts in his hands, he weighed and kneaded them. I might have been plus-sized, but my breasts were average size. “So beautiful. Lovely.”

The heat of his flesh ignited my own passion again. I was already wet. Hearing him moan had made me need him once more. What he said was true. I had to mark him. I hadn’t done that with Shea because I wasn’t sure if this was all happening. Now I regretted that. Once our bonds were secure, we could share one another’s feelings and communicate by thought. Have an intimacy I’d never known was possible. Before he could react, I dug my nails into his pecs and fastened my teeth around his neck. My mate shivered. He sunk his fangs into my throat just under my ear. He held me to him and slipped his cock deep inside of me. He didn’t lose his grip when he lifted me up and pushed me against the wall. I burrowed my teeth into his skin once more and soon tasted the thick blood. Collin began to pump into me. His claws pierced the flesh of my ass while his other hand cushioned me from the wall wrapping around my back. He pulled his teeth out of my throat and began to lick at the wound.

“Harder,” I growled.

“No.”

I raked my claws down his back and bit his shoulder. The intensity was building while I lapped at his wound. “Please. I need it.”

At that point, Collin couldn't say no to me. He would do anything I asked. And I would do the same. He thrust into me harder but covered the back of my head so it wouldn't slam into the plaster. Every time he delved into me, he hit my sweet spot, and I was brought higher. I was pulled away from my body and spun off into a world of sensation. Every muscle was alive. My body sang. My nerves twitched from the bliss riding them. He was almost there, ready to come again, and I could feel it, the tightening of his balls and the small shivers in his stomach muscles. The pressure built inside of Collin until he had to release it. At the last push, he hit my clit, and I was thrown over the edge.

"Oh, Collin. Yes!" I laid my head against his shoulder and sucked on the seeping bite marks. Most had already healed. He held me against the wall for a moment and then looked at me. A satisfied grin spread across his features.

"I knew you'd call out for me."

I kissed him on the lips quickly. "You were right. Happy?"

"Very. I have a woman to call my very own, and I never dreamed that would happen."

"And sharing me is going to be okay?"

My new mate let me untangle from him and stepped back. I sensed his trepidation and that he was choosing his words carefully. He zipped his pants back up and adjusted his shirt. I didn't bother putting my clothes back on. I was going to take another shower to clean up. I pulled my pants all the way off. Collin's desire stirred again and nearly pushed me into wanting him again, but I focused on work. Numbers weren't sexy. He drew in a breath and ran his hand along my ass. "Sharing you is what it is. We'll make it work. Now, what are you doing showing me that sweet ass of yours again? You're insatiable."

I giggled. "I'm taking a shower. You can join me if you want." I batted my eyelashes at him and headed down the hall. Collin followed a moment later. He muttered something I couldn't hear. The night wasn't halfway over, and from the way it was going, it was going to be a long one.

Chapter Six

A loud rumbling thundered next to my ear. I opened my eyes and saw Collin nestled up against me. His hard body warmed mine, and I didn't want to disturb him. The taste of his blood lingered in my mouth. We had spent much of the night exploring one another's body. Finally, I collapsed, exhausted. I got up and headed back into the bathroom. I turned the water on and let the warmth flow over my body. My muscles ached, but in a good way. My inner kitty was satisfied. When I thought about Collin, I got a warm glow in my mind. I let his glow envelop me and stayed there for a few minutes while I washed away the remnants of our lovemaking. My fingers slid over the spot where he had bitten me, and there was nothing there. Shifters had a remarkable rate of healing. We also had long life spans. I was thirty. Our aging slowed around thirty, so I could live to be two or three hundred years old, but nothing more than that. The cats had shorter life spans than some of the other shifters, but it wasn't anything to sniff at. Many humans would give their left arm to live that long. My youth sucked, and I admit I was pretty traumatized by it, but life moved on. As I thought about my past, I wondered how my mother was doing. I hadn't talked to her in ages. And I thought about what had happened to Bill. He was the only one who had tried to make my life not so miserable, and in his own way he had. Bill brought me food or books to read. Sometimes he snuck me CDs when my stepfather or brothers weren't looking. It would've been nice to know if he was okay. Just to know that something good had come out of his leaving.

I turned the water off, wrapped my hair in a towel, and brushed my teeth. I listened and heard music in bedroom. *Collin must be up.* I followed the newly established link we had, and sure enough I sensed he was awake. When I thought about him, I felt his inner cat slide along my mind. It was silky, and I wanted more of it. I shivered. I checked the mirror and didn't see any difference in my appearance and yet everything about me was different. I was more secure. I felt sexy, like someone wanted me. Like the whole world

wanted me. I could walk out the door, and no one would be able to say no to me. It was a very strange feeling.

I came out of the bathroom and found Collin was sitting on the bed. His eyes were closed. He bopped to the music on the radio and sang the lyrics. When I entered, he opened those beautiful blue eyes. I leaned over and kissed him. His hand cupped my breast, and he squeezed it lightly. I saw the desire in his eyes—and in the erection he sported under the sheet. I brushed my hand over it and watched him shudder.

“You are the devil. No one has ever stirred my blood more than you. I think last night was a record.”

I chuckled. “Yeah. Me, too. The shower is free if you want it. All I have for breakfast is the leftover pizza, so we’ll have to grab something on the way out if you’re hungry.”

“Way out? I assumed we could stay here all day.” He reached out for me, but I jumped backward. Everything in me wanted the same thing, but I had errands to run and some work I had to get caught up on. I couldn’t be distracted by a man.

“Not this morning. I have work to do. Besides, you need to get home to get some new clothes. I did a number on your jeans.”

Collin sighed. “All right, I guess. I’ll take that shower, and leftover pizza is fine.” He climbed out of bed and pinched my ass when he walked by. I giggled and jumped.

While he was in the bathroom, I dressed and went downstairs. I picked up the remnants of dinner and threw the plates into the trash. I fished a slice of pizza from the box and munched on it. When I closed the refrigerator door, I heard a loud meow behind me. Lucky stood in the doorway. I peeled a piece of pepperoni from the congealed cheese and held it out to him. He meowed and pranced over. He ate up the treat quickly and then rubbed against my jeans. I picked him up and snuggled with him.

“Hi, baby. You weren’t scared by the big kitty last night, were you? You’re going to have to get used to Collin. He’s a good guy. I know you’re hungry.” Lucky purred and bumped my chin with his head. I set him down

and got some fresh water and cat food. I petted him for a little bit, and then there was a loud bang on the door. My hand flew to my chest. The pounding started again. I walked to the front door and peered out of the peephole and saw Shea on the other side. The look on his face disturbed me.

I unlocked the door, and he brushed past me, looking around the house. I closed the door and followed him into the living room. He stood where Collin and I had made love last night. He put his hand on the wall and then turned to stare at me. When he did, I saw the hurt in his eyes.

“Where’s Collin?”

“He’s in the shower. I’m sure he’ll be out in a minute.” I reached for him, but he shied away from me. A bolt of hurt went through me that whatever was wrong he didn’t want to confide in me. “What’s wrong, Shea?”

He ran his hands over his face. He shook his head. The desperate look returned to his eyes. “You mated with him last night, didn’t you? You chose him as your first mate over me. How could you do that after I had the initial claim on you!” He slammed his fist against the wall and shook the picture.

I put my hands up. “Whoa! I didn’t choose anyone as first anything. Things happened between Collin and me last night, but you knew that when you left.”

“But you trusted him more than me to mark him for your mate! It must mean that I’m not good enough for you. Tell me what I have to do to be good enough for you, Ali.”

“Shea. Oh, no. Please don’t think that. It’s not like that at all.” I tried to take him into my arms, but he wouldn’t let me near him. The pain in his voice twisted my heart. I sank down on the couch and put my head in my hands. Tears stung my eyes. He was the last person I wanted to hurt. Dead-sexy and the first man who had looked at me for me in years, and I was hurting him. It wasn’t in my nature to wound others. It all seemed like a dream that I had met him only the other night at the coffee shop and was caught by his eyes. And those luscious lips with that dimple when he frowned, which was more pronounced than anything now. I wanted to make

sense of this whole mating thing, and it was more complicated the longer it went on.

His hands slid across mine. He buried his face between my knees. "I'm sorry. Please don't cry. I never meant for that."

I glanced up. He wiped the tears from my cheeks, and I saw the remorse in his eyes, but still a wildness was there I couldn't explain. Something had happened. Upstairs the water kept on running. The pull between us was so strong that I couldn't deny his luscious lips. I pressed my mouth to his. Tasting his sweetness once again, I nearly died in his arms knowing he had me. This time the feelings I had for him weren't my imagination. He was startled by my kiss but began to return it when I broke it and worked my way down his throat. I licked the spot under his ear, and before he could protest I opened my mouth wider and sunk my fangs into his flesh. His warm blood coursed down my throat. Shea groaned.

"Yes. Ali. Yes." I sunk my fangs deeper and then felt him bite me back.

I drank down a few swallows of his blood and then licked the wounds. We didn't have to make love to connect on that mental level. We had to taste one another and be open to it. He licked my neck, and I shivered. The sheer pleasure of us being together and sharing this moment overwhelmed me. I wanted to fuck him on the floor, but it wasn't a good idea with Collin upstairs. Shea pulled away from me and flicked his tongue over my lips so I could taste my blood on his mouth.

"I choose you as my mate, Shea. Not as first or second, but as my mate."

"And I accept. I'm sorry I doubted this. No one has ever said no to me before and with you running out the other night, I didn't know. I lost it a little bit."

I threaded my fingers through his hair. "I thought you never lost control. Isn't that what you said to me the other night?"

"Yeah, but with you, I guess all bets are off."

"Now tell me what's bothering you. It wasn't just about me that you came over here this early. Something's up. What is it?"

He shook his head and took my hands in his. Shea kissed the back of each of them. I sensed the link between us growing. He held something back. Whatever it was, it really scared him. That was why he had lost control. Not because he had freaked out about Collin.

"Nothing for you to be concerned about." He stood and drew me up. The shower had stopped.

"If it's bothering you, then I have to worry about it. Please tell me."

"Bro, what are you doing here?" Collin came down with his tattered jeans and his shirt.

I wrapped my arms around Shea's waist and kissed the side of his neck. He seemed to relax for a moment. Collin's gaze flicked between Shea and me. I gave Collin a small smile. I sensed his worry and his jealousy, but Collin remained silent. Shea was all wound up. He broke my embrace and went to his best friend.

"William called last night. Something's wrong. We have to go get him. I'm worried about him."

Collin's eye twitched. "Where is he?"

"He went back home. He said his old pride got him. I don't know why. He just asked us to come. He was only on the phone for a few minutes. We have to go."

"I'm going with you," I chimed in.

"No, you're not." Both of them said at the same time.

I growled. "You're not going to tell me what to do. No matter what. And if either of you are going to try and keep me here, it's not going to work." I brushed past them and went into my bedroom. They would wait for me whether they liked it or not.

Chapter Seven

I walked back from my room with a bag packed for a couple of days. I grabbed my purse; made sure I had my keys, cell phone, and wallet; and then put down the self-feeder for Lucky and filled the water bowl. *If I'm gone longer than a week, I'll call Minerva and ask her to refill the food and water.* She was the only other shifter that Lucky liked, and she had a key to my house. I opened the door and looked back at the two men.

“Coming?”

My mates grumbled. Shea shook his head, and Collin had a grim expression on his face. Neither of them wanted to put me in danger. However, they didn't know me well enough, didn't know that I could defend myself. I wasn't afraid of other shifters. If I shifted in front of others, I was normally bigger, stronger, and scarier than them. It came from being a hybrid of the lioness and tiger. I was bigger than my stepfather, and when he shifted he was a 450-pound lion. I outweighed him by a hundred pounds, and in my cat shape, it wasn't all flab either. I was a muscular beauty that enjoyed stalking the night. I didn't know about my two mates, but either way, they were in for a big surprise when they saw me shift. I wasn't insecure when it came to my inner cat. She was a mean, fearless mother that took no shit from anyone. I just wished that shone through more in my human persona.

Shea stepped outside. Collin went to the fridge and grabbed his leftover pizza. He stopped and then fished out my box, too. I smiled and then locked the door behind him. They walked to the car. Shea went to the driver's side door, but Collin put a hand on his arm.

“Bro, you're in no condition to drive. Hand over the keys.”

“One scratch—”

The other man waved him off and took the keys. “Yeah, I know. You'll have my head. Don't worry about it. I've never scratched your baby. Pathetic.” He handed Shea the pizza boxes.

I got in the backseat. The others climbed in, and Collin started the car. I settled into the leather interior and marveled at the smooth ride. I didn't feel

any bumps as we passed out of my neighborhood, which was riddled with potholes. Collin focused on the road, and I sensed that Shea wasn't going to be talking any time soon. So, I sighed and sent an e-mail to my boss that I wasn't going to be in for a few days, family emergency. My boss always said I worked too hard and urged me to take vacations. *I'm sure she'll understand and not bitch about it.* I wasn't worried about my job security. They needed me, and they knew it. I kept the company afloat, and they left me alone. Once I hit send, I shut my phone off and stared out of the tinted windows. We had turned onto the highway, and the world blurred by. I had no idea where we were headed, but my mates were in a hurry to get to their destination.

After a while, my stomach rumbled and I prodded Shea in the arm. He didn't respond at first. I poked him again. He turned around. "What?" he snapped.

"Sorry. Forget it."

I sat back in the seat and peered out the window. His hand slid along my knee. "Ali, I'm sorry. I'm just preoccupied about William. What did you need?"

"Can you hand me the top pizza box, please? Or do you have a thing for anyone eating in the car. It is quite immaculate. Are you going to kill me if I drop a crumb on it?"

He handed me the box. "I don't let anyone eat in the car. It's my pride and joy. But I'll make an exception for you."

I leaned forward and kissed him on the lips while cupping his face. "Thank you."

"Ahh, you mind handing me a slice, too, bro?" Collin asked.

Shea pulled back and looked at Collin's outstretched hand. He muttered something under his breath and then handed him a slice of pizza. I could feel the irritation and the wince when a drop of cheese hit the gear shift. He picked it up and wiped away the smudge with the back of his shirt. I couldn't stop laughing while I munched on the pizza. He looked back at me.

"What?"

“I’ve never seen a man so obsessed with his car before. You’d think that you love it more than you do anyone else.”

Collin met my gaze in the reflection of the rearview mirror. “Alison, you would never believe that this man talks to this thing. Even named her Grace. He takes better care of her than he does himself sometimes.”

“Both of you enough. You would take care of this car, too, if you spent a hundred grand on it.”

I nearly choked on my pizza. I didn’t make that in two years. “Holy shit. Shea, what exactly do you do for a living?”

“I’m a partner in a law firm. I started it from scratch. Most of my clients were shifters. I got the attention of a medium-sized firm that wanted to buy me out. I told them only if they made me a partner. We negotiated a deal, and fifteen years later, here I am. The other partner is a swan shifter, which is how I knew of Minerva. So, the longevity issue isn’t a problem. All of the upper management are shifters. We do have some humans on staff, but we like to hire our own if we can. You’ve probably heard of it. Wolfstein, White, and Felix.”

I nodded. The law firm was one of the biggest in the city. If you needed anything done in regard to law, you went there if you had the money. I’d never needed their services. But I was intrigued to learn more about Shea. “Wow. I guess if I need a lawyer, I know where to go.”

We settled into silence for a period of time. I glanced at the speedometer. We cruised close to a hundred miles an hour. How Collin hadn’t gotten pulled over, I didn’t know. The hours in the car grew long. We finished the pizza, and I was getting uncomfortable. Of the signs that flew by, the one that got my attention was that we were climbing into the mountains and heading toward Tennessee. My pride was on the Tennessee/Missouri border. I shook my head. Just because we headed into Tennessee didn’t mean we were going to stay in it. We could be traveling through the state to Kentucky or Oklahoma.

“So, tell me a little about William and where we’re going.”

Shea didn't turn around. Collin gripped the wheel harder. He stepped on the brakes when an eighteen-wheeler pulled in front of us without signaling. Shea's nails scraped along his jeans. He stared out the window, and from his reflection I could see a faraway look to his eyes.

"William and I were best friends growing up. My father was a farmer. He always said it was a healthy way to keep the beast under control. He hired William's father to work with us. They were migrant workers looking for any kind of work. William and I hit it off from the start. When we weren't doing chores, we worked or being boys. My father had broken away from his pride long ago because he didn't believe in the hierarchy and the bullshit, as he called it. But he knew of another pride leader in the area that he was friendly with. We would go there during the full moons and hunt on their lands. On occasion, we'd bring them a cow as tribute or something. One night, William snuck away with us in the truck. He saw us all change. The others were going to kill him, but I bit him instead. I initiated him into this life. He was thirteen. My father took responsibility for him. Told him that he couldn't tell his parents because they wouldn't understand. He was okay for a couple of years, but he had a hard time with the cat. We fought after a while. He rebelled against his family and almost killed them. My father asked the pride leader to take him in. The pride leader did. I didn't hear from William for almost ten years, and then out of the blue he appeared at the office. He said he needed a place to stay and a job. I didn't ask him any questions. I offered him a room in the house I had and gave him a job. He quit soon after, though, and started doing things around the house and got his own handyman business going. It keeps him busy."

I nodded. Shea hadn't opened up very much. But I did sense the obligation and the loyalty he had for William. He had given him the shifter life. Sometimes humans who were forced into the lifestyle didn't take to it. Even if you were a born shifter, some didn't handle it very well. I could only imagine what had happened to William the first time he had transformed. Bitten humans were accepted in the shifter community, but they were considered to be second-class citizens. There were a few who had made it

high up into the shifter ranks, but it was very rare. The one thing about bitten humans was that they were more readily accepted into shifter society than hybrids were. Technically, I was on the third tier of the shifter world. At least the two men in the front didn't think that way. They saw me as a goddess and worshipped me. That fate warmed my insides and kept me sane. I continued to stare out of the window.

I must have drifted off because when I came to, it was nearly dark. We had been driving all day. The car was parked at a truck stop. The pizza boxes were gone from the back seat. I got out and stretched my weary muscles. Collin was outside a diner. He waved. I returned the gesture and went inside to heed the call of nature. Once I was through, I found Shea outside with a bag that smelled like food.

"I didn't know what you liked, so I got you a cheeseburger and french fries. I hope that's okay."

I took the plate. "That's fine. Let me guess, Collin's eating a tofu burger?"

Collin laughed. The deep boom rolled down my spine. "Nope. Veggie quesadillas. Want one?"

I shook my head and dug into my burger at the table outside. Shea looked at the sky. The sun had almost set. We had been on the road for seven hours. I didn't know how long we had to drive for, but I knew we would be going through the night in order for them to get to William. I tugged on his arm and slid over so Shea could sit next to me. He gave me a small smile, but only picked at his french fries. I squeezed his arm.

"We'll get there. Don't worry about it. How much farther is it?" I asked.

"Not much. Another forty-five minutes or so. I used to live an hour from here," Shea responded.

"So, what exactly did he say on the phone besides to come. Did he sound hurt? Why is he out here? Did he tell you he was coming here before he left?" I asked.

Shea poked at his burger with a fry. "I had no idea why he'd come here. He hated the pride he was forced to be with. They never accepted him. He

had no kin there. He did say once there was a girl who he was friendly with, but it wouldn't be enough for him to return. Ever since he turned, he became a completely different person. Quiet. Withdrawn. After his fiancée died, he didn't date. We tried to set him up a few times. He never went. We almost got into a fight about it once. I'd had too much to drink and was goading him into dating or at least getting some pussy. We had words, I nearly cut him with a bottle, and that's when Collin stepped in and saved our asses. Been friends with him ever since."

"Yeah, you both need someone to watch your asses. Alison, don't let Shea fool you. Underneath all the fancy suits and expensive car, he's one powerful cat that could take off someone's head. See what you've hitched yourself to."

I ran my hand down Shea's back in an attempt to soothe him. His hazel eyes gazed into my blue ones. "Is your family still around here?"

He nodded. "Yeah. They're still working on the farm. My mother would like you. If we can clear this up, maybe we can head over there. I can show you where I grew up. First, William."

I patted his knee. The thought of meeting his parents and family chilled me. I didn't know what they would think of me. I smiled. "Okay."

We finished our meal in silence and then climbed back into the car. This time Shea took over. Collin sat in the front and pushed the seat back a little bit more. My stomach was all aflutter when I thought about what would come next.

Chapter Eight

While we were driving, I saw a sign that read *Ridgefield, Missouri*. It was right on the border of Tennessee and Missouri. The sign made my blood run cold. Almost automatically, Shea and Collin turned around. My stomach churned. "Stop the car."

Shea pulled over. I opened the door and ran around the car. At that moment, images of the past tore through my psyche. My back was suddenly on fire from the wounds inflicted by my stepfather's silver whips. My nails turned into claws from the memory of the pain. I clutched the back of the car, not caring that I scratched the black paint. It all rushed back, the years of torture and how I had been locked away.

"What's the matter?" Collin asked.

Shea touched my shoulder. "Alison, what's wrong?"

I drew in large breaths to calm down and felt the cat rise to the surface. The bones cracked and popped in my face. My muscles and ligaments struggled to break free of my human flesh, but I held onto my human façade with all that was in me. "What's wrong? I've spent twelve years trying to escape this place! Now you bring me back here." I growled. I swatted Shea's hand away and began pacing a few feet from them. I was caught. I was caged-in. They were bringing me back to the compound and the family I had run away from. *How could I have been so stupid? It was never about loving me. This matebond is all a bunch of shit.*

"Alison, how could we know this was where you'd come from? You never told us where you lived—just what had happened to you. How would Shea know? We're not going to harm you. Please. You know that we both love you." Collin approached me with his arms open. The longing in his eyes cut through the animal instinct. I hissed and clawed at him. He jumped back.

Shea stepped before me. I sniffed the air. His cat was close to the surface. His face had flattened some, and his eyes were spaced farther apart. "Come back to the car. Collin and I won't let anyone touch you. This wasn't a trick."

His voice rumbled with a low roar. He walked over to me and took my hand. He rubbed it across his cheek so I could feel the scratchy stubble on his jaw. He kissed my palm, and his love for me exploded in my soul. I stared into his eyes and saw he spoke the truth. I wrapped my arms around his neck and buried my face into his shoulder. I took in a few deep breaths and reined in the cat, telling her it wasn't time. Once I felt normal again, I kissed Shea and went over to Collin. He picked me up and placed a delicate kiss on my lips.

"You had me worried. But, damn, you were so fucking hot just then." He kissed my throat and tugged on my ear. "If we didn't have company, I'd fuck you right now. Tear up some of that leather interior." He squeezed my ass and then released me. I blushed when Shea caught my eye, but he smiled and went back into the car. Deep in the middle of nowhere, surrounded by woods, was the family I had left, and now it seemed I had to face them once again.

I sat in the front seat on the way there. The sun sunk near the horizon. Stars dotted the sky as the night wrestled with the day. Each minute we got closer, my inner kitty growled at being behind bars. She wanted out to tear into something. I gripped the edge of the seat and kneaded the leather without even realizing it. The landscape around me was familiar.

When I wasn't locked in my room, I was at school getting an education. I tried to be involved in as many school activities as I could, but my stepfather, being the ass he was, forbade most of them. I got good grades and was able to get into college.

We turned onto a badly paved road. The feelings of panic rolled up on me. I felt smothered, and my head began to pound. Collin rested his hands on my shoulders and began to massage them a little trying to calm me down. At last, we turned down the dirt driveway that gave way to a large six-bedroom house and three small cottages in the back where my stepfather's family still lived with some of their children. The pride consisted of my stepfather as the head male, my mother, eight brothers and sisters, my two aunts with their families, and my uncle, who wasn't in any shape to lead the

pack. My aunts' husbands were lesser males and did whatever my stepfather wanted. Each had three children. I hadn't seen them since they were toddlers and school-age children. I wouldn't recognize them now. When I left home, four of my brothers still lived there, helping with the family business. Two of my sisters were in high school, two twin girls were in middle school, and the twin boys were just out of diapers. Shea pulled the car up alongside the house. A large bonfire was going in the back. Many people were gathered around it. Several children played on the front porch.

"Stay in the car," Shea instructed. He got out, and Collin remained with me.

Shea walked up to the porch. A woman sat in a swing on the other end. She resembled my mother, but her features were pinched. Her once-beautiful red hair was shot through with gray. My mate said something to her, but she shook her head and pointed toward the back. I heard talking around me. Several faces peered into the darkened windows. Collin uttered a low growl at the heathens.

"You know, this is fate or irony. I don't know which one."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, here I go, trying to get away from this place, when I meet a man who not only grew up close to here, but whose best friend was the very teenage boy who made my life bearable for a few years while he was here. Now, I find myself back to rescue this boy who I haven't seen in fifteen years."

"The universe works in its own way."

I nodded and stared at the woman coming down the stairs. Her brown skirt was long, and her blouse was homespun. She reminded me of a pioneer, but I recognized her as my mother. Shea hadn't returned, and I needed to see her. I got out of the car and ignored Collin's protests. Our eyes met. Twenty years melted from her face. This was the woman that I knew. I walked over to her slowly. She ran at me with her arms open and stopped within a few feet.

"Alison, is that you?"

“Hi, Momma.”

I hesitated and then threw myself into her arms. She hugged me with a ferocity I didn't remember. Tears welled in my eyes, and I sniffled. She was the one person I ever regretted leaving behind. She separated from me but kept her hands on my face. I saw the pride that beamed in her eyes.

“I knew you weren't dead. I prayed every night for God to protect you and one day bring you back home to me. Come inside. We're roasting a hog in the back. Your brothers brought down a deer, and we got that cooking, too.” She grabbed my hand and tugged on it. I didn't move. As much as I wanted to stay here with her, it wasn't going to happen.

“Momma, I can't stay. You know why. I need to know where they're keeping William.”

“I don't know who you're talking about.”

I sighed. “Yes, you do. Please. That man who just spoke to you and the one by the car, they're William's friends—and my mates. I don't want to see anyone here get hurt.”

Her eyes widened. “Both of them are your mates? That first one. He's so dashing. And he knows?”

I nodded. “They both do, and they love me anyway. Momma, it's so wonderful. I never thought I'd feel love like that. One touch, and I knew. It's magical.”

She hugged me again. “It was that way for me, too, with your father. I'm sorry you never got to know him. And I never told you that—”

“My, my look what the cat dragged home.” I spun around. My stepfather swaggered toward me. He hadn't changed in the years since I had last seen him. He was about six feet tall with the beginnings of a beer belly. His black hair was peppered with gray. He had tanned skin from working outside all of his life. His amber eyes glowed in the setting sun. I could smell the blood he wiped on his shirt. A bolt of panic went through me. Shea hadn't returned yet.

“Hello, Harris. Where's the man who just went around back?”

His mouth spread into a wider grin that showed his teeth. "I don't think you needin' to be worryin' about him. Your brothers and cousins are taking care of him. Big cat comes lookin' for a fight, he had better know what he's gettin' himself into. He wasn't nothin' special to you, was he?"

I growled and stepped toward him. "If you laid one finger on him, I'll rip your heart out, and don't think that I won't." I snapped at his throat.

This time he backed away. His bravado melted away. He remembered quickly what I had done to him before. I pushed past him and glanced back toward Collin who strolled in the direction of the bonfire. Voices echoed from the back of the house. I raced around assailed by the smells of burning wood and cooking flesh. I heard a growl and then chanting. When I reached the back, a group of young men surrounded two lions that were swatting at one another. One was smaller than the other. The larger lion had a massive mane. His russet coat shone in the firelight. His muzzle was stained with blood, as were his claws. The littler lion was losing the fight. I locked eyes with the large lion and knew it was Shea. Some of the cheering stopped when I came around back. I recognized several of my brothers. They hadn't changed, and each was a younger version of Harris, their father. I didn't see our mother in any of them. Shea took that opportunity to pounce. He sunk his teeth into the other lion's neck and bit down. A loud snap sounded in the night. Once he was sure the other lion was dead, Shea released him and bellowed. He separated from the group and came over to me. I knelt down before him and rubbed my head along his cheek. His sandy tongue went along my face. I felt his remorse for having to kill the younger lion.

"It's okay. You did what you had to do." He bumped his head against my hand until I scratched him behind the ears. I giggled and then focused on the others gathered around us. One of my brothers, I searched my memory for a name. Lawrence. He cradled the slowly changing form of the lion. The form transformed back into his twin, Landon. Lawrence screamed and lunged at us. Collin stepped between us and caught his arms.

"You're going to die. You killed him. I'm going to take your head off." Collin held him.

“Son, I wouldn’t do that if I were you,” he said.

My brother roared. “What do you know! You’re not even a lion. You have no business here.”

“Enough! This didn’t have to happen if you answered Shea’s questions. Larry, calm your ass down and listen,” I said.

“Who the hell are you?” The older of my brothers approached us. He was a hair taller than me but well muscled. He had tortured me when I was a child. I fought for a name. Richard.

I stepped forward until I was nose-to-nose with him. “I’m your sister. You used to help Harris beat me when I was a teenager. You’d lock me in the closet and call me a half-breed. Remember?”

His eyes widened. “Alison. Yeah. I remember you. Papa said you died. Guess he was wrong. So, what brings you back? You think ’cause you’re all grown up that you can spread your claws and knead your way back into the pride. You’re not welcome here. Now, take your rejects and get out before I take you down myself.” He pushed me backward.

My claws unfurled. I hissed and swung at him. My nails connected with his flesh. The scent of blood bloomed in the air. He twisted his head to the side from the impact of my claws. My teeth sharpened. My inner kitty itched for a fight. She wanted out in a bad way, and I would let her sometime tonight. I could feel it. “You *will* show me some respect. I lived under the yoke of your father for eighteen years. I left to escape that asshole, and I will *not* take any lip from you, brother.”

“You’re nothing more than a half-breed bitch. Our mother should’ve been put down when she was found fucking around with your father.” Richard smiled and licked the blood from the side of his face. He cracked his neck. He could change at any moment.

“All of you enough!” Harris stood on the outside of the ring. In his hand was a modified version of the whip he had used on me. Instead of just the silver chains mounted onto the handle, it was leather entwined with silver barbs. A moment of dread passed through me. The fear would not rule me. Collin released my other brother and stepped closer to me. Shea went to my

other side. He slipped into the remains of his tattered pants. It gave him some coverage. I stood before them.

“We can be out of your hair in no time if you tell us where William is. And don’t play dumb. We both know he’s here. I can smell his blood all around here,” Shea demanded of my stepfather.

Harris rubbed his chin. “What’s it worth to you? I’ll give the trespasser back if you agree to leave that bitch here. She’s got to get broken in sometime.” He grabbed his crotch.

Collin stepped forward, but I grasped his arm and shook my head.

“I’m impressed. You have the two kittens trained. What other tricks have you learned while you’ve been gone?” my stepfather hissed.

“Wouldn’t you like to know? No deal. Now, where is he?” I snarled.

“Alison, is this the young man you’re looking for?” My mother came around the house with a barely conscious and beaten-up William. His eyes were swollen shut. Open slashes adorned his chest. Small black lines marred his flesh, which indicated that silver poisoning had set in. If he didn’t get to a healer soon, he would die. The only healer I knew strong enough to deal with such a silver infection was Minerva. I prayed for Shea’s and Collin’s sake that William would make the long trip back. My mates left my side and went to take their friend from my mother’s arms. He moaned while they helped him back to car. My stepfather was still shocked. I glanced back at my estranged siblings and then heard a loud smack and my mother cry out. I spun around. She was on the ground cowering. My stepfather stood over her with the whip in his fist. Everything in me snapped.

Chapter Nine

The vertebrae popped in my back. Fabric tore. My muscles stretched and rearranged. The pain that sliced through me was exquisite, and yet it didn't do any justice to the thoughts of what I was going to do to Harris. My cheekbones moved to the side of my face, and my jaw spread out to make way for wicked teeth. Fur sprouted all over me. Underneath the plus-sized girl lurked a strong, muscular tigon that weighed nearly six hundred pounds. My paws were as big as Collin's hands. They wrapped around my stepfather's head when we landed on the ground. The glee that ran through me was the best feeling I'd ever had. His eyes widened while I held his head between my claws. I saw the fear and smelled the urine from him pissing himself. After all the years that I had been insulted and beaten by him, this was my chance to make it right. I roared and narrowed my eyes. My jaws were inches from his throat.

I felt pain against my back. I peered behind me to see that Richard was beating me with another silver whip. I hissed and swatted at him. He backed off. My mother got up slowly and looked at the both of us. Someone shouted by the car. Shea and Collin rushed to my rescue. Collin leapt and shifted in midair to reveal the strong panther underneath. I enjoyed watching his bunching muscles and the sleek, dark fur that shone in the oncoming night. He jumped at Richard. I heard my brother yelp and more commotion. Satisfaction washed over me. *That would teach him to mess with me and my mates.* I turned my attention back to Harris. He was still stupefied underneath me.

I pulled back my lips and showed him all of my teeth. I lowered my fangs to his throat when my mother stepped in front of me. I growled at her.

"He's not worth it, Alison. I know how much you hate him for what he did to you, but don't stoop to his level. Your real father never would've wanted this for you."

I glanced between Harris and her. I raised my paw and slashed him down his sternum. The cuts weren't shallow, but he would heal from them. I jumped off of him. He got up slowly and backed into the side of the house. I

advanced and didn't let him out of my sight. Collin hissed at my brothers, but they stayed away, too. Harris flattened against the house. I wrapped my jaws around his throat. I bit hard enough to leave an impression, but not tear into the skin. He whimpered. When I raised my head, I narrowed my eyes. I growled, waiting for him to utter a word. He didn't. I stepped back. The cat yearned for more blood, but my mother was right. This piece of scum wasn't worth it. I wouldn't degrade myself to his level.

I butted my head against Collin's side. He turned and headed back toward the car. I followed behind him. Shea met us half-way with my bag of clothes. I transformed back to human form and threw on a shirt and jeans and went back over to my family. Harris still cowered against the house.

"If I ever hear that you've hurt her, I'll come back and rip your head off. All those years, you were a coward. Hitting women. Hitting me. Using silver to do it. No shifter uses silver on another. It's torture." I grabbed his throat and squeezed it. "Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes," he gasped.

"Good. I don't have time for you. Why did you treat William the way you did?"

"He was trespassing on our land. He left the pride. No one does that. I had to punish him."

I wrung his neck until his face was red and then purple. After a few moments, he passed out, but he wasn't dead. I turned back to my brothers and cousins. "I'll do the same to any of you if you dare lay a finger on her. You might be my *half* brothers, but that doesn't mean I won't take a bite out of you. Got it?" I snapped my jaws together and saw the same look of fear that was on Harris' face in their eyes. They never expected to see me again. I wasn't the weak girl they remembered.

"Alison, we need to get going!" Collin said behind me. I heard the urgency in his voice.

I nodded. I hugged my mother. "Come with me."

The longing in her eyes cut me to the quick. "I wish I could, but my life is here."

Emotion clogged my throat. I hugged her harder. "If he or anyone hurts you, then you call me." I scribbled my number down on a piece of paper I had in my purse.

"I will. You're a beautiful woman, Alison. More so than I ever imagined. I'll call you soon, and we can talk. There are some things I want to discuss about your father. Things I never told you before you left. You have other siblings from his side."

I smiled. "Thanks, Momma. We'll talk more when things calm down." I inhaled her scent and remembered when I used to feel safe in her arms. I didn't want to leave her, but we had to get William to a healer.

"Love you."

I kissed her cheek and then ran to the car. Collin stayed in the back with William. I climbed into the front and took my cell phone out of my purse. Once I closed the door, Shea sped off with rocks spitting out from underneath the tires. William moaned. I glanced back at Collin and saw the color drain from his face. I had never seen anyone so severely poisoned from silver. Shea's eyes stayed focused on the road, but he only thought about William. I punched Minerva's number in.

"Alison."

"How did you . . . never mind. I need your help."

"I know. I have everything ready. I'm about four hours away from you. I'm sending the address now. You should be able to find it. I'll see you when you get here." She hung up on me.

A moment later, my phone vibrated with a text message from Minerva with the address. I handed it to Shea. "We have to meet her there."

He nodded and plugged in the address on his in-dash GPS system. It took a moment to calculate, but then we zoomed down the road once again. Every once in a while William would moan if we hit a bump too hard. The moon had risen above us. Its cool light helped to calm my nerves, but inside my cat raked the lines of my consciousness because it wanted to get William to safety. Scaring the piss out of Harris had been good, but I still yearned to have sunk my fangs deep into his flesh and torn his throat out. But my

mother was right. I didn't need to stoop to his level. We drove in silence for a long time. I could barely concentrate from the tension in the car.

"Are you okay?" Shea asked me. I barely heard him at first.

"Yeah. Yeah. I'm fine. Don't worry about me."

He stroked my cheek. His eyes showed his concern. "But we have to worry about you. That's our job."

I placed my hand on top of his. "Let's worry about getting William healed first, and then we can think about me. I'm okay for now. I'm used to dealing with my family. You were magnificent back there, by the way. Your roar shook my bones."

"Glad you liked it. You were magnificent yourself. Beautiful fur. I would've mounted you right there if it weren't for the audience." The lust stirred in his eyes.

"Guys, can we focus on the road and keep the sex talk to a minimum for now?" Collin snarled.

I blushed and looked back out of the window. I didn't say anything for the rest of the trip. Three hours later, we pulled in front of a veterinarian's office. Most of the lights were off, but I could see the illumination in the back. Shea stopped right by the door. Minerva came out with another woman who could be her twin except she was a little younger. Both had surgical gloves on.

"Take him inside. Follow Elvira. Once you get indoors, scrub your hands. His blood is contaminated with silver. There's food and clothing in there, too."

Shea and Collin carried William inside, and I followed after them. Minerva gave me a small smile but directed them where to go. I wanted to go inside the room with them, but she shook her head. "Sit on the couch. Food is in the other room. You should take a shower to wash the blood off. Throw those clothes away. You don't need the silver to get into your bloodstream. I'll look at you after." She locked the door and left me staring through the glass.

"Don't feel bad. She does it to me all the time."

I turned around. By the door was a man about my height, slight in frame, with white hair and olive skin. I sensed he was another shifter. “Who are you?”

“Sorry. I thought Min would’ve mentioned me. She talks about you all the time. I’m her mate, Siegfried. Elvira is our daughter. She takes after her mother. She’ll soon be the new healer for the bevy. We just got back from overseas.”

“It’s nice to meet you.”

“A friend of mine owns this place. When Min woke up this morning, she was all about getting here. I didn’t hesitate. Come on, I’ll show you out back to the shower.”

I smiled and followed him. One section of the office was portioned off into a mini-apartment. Food was on the table. A small bed was in one corner and the bathroom in the other. I also saw a pile of clothes.

“Thanks.”

He nodded. “No problem. I’ll leave you to it then.”

After I showered and changed, I came out, and Collin was waiting. He was dressed in a blue fluffy robe. I didn’t comment as he went into the shower. As I sat on the bed, I opened a bag of chips and began to munch on them. I barely noticed the flavor when a scream echoed through the office. I raced in the direction, but Collin, who was wrapped in a towel, caught me.

“No, Alison. You have to let them help him. I want to go in there just as much as you.”

I nodded and let him pull me into his embrace. He smelled of soap and fresh water. His hard muscles were proof enough all of this was real. I had really stood up to my stepfather and my brothers. I had reunited with my mother. I had found the boy who had rescued me in so many ways when I was a teenage girl. Now he was in the other room being healed by my best friend. Collin kissed the top of my head and wrapped his arms around me. I couldn’t help but tremble in them, thanks to the knowledge that now that the adrenaline had stopped pumping through me, things could go either way. William could die, and I wouldn’t get a chance to say thank you or find out if

he was my third mate. I had seen him beaten and bloody in the backseat, and he didn't look like the teenager I remembered. Once he was healed, I would have to see.

"That was a smooth shift I saw you pull back at the house."

He laughed, which almost sounded like a purr. "The same goes for you. Big, beautiful cat. I agreed with Shea back in the car. I wanted to mount you right there." He brushed the hair away from my neck and began to kiss it. His other hand cupped my breast. His growing erection pressed against my ass. I lingered in the pleasure he gave me for a few seconds and pulled away. The disappointment was displayed on his face.

"Now isn't the best time for that."

"I know. I can't help it with you around."

I chuckled and threw him some clothes. He caught them and began to dress. I plopped back down on the bed and tore into the bag of chips. The smells of the other food enticed me. I saw a large silver container of something. I went to inspect and saw it was lasagna. I grabbed a plate and dug in. It was vegetable. I motioned to the tray. "It's veggie so you can eat it."

He took a large spoonful and then began to eat. When we were done, I went outside to get some air. The moon had climbed higher into the sky. Minerva and her daughter had been at it for hours. The night air cleared my head.

"They're almost done."

I turned. Shea sat on the bench outside the office; he leaned over. His hair was still wet from the shower. I sat next to him and wrapped my arms around him. He buried his head in my shoulder and sobbed. I ran my fingers through his hair and tried to soothe him. His body shook against mine. Through our link, his remorse was mine. Shea felt at fault somehow. He'd run on sheer adrenaline for hours, and now he was crashing. His worry seized me up in its strangling grip, too. He was torn in two different directions: the need to comfort me and to be with his best friend. I rubbed

his back and let him work it out. Shea pulled away, and his expression returned to unreadable.

"I'm sorry. I don't know what came over me."

"You've been through a lot today. We all have."

"But you're okay? I saw you get hit with that whip."

I'd forgotten about the whip marks. They had barely grazed my pelt and now were healed. "Right as rain. Don't worry about it."

He gave me a half-smile, but his dimple was more pronounced. He was about to say something when Minerva came out. We both stood up.

"William will recover. It will take a while for the aftereffects of the silver to go through his system."

"Will he still be able to shift? Is there any permanent damage?" Shea asked.

"It's up to your friend if he wants to shift. I've given him a choice. We did so much work on him that we were able to focus on the root of the infection. If he doesn't shift by the next full moon, then he will remain human."

"Can you do that?" I asked.

She shrugged. "On rare occasions. With the two of us, it was easier. If you had gotten here any later, I wouldn't have been able to save him."

Shea pulled her into a hug. "Thank you."

"You're welcome. Now go get something to eat. Ali, I think you might want to go in and see him now."

"I'd like to—"

Minerva gave Shea a hard look to cut him off. "No. She goes in first."

Shea shook his head and walked into the office. I stared at my friend. "What was that about?"

"Right now, he doesn't want anything to do with being a shifter. He'd rather stay human. You have to convince him otherwise."

"Why?"

"He's your third mate. But you already assumed that. There are other reasons that come up in the future. I can't say now. But they involve all four

of you. It would be bad for you if he doesn't remain a cat. Now go inside and talk to him." She gave me a little push.

I glanced back at her, not sure what to say, but headed to check on William. What she said gave me the chills. It would be easier if she told me, but she was good at keeping secrets. I just hoped that when the day came, it would turn out okay.

Chapter Ten

Inside the room, William laid flat on a steel table. His eyes were closed, but his brow was furrowed. Shadows of bruises were still prominent on his face, but I could see the handsome man underneath them. He was nothing like the teenager who had helped me years ago. That boy was lean, hardly muscled, and his face always had a strained look to it. This man had a weathered look. His hair was longer. The marks of the silver whip lined his neck and chest. The roundness of his arms showed he was muscular, but nothing like Collin. He had grown into his body. He didn't have a lot of hair on him, of which I was glad. His nose was crooked where he had broken it. The longer I stared, the more I was pulled to him. My body reacted. I inhaled his scent. Cinnamon. The longer I was in the room, the stronger the scent became. The more I inhaled it, the more aroused I got. Those were the pheromones that kicked in to let us know that a mate was close by. That was why I started salivating when I first walked into the coffee shop and set my eyes on Shea. It was why I had picked out the three scents in the house and catalogued them. It made sense now.

I walked a little closer, trying not to upset him. He was the one who was recovering, and he probably didn't need me drooling over him when he was hurt. When I thought to brush his face, I pulled my hand back. I bit my lip and drew in a deep breath.

"What do you want now? More poking and prodding?" Irritation and exhaustion peppered his voice. "I already told the others that I feel fine. Can't I get some rest after everything I've been through?"

"Sorry. I just wanted to see how you were doing." I stepped away to keep from touching him. The urge to feel his skin gripped me. See if it was soft under my fingers. *Please, don't let me have more mates out there. I can't take this with another guy.*

William opened his eyes. They were pure green and caught me in them. I drew in a deep breath and waited to see if he would recognize me. He didn't. "You're not one of the other healers, are you?"

“No. I’m friends with them.”

“I recognize your scent. It was on Shea and Collin. Who are you?” He tried to sit up but found that he was still too weak. “Shit.”

I reached to help, but he pulled away. Seeing him do that felt almost if he had slapped me. It hurt. “You used to sneak me food and CDs when I was a kid. My brothers called you Yellow-Bellied Bill. I just called you Bill.”

His eyes widened. The surprise in his expression was something that I enjoyed. “Alicat. My God. It’s . . . I can’t believe that it’s you. You’ve certainly grown up.”

I blushed. “Yeah, well, I was never the littlest one in the litter.” My cheeks burned. I glanced at my feet.

“No. I didn’t mean it that way. I just meant you were a teenager. I never would’ve expected you to have grown into such a beautiful woman.” He gave me a smile that warmed my bones.

“Well, that’s nice of you to say. I’m glad that you’re going to be okay. I wanted to thank you for what you did for me when I was little. It really saved my life.”

“How do you mean? What’s that smell by the way? It’s been driving me crazy for the past few minutes.”

“What does it smell like?”

“Vanilla and strawberries, I think. I can taste it on my tongue, but I can’t tell where it’s coming from.”

“I-I’m not sure. Maybe some kind of cleaner they use. I appreciate everything you gave me. It gave me a little bit of hope that not everyone in the world was an ass like my stepfather. So, I just wanted to say thanks.” I leaned over and brushed a kiss across his forehead. Once my lips touched his brow, the knowledge that he was my mate gripped me. My heart pounded against my rib cage. Small beads of perspiration formed on my brow. My inner kitty growled. I wanted to do more, but I didn’t want to push it. He wasn’t ready for that. “Rest up. We’ll talk later.”

I went to leave, but he caught my arm. “You don’t have to go.”

I unwound his fingers from my hand. Doing that ripped a piece of my soul away. "I think it's best that I do. You need to get some rest. I'll be around for a while." I didn't know what Shea had told him, if anything, so I wasn't going to drop that I was Shea's and Collin's mate. I gave him a half-smile and then walked out of the room to let him relax.

I went back into the office and sat down on the bed. Minerva sat down next to me. The others weren't in the room. She wrapped her arm around me and pulled me to her. "You know he's your mate."

"Yeah. He doesn't know. He didn't even recognize me. Not for that, but from me being the little girl that he helped. I can see the resentment in him. He's going to fight it tooth and nail. What's going to happen?"

She stroked my hair. "The next two weeks are going to be hard for you. Once mates have been found, the longer they don't act on their mutual attraction and then claim one another, the pain sets in. Normally, it isn't a problem. Once mates meet, they're usually on one another like rabbits. If he decides to become human again, the pain will stop for both of you. He will cease to be your mate, but I think part of you will die with him, too."

"How is it you were able to give him the choice to be human again?"

"I have powers beyond your wildest imagination."

"Seriously. Be straight with me."

"With all the silver infecting him, Elvira and I were able to also pinpoint the virus that tainted him. The silver had bonded to it. In order to remove the silver, we had to take some of the virus, too. The infection will build back up in his blood over the next two weeks. At the rise of the full moon, he can either shift or let it pass out of his system all together, which will cause him to break out in a fever. It might kill him, but he's aware of the risks."

"Have you told the others?" I asked.

"No. It's not my place. I can't tell you how this will turn out. It's too hazy to see. But whatever happens, I'll be here for you. Once we get it sorted out, we'll go out for some cheesecake and a movie. I need a good girl night out. Then you can dish on how wonderful your mates are."

She was being sincere. I gave her a quick hug. "Thanks, Minnie."

"I only let you call me that."

"I know."

"Good. Now go get some sleep. You can bring him home tomorrow."

She got up, and I lay back on the bed. The events of the day swirled through my mind. All of it made me dizzy. The ache to go back and check on William, to touch him, the desire to smell his glorious scent traveled through me. It was a hard impulse to control, but I did. I closed my eyes and drifted off.

The next morning the four of us piled back into Shea's car. I stayed in the front seat. It was too hard to be close to William for now. The other two men were quiet and kept their distance. Minerva had given us the food to bring back with us. Collin had already polished off half of the lasagna. I wasn't very hungry. The events of the past twenty-four hours swirled in my mind and churned my stomach. I wanted to run it through my head and get it all straight. During the drive, William kept silent. Shea stared at the road; he gripped the wheel with both hands. The tension in the car was so thick it could be cut. My two mates were troubled. I couldn't get a pure sense of their emotions, but I figured they weren't sure what to say to William about me. Or they didn't want to show me any affection, an action that strained them. Being so close to my mates made me feel better.

I reached over and went to turn on the radio, when I accidentally brushed Shea's knee. He looked over at me and smiled. "How are you feeling?"

I smiled back. "I'm okay. How about you?"

He glanced into the review mirror, I assumed looking at William. "I think I'm doing okay. You know we're close to your house. I could drop you off. Or you can come back with us?" I saw the hopeful look in his eye.

The leather made a noise behind me. Collin's hand rested on my shoulder. I turned to look back at him. "It'd be good if you did. We could sit down and talk." His hot breath blasted against my neck. I shivered from the moisture and warmth on my flesh.

I sighed. "I'd like that, but I think I should spend the night alone. Sorry, guys. Can you drop me off at the house, please? Besides, I think William needs to get some more rest after what he's been through. I have plenty of work to catch up on."

Shea brushed his fingers across my knee. "Okay."

We drove to my house. Shea and Collin got out and walked me to the door. While I stood between the two of them, neither made a move to bid me good-bye. If I kissed one, the other might get jealous. If I kissed neither, they would be hurt. I rolled my eyes. *This is getting way too complicated.* They looked at me and then at each other. The tension between them choked me. I set my bag down by the door and placed my hands on both of their chests. Touching them together made me wet, and the warmth that spread through me almost made me pass out from the pleasure. I bit my lip and held in a small moan.

"This is hard. Look, guys. The last thing I want to do is come between your friendship. I don't want either of you to think that I'm choosing one of you over the other. You're both alphas. Me, too. Competition is kinda built into your blood."

"We know that. It's just hard having you so close and not being able to touch you. And I love my bro and all, but I'm not into dudes, so we both know that's not going to happen."

Shea chuckled. "Collin, we're both on the same wavelength there, man. You're my brother but nothing else. And what he said is true. It's hard not being able to touch you and feeling a smidge jealous that you might want to be with him or even your third mate. If that happens."

I smiled and touched his cheek. His concern softened my heart. I leaned up and kissed him; as I did, I ran my tongue along his lips. He slid his arms around me and deepened the kiss. I pressed against his body. Now that we were far-enough away from my family and the events of the other day, I could let my guard down. Shea released my lips and rubbed his cheek against mine. I quivered in his embrace.

"Come back with me, and I'll make it worth your while," he breathed into my ear and nipped the end of it.

It took all of my control not to melt into a gelatinous pool before him, but I kept my dignity and pulled away. I went to Collin. He picked me up and bit the side of my neck.

"Show-off." Shea laughed.

I looked at him and stuck my tongue out. He walked back to the car. Collin bit a little harder and got me to moan. I ran my fingers over the scars on his head and swept my lips across his. I caught his bottom lip with my teeth and pulled on it gently. His hands raked down my back. He crushed me to him harder, then I pulled away to breathe.

"I need you, Alison." He held my face in his hands. "Please say you'll come back with us or let me stay."

His blue eyes implored me. I felt both of their wants, but I couldn't do it tonight. It wasn't anything against them. I needed alone time. "I'll come over tomorrow night and cook for you guys. I promise. I have tomorrow off. What time is good?"

"Now."

"Collin, please."

He groaned and stepped away. "Come after three. We can go shopping if you want. I don't think we have a morsel of food in the house."

I kissed him again lightly on the lips. "But I promise I'll stay all night. We'll just have to figure out sleeping arrangements."

His smile widened. "Okay."

"Tell Shea, please."

"Oh, I will."

He walked past me and grabbed my ass. I shook my head and unlocked the door. Shea pulled out of the driveway, and I was left all alone with Lucky. I scratched him for a while and curled up on the couch. When I did, my thoughts turned to William. His scent filled my nose, and the dull ache inside of my heart began to spread. It was going to be a challenge to get him to acknowledge me. My idea of what Shea and Collin had said to him on the

ride back went through my mind. It mattered what he thought of me. It mattered that he knew how much I appreciated his help when I was a little girl.

Maybe tomorrow we can talk, and things will be a little better.

Chapter Eleven

The next morning, I e-mailed my boss again and told her that the family emergency had turned into a funeral. I had said my brother had died and I had to help with the arrangements, so I needed the rest of the week off. She replied back to take as much time off as I needed and not to worry about it. I could take full advantage if I wanted. I wasn't lying to her. My brother had died, only I didn't feel any remorse about it. I wasn't sure if that was something I should be worried about or not. Did not having feelings for a family member make me a bad person when that family member helped to torture me when I was a child? I didn't think so.

I cleaned the house and did a few errands. When I was done, I went back to the house, changed into a pair of black jeans, and found a purple shirt that showed off the tops of my breasts. I desired my mates to drool over me. Such power over two handsome men was awesome. And I wanted to see if I could get William's attention. I wrestled with my hair but only ended up getting half of it put up. Once I was done, I petted Lucky and grabbed my overnight bag. When I arrived, Shea's car and Collin's bike weren't in the driveway. I drove all the way in and saw that the driveway wrapped around the back of the house where there was a large four-bay garage. I pulled in next to a white truck. The door was open on that bay. I got out and looked around, wondering if anyone was home.

"They're not here. Shea was called into court, and something happened at the jobsite so Collin had to go. Said they would be back for dinner, though." William rolled out from underneath the truck. His face was smudged with grease, and he was dressed in old blue overalls.

Wonderful. "Okay, well, I can certainly go to the store without one of them. Although it's going to be a little harder since I don't know what Shea likes to eat. What about you?"

He got up and wiped his hands on a rag. "I'm not really much into the whole food thing. I eat whatever's in the fridge."

I rolled my eyes. "What do you like to eat? I wasn't just going to cook for them and not you."

His eyes widened. "Oh, well, whatever you cook, I'm sure it's fine."

"Why don't you come with me and we can pick something out? I'm not the world's greatest chef, but I can do a few things."

"I really have to get this done. The axle has been giving me problems. It's the reason I didn't drive out to the funeral; instead I flew."

"Oh. I'm sorry to hear. W-who passed away?"

He met my eyes and then looked down at his hands. He balled the rag in his hand. "My mother. Ovarian cancer. They caught it too late. If only—" He pounded his fist into the truck, which left a small dent.

I went over to him and touched his shoulder. "If only what?"

He spun around. "Nothing. You wouldn't understand. Just forget it." He jerked out of my hold.

"What wouldn't I understand?"

"You've always been what you are. You weren't turned into this monster. Scorned by your family. If my mother had been a shifter, she never would've gotten sick in the first place," he barked. The anger and hurt flashed across his face. He threw his rag onto the tar.

"Right. So, you think that my being a born shifter makes me special? I'm the lowest rung on the shifter totem pole. A hybrid. It goes against every natural law for me to exist. I was locked away so the secret of the family wouldn't get out. I was beaten, whipped, shoved into the closet, and nearly raped because of what I am. The abuse I put up with is because I *am* a shifter. At least bitten shifters have some respect in the community. You should be thankful of that." I got closer and closer to him until I almost touched his nose. My anger crunched my muscles. I ground my teeth. My claws dug into the meat of my palm. The timid boy who had helped me at least had some compassion back then. But there was nothing left of the boy I thought I knew.

His expression changed. "I didn't know about all that. I'm sorry. But you don't know how hard it was for me with your family. They taunted me all the

time. But I wouldn't rise to the occasion. I never knew why they hid you away. You were just a girl. When I met Karen, none of it mattered anymore. I ran away with her. She was human, though. I loved her so much. We were making out, and I got overexcited. I shifted. Karen ran from me, fell, and hit her head. She died. I didn't know what to do so I ran. I roamed and finally found Shea. I figured he owed me."

"Do you still blame him for turning you into a shifter?" I asked. I backed away and leaned against the truck. It was hard for me to look at him because I wanted to take him into my arms and comfort him. But I kept my distance. He didn't want me. That much was clear.

"No, I don't blame him. He did what he had to do at the time. When I went back home, I went for a walk to clear my head and ended up on your family's property. Your brothers surprised me and brought me back to your stepfather. I guess it was fate you happened to know Shea and Collin."

"Yeah, Fate. They didn't tell you about us, did they?"

"They said you're involved with them."

I crossed my arms over my chest. "It's more than that. I'm their mate."

He shifted uncomfortably. "Well. They didn't tell me that. Great for them."

"So, are you going to listen to Minerva and try to become human again? Even though you could die."

"I don't see why not. It's the best option I have. I don't have anything to hold me to this life. It'd be nice to be normal again."

I touched his hand. When I did, that familiar zing ran along my arm. His nostrils flared. He felt the connection, too. "This life isn't so bad if you give it a chance."

"That's because you've never known a different way." He pulled away.

My inner kitty sighed. "I guess." I forced a smile and fought the tears. "Well, I'll go shopping. Last call. Anything you like."

He licked his lips. "Maybe something with strawberries. I can't seem to get the scent out of my nose since the other night. It gave me a craving for them."

I nodded. "Okay." *If he smelled strawberries, that has to be what I smell like to him. At least he's acknowledging it in some way.* "I can do that."

I left the house and headed to the grocery store. I walked around a couple of times to get an idea of what to buy and how much time I had. I got a large box of strawberries, chocolate, pork chops, salad, and other vegetables to make a stir-fry since Collin was vegetarian. When I got back to the house, William's truck was gone. No one was home, but I found a note on the front door that told me to find the key around back. So I trudged around back, found the key, unlocked the side door. I lugged all the groceries in and took stock of the immaculate kitchen. The pots and pans hung above the stove. I was able to reach them and pulled down what I needed. I busied myself in the mundane task of cooking for three hungry men who were also shifters, so I made twice the portions. Two hours later, I had the stir-fry sizzling, pork chops in the oven, and the melted chocolate in the double boiler that I dipped the strawberries in.

"It smells wonderful in here."

I jumped when I heard Shea's voice behind me. I turned and saw him dressed in a sleek black suit. He was clean-shaven and carried a leather bag with him. His red tie was loosened, but his shirt was still buttoned. He put his bag down on the chair and then greeted me with a kiss. When he released me, he dipped his finger into the bubbling chocolate.

"You'll burn yourself doing that."

He smiled and licked part of his finger before he offered it to me. "Yeah, but it tastes so good. Try some." He ran his finger along my lips.

I touched it lightly with my tongue, not wanting to encourage him. The chocolate did taste good. I let my tongue wrap around his finger and suck off the remaining sweetness. He stepped closer to me. Shea's arousal grew the longer he was with me. I released his finger and pushed him back a step. "Dinner will burn. Does this ever stop? The lust that comes with this?"

He nuzzled my neck and gave my breast a small squeeze. "I hope not. I rather enjoy it. Although it is very hard to focus when I'm around you."

"Dinner will be ready in twenty minutes."

He went to the fridge and took out a bottle of water. He sat on the chair and looked at me. "How did things go with William today?"

I shook my head. "I'd rather not talk about it."

"He's that hell bent on becoming human. Didn't you touch him? Didn't he smell you?"

"Yeah, but he wants nothing to do with being a shifter, so in essence he wants nothing to do with me."

"I'll say something to him."

"No. Don't. He has to figure it out himself. But the good news is I have the rest of the week off."

"Now that sounds like a wonderful thing." Collin strolled in. His musky scent filled the kitchen. He snatched a strawberry and ate the whole thing. He pressed his lips to mine so I could taste the remnants of the fruit. "Tastes just like you. Sweet and tangy. I'm going to wash up for dinner."

"A man could get used to this. Coming home and seeing you preparing a meal for him every night."

I threw a strawberry at Shea. "Yeah, don't get used to it." I finished the strawberries and then set them in the fridge to cool.

We ate dinner together, but William remained absent. After that, I sat between my two mates and watched some movie they had wanted to see. Shea took me into their media room which was a man's paradise with a sixty-inch flat screen and surround sound with a bunch more gadgets. I lost interest in the movie and began to doze wrapped in the combined heat of their bodies. I was content, and it was easy to drift off. The next thing I knew, I woke up and was lying on Shea's bed. When I looked around he wasn't there. I got up and walked out of the bedroom. I heard the television on downstairs and headed toward the noise. Expecting to find Shea, I was surprised to discover William. A mostly empty plate sat on the table; whatever else had been on it had been eaten, save for a couple of strawberry stems on the plate. He glanced up when I entered.

"Hey."

"Hi. What are you watching?"

“Nothing in particular. Couldn’t sleep. Oh, the food was good.”

“Thanks. Mind if I join you?”

“Be my guest.” He slid over on the couch to make room.

I sat beside him and watched the screen. After a few minutes, a cold chill ran through me. I rubbed my arms. “Did you guys turn the AC on or something?”

“No. For some reason this place gets cold at night. I think it’s a resident ghost, but those two don’t believe me. Here.”

I slid a little closer to him. His fingers brushed my back. I jumped from the contact.

“Sorry.”

“No. It’s okay. The scars on my back are sensitive. Never really healed all the way, I guess because of the silver.”

“Do you mind if I see?”

I lifted my shirt over my back so he could see the network of thin lines splayed against my flesh. I held my breath. His warm breath blasted against my ear. I arched my back when his finger began to trace the map across my skin. The soft touch ignited the passion within me. I bit my lip to keep from crying out when he ran his finger along my spine. The mishmash of raised tissue was concentrated there. Harris assumed if he could whip me hard enough, it would cripple me. That never happened. William’s other hand followed one of the longer marks along my side and brushed the side of my breast. My nipple hardened from the contact. I turned toward him. His pupils had dilated. He drew in shorter breaths. His hand slid further along my breast until he cupped it. I held in a breath. He inhaled again.

I searched his eyes and was lost in them. The scent of cinnamon surrounded and infused me. It made my head spin. I dared not move in case he pulled away. I yearned to capture his lips and taste him. My pulse pounded in my ears. One wrong move and the spell would be broken. His thumb swept over my nipple. A small sound escaped my lips.

“I think I know where the strawberries are coming from.”

He brushed his lips across my jaw. “Where is that?”

"It's you. You smell like them." His tongue touched my skin. "You taste like them. Is it your body wash or something?"

I turned until our lips were close to touching. "Do you like it?"

"Yes."

"Then kiss me."

He pressed his lips to mine and squeezed my breast. His kiss was gentle and light. I leaned in closer, with the urge to have more of him. The attraction between us burned through my veins. I closed my eyes and then lost myself in the gesture, but then he suddenly pulled away. I opened my eyes and saw him shake his head.

"God, what am I doing?"

"Nothing I didn't want you to do."

"But you're my friends' mate. I can't do this with you."

"Don't you know why I smell and taste this way to you? Why you feel the pull toward me?"

"It's nothing. It's late. We shouldn't be doing this. I'm sorry." He got up and left the room, leaving me completely alone and cold. I curled up on the sofa as I tried to find the warmth I had just a few moments ago. Sadness overwhelmed me. I couldn't fight it off. The pain in my soul took hold. My inner kitty howled for the loss of our mate. I wasn't going to go after him and beg. His rejection was rife in the air. I drew my knees up to my chest and cried into my hands. I'd never been one to really let loose with my tears, but the dam had burst, and I couldn't stop them. William had made his intentions clear. He would forget everything that happened. He wanted to be human. He didn't want to live the life of a shifter. That meant I didn't have any place in his outlook. I couldn't turn off the feelings I had for him that I still didn't understand. The instant attraction, instinct, that was what it was. As Minerva had said, when most mates met, they were on one another within minutes. I'd almost had that connection with William, but he chose humanity where he could die if he didn't shift. Minerva said there would be pain. I didn't know if it was physical or emotional. Right now it was emotional.

"Love, what are you doing here?"

I glanced up and saw Collin in the doorway. He was dressed only in boxer shorts, and sleep encrusted his eyes. I sniffled when I saw him. He walked over and wrapped me in his arms. He placed his chin on my head, and I rested my head against his hard chest. “Shh.”

I tried to take comfort from my mate, but found I could barely even think. The hurt rocked me and shredded my soul. Minerva said I had to convince William to stay a shifter. The way it was now, I knew he would keep his distance. That meant any hope for me or him had disappeared.

Chapter Twelve

The next day I woke up in Collin's bed. My two mates asked me what happened, but I wasn't in the mood to open up about it. Sleeping on the situation hadn't helped my mood because I was cranky. I barely said a word to them and left as soon as I could. I needed to be alone. That and I felt achy, which meant I was either getting sick or going into heat, but I wasn't close to that. Human women thought they had it bad monthly. Cat shifters went into heat every six months, and it normally lasted two weeks. The drive to have someone fuck your brains out was so bad that it was worse than the mating instinct I had with those two. That was another reason I had to get away from William. I couldn't be around him and him not want me. The impulse to be near him would drive me crazy, especially because his scent permeated everything. My mates tried to convince me to stay, but I told them no I needed time alone. And that was how I spent the rest of the week.

I ignored their calls or when they came by. I just couldn't do it. With the rest of the week off, I haunted the mall and bought clothes I didn't really need. I hit the bath stores and gagged when I smelled anything with strawberries in it, which seemed to be half the store because strawberries were the new 'it' scent. It was either that or I had strawberries on the brain.

The weekend came and went. Shea's and Collin's messages were frantic. I had to go see them even if it culminated in a confrontation with William. It was Monday, and I felt like shit. I was achy, and my fever was higher. I barely slept. I made it halfway through the day when my boss pulled me aside and told me to go home and take another few days off. She asked me how the funeral was, and I acted like it was very sad, but I still hadn't felt grief for the death of my brother. I told her I must have gotten sick from all the stress. Instead of going home, I went to Minerva. I couldn't face my mates yet.

When I walked into her herb shop, she handed me a cup of tea. It smelled like ass. I made a face at it. She thrust it back into my hands anyway.

"It'll make your fever go down."

I grumbled and took a sip. It tasted worse than it smelled. "Yuck. What's in this stuff?"

My friend laughed. "You don't want to know. But it'll help. How bad are you feeling?" She laid her hand on my forehead and my cheek.

"Like I want to kill something. My inner cat is getting harder to control. It doesn't help it's almost the full moon. I'm achy, bitchy, and could eat an elephant."

"How are you handling things emotionally?"

I stared at her and nearly lost it. Tears brimmed and almost spilled over my lashes. My lower lip trembled. I turned away and wiped the wetness away. I hated being emotional, but this was getting ridiculous. I had to face the reality William had snubbed me. "I'm a wreck, but what, I got three more days until the full moon and William becomes human again. Then I'm home free."

She gave me a hug. "It's won't be any easier. Have you talked to him at all? Explained it."

I nodded. "We talked. We kissed. He feels the pull to mate, but he didn't want to put the moves on his friends' girl. I haven't been over there in a week. Shea and Collin have called and come by, but I've tried to make myself scarce. I was going over there tonight and see what happens. I dread the thought of seeing him. He doesn't want me, Minnie."

"Collin came here and asked about you. I told him to back off for a while. He didn't like that answer, but he listened. They're worried about you. Their first instinct is to protect you. They feel an echo of what you feel, and the longer you're mated, the easier you'll be able to sense their thoughts. If you're pent-up, I'm sure they are, too. You are the balm that can soothe their wounds and vice versa. Keep trying with William. Now finish your tea."

I frowned and took a few more sips. I mulled over what she said while a woman stepped into the shop. I sat on the stool by the back counter and looked at her. She was familiar. I recognized her as the woman who had been at Shea's table at the bookstore. She looked up and met my eyes. She talked

to Minerva, who nodded in my direction. I took another sip of the tea. The brew helped cool me down. The woman came over to me.

“Hi.”

I raised an eyebrow at her. “Hi.”

She had dark hair that hung to her shoulders. Her eyes were nearly black. Her skin was pale. She was dressed in jeans and a plain shirt. She was thin, but there wasn't anything delicate about her. “You're Alison, right?”

A scorned ex. This is all I need. “Yeah. That's me. Can I help you with something?”

She looked down at her shoes. “I was hoping you'd give a message to William for me.”

My eyes widened. “I'm sorry, but weren't you with Shea the other night at the bookstore?”

She looked up. “Yeah. We dated for a month.”

“So, why do you want me to give a message to William? Just call the house and leave one yourself.”

“Thing is, Shea never gave me the house number. So, I can't. I wouldn't ask you to do this, but it wasn't until I dated Shea that I realized who his roommate was. I didn't know how to bring it up to him. The other night I had to ask him to tell William that I was okay. Happy and everything.”

“Who are you?”

“Sorry. My name's Karen Anders. William and I dated when I was human.”

My eyes widened. “Wait a minute. You're the girl that he thinks is dead? How are you still alive? He said you hit your head after you ran away from him seeing him change.”

She nodded. “I nearly was. We'd been making out the night before, and he bit me. I don't think he even realized he did it. That started the change in me. When I hit my head, I was unconscious for several days. I woke up in the hospital. Hunters found me. I couldn't remember anything at first. It took me three months to get my memory back. By then, I was almost fully transformed. I searched for him, but he was long-gone. I looked for years

and then ran into Shea. I smelled William on him but realized after the fact that was why we went out. When I saw him at the bookstore, I wanted to talk to him. Since you were close to Shea, I hoped you could give William a message for me.”

I swallowed the rest of my tea and threw it away. “I have a better idea. Why don’t you come with me and tell him yourself?”

“Really? I-I’m not sure that’s a good idea.”

“Trust me. He would want to see you. He’s carried around the guilt for years. Come on.”

Her face brightened. “Okay.”

I hopped off the stool and waved to Minerva. I wondered if she had a hand in this. Karen got in my car, and twenty minutes later we were at the house. All three vehicles were in the driveway, so I parked on the street. Once I got out, I heard shouting. There was a loud crash. When I got to the back of the house, Shea was shirtless. The muscles were strained in his chest and neck. There was blood on his face. William was back against the bed of his truck where a large indentation was in the metal. His lip was split, and blood trickled from his nose.

“You’re the cause of all of this. You’re the reason she’s not here!” Shea raised his fist again.

“Whoa!” I caught his arm and slid between the two of them before he could hurt William again. “Calm down, Shea.” His eyes were slits, and he panted. His muscles twitched underneath his skin. He didn’t lower his hand, and I didn’t have the strength to force him to. So, I took his face between my hands. “Honey, look at me.”

After a moment, he did. He focused his eyes on me. He lowered his hand. Shea drew in longer breaths, but he was still on edge. He wrapped me in a bone-crushing hug and buried his head in my hair. He stroked my back. I sensed he tried to regain control. “I’ve been so worried. I didn’t know what I did wrong to make you stay away. Then I realized it was him.”

I kissed him. “No. It wasn’t your fault. It wasn’t William’s fault. It was mine. I didn’t want to think of his face when he rejected me again. I figured

it would be easier to wait until he chose to become human. 'Then it wouldn't matter. He's one of your best friends. You shouldn't fight over me.'

Shea smoothed the hair from my face. "He told me what happened. He was guilty, but said he wanted you. Just that it wasn't right. I tried to talk to him and tell him shifters can be mated to several different people at a time, but he didn't want to hear it. I—"

"Is everything okay?"

I glanced over at Karen. I had forgotten she was there. Shea growled and was about to say something when I shot him a look. "Yeah. It's fine. Why don't you come over here?"

I walked over to William, who was still in the garage. Karen followed. "William, can I talk to you?"

"Why? So Shea can hit me again?" he growled.

"No. Because there's someone here who wants to talk to you."

He turned around. Once he saw Karen, he backed into his tool bench. Several wrenches fell onto the table beneath. He paled and clutched the edge of the worktable. The surprise in his eyes and the disbelief on his face made me a little jealous. "You. You're dead. That's not Karen."

"Will, it's really me." She walked over and picked up his hand. I left so they could have some time to talk and get reacquainted. I'm sure there was a lot they had to talk about.

"Why did you bring the psycho over here? You know, when we dated she asked me to bring her over to see William."

"That's because she's the woman he thought he killed. He didn't know it, but he infected her and she turned. Come on. Can we get out of here? Go eat or do something?"

"I'll get cleaned up. Collin will want to come with us."

"I just want to be with you for now. I'll wait out front." I walked away as I felt my heart get heavier with each step. William would choose her over me. I could already feel it. His scent was all over me. I had to get away from here, because I couldn't think straight. I didn't know how long the tea Minerva gave me would last, but so far I was okay.

Shea returned, and we went to my car. "What do you feel like?"

I shrugged. "Quiet. Not too spicy."

He smiled and squeezed my knee. "I know just the place."

Chapter Thirteen

When we returned, Shea had to get some work done, and Collin's bike was gone. I thought about going home but decided against it. I had to talk to William and get it over with. I had to know once and for all who he had chosen. Her or me. Humanity or shifter. Either way, it was the only way to ease the hurt in my soul. My fever had come back, along with the aches. Only now they were worse. The knots in my stomach grew worse, and the pain made it hard to concentrate. I tried to push it aside and focus on other things, but it wasn't working. I tried the garage, but William wasn't there. I went into the house and down to the media room. He wasn't there either. His deep cinnamon scent and Karen's mint perfume permeated the air. I inhaled again and followed the two aromas to the back of the house and up a flight of stairs. I was in a hallway with three doors. One was the bathroom, and the other two were closed. I knocked on the one where I smelled him the strongest.

"Come in," William called, but his voice was muffled.

I turned the knob and expected to find her sitting on bed. When I went in, I saw William standing at the balcony looking at the field behind the house. Beyond the pasture, trees lined the entrance to the woods. He didn't look behind him. "Where's Karen?"

"I called her a cab so she could go home."

"Oh. Did you and she get into a fight?"

He chuckled. "No. I touched her. Kissed her. And nothing. The joy of her return was miraculous, but now that she's a shifter, we still can't be together after all these years. What's the point to all of this? The universe is playing one cruel joke on me."

I sighed. "I'm sorry that you're not compatible. If I could take the whole mating instinct away, I would. So, you're going to choose humanity then?"

"What other choice do I have?"

"You could choose me," I said softly.

William turned around. The way he stared at me with his smoldering eyes, I nearly lost it. A sharp pain struck me at that moment, so much so that I grimaced. "Are you okay?"

I shook my head and sunk down on the bed. "No."

"I'll get Shea."

I grabbed his arm. "Shea can't help me with this. Neither can Collin. You're the only one who can make this pain go away. Haven't you felt it, too? The fever. The aches?"

"Yeah, but I just ignored them. How can I cause your pain?"

"Because we're denying the instinct to mate. It becomes painful after a while. Excruciating if you let it go on too long. But once you're human, I won't have to worry about it. William, I'm not going to force you to claim me for a mate. Why fate chooses me to be compatible with three different men who are friends, I'll never know. I just need to hear you say that you don't want me. And not because humanity is a better option than being a shifter, but because you don't want *me*. I know I'm not your type. I'm not anyone's really, but whatever." Another stab hit my side again. I figured it was because I was so close to him.

He knelt before me and took my face in his hands. "I'm not in love with you, Alison. It isn't human to take up with someone all because of instinct. We're not animals."

I laughed. "Yes, we are. You have to get that. You're not completely human anymore. What lives inside of you is a powerful cat. It gives you strength and stealth. It makes you walk with your head held high. Won't you miss that when you choose humanity in a couple of days?" I pushed him down on the floor and straddled him. He was too surprised to react. I pressed my body to his and held his arms down with my hand. I inhaled his deep scent and let the cat into my nature. I rubbed my cheek along his and licked his throat. His heart pounded against his chest. I felt the reverberation in my own. I purred while I nuzzled against him. I bit down on his throat, under his ear, but didn't break the skin. He had to accept me before I claimed him for a mate.

He let out a moan. His erection pushed against my belly. I purred again next to his ear so he could hear my contentment. "Don't tell me you don't feel excited about this. Don't humans fuck after knowing one another for minutes at a time?" I began to grind along his cock.

His eyes rolled back into his head. His hips jerked forward. William groaned. I kissed him again, tracing my tongue over his lips. I sucked on his Adam's apple, swirling my tongue over it. I bit down on his neck and kissed over the fabric of his shirt. I released his arms and raked his skin with my nails. The scent of cinnamon filled my nose. I needed him. I pulled his shirt up and began kissing his flat stomach. My nipples hardened. I was wet with the anticipation of his cock sliding inside of me. I came to his nipple and nibbled on it. He moaned. William's fingers wound into my hair. He pulled me from his chest and to his lips. He kissed me hard and thrust his tongue into my mouth, meeting mine. I groaned and dragged my nails across his chest. He broke the kiss and pushed me away.

"I'm not an animal. I'm not going to fuck you because it's built into my DNA."

It took me a moment before I could catch my breath. "It's not about fucking. It's more than that. Once the matebond has been established, we sense one another's emotions and then each other's thoughts. I'm sorry. I'll leave you alone." I got up and left the room. I made it a few steps when he grabbed my arm and turned me around. I hissed. "You've made it quite clear you don't want me. Why come after me now?"

"I don't know. Because I don't want you to go to Shea. I don't want you to go to Collin. I want you with me. I don't know. It's all fucked up. I have two things fighting in my head. I always have. The human pulls me in one direction. The cat in another. Sometimes I do things I don't even know I'm doing. Like when I bit Karen. I never knew. I guess I wanted her with me. Even though I don't know you well, the image of you with them, it twists my gut. I know that you are their mate, but the cat wants you all to himself."

I melted when I saw the fight in his eyes between his humanity and the cat inside of him and felt how it ripped his soul apart. He was afraid to lose

who he was, so he desperately clung onto his humanity, thinking it would slip away. I touched his face. "I can't make the decision for you. But remember it was the human who was nice to me while I was hidden away in a closet. You were the first boy I ever had a crush on. Part of me has always held onto that. If you choose to remain a shifter, I'll love you the way I love your friends. Equally. Once you're human, part of me will shrivel away because you'll be gone from me. The world has changed for me because I accepted Shea and Collin as my mates. It's true I don't know them well, but I love them already. They've made my life worth living again. I never understood what my mother meant when she told me she'd sacrifice everything all over again and have those few nights with my real father. But he was her true mate. Not my stepfather. When she talks about him, her eyes light up, and I see the woman she could have been. My father was a tiger shifter. Cross-mating between species doesn't happen much, but it did with her. She couldn't fight it. I think she stays with my stepfather because she feels it's penance. I don't know." I brushed my lips across his and then slipped out of his grasp. The pain remained, but it was manageable. I walked through the house and slipped into Shea's office. He looked up and smiled.

"You mind if I just hang out here?"

"Of course not. It'll be rather boring, though. I take it things aren't going well with William."

"Not really."

"Should I go talk to him?"

"It won't do any good. Don't make any more waves between you two. You shouldn't fight over me. It isn't worth it."

"Can't help it. You're too beautiful not to fight over."

I blushed. "Thanks. On second thought, I'm going to watch a movie downstairs while you're working. Come join me later."

His mouth spread into that gorgeous smile I loved. "Of course."

Chapter Fourteen

Wednesday night came. The moon was near full. The pull of it made me crazy combined with the piercing pains and overall bitchy attitude I had. My inner cat paced frantically to be let out. I forced myself to get up from the bed and stare out the window. Each time I did, the moon helped cool me down, but then it also amped me up. Shea and Collin had tried to ease the tension I felt each taking me for a night and making love to me. It helped ease some of my anxiety and pain, but it hadn't completely gone away. William had disappeared Monday night. I didn't sense him near the house. I asked Shea about it, and he mentioned William would go deep into the woods to clear his head. Even as kids he liked to be alone. Tonight my mates had left the house. They hadn't wanted to, but I forced them to go. I needed time to be alone. It was easier now without them around because my emotions didn't reflect back on me. I stood before the moon dressed in one of the nightgowns I bought from Victoria's Secret. It was emerald and made me feel sexy. It went with the different colors of my hair. I stretched my arms out and rolled my shoulders, feeling the bones pop. It would be a relief to change with the moon: three nights of being a cat and frolicking in the woods lay ahead. I could already feel my claws sinking into the meat of a deer and letting the blood slide down my throat. Just the thought made me purr.

"Can I come in?"

I spun around and went to all fours from the surprise. A small hiss slipped from my lips. I crawled forward until I sniffed the air and realized it was William. I rose up and stood before him. "What do you want?"

"I came to apologize."

"Apology accepted. Now, go away."

"Look, you have every right to be angry with me. Please hear me out."

I narrowed my eyes. His scent was still intoxicating, but it was turning my stomach. "Why? You already said you don't want me. I've accepted that. Everything else is moot. Go be human. You have one day left if you survive and don't succumb to shifting." I turned and walked past him. I couldn't do

this with him anymore. I couldn't bare my soul and have it ripped to shreds again.

He growled behind me. I ignored him and kept on walking toward the stairs. I needed to get downstairs and outside where there was fresh air. William grabbed my arm. I yanked out of his grasp. He tried for me again, and this time I stumbled. The carpet cushioned my fall, but it rattled my bones nonetheless. William reached for me, but I scurried away from him.

"Stop trying to run away." He trapped me between his knees. "You need to listen to me, Alicat." He leaned over me and clasped my hands above my head. I snapped at him. He pulled back before I could get him. He covered my mouth with one hand. He lowered his lips to my ear. Pressing his mouth against my throat, he began to kiss me slowly along the length of my neck. Those soft, slow kisses ignited the fire in me. I squeezed my eyes shut and fought it back. This didn't mean anything. He removed his hand and slid his fingers along my collarbone.

"You have no right to touch me like that."

He glanced up. I saw the sadness in his eyes and some kind of resolve. "Please hear me out. Will you listen?"

"Only if you let me up."

"I kinda like you like this. Flushed and panting. Helpless and wanting."

"Get to the point!" I snarled.

"Monday night I left and went into the woods. I have this spot I go to. I sat and for the first time I tried to talk or at least communicate with the cat. I never thought about it until you made a point that I should accept it. Karen said I should try it, too, that it might help me acclimate. So I asked it questions, and it answered. I never thought it was intelligent before. I did, but not as a thing outside of myself. Anyway, the point is I embraced it. Or I'm trying to embrace it. I know what I want now."

"And what is that?"

He studied my face. "You."

"Right. Now let me up. You've had your fun."

He thrust his hands onto the carpet next to my head, boxing me in. A low snarl came from his lips. For the first time, I saw the cat in his eyes. He didn't break my gaze, but lowered his lips to mine and began to kiss them. It took everything in me not to respond. He pressed his lips harder against mine and ran his tongue along them. He trailed his kisses along my jaw and nipped at my ear. William bit into my throat. The pain made me cry out. "Please trust me. Please open your heart to me. I know I don't deserve it. I've been a bastard, but I need you."

"What about your speech that you don't love me?" Hot tears of desire slid from my eyes. It took everything in me not to wrap my legs around him and sink my teeth into his soft throat. His sweet scent intoxicated me. The fabric of his shirt was scratchy against my sensitive flesh.

"I was an idiot. The lion inside already loves you. So I love you, too. I want you for a mate. God, Alicat, you taste so good." He sucked on my neck.

I arched up and pressed my breasts against him. My nipples were pleasure hardened. My clit throbbed with unspent desire. The instinct to mate with him overwhelmed me. The pain of our delayed mating gripped me. I needed to taste him. "Do you want me?" I searched his eyes. "For a mate, to share with the others?"

"Whatever it takes to have you. I'll do anything."

I ran my hand down his face and saw the truth in his eyes. He wanted me without holding back. I kissed him lightly and touched the tip of my tongue to his neck. I found the spot under his ear. I opened my mouth wide and bit into his throat. I sucked on his warm blood and let it slide down my throat.

"Oh, fuck!" William's hips thrust into mine. His erection was rock-hard.

I lapped at the wound. "I claim you for my mate." With each stroke of my tongue, he shivered until I pulled away. I pressed my lips to his and plunged my tongue between his lips. He sucked on it and licked my lips clean of the blood. "I need you to claim me. Bite me so you draw blood. That cements the matebond."

I wrapped my arms around his neck and held him against my throat. William licked the spot below my ear. I sensed his hesitation. I began

stroking his cock. Once he moaned, I slowed my caresses and felt him nip along the spot. I braced myself for the pain, and before I knew it, he was pulling in my blood. Tasting me. I cried out and swayed against him.

“Yes.” He licked the wound with his sandy tongue. Each stroke brought me higher and higher. I took his hand and brought it under my nightgown so he could cup my sex. Feel how wet I already was. He didn’t need any more encouragement and began fondling my clit. His sudden touches brought an orgasm crashing through me. I screamed and pressed my nails into his back.

“Mine. I claim you for mine. Shit, you smell so fucking good.” William let me go and slid down my body until his face was pressed against my sex. He pushed up the fabric of my nightgown. He lapped at my juices. Each time his tongue touched the folds of my sex, a powerful jolt of bliss wove through me. I couldn’t stand it.

“Need you. Now.” I pulled his face back up to mine and worked on his zipper.

He clutched one of my breasts and kissed me. “Too fast. I want to pleasure you.”

“Later.” I panted. I pulled his cock out from his jeans and straddled him. I guided his dick deep inside of me. William groaned.

“Yes.”

He squeezed my nipple and then caught the other one through the fabric with his teeth. He bit down hard when I began to ride him. My nails shredded the back of his shirt while he pushed up inside of me. I kissed the side of his neck. I couldn’t take a slow, lovemaking session. It was too near the full moon. The instinct just to fuck was on me. If my other mates were back soon, I’d make them each have a turn with me, not that they would mind. When I thought about my other mates, seeing their straining faces while they made love to me, it drove me to orgasm faster. I rode William harder. His blood scented the air. He pushed down the straps of my negligee and tried to stuff as much of my breast into his mouth as he could. His other hand clutched my ass. I couldn’t hold back any longer, so I sunk my teeth into the meat of his shoulder to taste him once more.

He squeezed my ass hard and shot his seed deep inside of me. The intensity of the passion made my vision turn black. I was nearly out of breath. I tried to slow down, but couldn't. I needed more. I needed the others with me. I needed them filling me once William was done, one after the other, with their lips on mine. I shook my head. Mixing them was not part of the bargain. I would claim them separately, and they would worship me for a goddess for the ecstasy I would bring them. He slammed into me a few more times, and then we rocked together. Our tongues intertwined, and we tasted one another. The pain I was in before had evaporated. My mood had brightened. Now, nothing would stop us from being together.

William lifted his lips from mine. "That was amazing. I never thought it would be like that."

I nipped his bottom lip. "It only gets better from here."

"Really?"

I kissed his neck. "Sure does. Just wait." I felt him growing hard again inside of me. This time we would take it slow.

"Well, I'll guess you'll just have to show me."

I smiled. "Bet on it."

Chapter Fifteen

The full moon came and went. For those three nights, we romped in the fields and in the trees on the property that my mates owned. After that, things started to settle into a normal routine. I spent a couple of nights there with one mate while making sure not to ignore the other two. Not that I could anyway because they were just so damn sexy. Then I would go home for a couple of nights to recover from their attentions. Besides, I had Lucky at home to give some love to. I couldn't let him forget that he was my main squeeze. Every time I came home, he loved and rubbed against me. I scratched behind his ears and then began to purr. I started back to work and found that I was happy with my life. Of course I wasn't sure how I could deal with my three mates. The longer I was away from them, the more I wanted to be around them, but I wasn't ready to give up my freedom. It was a constant battle. After work, I headed to their house and found a spot in the driveway.

I walked into the house and smelled dinner, venison with something else. When I went into the kitchen, Collin was over the stove stirring the contents of a pot. I walked around him and slid my hands along his chest. Those rock-hard abs got me hot for him. I leaned up on tiptoe and nipped his throat. "Smells great, baby."

"Thanks. It'll be done in a few minutes. Do you have a second?"

"Anything for you. Can you take a break from this?"

"Yeah."

He turned the heat down on the burners and threaded his fingers through mine. He walked into the media room where the other men were sitting. They looked up when I came in. I gave them each a lingering kiss before I sat down. William slipped his hand over my breast, and Shea raked my thigh. I shivered when all three of them touched me at the same time. I purred and settled into the sofa. All of them looked at me. Their expressions were serious the longer I looked at them.

"Okay, guys, you're scaring me. What's going on?"

"We've all been talking," William started.

"We want you to move in with us," Shea finished.

I was floored by the offer. A smile spread on my lips. "Really? Are you sure that you're ready for a woman to move into this rockin' bachelor pad that you have going on? You know if I do take you up on it, I'm not cleaning up after you and cooking every night. And you'd have to deal with Lucky. You'd have to play nice. You think you can do that?"

My mates glanced at one another. I could only imagine all of my large cats getting along with my smaller one. "If we have to. So, what do you say?" Collin asked.

"Where am I going to sleep? Not that I mind sharing each of your beds, but a girl has to have a room of her own."

Shea gave me his devilish smile. He got up, and before I could protest, he scooped me up in his arms. The others came after him. We went in the direction of his office. Collin opened the door. The room had been transformed. A king sized bed sat in the center of the room. The walls had been painted white. A new walk-in closet had been built, and off of it was a bathroom. Shea put me down and let me look around. I touched the bed tentatively and felt that it was perfect. It was filled with pillows. The room smelled like strawberries, vanilla, and jasmine. I looked around and saw several candles.

"Will this accommodate you, Ali?" Shea slid his hands down my sides.

I wound my fingers through his hair. "It's perfect. You'll have to help me with my place. Though I'm sure three big strong men such as yourselves can take it."

"We've been working on it. William did most of the work."

I walked over to him and slid my hand over his crotch. I felt him stir underneath me. He still had issues integrating his cat with his human personality, but we were working it out. "I guess you'll be the first one to try out the new bed."

"Is that really fair since we all toiled with it?" Collin asked.

“Guys, we’ll all figure out a schedule. There’s enough of me to go around. We’ll have to have some open-door or closed-door policy. If it’s open, then you’re welcome to come in. If it’s closed, well, it means I’m either occupied or want to be alone. And Lucky will have free rein of the house.”

“I think we can all agree to that. So, when do you want to move in?” Shea asked.

I looked around and saw their hopeful expressions. My inner cat purred her contentment. All of this would work out just fine. “How about right now?” Each one gave me a cat smile, as he grinned from ear to ear. These were my mates. These were my pride. I was there for them, and they would always be there for me.

The End

About the Author

Crymsyn Hart is the author of over thirty books. Each world is filled with luscious vampires, gorgeous gods, quirky witches, and everything else that goes bump in the night.

Crymsyn worked as a psychic for many years in Boston while attending Emerson College. She graduated with a BFA in Writing, Literature, & Publishing. Crymsyn shares her life with a small zoo, two playful puppies, and her hubby Mark. If you come after dark, you're more than likely to find her snuggled up with a gory horror movie, or a bloody vampire movie.

Crymsyn has a collection of Living Dead Dolls and five bookshelves overflowing with books. Of course there's always room for more.