



LUST BITES

PRETTY
KITTY

DESIREE HOLT

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Pretty Kitty

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Warning: This book contains sexually explicit content, which is only suitable for mature readers. This story has been rated *Total-e-burning*.

PRETTY KITTY

Desiree Holt

Dedication

To Amy, Steven and Suzanne, who never fail to give me the encouragement I need,
even on the worst of days.

Chapter One

The Litter Box was rocking. The band was ramped up to high energy tonight, every seat and square foot of standing space was taken, and the rumble of conversation vied with the band for volume. A familiar hangout for cat shifters, the place was usually full even during the week. Tonight being Friday, it was more jammed than usual. People working off the stress of the week. Letting loosely all their inhibitions.

Everyone seemed to be connecting with someone except her. Aisha McClellan took a sip of her vodka stinger and tried not to feel sorry for herself. She'd been in San Antonio for six months now and except that this job paid better than the others she'd had, nothing was much different. Same impersonal apartment. Same lack of friends. Same absence of social life. She wondered if she had a sign tattooed on her forehead that shouted, "Keep Away".

She took another sip of her drink, letting the chilled liquid slide down her throat.

No one wanted damaged goods. It was as simple as that. And she was about as damaged as one could get. A full-blooded snow leopard shifter, she had never recovered from an assault when she was eighteen and just coming into her first shift. Since then she'd been stuck in a half-life, unable to fully transform into a leopard and unable to derive any pleasure at all from sex. She was sure the vibes she gave off were unpleasant no matter how hard she tried.

She drained her glass and thumped it on the bar.

"Fill 'er up," she told the bartender.

Max Rogan looked up from where he was rinsing glasses.

Gods, she loved looking at him. A lean six feet of hot male, his black hair hung like silk to his shoulders and was usually tied back with a leather thong. Thick black lashes almost too pretty for a man framed eyes that could only be called electric blue. A strong jaw called attention to his very masculine face, with its brackets on either side of his sensual mouth and his high almost exotic cheekbones. Defined muscles moved smoothly beneath the black tee and the dark jeans he wore, hinting at great strength.

Oh, yeah. Max Rogan was a dream and a half. Unfortunately she didn't think she was on his radar except as someone who hung out at The Litter Box, drank too much and went home with strange men she never talked to again. If she did that much longer, she'd run out of men to take home with her. Not that any of them had ever done her any good.

He'd become a friend. Probably her only friend. Someone who'd got under her defences and wormed the whole ugly story of her assault from her one rainy night. The good thing about Max was he'd listened quietly, nodded his head in the right places and didn't offer either criticism or advice. And he was always there when she wanted to talk on nights the bar was quiet.

Yes, a good friend. Damn it. Recently she'd realised her feelings for him went beyond that, but she didn't know how to pursue them. Him. What would he want with her anyway, when he probably had women hanging on him like fleas on a dog?

So he had become someone who now watched out for her, giving her a safety net if she ever needed it. It was great except for the disapproval he sometimes expressed. Like right now.

"Drinking a little fast tonight, aren't you, princess?" Max set a fresh drink in front of her. His voice was so low and deep it sent shivers skating over her spine.

"Just occupying my time," she told him, looking as nonchalant as possible.

"Maybe you should occupy it with some coffee for a change."

In order for her to hear him, he had to lean over the bar so his mouth was close to her ear. Heat washed over her, fingers of flame that set her pulses throbbing. Oh, great. The only man to get her sexual juices flowing was the only one who didn't seem to have any interest in her beyond being a good friend. She had much more than friendship in mind if they could ever get to it.

"I'm fine, Max. Take care of the real customers."

He winked at her then went back to his work. "You're a real customer, princess. More real than a lot of them."

Oh, Max, if you only knew.

She raised herself up and leaned way across the bar, putting her face as close to his as she could get. "So, Max, tell me something."

He looked up. "It better be something short and sweet because screaming's not my thing and the noise level in here could raise the dead."

"How come you never go out with the women who hang here? I've seen a lot of them come on to you."

"Because my heart belongs to you, princess." He winked again. "I'm waiting for you to get around to me."

"Ha, ha." She sat back down on her bar stool and let the sound wash over her.

If only.

Maybe if she wasn't such a freak. If her long hair was a nice beautiful colour instead of the weird streaks she'd been left with when unable to complete her shift. Or her eyes were amber like the other cats instead of the ugly pale grey she was stuck with. If she was long and slinky instead of short and dumpy. Okay, maybe not dumpy but certainly shorter than she liked. She saw how men drooled over long legs.

Sometimes she lay in bed at night and imagined what it would be like to find her cat. To stretch out the sinewy body and race with the wind. To be sleek and graceful and totally free. Like all the others who came to The Litter Box. They were all manner of cat shifters, some just looking to hang out, but many of them looking to mate. Something she'd never be able to do, even if someone should want her.

Yeah, right. Who would want a freak of nature, someone stuck in two worlds but not of either?

She had just taken another swallow of her drink when she felt a hand at her elbow. Looking up, she saw a tall, blond man smiling down at her. The green of his shirt was almost the exact colour of his eyes. Cat's eyes. She wondered which breed he was. Cougar? Puma? Not panther, he was too light. Not snow leopard like her. She'd have at least been able to sense that.

Oh, well. Not that it mattered, anyway. None of them could help her.

She raised an eyebrow. "Yes?" She had to mouth the word because the noise level had risen again.

He stroked a hand down the bare skin of her arm, then hooked a thumb over his shoulder, pointing to the dance floor, and wiggled his hips.

"Dance?" he mouthed at her.

Sure. Why not?

“Watch my drink?” she shouted at Max as she slipped off her stool.

She and the blond managed to find four square inches on the dance floor to squeeze their bodies into and began moving to the heavy beat of the bass and drums. They were pressed so close together it was impossible not to feel the hard thickness of his cock straining behind the fabric of his pants. Or to keep her breasts from being pressed against his chest.

When he put his hands on her waist to keep her body tight against his, Aisha looked up and saw sexual hunger blazing in his eyes. The message was as clear as if he’d spoken it aloud.

I’ve heard about you. I want to take you home and fuck you. I can be the one to make you lose your mind.

As if, she thought. None of them could. Not one. While they heaved over her naked and sweaty, she always lay beneath them willing it to be over. She knew the reputation she’d garnered. Maybe they all had some kind of wager going, to see who was the first one to break through the wall of ice around her sexual response.

The assault the night she was just coming into her first heat had left her both unable to shift and traumatized where sex was concerned. And nothing and no one had been able to make it pleasant for her.

When her dance partner slid his hands up her rib cage and brushed his thumbs against her breasts, she’d had enough and jerked away from him. He grabbed her arms, tightening his hold on her, anger in every line of his body.

Taking a deep breath, she broke his hold on her, pushed through the mob to get off the dance floor and made her way back to the bar. She had to laugh when she squeezed onto her bar stool again.

Someone—Max, of course—had put a crudely lettered *Reserved* sign next to her drink. Ignoring the dirty looks from the customers forced to stand, she hitched up onto the stool again and waved at Max, filling an order at the end of the bar.

He smiled and winked at her.

Gods, that wink was so utterly sexy. If anyone could kick start her pheromones, it would be him, but she had as much chance at that as she had of winning the lottery. He was kind, friendly, even a protector when he thought she needed one. But he’d never once given

off a vibe that told her he'd be interested, even when she'd had a drink too many and deliberately flirted with him. No silent sexual messages. Nothing.

Since she'd found out about The Litter Box, she'd taken to hanging out here several nights a week. Hoping to find that one person who could help her get past her trauma. Make the act of sex so arousing that she lost herself in the climax and finally, finally came into full heat and shifted.

She'd tried, the gods knew. She'd probably fucked half the clientele of the shifter bar. But they all left her cold. Incomplete. Most of them didn't even care that the orgasms she had were faked. Assholes. Why did she even bother again and again? It always ended the same way. Afterwards she couldn't even stand to talk to them.

Only Max had been a constant. Sexy as sin Max Rogan who had become her best friend. The only person who knew her sad, pathetic story. The one who always kept a watchful eye on her. The one she could always count on.

The man who never saw her as anything but Aisha, vodka stinger on the rocks.

The one she really, really wanted more than any of the others.

She stirred the ice cubes in her drink with her finger then licked off the moisture. For a brief moment she wondered what it would be like licking Max's cock and a totally unfamiliar surge of lust rolled through her. She squirmed on the seat trying to satisfy the sudden craving in her pussy. Where had that come from?

Quickly she downed the rest of her drink and tapped her glass on the bar for a refill. She ignored the scowl on Max's face and just gave him her biggest smile, pointing to her empty glass. What the hell. Drinking seemed to be her only pleasure these days.

Max finished pouring a fresh brew for the puma sitting at the end of the bar, mixed a quick gimlet for the panther in the red dress, and refilled a bowl of pub mix before making his way back to Aisha. He was worried about her.

Tonight she seemed to be strung tighter than usual. Had the guy she'd taken home the other night hurt her in some way? It bothered the shit out of him that she seemed to be working her way through the entire male clientele of The Litter Box without ever letting any contact affect her. She'd dance with them, take them home then never speak to them again. And she always looked so alone.

After a while, he found himself consumed with raging jealousy every time Aisha left with a different cat. *He* wanted to be the one going home with her. The one in her bed. The one under her, over her. *In her*. Like that was going to happen any time soon.

His gut still twisted when he thought of the story she'd blurted out to him one night. A story so traumatic that he wanted to find the shifter who attacked her and destroy him.

She had only been eighteen when it happened, just on the verge of her first heat. A rogue member of her pack, spurned both by her and by the alpha as a potential mate for her, attacked her in a fit of rage and nearly destroyed her. Left unable to shift, she was cast out by her pack, sent off on her own. Now she made a half-life for herself on the outskirts of both human and shifter societies, belonging to neither. According to what he'd been able to pry out of her, she just kept moving from city to city, seeking some kind of attachment but unable to connect with anyone. Someone who could help her shake off this curse.

He knew she had a certification in computer science so she had no problem finding work. Nor did she have trouble finding willing partners for meaningless sex. But she hadn't been able to hook up with a new pack. If she couldn't shift they didn't want her. And apparently no one was stepping up to the plate to help her.

Max was appalled by her story and distressed by the life she was living, but he didn't know what to do about it. Several times he thought about talking to the alpha of his own pack, but then he'd have to explain why he was involved with her and he wasn't even sure he knew the answer to that himself.

What he did know was he felt some kind of very strong emotion for her that he didn't want to give a name to. And that every time she walked into The Litter Box, his cock stood up at attention and saluted. Which sometimes meant a quick trip to the men's room and ice cubes in his shorts so he could continue doing his job at the bar.

There was something so vulnerable about this pretty kitty that kept him from making his move. Besides, he didn't want to be just another body she took home to fuck and never spoke to again. He'd rather remain her friend, even if it meant suffering with a painful hard-on.

Tonight she seemed to be more despondent than ever. She was certainly drinking more heavily than usual. A fact that worried him. He was even watering her drinks, a no-no for a bartender but thankfully she didn't seem to notice. He was at least grateful that she'd walked

away from the guy on the dance floor. He knew personally that particular cat was trouble. He might have been forced to step in if he'd seen her heading for the door with him.

Instead, however, she was lapping up the sauce like it was cream.

Thank all the gods she always gave him her purse to hold. Her intent was to make sure someone didn't steal it while she was on the dance floor or otherwise not paying attention to it. But Max had formed the habit of slipping out her car keys and sticking them in his pocket until the evening was over. If she was sober enough when she got ready to leave, then he tucked them back in and she was none the wiser. But tonight he was sure he wouldn't be giving them back. He wasn't too anxious to pour her into a cab, either. Cab drivers weren't the most trustworthy guys in the world.

A glance at his watch told him they were just thirty minutes from closing time. Thank the gods. He reached behind him and yanked on the rope of the bell hanging there. It was the signal for the band to stop playing for a minute and give him a chance to make his announcement.

"Last call," he shouted. "Better get 'em now."

People immediately surged from the dance floor and crowded the bar or waved down the waitresses from their tables. The next half hour was a blur for Max as he uncapped beer bottles, drew draught from the taps, mixed drinks and poured shots. In ten years he'd become one of the fastest, most efficient bartenders in the city and the customers appreciated it.

Then finally, finally, everyone was gone. The last stragglers ushered out the door by the bouncer. All the cars safely out of the parking lot. Those too drunk to drive dumped into one of the cabs they'd called and sent on their way.

Max blew out a breath, wiping his hands on a bar towel. Now he just had to deal with Aisha.

She was still sitting on the bar stool, arms crossed on the bar and her head resting on her forearms. Her beautiful streaked hair spread out over the varnished surface like a curtain, tempting him to run his fingers through it. Touch that delicate skin. Stroke the smooth surface of her arms.

Suck it up, you lech.

He wondered if she'd passed out, but when he touched her hand she lifted her head and looked at him from beneath heavy lids.

"Hey, Max."

"Hey, Aisha." He couldn't help himself. He brushed her hair away from her face, revelling in its silken touch. "Time to pack it in for the night."

"Oh. Hmm. Okay." She dropped her head back onto her arms.

Max sighed. He had two choices here, at least ones he'd feel okay with—take her home himself or stuff her into a cab. Not that he didn't trust the cab drivers—oh, okay, he *didn't* trust them and he rejected that option. That left just him. Sir Galahad to the rescue.

Yup, that was him. Good old Max, saviour of drunken women. He went through his usual closing routine—locking the doors, cashing out the till, putting the money in the office safe for deposit the next day. Shutting of everything that needed to be shut off.

At last he hung her thin purse around his neck, lifted Aisha in his arms—Jesus, she was light as a feather—and carried her out the back door. Next question—her car? His car? He decided to take hers and leave his in the lot, since he didn't know how long he'd need to be at her place. If anyone wanted to trash a vehicle, better his than Aisha's.

After he had her buckled into the passenger seat, he fished in her purse for her wallet and pulled out her driver's license to check her address. Close by. Good.

He had to physically restrain himself from running the tips of his fingers over her mouth-watering breasts that peaked at him so temptingly from the low neckline of her dress. Or smoothing them down the line of her hip and thigh. Sliding them beneath the short skirt of the dress.

Jesus, Rogan!

He mentally shook himself. What kind of perv was he, anyway? Still cursing under his breath he pulled out of the parking lot and headed down the street. The sooner he got her into her own place the better for both of them.

And all the while he'd been busy getting her in the car, heading towards her apartment, he'd never noticed the car at the kerb across the street from the club, or the man sitting in it, watching them.

Chapter Two

Of course she had to live on the second floor of the building in her apartment complex. And of course it had no elevator. Max was just damn glad he hadn't been one of the guys moving her in.

He balanced her against him, holding onto her tightly with one arm as he fiddled with her keys until he found the right one, pushed the door open and stepped gratefully inside. Groping with his free hand, he found a light switch and flicked it on. A small overhead light came to life, giving him just enough illumination to get his bearing. Straight ahead was the living room/dining room and beyond that he could see a small kitchen separated from the rest of the room by a raised counter. To the right was a little hall that he assumed led to her bedroom.

Sighing, he adjusted her in his grip and carried her to the first open door. Bingo. The switch on the wall this time turned on a lamp beside the bed. He carried her over to the bed and set her on her feet, but before he could do anything else she had draped herself against his body, her arms hanging around his neck. A neck that at the moment she was licking enthusiastically.

"Ease up, sugar." He unwound her arms and pushed her back a little.

"No," she moaned. "Wanna kiss you."

Did she even know who he was?

"C'mon, Maxie. Stick your tongue in my mouth."

Well, okay. That answered one question. But no way was he giving in to her. "Time for bed, sugar."

Tossing aside the fluffy throw pillows and pulling back the covers, he placed Aisha carefully on the bed, taking off her shoes and lifting her feet. Before he could straighten up she grabbed his hand.

"Want you in here with me. C'mon, Maxie. Come fuck me."

The shock of her words jolted his system and made his already hard cock throb painfully. "Not tonight, Aisha. You need to go to sleep."

"Sleep with you," she mumbled.

"Uh, uh, little kitty. Not tonight."

He managed to disengage her hand from his and place it next to her body. In a moment her breathing evened out and he realised she was asleep. He knew he probably should remove at least her dress but he didn't trust himself that much. He had only so much self-control. He stood looking down at her for a long moment. She was so beautiful with her face relaxed and the soft light casting a glow on her. For one brief moment he allowed himself to acknowledge how very much he wanted her. Even if she couldn't shift.

Then he sighed, pulled the covers up and turned off the lamp. He relieved himself in the small bathroom then looked through the linen closet and found an extra pillow and a blanket. He didn't feel good about leaving her alone like this. What if she got sick? Or tried to get up and fell, hitting her head?

As drunk as she was, he didn't think she should be on her own. He'd just stay until whenever she woke up, get her to take him back to the bar and be out of her hair.

Just in case, he turned on a small table lamp before settling on the couch for however long he'd be there. He wished he could stop thinking about Aisha in the other room. Aisha on the bed. Aisha naked. *Wait. Where had that come from?*

Get your brain out of your crotch, Rogan.

Closing his eyes he forced himself to relax and in moments drifted off into a light sleep, only to jerk wide awake at the touch of a hand on his shoulder and a soft voice in his ear.

Aisha opened her eyes to complete darkness and groaned. Her head felt like a jackhammer had been pounding on it and her stomach wanted to throw its contents up into her throat. What was the matter with her?

Oh, right! An extra vodka stinger or five. And hadn't that just been one of the dumber things she'd done. All she had to show for it was the beginning of a gigantic hangover.

She managed to push herself up out of bed and onto her feet, staggering only slightly. Bed. House. Someone had taken the time to bring her home safely. Who? Certainly not one of the guys from The Litter Box. As little class as any of them had, he would have fucked her senseless and left her naked and drunk. So who, then? And where was her car? She hated the fact that she had no recollection of even leaving the club.

When she was steady enough on her feet, she made her way into the bathroom, flicked on the light and splashed cold water on her face. Then she looked in the mirror. Big mistake.

Who was the person with that makeup streaked face and puffy eyes? Damn! She must have really done it this time.

But who the hell had brought her home?

She noticed soft light seemed to be coming from the living room and that startled her. She never went to sleep with lights on in the house. Did her unknown saviour leave it for her? She stumbled towards the living room, using the wall for support, stopping when she noticed a lump on the couch. One that looked suspiciously like a body. But who?

Inching closer she was startled to see Max Rogan stretched out with a pillow and blanket. Max? Was he the one who'd taken care of her? She reached a tentative hand down to touch his shoulder.

"Max?"

Instantly, he was awake and sitting up.

"Aisha, honey, you should be in bed." His gaze raked over her. "Maybe in something a little more comfortable."

"You brought me home. Thank you, Max."

He shrugged. "Yeah, well, call it my good deed for the year. You certainly weren't in any shape to get here yourself, and I wasn't about to leave you to the predators hanging around."

"Thank you," she said again, and collapsed into his lap.

Oh, gods, he smelt so good. So earthy. So animal. So...so...cat. She wound her arms around his neck and pulled his face down to hers. Before she could stop and think what she was doing, she'd pressed her mouth to his, kissing him as hard as she could. She was stunned when he lifted his head and gently pulled her arms away from him.

"Listen, Aisha, this isn't such a good idea."

"Oh, no?" She gave him a half-sober grin. "Feels like a good idea to me." She wriggled on his lap, her ass sliding on his very obvious erection. This was Max. Wonderful Max. How many times had she dreamt of being here with him just like this?

When he stood up abruptly, she would have tumbled to the floor if he hadn't had such a strong grip on her arms. She looked up into his face, puzzled.

"Don't you want me? It sure felt like you did." A kernel of ice dropped into her stomach. "It's because of all those guys, right? You think I'm just a slut." Well, what did she expect? He'd watched her take home stranger after stranger. How could he possibly think anything else? She blinked her eyes against the tears gathering.

"No, it's not." His voice sounded strained. "That's not it at all."

"Then what?" she pleaded. "Tell me. Because you're the one I've always wanted."

He sighed. "Aisha, you're still half-drunk. You soaked yourself in alcohol tonight. You have no idea what you're doing, and unlike those junkyard cats who sniff around you, I refuse to take advantage of you. I'm your friend."

She leaned into him, loving the feel of his hard body. Of his cock pressing into the soft flesh of her tummy. "Then be my friend, Max. Make me feel good."

Again he moved her away from him. "Not tonight, sugar. Not when you're like this." He kissed her forehead. "Let's get you into the bathroom so you can shower and get into bed. We'll talk in the morning."

"But—"

"No buts. Come on. You'll feel better, I promise you."

He turned on the shower for her, adjusted the spray, made sure she had towels, then backed out of the bathroom.

"Get into bed as soon as you're done. Get some sleep."

Aisha took time washing the bar smell out of her body and hair, lathering herself twice with jasmine-scented shower gel. The shampoo she used had a matching scent, the steam in the shower filled with the exotic fragrance. She even took time to shave her legs and under her arms, even though she'd done it early in the evening when she'd dressed to go out.

Towelling herself off, she poured lotion into her hands and rubbed the creamy substance into every inch and crevice of her skin. She brushed her teeth and rinsed her mouth twice, washing away the aftertaste of the vodka. She carefully blow-dried her hair, taming it into relaxed curls. A dab of perfume and she was ready.

And sleep was the last thing she had on her mind. The shower had washed away the effects of the alcohol, her stomach didn't seem to be rebelling any more and two aspirin took care of her headache. Wrapping a fresh towel around her body and knotting it at her breasts,

she headed towards the living room. This might be her only chance with Max Rogan and she intended to take full advantage of it.

The lamp was still lit in the living room, probably in case he needed to get up and minister to her drunken self. The soft light showed the outline of his body stretched out on the couch again, arms behind his head. Was he awake? Was he thinking about her? Was his cock still as hard as it had been earlier?

She hoped so, because she planned to take full advantage of the fact. Finally, finally, she had Max in her apartment. Butterflies danced the mambo in her stomach and she was trembling with a bad case of nerves, but it was now or never. This was her best chance to make a move she'd never have the courage to try in the bar. She hoped in her current naked and perfumed state he could only hold her off for so long.

She stood looking down at him for a long moment, trying to determine if he was really asleep or just faking it. The blanket he'd found was only pulled to the waist and he'd taken off his shirt. The sight of his hard-muscled chest with its thick pelt of rich black hair literally made her mouth water. She couldn't stop staring at it. And at the unmistakeable bulge beneath the light covering. It must be something, to be so visible even with his jeans on. Her fingers flexed with the urge to reach out and touch him.

She took one step closer, then another. Reached out a hand.

"I'm awake," he said, his deep voice so low and smooth.

"Oh!" Now what?

"Were you planning to stand there all night looking at me?"

Aisha swallowed. "N-No. No, I was...I mean..."

He opened his eyes. "You were what, pretty kitty? Going to touch me?"

She wet her lips, suddenly shy. "Yes. I want to touch you, Max."

He shook his head. "I don't think that's such a good idea, Aisha."

"Why?" Her shyness was displaced by a wave of irritation. "I'm not drunk anymore. Am I not good enough for you?" She unknotted the towel and dropped it to the floor. "Take a look, Max. Then tell me you don't want me."

Before she could catch her breath, he reached out, grabbed her wrist and tumbled her down on top of him.

“The problem isn’t that I don’t want you.” His voice was low and edgy. “It’s that I want you too much. So be damn sure you know what the hell you’re doing.”

She stared into his darker than night eyes. “Oh, I’m sure, Max. Very sure.”

Chapter Three

Max knew his mouth should be watering but instead it was so dry he couldn't swallow. Having his arms full of a very naked Aisha McClellan was enough to shock anyone's system. Her skin was just as smooth as he knew it would be, the light touches he'd stolen earlier barely a hint of what lay beneath her clothing. Her breasts, small but firm, pushed into his chest, the hardened nipples like chiselled points boring holes into him.

He let his hand drift down her back and over the curve of her ass, learning the dips and swells of her body. Oh, gods, her body. The things he wanted to do to it. Tamping down his misgivings, he shifted so they were lying on their sides and took her mouth that he'd wanted for so long. Her lips were full and sensuous, soft beneath his tongue as he licked them and traced the outline of them. When she parted them slightly in open invitation he swept in without hesitation, feasting on her. Gliding his tongue over her small one. Angling his head slightly he took the kiss deeper, afraid to miss even one inch of that warm, welcoming place.

He didn't want to break the contact, but for what he wanted to do to her, with her, he needed more space than this couch offered. Juggling her carefully, he managed to sit up, dispose of the light blanket and roll to his feet with her in his arms.

"I know the way to your bedroom," he murmured as he carried her down the short hallway.

He stood her on her feet and took a moment to just savour the look of her. His hands reached out and cupped her breasts, thumbs rasping against the already pebbled nipples. He could see the hard thrum of her pulse in the hollow of her throat, beating in time with the throbbing of his swollen cock. She shivered slightly as his fingers lightly traced the line of her rib cage and moved across the surface of her tummy. It wasn't from a chill, though. Looking into her eyes he saw a heat blazing as hot as his own.

He leant down and licked her lips as his fingers travelled further down, finding the glossy nest of curls surrounding her cunt. He could already scent her arousal and hoped it was as fierce as his own. Moving one foot between hers, he nudged them apart to give him better access to her and sank his fingers into the wet flesh of her pussy. She was drenched,

her slick cream coating his fingers. He rubbed it up and down the lips, from her clit to the opening of her vagina and back up to that swollen knot of nerves.

Aisha shivered again but stood still beneath his exploration. Cupping a breast with one hand he slid two fingers of the other into her hot channel. When her inner muscles clamped down on him, his cock pressed so hard against his fly he was afraid he'd hurt himself. Very slowly he lifted his fingers and, with his gaze locked on hers, deliberately licked each finger clean.

"Delicious," he murmured. "Better than any drink I've ever mixed." He reached down to scoop more onto his fingers then pushed them against her lips. "You taste, Aisha. Tell me how great it tastes."

She obediently licked his fingers then said in a wicked little voice, "I'd rather taste you."

"Oh, well." He chuckled, a slightly uneven sound. "You'll have plenty of chance to do that. Don't you worry."

He kissed her again, tasting all the flavours of her on her lips while his fingers probed her pussy and his arm banded her trembling body to his. Holy shit, this woman was like liquid lightning, and it was shooting straight to his balls. They drew up tight, reminding him just how much this woman aroused him. Especially now that he was finally seeing her naked. And right here for him to touch and explore.

With his hands gentle on her shoulders, he turned her around and swept her hair aside so he could kiss the nape of her neck. Another little shudder. Gods, she was so sensitive.

He bent to trace the length of her spine with his tongue, ending at the curve of her heart-shaped ass. Cupping the globes in his hands he separated them, sucking in his breath at the sight of that warm crevice and the tight little ring of her anus.

He moistened the tip of one finger and touched her there, circling the opening.

"Those men, pretty kitty. The ones I know didn't mean shit to you. Did you ever let any of them fuck you here?" He pressed the opening a little harder.

She shook her head, her body trembling.

"I want to hear you say it," he insisted.

"No. No. None of them."

"Why?" He had to know the answer. "Why didn't you?"

"Because it was...it was...it was too personal."

A fist of emotion held him with a grip of steel. All right then. The obsessive urge to make her his, to brand her, to let all the others know she was now his, rode through him like a storm.

"Tonight I'm going to fuck you here," he whispered in her ear. "I'm going to fuck your ass and after that there won't be anyone for you but me. Do you understand, little cat?"

Her body tensed. "But what if..."

"What if?" he urged.

"What if I can't, you know, come?" Tears laced her voice. "I'll still be a freak and I'll have lost you."

He turned her around and cupped her chin, tilting her face up to his. "Listen to me. Tonight, I am going to give you the biggest orgasm of anyone's life. You will know pleasure you never would have believed. Then you'll be able to shift and you'll be mine." He brushed his mouth against hers. "Do you understand me?"

"Yes," she breathed.

"You have no idea how long I've wanted to do this," he told her. "Wanted to knock all those other assholes out of the way and make you mine. But I watched what happened to the other men you were with. How you acted afterwards. I just...didn't want to be another faceless body to you. But tonight...I, don't know, things are different, right? *This* is different. So I'm just going to do it. Because tonight...I think tonight was meant to be. For us." He kissed her again. "Do you trust me?"

She nodded. "Yes. I do."

"Good. Then everything will be all right." He slipped his hand between her thighs again to find the thick cream of her cunt. "You're already so wet, little cat. You want me. Just let yourself go."

Aisha wanted to believe him with all her heart. Already he'd aroused feelings in her, responses that no one else ever had. Was it possible she'd just been on hold all this time, waiting for him? That he was ordained to be her mate? She shuddered to think what would have happened if he'd just kept watching her and listening to her, if she hadn't made a move tonight. Nothing, Nothing would have happened, and she'd still be living on the edge of two worlds.

She watched as he took a step back and shucked his jeans and boxers in one fluid, graceful movement and tossed them to the side. She sucked in her breath at the sight of him totally naked, his magnificent cock jutting out thick and straight and proud. The broad head was flared and dark, a tiny bead of fluid sitting right on the slit.

She couldn't help herself. She dropped to her knees in front of him, wrapped her fingers around his shaft and licked the fluid.

Max sucked in a breath and his muscles tightened, so she did it again, this time probing the slit with the tip of her tongue. He threaded his fingers through her hair and held her head in place, rocking his hips slightly against her mouth. Almost automatically one hand stole between his thighs to cup his sac, feeling the soft hair covering the skin and the fullness of his balls inside.

When he yanked her head away, she looked up, startled. Hurt. "Did I do something wrong?"

"No, pretty kitty." He lifted her with his hands beneath her elbows. "You were doing something very, very right. But when I come with you the first time, it won't be in your mouth. It will be in your ass. After that..." He smiled. "We'll have time for everything."

Urging her backwards, he tumbled her onto the bed, arranging her so her head was on the pillows and her legs were spread wide. His eyes were drawn to the glistening folds of her pussy and the soft curls framing it. Holy shit. He could spend all night just looking at that vision. Except his cock was sending him other signals. Like hurry up and get to business.

Only he didn't want to rush too much. He'd spent a long time wanting this, thinking about this, wondering if he'd ever have the opportunity. Now he wanted to take his time and savour it. Not to mention the fact that he was making it his goal to drive Aisha wild and give her the orgasm she'd been seeking for so long.

Kneeling between her thighs, he bent over her and took one plump nipple into his mouth, rolling it around on his tongue. He nipped it lightly with his teeth, resisting the urge to clamp down on it and bite it firmly. A little at a time, he cautioned himself. When he'd teased it until it was hot and swollen he moved to the other one, laving it and nibbling at it until Aisha was making delicious little sounds.

Moving down the sweep of her body, he licked a path to her navel, tracing the furled flesh with his tongue again and again. She twisted back and forth beneath him, arching up to him as if offering herself, urging him to hurry, hurry, hurry.

At last his mouth found the wet heat of her cunt, his tongue lapping the length of her slit over and over, deliberately missing the opening of that slick pussy as well as the bundle of nerves that was her pink clit.

"Please," she whimpered. "Please, Max."

"Please what?" he asked, his mouth against her labia.

"Please...suck me harder." Her breathing was uneven, her voice raw with need.

"My pleasure."

The moment he took her clit into his mouth she bucked up at him, her hands gripping his head, her legs winding around his neck to hold him in place. She was so wet her cream was dripping onto his chin.

Yes! This is what I wanted.

He tormented her clit with his tongue and his teeth, pulling and tugging and sucking, feeling it swell even more. Aisha was moaning and twisting, digging her fingers into his scalp.

Sliding one hand down, he thrust two fingers inside her, curving them to scrape her hot spot, pushing up against her clit from inside her pussy. His fingers moved in tandem with his mouth. Rub, rub, rub.

The explosion came so suddenly it caught him off guard. Her legs tightened convulsively around his neck, a scream of ecstasy rolled from her throat and the walls of her cunt spasmed against his fingers. He pushed a third one inside her, working her, stretching her, feeling her hot cream drench his hand as she came and came and came.

When the contractions faded, he slipped his fingers free and moved them lower, painting her anus with her liquid.

"Later," he murmured against her skin. "I'm going to take you here. Later."

Her legs fell away from him and he looked up, seeing the flush of satisfaction on her face, watching her breasts quiver as she breathed unevenly. He moved up her body, smoothing her hair back from her face, kissing her forehead and her cheeks before taking her mouth. Sliding his tongue inside to share her taste with her.

He let his tongue dance everywhere over the smooth surface, coaxing her own small tongue to duel with his. Cupping first one breast then the other. Tweaking her nipples so sensitive now from her climax. Letting his hand drift lower until he found her pussy again. Stroking it, rubbing it, even as she jerked at his touch. He knew how sensitive her clit was now. How the walls of her cunt still quivered. But before he entered her, he wanted her so far over the edge that she had no control at all.

And so he slid two fingers inside her soaked channel, his thumb pressing lightly on the peak of her clit, dragging back and forth over it as she cried out.

“Oh, oh, oh.”

She tried to twist away from him but he kept her pinned with his mouth firmly pressed to hers and his free arm wrapped around her. He worked her clit, setting up a steady rhythm with his fingers inside her, driving her up the slope again. The pace of her breathing increased, the pulse at the hollow of her neck beat faster. She tried to twist her head away from his but he was relentless with his mouth.

He felt the onset of her orgasm when the walls of her pussy quivered against the thrust of his fingers and she arched her body again, pushing herself at his hand. Her tongue swirled with his and she sucked at it with desperation.

Then she was there again, convulsing in his arms, whimpering into his mouth. Pushing her pelvis hard against his hand. His thumb was unrelenting on her clit, stroking and rubbing, pushing her over the edge and keeping her there as she shivered and shook with the force of the spasms.

She was still riding the aftershocks when Max grabbed the condom he'd dropped onto the nightstand and sheathed himself quickly. Draping her legs over his shoulders, he slid his palms beneath the cheeks of her ass and drove into her pussy with one hard, fast thrust.

“Ah, oh, oh,” she cried again, leveraging herself with her legs locked behind him.

Max was sweating with the effort to control himself as he pushed her high again, up, up, up that erotic roller coaster. He watched her face, her eyes, watching for every signal that she was close to riding the peak again.

When he felt that telltale quiver around his cock, saw her mouth open as she panted for breath, he increased his pace, pumping into her harder and faster. More, more, more. His

spine tingled and his balls tightened. And then...and then...they crashed over together, spinning into space, lights exploding behind his eyes.

Holy fuck!

Max collapsed on her, taking his weight with his forearms. Her heart was hammering as heavily as his, her breathing just as erratic. He murmured soft, erotic words into her mouth as he waited for their heart rates to return to normal and the breath to stop seesawing in and out of their lungs. He held her in his arms for a long time as she trembled and shudders skated over her.

Finally, he slid gently from her, padded to the bathroom to dispose of the condom and climbed back into bed beside her. He pulled her hard against his body, stroking her back, her arm, the cheeks of her ass. At last she moved her head and raised her eyes to his.

"Thank you seems like such a small thing to say after that." Her voice was still trembly but it held a warmth he'd never heard before. As if something inside her had softened at last.

"I should be the one thanking you," he told her, his palm against her cheek.

"It was...more than I ever dreamt it could be." She let out a slow breath. "Max, I...I mean...you and I..."

He tensed, not sure if he wanted to hear what she had to say. Would he simply be the one who had pulled her from her half-state, urged her through a full heat and given her the intense orgasm she'd been dreaming about? That had eluded her for so long since that terrible night? This was so much more to him.

My mate. Who would have thought it?

He swallowed and stroked her cheek. "Yes. You and I pretty kitty. Together."

She cuddled herself into him, like a kitten. "What if I hadn't got drunk tonight? What if you hadn't taken me home? What if —"

He touched her lips with his fingers. "Hush. No more what ifs. I'm a big believer in the fact that things happen the way they're supposed to. Maybe Fate just decided we needed a little nudge." He cupped her chin, turned her face up to his. "This was a hell of a lot more than a hot fuck for me. And I hope it was for you, too. Because we crossed a line here, way past friendship, and I don't intend to go back over it. Or let any other cat get his claws or teeth or cock into you." He hugged her to him. "You're mine now. Period."

"Oh, Max. It feels so good to hear you say that. I never thought I'd belong to anyone. After..." Her voice trailed away.

"I'm going to make you forget what happened, Aisha. Wipe it from your mind."

"It's already fading." She giggled. "That—what we just did—was beyond unbelievable. You gave me something I never thought I'd have. I'm certainly not going to walk away from this."

Time enough later to tell her we were meant to be mates. "You know, this means you'll finally have the ability to shift."

Her eyes widened. "You're right. Oh, gods, Max. Can I try it now?" She sat up and tried to shove the covers away from them.

He laughed, enjoying her excitement. "Of course." He pulled her back and licked her ear. "But don't think I'm through with you tonight."

She hoped he wasn't through with her. Aisha stretched, a sense of satisfaction washing through her unlike anything else she'd ever felt. Despairing of anyone who could help her through her crisis she'd resigned herself to living her half-life and never fully enjoying sex. But with Max? Gods, it was the most incredible thing in the world. He filled her up, surrounded her, took her to a plane of pleasure she never knew existed.

She loved the feel of his lean, sleek body, the muscles stretched smoothly beneath the skin. His rich, black hair, so silken to the touch, much like the way she was sure his pelt was when he was his cat. And his kisses, hot and drugging. No one had ever kissed her that way. And she didn't intend that anyone else ever would.

Closing her eyes she called up again that moment of intense pleasure when her body exploded, when the spasms rocketed through her and Max's thick shaft pulsed inside her. She was sure she'd remember that for the rest of her life, no matter how good anything after this was.

He hadn't jerked up and run away when she'd told him how she felt. To the contrary, he'd told her how possessive he felt, that she belonged to him. A thrill raced through her. Who would ever have thought that she and Max...

Aisha smiled to herself.

"Come on." She smacked Max lightly on his arm. "I want to do this now."

"All right. But we'll just stay in the apartment for now. Next time we'll go to my place and we can run outside."

"All right." She stood facing him. "Just tell me what to do."

His voice was low and soothing, almost crooning as he instructed her in her breathing and concentration. She closed her eyes and focused and in what seemed like seconds she could feel her bones lengthening, her skin stretching and her entire body changing. She gave into the urge to drop down to all fours, the metamorphosis continuing until she finally opened her eyes to look at herself and gasped.

Her body was covered with a light grey pelt fading to white and dotted with black rosettes. Where her hands and feet had been, she now had paws with very sharp claws. Wriggling her hindquarters she found she had a tail that swished against her body. Everything felt different. Strange, but not unpleasant.

She turned her head and for a moment was startled to see a large black panther standing not four feet away from her. His lips pulled back in what could almost be called a grin.

Max!

How do you feel, pretty kitty?

Gods! She could hear him in her head!

Weird. But good. All good.

She padded around the room, loving the feel of her muscles as they stretched with each step she took, the clicking of her claws on the wooden floor, the sudden sharpening of every sense.

Max? This is wonderful?

It will be even more wonderful when we can run outside. You'll love it.

Can we do it soon?

Maybe tonight after I close the bar. Want to hang out at The Litter Box and wait for me?

Yes! Yes, I do!

Okay. But no dancing or sniffing other cats.

Ha, ha, ha. As if I'd want to now.

And Aisha?

Yes?

When we fuck as cats it will surpass anything you could imagine.

A shiver of anticipation raced over her body.

I can't wait.

Chapter Four

Gunnar Forest sat in his car, slouched down, allowing himself the luxury of a cigarette. He'd been watching The Litter Box for a week now, plotting and planning. It had taken him nearly a year to track her down and it hadn't been easy. The only things he had to go on were her computer expertise and her habit of finding a shifter bar to hang out at. She never bought property, obviously paid cash for her car and if she had a phone it was unlisted. Maybe she only used a cell. If that was also unlisted, he didn't have the expertise to find the number.

She'd obviously been in San Antonio for some time when he finally tracked her down because she had an established pattern of activity. He followed her to work each day, then home where she changed and headed for The Litter Box. He noted that she had absolutely no visitors at her apartment except for the men she brought home, no friends who visited. He was well aware of the fact that his attack on her had left her an outcast in the pack. And obviously uncomfortable in human society.

Gunnar didn't regret that night for one minute. Not even for a second. Aisha McClellan was so tempting. So beautiful. Slender yet with lush curves and that wild mane of hair. The bastard alpha had made it clear Gunnar wasn't good enough for her and he should quit snuffing around Aisha as she came into her first heat. But the thought of anyone else fucking her first drove him mad. And it had been so easy to grab her that night when she was jogging through the park.

Don't go out at night alone, pretty kitty.

But she did, every night after work, even in the dark of winter. If she'd just been more accommodating, it would have been good for both of them. Great. Terrific. But the damn Aisha had fought him, kicking and screaming until he'd had to gag her to keep her quiet. By that time he was so aroused he'd ripped her clothes off in his haste to penetrate her, shoving his painfully hard cock inside her tight, wet pussy. Her virgin pussy.

Yes!

Even now as he thought of it he hardened again and stroked himself through his jeans.

Careful. You don't want someone seeing you and nailing you as a pervert. Calling the cops.

Finding the opportunity to be alone with her was nearly impossible. Her apartment complex was crawling with people on the weekends and before and after work, and at night someone always followed her home. Too many someones as far as he was concerned.

Then last night the damn fucking bartender had taken her home himself and stayed the night. Shit. First chance he had, he'd rip the asshole to shreds. Aisha was his. He'd claimed her, marked her, and he wasn't about to let her get away.

Had she been able to shift yet? That was the only thing about that night he regretted, locking away her ability. But if someone else had released her and helped her through that first shift he'd be forced to kill the bastard.

Tonight. He just felt it. Tonight the opportunity would present itself.

He flicked his cigarette out the window and settled down to wait.

Aisha had been nursing her second drink for three hours now. She really wanted a fresh one but she'd promised both Max and herself that she'd keep herself to a two-drink limit tonight. Anyway, she was so aroused and excited about the prospect of what waited for her when The Litter Box closed that she didn't want to take the edge off with alcohol. She wanted every sense fully alert.

So she sat at the bar, feeling only slightly guilty for monopolising a seat, listening to the band and watching the sweaty bodies on the dance floor sending signals to each other. If not for last night, she'd be one of those bodies out there. Now she was content to simply observe.

Not that she had much choice, she thought to herself, swallowing a laugh. Now that she'd accomplished her first shift, she seemed to give out different pheromones that attracted every single cat. Max glowered so fiercely at anyone who even tried to strike up a conversation with her that soon everyone just left her alone. Talk about staking a claim.

Soon Max was ringing the bell for last call, serving the last round of drinks, getting ready to close.

"Why don't you go ahead to my house and wait for me?" He pressed a key into her hand.

"Really? You don't want me to just follow you?"

He winked at her. "I thought you might like to turn on the hot tub. Open the wine I have in the fridge."

Her eyes widened. "Hot tub? Wine?"

"Uh, huh. I'm not too far from here." He gave her the address. "Think you can find it?"

"Absolutely. I drive through there sometimes just looking at the houses. Nice neighbourhood."

He grinned. "I call it my 'tip' house. Paid for it with tips."

"I can't wait to see it."

He stroked her arm. "Fifteen minutes," he told her. "I'll hurry."

"I'll be ready." She gave him a smile filled with anticipation. "Very ready."

Aisha backed out of the parking lot and headed down the street, intent on her destination, never noticing the car across the street that pulled out after her.

Finding Max's house was just as easy as she'd figured. Pulling into his driveway, she looked at the beautiful craftsman-style bungalow and thought how perfect it was for him.

Nearly dancing with excitement, she headed up the walk to the front porch, totally unaware of the car pulling in across the street. She had just unlocked the door and pushed it open when she heard footsteps behind her and suddenly hard, muscular arms were around her, holding her against a body.

When she opened her mouth to scream, a hand came up and covered her mouth.

"Inside," a male voice said. "Now. Don't fight me. You can't win."

She recognised the voice at once and fear shot icy arrows through her. Gunnar! Gods! After all this time, she'd been sure she'd managed to fall off his radar. How had he found her, anyway?

She heard the door slam and the rattle of the safety chain as he slipped it in place. Still holding her against him, he moved them into the living room. Only when he reached the couch did he turn her around so she could see his face and her breath lodged in her throat.

Pure evil shone in his eyes, malevolence so fierce her heart nearly stopped with fright. She tried to say something but she was suddenly incapable of speech.

"Thought you'd got away from me, didn't you, bitch?" he spat. His fingers grabbed her face, digging into her like steel claws. "It's been no end of trouble to find you."

He pressed his mouth to hers, demanding a kiss. When she tried to close her mouth, he squeezed her face harder. "Open, damn it. I want my tongue in there."

Aisha tried to keep her mouth closed but his painful grip forced it open and his tongue thrust into her with brutal force. She tried to pull at his arms, to break his hold on her but his strength was too much. Her stomach heaved and she was afraid she would vomit into his mouth.

When he broke the kiss at last, he slapped her across the face so hard her ears rang. "You're mine, you ungrateful bitch. I took you. I marked you. You belong to me."

"You raped me," she cried. "Right as I was coming into my first heat. You left me unable to shift, an outcast among my own kind. How could you be so cruel?"

"If you just hadn't fought me so hard, I could have made it wonderful for you. We could have mated and none of the rest would have happened." He slapped her again. "I'm going to have to punish you for that, Aisha. Then I'm going to fuck you every way possible so you'll know once and for all who you belong to. And it isn't that bastard bartender you took home with you last night. I have something special planned for him."

Oh, gods. Max.

She couldn't let him hurt Max but what could she do? She had never felt such pure evil in her life or felt so helpless in its powerful grip and it frightened her to such a degree she couldn't think straight.

Grabbing the neckline of her dress, he yanked on the material, ripping it nearly all the way down. Her bra was next, heat flaring in his eyes as he looked at her naked breasts.

"Maturity becomes you, Aisha. Your breasts are gorgeous." He gripped one so hard with his fingers it brought tears to her eyes, but the pain was nothing compared to the vicious twist he gave to her nipple. He laughed at her discomfort and pulled the nipple into his mouth, viciously biting it.

Aisha swallowed the scream, knowing the sound would only incite his blood.

"Let's see the rest of you," he snarled, shoving her down on the couch.

Holding both of her hands in one of his, he tore the last shred of her dress so it fell away, then ripped her panties with one stroke. Using his legs to shove hers apart, he stared at her exposed pussy, his eyes glittering with hunger.

"Oh, yes. You're definitely ripe."

Bending slightly, he shoved two fingers roughly inside her cunt. This time she couldn't help the cry of pain that fell from her. He was rough and everything he did hurt unbearably. She had no idea how to stop this, but she was afraid he'd kill her if she didn't.

When he yanked out his fingers and lifted them to his mouth, licking them, she took a deep breath and forced a smile.

"M-Maybe you were right, Gunnar." She tried to still the trembling in her voice. "Maybe I just didn't give you a chance. M-Maybe now that I'm older, I know you were right."

He stared at her, his face expressionless. "Yeah? Why the sudden change of heart? Wasn't the bartender enough for you? Didn't all those other strays you took home satisfy you?"

Whatever he saw in her face enraged him because he slapped her again, raking his nails across her skin.

"Please," she begged. "Don't do that again. I'll be good. I promise. I-I can make it good for you."

Max, Max, Max. Where are you? Can you read me from a distance?

"Damn right you'll make it good for me." Yanking up the shreds of her dress, he wound it around her arms and hands, immobilizing them. He used the scrap of her panties to tie her ankles together. "Can't take a chance you'll run while I get ready, bitch."

Aisha struggled against her bindings as Gunnar unbuttoned his shirt, his violent gaze locked on her thrashing body. He was grinning at her with pure malevolence when they both heard the doorbell ring.

"Aisha?" Max's voice. "Honey, I gave you my key. You need to let me in."

Gunnar's hand stilled. "Ah," he said. "The bartender comes to fuck you, slut."

The doorbell rang again and again. Then they heard him pounding on the door.

"Max," she screamed. "Be careful."

"Aisha?"

"Be careful," she yelled again, trying to leverage herself upwards.

Gunnar turned towards the door just as it came crashing in behind the full force of Max's weight.

Max took in the scene at once, his face filled with fury as he spotted Aisha restrained on the couch. When he saw the marks on her face and her breast, a growl like the fury of hell ripped from his throat.

"Stay away, bartender," Gunnar said in a low, vicious voice. "She's mine. I'm taking her out of here to finish what I started."

"Fuck no, you're not," Max spat at him and advanced into the room.

With an unholy sound, Gunnar changed before her eyes. Where the man had stood, she now saw a mountain lion baring his teeth. The air around Max shimmered, his clothes shredded and in seconds he was in his panther form, a low growl vibrating in his throat.

Aisha wanted to do something to help, but she didn't know if bound hand and foot as she was, she could change. For the moment all she could do was watch helplessly as the two cats circled each other.

Gunnar swatted at Max with a paw, but Max lithely evaded him, circling around, leaping on the other cat. Gunnar shook him off as if he was no more than a flea and raked a claw down Max's side. Aisha gasped as a thin ribbon of blood seeped into the black pelt.

Max leapt sideways, reached out and dragged his own claws down Gunnar's hindquarters, drawing blood from his foe. The air was ripe with the scents of animal testosterone and the metallic essence of blood.

The cats circled each other again, each looking for the right opening. The best opportunity. Aisha knew Gunnar was probably the stronger of the two, his strength fuelled by evil. But Max's eyes gleamed with the rage that filled him and would give him the extra strength he'd need.

Aisha could barely breathe as she took in the tableau playing out before her, the two magnificent animals each seeking the other's weakness. She struggled futilely against the material binding her, devastated at the possibility that Max might be the one destroyed. Her heart was beating so fast she was sure it would leap from her chest.

Max snarled again, stalking the mountain lion, circling him. Watching, Aisha realised he was working Gunnar into a corner of the room, backing him up, trapping him in a narrow space. Then he leapt, his teeth sinking into Gunnar's neck, his claws digging into the cat's shoulders, an unholy sound roaring from his throat.

Gunnar scrambled on the floor, leapt, twisted, turning in midair as he tried to dislodge the panther from his back, but Max simply sank his claws and teeth in deeper. The wild dance went on and on, Gunnar thrashing, heaving himself against the wall then rolling on the floor in an effort to gain back the upper hand. Such fury blazed in Max's eyes, Aisha could almost feel the fire.

When Gunnar managed to twist around and partially dislodge Max, turning his head to sink his teeth into Max's neck, Aisha felt her own rage bubbling up. No! She couldn't lose Max. Not now. Not when...

Closing her eyes, she summoned her inner cat the way Max had taught her. For one long fearful moment she was afraid it wasn't going to work. Then she felt it, the stretching of bones and skin, the claws bursting through at the ends of her fingers, her anger so strong it shredded the cloth binding her, and her cat broke free.

Sounding her own roar, she leapt through the air onto Gunnar's back, biting him viciously.

The shock of her teeth sinking into him distracted Gunnar long enough for Max to break free and make his own assault on the enemy's throat. This time he hit the jugular, ripping it open so that blood spurted everywhere.

Aisha hung on, not willing to let go until she was sure the fight was over. Gunnar fell backwards then rolled onto his side, Max's teeth still buried in his flesh. His legs twitched, his tail switched once, then he was still. Unmoving.

Dead.

Max lifted his head, his face smeared with the blood of his enemy. But the rage was gone from his eyes, replaced by concern and...love. Yes!

Aisha backed away from Gunnar's body and sat on her haunches, waiting for a signal from the panther.

Change, little cat. Now.

Without hesitation, she centred herself and in seconds was back in human form, facing a naked, human Max. He reached a hand out to caress her swollen, bleeding cheek, the fire back in his eyes.

"I'm fine," she insisted in a trembling voice. "Really. He...didn't do anything, you got here in time."

"He's the one, isn't he?"

She nodded.

"Then good riddance." He sighed. "I have some cleanup to do but first let's get you taken care of."

"I can wait," she told him. "Do what you have to."

He shook his head. "First things first."

Propping the front door shut as best he could, Max took Aisha upstairs and into the shower, bathing her very carefully, his eyes angry and sad by turns.

"How could I let this happen to you?" he asked over and over.

"Max," she repeated, "it's not your fault. Why would we even think of him being here? I thought he'd forgotten about me a long time ago."

He dried her off with a tenderness that almost made her cry, then wrapped her in a flannel robe of his. Pulling a first aid kit from the bathroom closet, he tended to her scratches, covering them with an antiseptic cream.

"Cat shifters heal fast," he told her, "but we'll help this process along. Come on. I want to get some ice on that cheek before I call my alpha."

She was sitting in a big chair in the living room, still wrapped in the robe but also covered with a light blanket, holding the ice pack to her face when Max opened the door to a tall older man, bigger and broader than Max. The expression on his face was like stone until he spotted Aisha then it softened.

"This her?" he asked.

Max nodded. "Paul, meet Aisha McClellan. Aisha, honey, this is Paul Rodriguez, the alpha of my pack."

"I'm so sorry about this," she began as Paul moved across the room towards her.

He took her free hand and folded it into both of his. "Nothing to apologise for. It's unfortunate that there are always these rogue shifters to deal with. I told Max on the phone he never should have waited so long to tell me about you." He grinned and his face actually lit up. "Unfortunately, our Max is too private for his own good. He should have told us he'd found his mate."

Her eyes widened. "Mate?"

Max moved forward. "Paul, listen, I—"

"Oh, yes," he continued. "It's very obvious." He lifted her hand and kissed the knuckles. "Let me welcome you to our pack."

Aisha was stunned, speechless, as she watched the two men conversing in low voices.

Paul nodded, his face serious then Max helped her rise from the chair.

"I want you to go into the bedroom and wait for me," he told her. "Paul and I are going to take out the trash. Then I'll be back with you." He grinned. "By the way, that was some exhibition you put on. Thanks for saving my life."

"Max?" She stopped, refusing to move. "Wait. What Paul said. About being your mate."

Max held her gaze with his. "I didn't expect him to blurt it out like that. I mean, I wanted time to explain things to you, to—"

"Stop." She smiled. "I know what that means. And he's right. I knew it last night and so did you." She lifted on her toes and brushed her mouth against his. "I can make it to the bedroom myself. Hurry. I'll be waiting for you."

When she reached Max's room she pulled the covers back, took off her robe and slipped beneath the covers, still holding the iced to her battered face. She had every intention of being awake when Max finally finished, but she was so exhausted from everything that her eyes closed automatically and she drifted off to sleep.

* * * *

"Good morning."

Aisha opened her eyes to find Max's face close to hers, his mouth curved in a smile. She glanced around the room to see the bedside lamp lit and the first edge of dawn through the open curtains.

"How long did I sleep?" she asked, wondering what time it was.

"Just a couple of hours." He trailed his lips over her face, placing soft kisses on her cheeks, her forehead, even her nose and chin. "I should probably have let you sleep longer but I couldn't wait any longer."

She frowned. "For what? And what did you do about...the body?"

"Paul took care of it." He licked her lower lip. "He wants me to bring you to a pack meeting Sunday afternoon."

"Because?" She knew the answer and couldn't keep the amusement from her voice.

"I think you know why."

His kiss this time was far from gentle, hungrier, more claiming. His tongue found its way into her mouth, sweeping the slick surface, gliding against her own tongue. One hand moved up to gently cup her uninjured breast, his thumb rasping back and forth across the nipple.

"I love you, Aisha." His voice was rough with passion and heat. "I think I have since the first night you walked into the bar."

"Oh, Max," she sighed. "I love you, too. I never thought we'd get to this point."

His hand slid between her thighs, probing her pussy, sliding along the smooth flesh. When he lightly pinched her clit, she jerked in response, heat rushing up through her body and every nerve thrumming with desire.

"I know the point I'd like to get to with you," he told her.

Turning her on her side to face him, he lifted one of her legs and rested it on his, opening her to him. His hand returned to her throbbing cunt, sliding over the wet lips and circling her clit again and again, a deliberate teasing movement that shot fire through her. She tried to close her legs, trapping his hand, needing the pressure but he just laughed, a low, heated sound.

"Uh, uh. I'm taking my time with this. When you're ready, I have a special treat for you."

"Treat?" Her voice was breathless as she tried to concentrate on his words. "What kind of treat?"

He nipped her ear. "When you're ready."

"I think I'm ready now," she told him in a strangled voice as he worked her clit harder. "Gods, Max, I want you inside me."

"Soon," he promised. "I'm not through playing yet." His face sobered when he looked at her breasts, the marks of Gunnar's fingers still faintly visible. "It's too bad I can't dig that bastard up and kill him all over again."

"I'm fine," she assured him. "I told you. But I won't be fine if you don't...don't..."

"Don't what, pretty kitty? Fuck you? Here?" He thrust two fingers into her hungry cunt, curling his fingers just enough to scrape against her hot spot.

Aisha pushed down on him, trying to impale herself on him. Her hips moved as she rode his hand, desperately seeking the release that was building inside her.

"Yes," she breathed. "F-Fuck me. Please."

"How about if I suck you instead?"

He moved down her body, lifting her leg over his shoulder and opening the lips of her pussy to give his mouth access to her throbbing bundle of nerves. When his lips closed over it and tugged on it, the first wave of spasms rolled through her, soft like the baby breakers in a pond, barely enough to take the edge off.

"Oh, oh, oh." She thrust herself against him, tightening her leg on him as she tried to pull his body closer.

Max pushed his fingers into her again, three of them this time, moving them in cadence with his mouth. Working her. Letting her ride out the slow climax, knowing it would only drive her need for more. Every nerve in her body was firing, a craving she hadn't even known she felt rising in her like a tidal wave.

He lapped at her, using his fingers and his mouth until he'd coaxed another climax from her. Her body trembled with the aftershocks but the edge was still there. All Max had succeeded in doing was creating a deeper hunger so that she could think of nothing but his cock inside her, his mouth sucking her nipples. His hands everywhere on her.

When she was sure she couldn't stand it another minute, when she was nearly incoherent with need, he rose and urged her from the bed.

"Time to shift, little cat."

She stared at him. "Now?"

He nodded. "Right now. It is time for us to mate as cats, binding us together forever. We need to go while there's still a thread of darkness."

He led her to the back porch, leaving the back door open just an inch. Holding her hand, he nodded.

Aisha knew what to do now, and in seconds they were both in cat form. He leapt from the porch, looking back to make sure she was following him, and led the way across the

yard. Exhilarated to be outside in her cat form, Aisha ran behind him into the forested area that bordered his house.

All of her senses were sharpened. The soft dawn breeze felt good against her fur, the rich forest smells were so earthy to her nostrils, the chirping of the early birds so clear in her ears it sounded as if they were perched on her shoulders. The ground was soft beneath her paws as she followed Max in and around the trees.

And inside her body, desire bloomed and burst like a rampaging fire. She hadn't thought it possible to be more aroused in her cat form but she wanted Max now with an intensity that consumed her.

When they reached a small clearing, a private place among the trees, Max stopped and turned, looking at her.

Now, Aisha.

She cocked her head at him.

Now?

Now we will be mated and you will be mine forever. We will be bonded for life.

I'm ready.

He nudged her to the ground with his shoulder and dropped down between her hind legs, licking her pussy with his rough tongue. Shudders raced through her as every nerve in her cat's vaginal walls fired. Gods, she wanted him so badly. Needed him inside her.

At the moment she was sure she'd go mad with need, he rolled her over and urged her to her feet. But when he mounted her, it wasn't her cunt that he entered but her ass, driving his swollen cock inside with powerful thrust. He pushed into her again and again, his balls slapping against her with the force of his movements. His front claws clung to her coat and he bit down gently on one shoulder, like a stallion claiming a mare.

He rode her, on and on, harder and harder, until with one last thrust he drove them to a climax that shook her entire body. His teeth bit deeper as he emptied himself inside her in hot, thick spurts.

Everything ceased to exist for Aisha except for her and this shifter. Her mate. Finally, exhausted, they both slumped to the ground, Max still buried inside her. She was sure she could stay like that forever but at last he slid bit by bit from the tight clasp of her ass.

Rolling to the side, he nudged her until she faced him.

Change.

Now?

Just for a moment.

It was becoming second nature to her now and in seconds they were facing each other, still breathing heavily from the strength of their shared climax.

Max reached out to draw her close to him. "I love you, Aisha." He traced her mouth with his tongue. "My pretty kitty. Such a beautiful cat."

"I love you, too. I told you that."

He smiled. "I just wanted to hear it again. Because now I want to ask you to marry me. Just as soon as we can arrange it."

She wound her arms tightly around his neck and pressed her breasts to the soft curls of his chest. "Oh, Max, of course I will. I...I never thought I'd find this in my life."

He kissed her softly. "Maybe you were just waiting for me." Then he winked at her. "Now I think we'd better change again before heading home. It's getting a little light for two naked people to be running around. The neighbours might call the cops."

"They won't wonder at the sight of two huge cats racing through your yard?"

"Not if we do it quickly. We can run faster in cat form."

That quickly, they shifted and Aisha followed him back to his house, to the place she would finally call home.

About the Author

Desiree Holt has lived a life of excitement that brings the colour to her writing. She was a summer fishing guide, a summer field hand where she was one of only three women working, a member of a beginning ski team that skied in competition (and no, no broken bones!). She spent several years in the music business representing every kind of artist from country singer to heavy metal rock bands. For several years she also ran her own public relations agency handling any client that interested her. She is twice a finalist for an EPIC E-Book Award, a nominee for a Romantic Times Reviewers Choice Award, winner of the first 5 Heart Sweetheart of the Year Award at The Romance Studio as well as a CAPA for Best BDSM Book of the Year, winner of two Holt Medallion Awards of Merit, and is published by four different houses. Romance Junkies said of her work: "Desiree Holt is the most amazing erotica author of our time and each story is more fulfilling than the last."

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