

ELLORA'S CAVE TWILIGHT



Twin
Trouble

Shelley Munro

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Middlemarch Mates, Book Eleven

Man wanted: confident and charismatic, a virtuoso in bed and capable of supporting a woman in her quest for freedom.

Shifter Kiera Pascoe is desperate to foil her brothers' plan to ship her back to England. She needs help, and hunky Joe Mitchell is the perfect applicant. Joe misses his twin Sly, and Kiera presents a diversion from his isolated state. From the start, hunger explodes between them and sparks fly with each intoxicating touch. The sex is fun and challenging – mutual ecstasy with a little spanking and kink.

Sly arrives home unexpectedly, creating chaos with their erotic hijinks. Emotions tangle and create a dilemma for all three. Joe has feelings for Kiera and wants to keep her. Kiera worries about exchanging one set of pushy males for another while Sly lusts after his twin's lover. Two sexy shifter twins and one gorgeous feline woman – they've got trouble in Middlemarch and it's gonna take time to unravel the steamy muddle.

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Twin Trouble

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TWIN TROUBLE

Shelley Munro

Chapter One

“Someone finally purchased the garage in town.” The mischief in his twin brother snared Sly Mitchell’s attention seconds after Joe burst into the kitchen of their newly purchased Middlemarch farmhouse. He recognized the glee in his twin. A punch line lurked somewhere, waiting to pounce at him.

Joe tossed the latest issue of the *New Zealand Times* newspaper and the day’s mail on the kitchen counter. A bunch of keys clattered when they landed inside an empty fruit bowl. “A woman.”

A chuckle burst from Sly. “You’re kidding.”

“Does this face look as if it’s joking?” Joe paused a beat, amusement tilting up the corners of his mouth. “A single woman.”

“Okay, what’s the joke? You might as well tell me everything. She looks like the back end of a bus. She has warts on the end of her nose. She’s fifty-plus with wrinkles.”

“Not from where I was standing. She’s a babe. Curvy. Vivacious.” Joe winked at him. “Shifter.”

“Yeah?”

“Around our age. I liked her.”

Interest stirred in Sly. He and Joe were identical twins. They looked alike with their short, black hair and green eyes. Sexy, according to his sisters-in-law and the women they met. They enjoyed the same things and bore an uncanny ability to determine what the other had on his mind. Their family suspected telepathy, but they didn’t communicate via mind. It was more an instinctive understanding of the way they both saw the world. Joe wasn’t like him. He was *him*.

Sly picked up the mail and flicked through the bills before tossing them aside. “I thought we’d decided to woo Maggie to our way of thinking.” He snatched up the newspaper and ripped off the outer plastic covering, absently unfolding the pages while he frowned at Joe.

“Did I say anything about commitment? Kiera Pascoe is about fun. She’s not interested in anything serious either.”

“You guys must’ve enjoyed an intense chat.” Sly flicked through the paper, scanning the pages for items of interest.

“Not really, but we hit—”

“What the fuck?” Sly interrupted, staring at a small article in the social section.

Joe stood beside him in seconds. “What is it? What’s wrong?”

"This." Sly slammed his fist on top of the table. "How could she? We had an understanding."

"Maggie?" Joe shoved his brother aside. "If you move your hand, I might have a hope of reading the bloody article."

"I'll read the notice for you. *Catherine Scarlet of Dunedin is delighted to announce the engagement of her only daughter Margaret Judith to Nathaniel Henry Charles, eldest son of Henry and Elizabeth Napier of Dunedin.* Maggie's fuckin' engaged."

"When? Does the paper say when she's getting married?"

"No mention of a date." Sly scowled and started to pace. "We need to talk to her or, better yet, spend a few days with her. Alone."

It was Joe's turn to frown. Although he liked Maggie and they'd had some fun times together, he didn't feel the same way about her as his brother. The lack of connection troubled him. He should tell Sly the truth yet he'd hesitated. There was something about Maggie that troubled him... Difficult to explain to himself let alone to his brother.

"We'll go and visit her." Sly grabbed the car keys from the fruit bowl. "Tonight."

"How about a shower before we drive to Dunedin? I'm covered in mud." His nostrils flared when he inhaled. "And you have the distinct whiff of cow shit."

Sly sniffed loudly, his nose wrinkling in a feline manner. "Good point. We'll leave in half an hour."

Twilight gave way to evening by the time they pulled up outside the two-bedroom house Maggie shared with one of her friends in an expensive suburb of Dunedin. Sly jumped out of their mud-splattered SUV and hurried to the front door while Joe followed at a slower pace.

They hadn't seen Maggie recently, mainly because they'd been busy with their newly purchased farm. Perhaps catching up with her wouldn't hurt. Despite Joe's unspoken qualms, the three of them enjoyed a dynamite time together in bed.

The door opened and Maggie stared out at them. The last time they'd seen her she'd sported unruly brown hair. Now her curly hair lay sleek against her skull. The golden highlights added another layer of sophistication as did the makeup and the black dress skimming her slimmed-down curves.

"Maggie." Sly took possession of her right hand and kissed the back. "You look gorgeous."

"Sly. Joe." She glanced down the footpath before opening the door fully. "Come in. It's great to see you both. I was ready to shout at my roomie for losing her key again."

They both stepped inside and waited for Maggie to close the door after them. The instant the door shut, Sly grabbed Maggie and hauled her into his arms for a passionate kiss. Her arms wound around his neck and she pressed her lithe body against him.

Her exotic spicy scent filled Joe's senses and hauled him in like a trout. Unable to help himself, he tapped Sly on the shoulder. "Can I have a turn?"

Laughing, his face blazing full of happiness, Sly stepped back to let Joe take his place with Maggie. Maggie's brown eyes glittered with an expression Joe couldn't read, then her soft lips came into contact with his and the fleeting worry faded from his mind. She trembled in his arms and a spear of sheer lust filled him. They'd worked hard lately, racking up long hours to get their farm into production. These days, a drink out at the local Middlemarch pub with Jonno, Jake and Hari was about their limit.

Aware of the questions they needed to ask before they carried Maggie off to their bed, Joe released Maggie with a grin. "I understand you're engaged."

Maggie let out a derisive snort, a surprising tone that didn't tally with her current feminine image. "My mother likes Nathaniel. Come into the kitchen while I get some drinks."

"She should marry him," Sly said, following. "We had an understanding."

"He wore me down." Maggie reached into the fridge for two beers. She placed them on the counter and grabbed an open bottle of white wine. "The second I wavered, he pushed a ring on my finger."

"Why didn't you contact us?" Sly asked.

Joe remained quiet. While Maggie seemed pleased that they'd turned up, something didn't jibe with her behavior. He sank onto a barstool and watched her closely while she fussed with drinks.

"I'm not sure if I can live in Middlemarch."

Joe inclined his head. At least she admitted her misgivings.

"Don't tell me you're frightened of Emily?" Sly made a scoffing noise. "Joe and I have our own place now and six hundred acres. Come and visit. Spend the weekend."

"I'm meant to go out with friends tomorrow."

"Blow them off." Sly radiated calm confidence. "Come on. You want to spend the weekend with us."

Joe started to object, intending to tell his brother he didn't agree with his plan. A quick glance at Maggie changed his mind. A brittle edge framed her smile, as if she forced her happiness to the surface. Maybe he needed to stand back and let the truth unfold for Sly. That way, Sly couldn't pine after something that wasn't right at a later date.

Strangely disconnected from their meeting, Joe continued to study her closely. The large diamond weighed down her finger in an almost obscene display of disposable income. This Nathaniel possessed big-time money and prestige while he and Sly owned six hundred acres and a mortgage. Sure, Saber would have lent them money if they'd requested a loan. Probably Leo and Felix would've chipped in too. They hadn't approached their brothers because they'd wanted to do everything on their own rather than rely on family connections.

Maggie knew nothing of their feline nature either, and Joe couldn't envisage telling her—another fact to worry him. While they'd spent some fun times together, Maggie

tended to treat them like a convenience. She let them have her body and time when it suited her.

He saw the problems with their relationship. Why couldn't Sly?

"Right." Sly straightened from his sprawl against the kitchen counter. "We're kidnapping you for the weekend and we're not taking no for an answer." He grabbed Maggie, lifting until she hung over his shoulder. "Joe, get the door for me."

Maggie giggled. "Put me down, you brute."

Sly slapped her on the ass. "Keep still, wench."

Joe followed them back down the hall and reached past Sly to open the door. "Wait. If we're gonna take Maggie with us, we need to leave a note."

"We'll wait for you in the vehicle," Sly said.

Frowning, Joe stalked back to the kitchen and grabbed a notepad from next to the telephone. He found a pen nearby and scrawled a quick note, sticking the page under one of the magnets clinging to the fridge. The note was prominent enough for her roommate to notice when she arrived home. He flicked off the light before leaving to join his brother and Maggie.

Sly sat in the passenger seat with Maggie squished in the middle seat. The pair kissed, their hands wandering over each other. Okay, maybe Maggie wasn't unwilling. Joe climbed behind the wheel and soon they headed in the direction of Middlemarch.

* * * * *

Sly woke to a sensation of warmth along his chest. A relaxed, feminine body curled up next to him, her ass cozying into his groin. The events of the previous night came back to him and satisfaction swelled in his chest.

They'd collected Maggie from Dunedin and returned to Middlemarch.

At present, they spooned on the king-size bed in the master bedroom. He and Joe had their own rooms. They planned to use this bedroom when they invited over company. Last night they'd christened the room in a big way. His hand slid over a curvy hip, savoring the silky skin beneath his calloused palm. What a hell of an idea. Kidnapping Maggie and bringing her to their place was a masterstroke.

Someone moved over the far side of the bedroom and he opened his eyes, relaxing when he noticed Joe. "Where are you going?"

"I'm going to check the stock."

"I'll come with you." They'd pooled their money for their farm and took an equal share of the chores. But, for once in his life, he wanted to stay with his woman. His cock lengthened at the idea and a vision of him thrusting into Maggie's warm, clinging channel brought him to a full erection.

"Stay in bed. Feeding the dogs and shifting the stock won't take me long."

"You sure? You'll come back to join us? The fence repairs can wait a couple more days."

Joe scanned Maggie's sleeping form. "We can work on the fences tomorrow. I'll be back in half an hour."

"I owe you."

Joe winked at him, the flash of smartass in his grin sending a flood of relief through Sly. When it came to Maggie, they didn't inhabit the same page. Joe seemed happy enough to fuck her but held a part of himself back. Sly didn't understand Joe's attitude. Usually they held the same opinions and outlook. They reacted the same way in any given situation and instinctively understood how they'd each react. With Maggie, tension crept into the equation. Joe closed off his emotions and Sly couldn't read him or get a sense of his brother's true opinion of her.

Sly couldn't work out why and the not knowing worried him. The smart thing would be to confront the problem. The cowardly part of him wanted to hide from Joe's reservations because he liked Maggie. A lot.

"Sly?" The sleepy voice jolted him from his musing.

"Yeah." He nuzzled her neck, using his tongue to lick across the shell of her ear. She sighed, angling her head to allow easier access.

"You do that well."

"Yeah?" Sly turned Maggie over onto her back and straddled her. "You have such a pretty mouth. I want to see it stretched around my cock." He nudged her lips with his erection and grinned at her. When she returned the smile, he pushed his dick inside. The tight warmth bathing his cock wrenched a groan from him.

"That's it, sweetheart. Suck on me. Take me deeper."

She went about her task with enthusiasm, working him with her mouth and tongue, licking and sucking until he shuddered uncontrollably. Damn, she was good. Natural talent. A lot to be said for natural talent. She teased his balls with her fingers, stroking the taut skin behind. His sac tightened under her ministrations, and when she pushed an impudent finger into his hole and sucked at the same time, he lost it, coming in hard spurts until he had nothing left to give.

"Sweetheart, that was good." His breathing had scarcely slowed when Maggie slapped him on the butt, her fingers reaching for his ribs and nipping him. "Ow! What did you pinch me for?"

"You're grinning like an idiot."

"You shouldn't insult me. I might not return the favor." There was nothing he liked more than giving Maggie pleasure. The first time with her, she'd acted tentatively, her nerves showing even though she wasn't a virgin. She'd come a long way from the shy girl they'd first flirted with during a Middlemarch singles' ball. The same night their oldest brother Saber met his wife Emily.

A giggle escaped her. "I'll behave. I promise. Please don't punish me." She wriggled beneath him and batted her eyelashes. "You wouldn't torture me, would you?" She squirmed again, her writhing sending his mind on a sexual jaunt.

"Keep doing that sexy wiggle and I'm never gonna let you out of this bed."

Her fingers caressed his leg and pinched him.

Sly yelped. "You wanna play rough? I can do physical." Holding her fast, he leaned over and opened the nearest drawer. Giggling, she wriggled and kicked, halfheartedly attempting to escape. Sly controlled her with ease, grinning at her antics. "You, my wench, are under the control of Captain Sly."

"Ooh, a pirate," she cooed, fluttering her eyelashes.

A grunt of satisfaction emerged when his fingers clasped the silk scarves he'd stashed inside the drawer. With easy, competent moves, he lashed both of her hands to the headboard. She didn't even struggle until he'd tied the final knot. "Now what are you gonna do?"

"Mr. Pirate, you have captured my hands." A tiny smile played around her swollen lips. "My feet are still free. I could kick your ass."

"Saucy wench." Sly rummaged through the drawer again and came up with two more scarves. He let the silk stroke across her cheek. "Oh no you don't," he said when she attempted another sneak attack.

Giggling again, Maggie twisted and kicked, trying to avoid Sly's grasp on her legs. Not as strong as him, she didn't have a hope of avoiding restraint. "P-please, Mr. P-Pirate." She was laughing so hard she started stuttering, her merriment making him chuckle.

With determination and greater strength, he soon secured her, laying her out for his pleasure. "Not sassy now are you, wench?"

"What do you intend to do with me now, Mr. Pirate?"

"Hmm." He scratched his chin, pretending to ponder. "A little sensual torture, I think."

Maggie moistened her lips with the tip of her tongue and sent him a flirty look. "There's not much I can do to avoid your attentions, Mr. Pirate." Her lashes fluttered and a delicate flush swept into her cheeks.

Sly took a sharp breath, arousal striking him hard. She was beautiful. His gaze drifted toward her neck and the fleshy pad of skin where neck and shoulder met. The marking site for feline shifters. Not for the first time, his feline pushed him, straining for release. Despite the need surging through him, he fought and gained control. Before he exhibited any catlike behavior, he needed to tell Maggie about his special nature.

Another day.

"I'd never hurt you. Joe and I would never do anything to hurt you, Maggie."

"Hey, why so serious? Where did my pirate go?"

"You're engaged."

The teasing slipped from her face. "Let's not talk about that now." Maggie turned her head, attempting to touch him with her mouth.

Sly hesitated, part of him wanting to push Maggie and discover the truth. Didn't she want them any longer? He didn't like the idea of sneaking around. When it came to romance, he wasn't the kind of man to steal from another. This aspect bothered him and it'd worry Joe too, not that they'd discussed the matter. Yet.

"Come on. Make good on your promise."

"What promise?"

"Seduce me, Mr. Pirate." She lowered her eyelids but peeked up at him in a seductive manner. "Plunder your stolen wench."

Sly considered resisting then shrugged inwardly. They'd talk later. Not a problem. He leaned closer and kissed her, a slow nibble of lips. She ceased her restive fidgeting and strained up toward him, encouraging him to deepen the contact. When their mouths finally parted, they were both breathing hard.

"We have some chocolate syrup in the fridge. I'm thinking chocolate will complement your silky skin." Sly pressed a kiss to the curve of one breast, pausing to lick around her nipple before backing away.

"Sly!"

"Soon, sweetheart. You like chocolate."

"But I won't be the one consuming it." She pouted and her breasts moved up and down with her rapid breathing, making him linger. He found himself leaning back to steal a taste of one pouting nipple.

Finally, with a chuckle, he pulled away and wagged a chiding finger in her direction. "Don't try to distract me. I'm going to get the chocolate syrup."

"Party pooper."

"You'll thank me later." With a last lingering glance, Sly left the bedroom.

Halfway to the kitchen, someone pounded on the door. Before he had time to dart back down the passage to his room to grab a pair of jeans, his visitor wrenched the door open. Two cops shouldered their way inside before Sly had a chance to protest.

"What's going on?" he demanded. "You don't have any right to burst in here without permission."

"Put your hands on the wall where we can eyeball them," one of the men ordered.

"Show me your ID."

Both men flashed official-looking IDs in front of him. He caught a glimpse of their marked car through the open door. Definitely cops. Another car pulled up behind their vehicle, but Sly's sight couldn't pierce the darkened windows. He decided to obey and placed his arms on the wall. If he cooperated, he'd learn the truth much faster.

One cop remained with him while the other disappeared, obviously checking each room. He appeared again and strode past them. Sly stiffened when he approached the bedroom where he'd left Maggie tied up.

The man came to an abrupt halt and glanced back to glare at Sly in disgust. "She's here. Bastard tied her up." He entered the bedroom and disappeared from view.

"Does Laura know you're here?" These guys weren't part of Middlemarch's police force.

"Shut up," the guy behind him ordered.

The second cop appeared in the doorway again, a hint of loathing on his face. "Bastard kidnapped her. Raped her too."

"I did not! Ask her. Ask, Maggie. She'll tell you the truth." Horrified, Sly stared at the two cops. What the fuck was going on?

Maggie appeared, fully dressed in her wrinkled clothes. Her hair lay in disheveled locks on her shoulders, her lips swollen from their kisses. A faint bruise marked her neck.

"Maggie? Tell them the truth."

"Shut the fuck up," one of the cops snarled.

"Mr. Charles is waiting outside for you in the car. We'll come by to take your statement later this afternoon."

To Sly's horror, Maggie hurried past them without meeting his gaze.

"Maggie?" When she disappeared from sight, Sly realized she wasn't going to help him. She was too busy saving her own skin. "Maggie!"

"Bastard," a second cop snapped. "I despise men like you."

"Where are your clothes?" the other cop asked.

"In the bedroom." Sly contemplated using his brute strength to get free and nixed the idea immediately. Saber wouldn't want him to draw attention, and this situation contained the makings of a cluster fuck without bringing feline business into prominence. Hell, what a bloody mess. He let the two cops guide him roughly toward the bedroom. The room reeked of Maggie and sex.

Sex without duress, not that anything he said would convince these numbskulls of his innocence. Everything he and Joe did with Maggie had been wholly consensual. In silence, he pulled on his clothes. Once dressed, they cuffed him and read him his rights.

Hell, he hoped Joe wouldn't arrive back to complicate things. Somehow, he needed to get word to his brother without landing him in the middle of this fiasco. One of them was bad enough. Saber would have kittens. Despite their stunts in the past, no one had ever accused them of kidnapping or rape.

"Let's get him back to the station."

Together the two cops manhandled him out to their car and shoved him in the back. The other car left, the dust kicked up from the gravel road signaling its progress. From

the corner of his eye, he caught a glimpse of Joe. Sly focused on him, and sure enough, his brother turned and stared straight at him. His eyes widened and he took half a step forward. Sly gave a swift shake of his head and Joe froze.

“Get Saber,” Sly mouthed.

Joe inclined his head and backed up, watching the police car when it pulled away. Sly clenched his fists and stared at his brother, taking strength in the knowledge his family would help him. He watched Joe until his twin disappeared from view.

* * * * *

“What the fuck?” Joe stared after his brother, seated in the rear of a cop car. What had happened while he was away? Where was Maggie?

Joe left the storage shed at a run, heading for the house. “Maggie? Are you here?” Lack of response and a quick search told him the place was empty.

Picking up the phone, he dialed Laura and Jonno first – their private residence since it was the weekend.

Jonno picked up. “This better be good –”

“Jonno, can I speak to Laura?”

“Sly?”

“No, Joe. Please, it’s urgent. Is Laura there?”

Rustling sounds echoed down the line while the phone changed hands.

“Joe? What’s the problem?”

“A cop car drove off with Sly in the back. Was it you?”

“No. Who were they? Where were they from?” She paused a beat. “Are you winding me up?” Suspicion laced her tone. “You interrupted us in order to play –”

“No, Laura. I swear to you, hand on my heart. Some cops arrested Sly, or at least they’ve taken him away. I have no idea why.” Joe made a mental note to stop playing jokes on his family and friends. This was serious and they didn’t believe him. “They carted him away.”

“Plain car?”

“No, it was a marked cop car.”

“Tell me everything.” Laura sounded less suspicious.

Worry gripped Joe, making it difficult to draw breath. This was something to do with Maggie. Gut feeling told him to stay away from her, but he’d followed Sly’s lead anyway. He should’ve listened to his instincts since they were seldom wrong. He ran through the events of the previous evening and this morning, not leaving anything out.

“Are you sure she wanted to spend time with you? Did you kidnap her?”

“No! Of course not. Ask Jonno. We’d never hurt a woman. We might get a bit kinky, but we’re not into abuse. Hell, check with Jake too. They’ll both tell you the

same." He fell silent, anxiety stirring his feline. Unable to remain still, he started to pace the confines of their kitchen. A couple of the tiles were cracked and needed replacing. The bright green painted on the wall made him wince every time he entered the room. He and Sly intended to decorate during the evenings or when adverse weather made it impossible to get out on the farm.

"I'll ring Charlie to try to discover what's going on."

"Thanks, Laura. I'm going to visit Saber and Emily. Ring me there." He disconnected the call, mentally running through the chores. He'd shifted the steers, fed and watered the dogs and the dozen chickens they'd purchased the previous week. Everything else could wait until he returned home.

* * * * *

A few months later

The public gallery in the Dunedin courtroom was crowded, Sly's prosecution attracting lots of public attention. Joe sat on a hard, wooden seat, numb as he watched and listened to the lawyer do a hatchet job on his brother. Beside him, Saber stiffened, his face remaining impassive even while listening to the damning evidence during the lawyer's summation.

Despite the crowded court system, someone had managed to rush this case, keeping Sly incarcerated the entire time.

"All rise."

They stood while the judge and jury filed out of the court.

A knot of emotion blocked Joe's throat, his eyes stinging as he fought to keep himself together. His feline urged him to attack, to fight this travesty of lies with violence. Blindly, he turned, desperate to get outside in the fresh air.

"Steady." Saber squeezed his shoulder in a bruising reminder for Joe to hold his shit together.

"I have to stand outside."

"We'll all go." Emily led the family exodus outside.

They ignored the reporters and made for the far end of the courtyard outside the court. Felix and Leo stood on guard, chatting together while watching closely for eavesdroppers.

The rest of his family and friends surrounded him, offering unspoken sympathy with their presence.

A shiver racked Joe, fear battering his mind. He'd tried to visit Sly, but his brother refused to see him. The lack of close contact with Sly made him feel as if he were missing a limb. Sly was his best friend. They did everything together.

Fury simmered inside him. Anger at Maggie for her deceit and lies. Anger at Sly for refusing to say anything and fight the charges. Anger at the helplessness filling him because he couldn't fix this mess.

"Joe, quit growling," Saber snapped, cuffing him sharply across the jaw. "Hold yourself together."

Emily shot her husband a chiding look and grasped Joe's hand, pulling him closer. She winced when one of his claws scratched her. "You need to keep control. Push back your feline now."

Joe swallowed and struggled to control himself. She was right. The last thing Sly needed was for him to turn feral in the middle of the courtroom. "They've twisted everything." His voice broke and a shudder swept him. God, he didn't think he could go back into the courtroom for the sentencing, yet he needed to stay strong for Sly.

"They're gonna lock him up and throw away the key," Tomasine, one of his sisters-in-law muttered in disgust.

"Can't we do something?" Emily cast imploring eyes at Saber. "Maybe if I tried to talk to Maggie again, make her understand how she's destroying Sly's life."

"Talking to Maggie didn't do much good the first time," Saber said in a hard voice. "I've still got people in place. Medical staff for when they process him into the system."

"He's innocent," Joe snarled. "This shouldn't be happening."

"The evidence suggests otherwise." Saber's ferocious stare scared the crap out of Joe and went a long way to help push his feline back and regain full control.

"If Sly's guilty, so am I," Joe said. "Maybe I should turn myself in to the cops."

Saber grabbed him as he turned away. "Don't even think it. At least Sly kept you out of this trouble."

Emily scowled. "I can't believe I once called Maggie a friend. There's something wrong with the entire family."

Joe wasn't as sure about not turning himself in to the cops. Already separation from Sly was doing his head. He couldn't concentrate with the aching gap in his mind, in his life. Like him, Sly enjoyed the outdoors, which was why they'd purchased a farm. They were a team. Twins against the world.

At the far end of the courtyard, the reporters stirred. Maggie's fiancé appeared on the court steps and spoke to the animated reporters and camera crews. He was much older than Maggie and in his late forties, according to Emily.

A marriage of convenience.

Joe's mouth twisted when Maggie joined her fiancé on the steps. She'd always enjoyed the finer things in life, and obviously she cared more about money than about truth and justice. Decency.

People started to file back into the court.

"Showtime," Joe said in a harsh voice.

With his family and friends flanking him, they entered the court, taking seats to listen to the verdict. It wasn't long coming.

Guilty. Guilty. *Guilty.*

The judge read out the sentence and Joe's stomach bucked violently.

Ten years.

Beside him, Saber shot to his feet. Joe didn't understand why until he realized he was standing too. Joe stared at his twin and, for the first time, Sly lifted his bowed head, to meet his gaze. A wealth of emotions passed between them. Fear. Anger. Acceptance.

Love.

Then Sly broke the connection, turning to exit with the guards.

Joe watched his brother until he disappeared from sight. Like an automaton, he allowed Saber to guide him from the court. His eyesight blurred, fear for his brother threatening to overwhelm him. Worst of all was the sense of disbelief. The betrayal by a woman. Outside, they paused for the rest of their family.

Nathaniel Charles escorted Maggie to a waiting taxi. As he helped her into the rear of the vehicle, Maggie glanced up and noticed him. Her mouth parted a fraction and the color fled her cheeks. She wrenched her gaze from Joe to smile brightly at her fiancé.

Sending a good man to prison because of her lies didn't trouble her. All she cared about was her good name. Shallow. She'd always borne the character trait, but neither he nor Sly had worried much, stupidly thinking their love would help her grow.

Obviously not. The woman was beyond help.

Her husky chuckle reached Joe, his feline hearing catching her open amusement without difficulty. No, she didn't worry about ruining his brother's life or sentencing Joe to a world of loneliness and despair.

Her concern was only for herself.

In that moment he vowed to make Maggie Scarlet pay. Karma might be a bitch but she had nothing on a pissed feline.

Chapter Two

Three months later

Kiera Pascoe swept into the Storm in a Teacup café, waved at Emily and Tomasine behind the counter and stomped over to Ambar Patel who was sitting at a table near a window. “I need a man,” she said as she yanked out a chair and plonked her overall-clad butt onto the wooden seat. Her eyes narrowed on her friend. “You have two. Give me one of yours.”

“No.” A grin surfaced in Ambar despite her instant rejection of the suggestion.

Kiera sniffed loudly. “Well, that’s plain selfish. Did you order yet? I only have half an hour. I promised Joe Mitchell I’d fix his tractor in time for him to mow his hay tomorrow morning.”

“I ordered for both of us. My men love me.” Ambar returned to the topic of men and the fact Kiera needed one. “We’re happy together.”

“Yeah. Yeah. It’s positively sickening.” Where was she going to find a man? Heck, maybe the better question was why had she settled in Middlemarch, a town known for its shortage of the male sex?

“Last I heard, you were too busy building your business to bother about a man. Just you and your trusty vibe, you said.”

“Yeah, well. That was before my three older brothers rang to tell me they’re coming out to New Zealand to attend polo school.”

“Isn’t that a good thing?”

“They’re bringing a friend with them.”

“Your brothers are matchmaking?” Ambar’s brows rose, highlighting her amusement. “I suppose they have hoity-toity accents like you and Hari?”

Kiera snorted because Ambar expected the response. A halfhearted reaction while her mind drifted to her brothers’ coming visit. They hadn’t admitted it, but her brothers—or Matthew, at least—intended to put pressure on her with emotional blackmail. A society marriage. Children. They were hoping she’d give up her weird fascination of tinkering with engines. So unfeminine. An agitated growl built deep in her throat, vibrating and wringing a chiding scowl from Ambar.

“Sorry.” Returning to England and a pointless society life was the last thing she wanted. She liked running the garage and working with motors and machinery. So what if her work played hell with her manicure? Running the garage gave her more satisfaction than attending exclusive London gatherings, and her career gave her a sense of closeness to her grandfather. The gruff old man, who’d discovered her crying

one day when she was seven years old and taken her with him to a vintage car rally, had given her a very special gift – one of freedom.

Ambar made small-talk with Tomasine when she delivered their coffees and sandwiches. When Tomasine left, she frowned at Kiera. “What are you going to do?”

“I have three days to find a man. My brothers fly into Dunedin on Wednesday. They want to spend a few days with me before traveling up to Christchurch for the polo school.”

“Isn’t polo where they play croquet on horseback?”

Kiera chuckled, imagining her brothers’ reaction to Ambar’s description of their favorite sport. “Sort of.”

“I didn’t know they had polo schools.”

“They’re spending the entire summer improving their game,” Kiera said glumly. “I told them I work in an office.”

Ambar made a *tsking* noise. “You’re screwed.”

“Yeah,” Kiera said in a morose voice. “You’d better enjoy my company while you can. Once my three older brothers gang up on me, I won’t stand a chance.”

“Your brothers sound like tyrants.” Ambar paused to sip her latte.

They weren’t, not really. They loved her but were used to women fawning over them. Obeying their every command. If she’d stood up to them sooner instead of running away, she wouldn’t have to face them now at a disadvantage. Heck, she liked living in Middlemarch. She’d made friends here, started to carve out a life for herself. “My brothers are overprotective. They mean well.”

“You need to stand up to them.”

“Easy for you to say.” Kiera picked at her sandwich, her appetite nil. Finally she gave up. She set it back on the plate and drank her coffee instead. She’d get Emily to wrap the sandwich to go.

“Are your brothers married?”

“No. Actually, I’m surprised they’re taking a break from the law firm to come out here. They were close-mouthed about their reasons. I wasn’t exactly thinking clearly after they dropped their bombshell. I should have asked more questions.”

“If they give you a hard time, I can rally a few tiger and leopard shifters to knock sense into them.”

Kiera treated Ambar’s words as a joke, but her offer was genuine. She’d become a good friend. “I’d better go and sort out Joe’s tractor.”

“Joe’s single.”

Kiera wrinkled her nose. “He’s not interested in me.”

“He’s not interested in anything since Sly went to prison.” Ambar glanced over her shoulder and leaned closer. “Sly refuses to see him. We’re worried about them both.”

Kiera stood. Since Emily was busy, she grabbed a couple of paper napkins and wrapped her sandwich to take with her. "I'll catch up with you tomorrow."

With a wave, Kiera hurried from the café down the road to her garage.

Located opposite the post office, her garage consisted of fuel pumps to service both cars and trucks and a large workshop decked out for mechanical repairs. A small studio apartment rounded out the facilities. The garage wasn't exactly the luxury she'd grown up with but it sufficed. Her brothers would turn up their collective feline noses.

"Where have you been?" Joe demanded, straightening from his lean against the wall.

Kiera lifted her sandwich. "Give me a break. I have to eat."

The man had changed since their first meeting. He appeared thinner, his face gaunt while his beautiful green eyes lacked the teasing sparkle that first grabbed her attention. His black hair, shaggy and much longer now, grew past his collar. A wave of empathy swept her. According to Ambar, Sly shouldn't be in jail. And she wasn't the only Middlemarch resident who held the opinion.

A yawn cracked Joe's jaw and he offered her a sheepish look. "Sorry."

"No problem. You want half a sandwich?"

His eyes widened a fraction, as if her offer surprised him. The rumble of his stomach settled the matter. She unwrapped the sandwich and handed him half. She watched him surreptitiously, part of her surprised he'd even accepted the food.

"How long will my tractor take?"

"Without interruptions—say half an hour to an hour. Why don't you take a pew while I finish the repairs?"

He didn't move a muscle. "I'll fall asleep if I sit down."

Kiera shot him a quick glance before rewrapping her sandwich and setting it aside. "Maybe you should try to sleep. You can always stretch out on my bed."

"Never heard that line before." A quick grin twisted his lips, but his amusement faded before she became comfortable with the ease of tension in him. A spurt of pleasure filled her because she'd made him smile, and she immediately wanted to do it again.

"It was a genuine offer," Kiera said. "You look as if you might keel over with exhaustion. I have a bed that's not in use at present."

"You're not after my body. What a disappointment."

Kiera sighed and reached for a wrench. "I do need a man."

Another of those half grins flitted across his face, too rapid to light up his pretty eyes. "I'm surprised you'd have problems in that department."

"I said I needed a man. I didn't say I wanted to keep him."

“Explain.” His gaze connected with hers, shocking her libido with a flash of intensity and yearning. Her body reacted immediately, nipples contracting to tight peaks, and she was thankful for the baggy overalls hiding her breasts.

“Do you gossip?”

Her question dragged a bark of rusty laughter from him. “Haven’t you heard? My brother is a criminal. No one associates with me because they consider me a crook by extension.”

“Bullshit. Word on the street is your brother isn’t guilty.”

“And you believe that?”

“Ambar Patel is my best friend. She believes in your brother’s innocence. Jake and Hari. Jonno. Even Laura thinks he was wrongly charged, and she’s a cop.”

“Tell me why you need a man.”

“This isn’t getting your tractor fixed.”

“Stop prevaricating.”

According to Ambar, he hadn’t shown interest in anything since Sly went to jail. Instead, he slaved away on their farm, not seeing other people or felines for days. And, because she knew Ambar and the rest of his friends and family worried about him, Kiera decided to trust Joe and tell him the whole sordid story.

“I’m the youngest in my family. I have three older brothers.”

This time the amusement sparked briefly in his eyes. Her heart stuttered a fraction before kicking into a racy beat. Stunning. What would it feel like to have his attention focused on her for real? A streak of awareness snuck down her body to take up residence in her lady parts. Kiera shifted uneasily.

“I can probably guess the rest but continue.”

“Bossy much?”

“You forget I have three older brothers too.”

“You didn’t move to the other side of the world.”

“True.” His dark brows rose in a silent order to continue.

“My brothers are coming to visit. They’re bringing a friend.”

“Matchmaking?”

Kiera scowled at the wrench in her right hand. “Maybe. Probably,” she amended, risking a glance at him. “My brothers are staying for the entire summer. They’re attending a polo school in Christchurch.”

“You think a man in your life will stop them trying to matchmake?”

“It’s the only plan I have.”

“You could always tell your brothers you don’t want to marry whoever they have in mind.”

"You don't know my brothers." Bossy and arrogant were two words that came to mind. Add in determined and charming times three and Kiera found it difficult to stand her ground. At least when her grandfather had been around, he'd sided with her and aided her bid for independence.

Joe shrugged. "Tell them you're gay."

"But that wouldn't be true."

They stared at each other, and Kiera caught her breath, her chest growing tight with expectation. Joe glanced away first and disappointment seared her. She wasn't even sure why. Sighing, she turned to the tractor and focused on its innards. Running through the manual in her mind, she applied her knowledge and started tinkering, checking and double-checking. There. Problems with the fuel line.

"I guess I could help you out."

Kiera maneuvered for a better angle, focused on the job at hand. "What?"

"I'll be your man."

Her head jerked upward, the top of her skull colliding with the side of the engine housing. "Hell." An explosion of bright stars colored the insides of her tightly squeezed eyelids. She stumbled back, jumping when Joe grasped her shoulders.

"Steady. I'm not going to hurt you." Gentle fingers probed her head.

"You just have," she retorted, yanking from his investigation. "You shouldn't make statements like that while I'm trying to work." She rubbed the spot, wincing at the echo her touch generated. No doubt she'd live.

"Do you want my help or not?"

"You'll have to fuck me."

His dark brows scrunched together. "Jesus, you're blunt."

"It's better if I state my needs up front."

Joe blinked, focusing her attention on his long, dark eyelashes. "There's more?"

"I need to have sex and have a male's scent on me and my apartment. My brothers have to believe we're serious. The relationship would be a façade since I have no intention of hooking up with a man on a permanent basis."

"Most women want kids, a family."

"I'm happy as I am at present. If I want something to cuddle, I'll get a dog."

"No strings? Sex only?"

He didn't believe her. Suspected she was playing games with him. "That's exactly what I want." Her tone was sharp. Most guys would jump at the chance. She turned away, disappointed but stoic at his reaction. She'd have to work out another plan to foil her brothers.

Joe grasped her shoulder and spun her back to face him. His jaw worked, a tide of anger sweeping his face. "I've been with a woman who said one thing and meant

something else entirely. I don't want to put myself through that crap again. I don't want a permanent relationship. I don't want marriage. I do not want a mate."

"So why did you offer?"

Joe's shrug was irritable. "Hell if I know." He finished off with a jaw-cracking yawn.

"For goodness' sake, go and stretch out on my bed. Get some sleep and let me concentrate on your tractor."

"You just want me to mark my scent in your personal space."

True. But she found herself yearning for his touch too. Sex with Joe Mitchell would prove interesting. The man had changed from the teasing one she'd met and flirted with several months ago. This Joe was completely different. He'd matured and was probably worth saving. Not that she was the right woman to cement the changes in him.

Kiera shoved his shoulder, pushing him in the direction of her apartment. "Go. Make sure you don't piss in any corners while you're scent marking. I don't have time to clean up the mess."

She turned back to the tractor, hiding a smile when she heard his grunt of disbelief. Even if he didn't agree, their relationship had changed today. She might score a friendly fuck buddy out of this yet.

Joe found himself heading for Kiera's apartment without understanding how it had come about. Following her scent trail, he opened a plain white door and stepped into an open-plan apartment. Light streamed through several ceiling windows, the bright sun merciless in highlighting the sparse, rough contents. The ruffled, pink sheets on the single bed at the far end of the room were the only indication of a woman's presence. A drying rack held several pairs of faded jeans and a pair of navy overalls.

His steps carried him over to her bed and he figured what the hell. He kicked off his work boots, pretty sure he wouldn't sleep even though his body cried for rest. After removing his jacket, he dropped onto the bed. Her scent—a bouquet of citrus and flowers with an underpinning of hand cleanser and laundry powder—permeated the sheets. He relaxed and immediately a stream of aggressive curses filled his mind.

Sly.

Joe didn't understand why this had happened, but despite the miles between them, he and Sly could slip into each other's minds and consciousnesses. He reached out, craving closeness with his twin. The door between them slammed shut and bitterness writhed in his gut. He'd do anything for his twin and he didn't understand why Sly blocked him mentally and refused to let him visit in person.

God, if he could get his hands on Maggie, he'd commit murder.

The traitorous bitch.

He forced his mind to concentrate on Kiera. He liked her. When she'd first arrived and set up shop, none of the local farmers had believed her capable of servicing their

cars or repairing their farm equipment. Saber didn't think the same way and had given her a chance. It hadn't taken her long to prove herself and now the locals needed to book ahead for her expertise.

She was attractive with her dark, curly hair and storm-blue eyes, unusual in leopard shifters. He found himself curious about what her hair would look like loose. He'd only ever seen her with her hair screwed into a knot at the back of her neck and wearing a cap.

Kiera didn't date, probably not for lack of offers. Instead she spent time with his friends and seemed content. He shifted his weight and turned onto his side. There was something lumpy under the pillow. He slipped a hand beneath to move the item. His hand came into contact with something hard. Joe raised it in front of his face, a spurt of amusement flickering to life.

A vibrator.

Sex.

A whoosh of heat zapped to his cock—the first hint of sex in his life for months. Kiera needed a man. Maybe he could be that man. Maybe they'd help each other. At least her presence might help drive the ghosts at the farm into hiding. He'd tell her again once she'd finished the tractor repairs—her proposition interested him as long as she understood their teaming up wouldn't become permanent.

* * * * *

Almost two hours later, Kiera entered her apartment. The repairs took longer than she'd envisaged but at least the tractor now purred smoother than a happy feline.

Joe had stretched out on her bed and was fast asleep. Smiling, she padded closer, coming to an abrupt halt when she saw exactly what he cuddled in his slumber.

Her trusty vibrator.

A mortified *humph* escaped. The man seemed right at home. An ache closed her throat. She didn't want to wake him, but no point in delaying the embarrassment to come.

"Joe?" She didn't want to startle him from his slumber. "Joe."

"Don't want breakfast. Go away."

"It's closer to dinner than breakfast," she returned drily. Shades of her English accent curled around her words, much more precise than the softer New Zealand drawl.

His eyes popped open and she sensed his confusion.

"It's Kiera. I've finished fixing your tractor." Her voice drew his gaze and focused him. He lost his bewildered expression.

"How long did I sleep?"

"Two hours." Determined to embrace embarrassment full-on, she added, "Maybe it was the vibrator. I always sleep better after sexual release."

A snigger escaped him. "Why do you keep it under your pillow?"

"Do you see much furniture in here?"

He sat up and tucked her vibrator out of sight beneath the pillow. His hair plastered to his skull on one side and stuck up on the other. She had to force herself not to step closer and smooth down the unruly, dark strands.

"The place has a temporary air about it. You'd better move in with me for the duration of your brothers' visit."

Hope surged inside her. "I thought you didn't want to have sex with me."

"I didn't say that."

"I'm confused. What did you say?"

"I'll be your tame man, but in return, you have to fix my farm machinery and service my SUV for a year without charging me."

Kiera sniffed. "I'm not a charity. I have to make a living."

"Neither am I. I've been used and discarded before. It's not gonna happen again."

Fair enough. Part of her understood his caution and his way made this a straight business proposition with boundaries. "What do I get in return? Spell it out for me."

"You get me in your bed, all the sex you want. I'll play the part for your brothers and the rest of the community. But this is nothing more than sex. No ties. No promises." He pulled on his boots and stood, shrugging into his lightweight jacket.

"Do you have a time limit in mind? My brothers are spending the summer and might decide to visit me at whim."

"We can keep this going until your brothers leave New Zealand. If this agreement works out, we can discuss longer terms."

Kiera nodded. "Fair enough. Are you sure you're okay with having me underfoot?"

"Can you cook?"

"Yes, but I'm not taking on sole cooking duties. We share." She didn't intend to act the lackey for anyone.

"Household chores fifty-fifty," he agreed without a fight.

Kiera held out her hand. "You've got a deal."

"Good. Make sure you bring your vibrator." Joe strode from her apartment before her tumbled feelings morphed into words.

"I understood you were the sex toy." She barreled from her apartment and came face-to-face with Saber Mitchell, Joe's oldest brother. One glance at his surprised face told her he'd heard her holler. A flush suffused her cheeks. Oh boy. Not one of her finest moments.

"Kiera. Joe," Saber said. "Am I interrupting?"

"No," Kiera said.

"Yes," Joe said at the same time.

Kiera glared at Joe but couldn't hold her irritation when his grin sprang into evidence. Her insides softened like chocolate sitting in the hot, summer sun. Lord above, what had she let herself into with Joe? He wasn't a man to lead around by his cock, which was how she preferred her men. Joe Mitchell presented a challenge and a half.

"We'll continue this discussion at home tonight," Joe said. "Don't be late. It's your turn to cook." Then, before she opened her mouth to reply, he pounced, grasping her shoulders to lay a quick, down-and-dirty kiss with tongue on her. When he lifted his head, his face bore a wealth of satisfaction. "Can I take my tractor now?"

Kiera managed a nod. "Can I help you with something, Saber?"

"I wanted to book in Emily's car for a service." Saber glanced from her to Joe, and Kiera fought a blush.

She grabbed her appointment book. "I've had a cancellation for Tuesday morning. Will that work?"

"Tuesday is fine. I'll see you then," Saber said.

Another customer arrived and she hustled over to discuss his car repairs with him. By the time she'd finished, both Joe and his tractor were gone. A sense of confusion and anticipation warred inside her. She'd made a deal with the devil. This couldn't end well.

Chapter Three

Saber halted Joe with a heavy hand on his shoulder. "What's going on with you and Kiera?"

"We've been seeing each other," Joe said, deciding to get the ball rolling for Kiera. "She's agreed to move in with me."

"You kept that quiet." Saber clapped him on the back, a broad grin breaking out. "Emily will be pleased. She likes Kiera."

Joe nodded and stalked over to his green tractor. Already part of him looked forward to going home to someone, but living with a woman and not having Sly around...that would be weird. God, he missed his idiot twin. Joe rattled around the empty farmhouse. Hell, some days he didn't hear another voice. He'd even started talking to himself, answering back. Crazy, maybe, yet it made him seem less alone. "I was going to ask Hari if he'd drive my vehicle back to the farm while I take the tractor."

"I'll do it for you, if you can drop me back at the café."

"Sure."

Saber's eyes widened at his easy acceptance. Not surprising given his churlish behavior recently. Joe's gut lurched as his mind returned to Sly.

"Have you seen Sly this week?" The question cost him, provoked his feline. A silent snarl filled his mind, yet he didn't recall the words or change the subject, too thirsty for information about his twin. Sly didn't slip often, mostly keeping the door firmly shut between them. Like earlier, he only received brief flashes before Sly slashed the mental ties.

"Emily and I visited him yesterday." Saber hesitated. "He was in a fight."

Alarm flared, his feline hissing to highlight his concern. "He okay?" God, he couldn't get his twin's back when they lived apart.

"Yeah. The other guys didn't do too well. A broken arm and some busted ribs. They put Sly in solitary."

"I'm surprised they let you see him." Joe's shoulders slumped. At least Sly maintained control of his feline. A fight could've escalated to worse than solitary.

"They didn't. We have to wait until he's released into the general facility again."

No wonder Sly's thoughts had reached him today. "I'm gonna cut my hay tomorrow." Joe changed the subject, unable to discuss his twin any longer without letting his frustration show.

"Our paddocks are ready to cut too."

"You want me to cut them later in the week?" Farm work, he could do. At least if he fell into bed exhausted, he didn't lie awake half the night dreaming up ways to make Maggie pay.

"According to the weather forecast, we're in for a stretch of dry weather."

Joe tossed Saber his SUV keys. "No problem. If you hear of anyone else needing their paddocks cut, tell them I'm available. The extra income will come in handy."

"I can lend—"

"No," Joe said sharply. He and Sly had agreed at the start they wanted to do everything on their own. So far, he was coping with the bills. A struggle, but one he faced willingly for his brother. Sly would have something to come home to—him and the farm.

Saber gave a curt nod. "The offer stands. I'm here if you need me for anything."

"Thanks." Joe started his tractor and backed from the workshop. Kiera was still with her customer, her hands flashing while she indicated something under the hood. The coming night would prove interesting—something to look forward to while he cut hay under the hot sun.

* * * * *

Kiera tossed her bags into the rear of her runaround truck. A glance at her watch told her it was after six, but she still had time to visit Ambar.

"Knock. Knock." Kiera tapped on the open door and stuck her head inside the farmhouse where her friend lived with Hari and Jake, her two mates.

Ambar appeared, her clothes distinctly rumpled.

"Have I interrupted?"

"No, nothing important."

Kiera suppressed a grin when a male snort came from a room to the right. "Then why are your buttons done up wrong?"

"Busted." Unperturbed, Ambar rearranged her buttons. "Come in. We're supervising Hari making dinner."

The scent of curry spices grew stronger as she followed Ambar through the house. "Smells good."

"Hari's made a beef curry."

"I came to tell you I've found a man."

Ambar stopped abruptly and Kiera plowed into her. She came out second best because Ambar was a tiger shifter and much taller than her.

"Ow." Kiera rubbed her nose.

"That was fast work." Ambar grabbed her arm and dragged her into the kitchen. "Where did you find a man?"

“Kiera has a man?” Hari asked.

“Who?” Jake handed Kiera a glass of white wine.

“Blabbermouth.” Kiera glared at Ambar.

“Ah-ah. Not me.” Ambar pressed her hand to her heart. The naughty twinkle in her eyes spoiled the angelic effect.

“Careful. Don’t overdo the innocent act. I think the curry is done.” Hari tapped a wooden spoon against his pot and set it on a chopping board.

“Don’t change the subject,” Ambar warned. “We’ll never worm the information out of the girl if we don’t focus and use a three-pronged attack.”

Jake and Hari smirked at their lover. Then Kiera’s three friends turned to face her, clear expectation on their faces.

“I’m moving in with Joe Mitchell.” She checked the time. “Maybe I’d better go. It’s getting late and I promised I’d cook dinner.”

“No, you don’t.” Jake grasped her shoulders and propelled her to an empty seat at their kitchen table. “Talk.”

“I don’t ask you the intimate details of your sex life.”

“Leave Kiera alone,” Hari said. “I have enough curry to feed an army. You can take some for your dinner.”

“Joe doesn’t like spicy food,” Jake said.

Kiera didn’t hesitate. “I’ll take it.” Too bad. He deserved a spicy meal for maneuvering her in front of his brother.

“You’re sharing the house because you’re sick of the ugly apartment you’ve been living in,” Ambar said.

“Yes.” Great story and one she’d stick with for the present. She wanted to give the locals the impression her relationship with Joe evolved naturally. Suspicions about a cold-blooded deal of convenience would find their way to her brothers. That was the last thing she needed.

“It’ll do Joe good to have company. He’s been like a hermit since Sly –” Jake broke off with a scowl. “You’ll be good for him.”

Kiera stayed for another half an hour before admitting she was prevaricating. Time to move. She departed for Joe’s place with a bag of goodies for dinner.

The sun sat low on the horizon when she pulled up outside Joe’s house. She parked alongside Joe’s SUV. He must have been waiting for her because he appeared from the side of the house and stalked over to her.

Unaccountably, nerves leaped about in the pit of her stomach. Her feline stirred and snapped to attention, uncertain and cautious with Kiera’s agitation. Despite this, she trusted him implicitly. She might not know Joe well, but his friends – her friends now – thought highly of him and his brother. No, fear didn’t unsettle her. It was the knowledge she intended to go through with this charade. And worse, since she’d

started thinking about Joe and sex at the same time, she couldn't stop. Right now, a distinct dampness settled at the juncture of her thighs. She was primed and not above begging.

He opened the door of her truck. "I thought you might have changed your mind."

"No. I didn't finish until after six. I had to shower and pack some clothes."

His nose twitched at the scent of food coming from the passenger side of the vehicle. "You brought food."

Kiera shrugged dismissively. "You said it was my turn to cook." She reached over to grab her bag and Joe held out his hand, silently demanding possession from her. She handed it over.

"A lady who packs light."

"I don't have many clothes." She didn't inform him she'd left most of them back in England, preferring to dress down in jeans and overalls. Designer labels and ball gowns didn't fit with a motor vehicle workshop.

She collected the food from the front and followed Joe inside. The door they entered led into a utility room. Two pairs of boots stood in a neat line against the wall. Kiera toed off her casual shoes and followed Joe. Like her apartment, the farmhouse didn't have much personality. The utility room led into the kitchen, a large room and a surprisingly tidy one. The bright frog-green paint on the walls made her blink. Not a color she'd choose.

Kiera set the food she carried on the counter and waited expectantly. Joe seemed a bit uncomfortable and she decided to prod him. "Are you going to give me a tour?"

"Sure. Kitchen." He walked over to another door and pushed it open. "Lounge."

This room was obviously one he used more often. A flat-screen television hung on one wall. Two comfortable chairs faced the screen. A couple of books and farming magazines sat in a pile by one of the chairs.

He didn't give her the opportunity to study more, moving her through another door and leading her down a passage.

"There are three bedrooms. This is Sly's room. This is the guest room. And this is my room." He set her bag down beside his double bed. "You'll share this room with me." His words held a distinct challenge.

Kiera merely nodded. "Looks good. Where's the bathroom?"

The tension left Joe and he took her hand, tugging her from his bedroom. "The bathroom is right at the end of the passage, plus a separate toilet." He showed her both before returning to the kitchen.

He didn't drop her hand and she found herself enjoying the physical contact. His slight feline scent was a comfortable, familiar one while his calloused fingers rubbing against her own work-roughened hands made her wonder how they'd feel caressing her naked skin. A shiver licked her spine, hitting the high spots and perking up her nipples on the way. She couldn't wait to find out.

The more she considered sex with Joe, the more she realized she'd missed the physical closeness with another person. For a while she'd assumed Gibson, a human in London, might be the one, but she refused to share with other women. She wanted the one-hundred-percent focus of her man.

"Are you ready to have dinner?"

"Sure." Kiera returned to the kitchen with Joe, still holding hands.

He tugged her to face him. "I'm going to kiss you."

A statement of intent. Goose bumps rose on her arms and legs, anticipation building a moan of assent in her throat. Luckily, she managed to keep the cry contained and under control. He didn't need to know he made her melt, her knees distinctly weak.

Without haste he drew her closer, giving her the opportunity to change her mind. The silent care and concern made her confidence leap. This plan would work and they'd have fun at the same time.

Finally his lips settled on hers. Kiera let her groan escape, gripping his shoulders and sinking into the kiss, the hot maleness of him. His scent filled each breath, already familiar and soothing. Sighing with satisfaction, she opened for him, silently inviting deeper contact. Their tongues twined together, the pace slow and easy.

Their bodies pressed together, his hard chest flattening her breasts. The ridge of his erection dug into her stomach, enticing her to press for more. She wriggled, craving more than a kiss.

Joe pulled away to glower at her. "Stop squirming, woman. Let me set the pace."

"You're moving too slow."

"We'll move at the speed I set."

A direct challenge. A spark of knowledge settled in her mind, and she wasn't sure what to make of her conclusion. Joe expected obedience.

She gnawed her bottom lip, considering the new info. Her brothers attempted to boss her around. She'd left England over a year ago, ostensibly to vacation in New Zealand. Settling in Middlemarch hadn't been part of their plan for her.

"What are you trying to say?" Clarification would help.

"If you want a man you can wrap around your finger, I'm not the right choice."

Her brows rose a fraction. "Oh?"

"I expect obedience."

A frown of uncertainty scrunched up her brow. "What do I get in return?"

"I will give you pleasure. I'll cherish and respect you. You'll get a man who won't turn and run when faced with your brothers."

She straightened, her breath huffing out with determination. "I won't do a little-woman act."

“Kiera, I don’t want to break your spirit.” He cupped her chin, exerting gentle force to make her meet his gaze. “This might be a business proposition but we can have fun together.” Unknowingly, he echoed her earlier thoughts.

“Let me think.”

An expression that hovered close to disappointment flitted across his features. Joe let his hands fall to his sides and stepped away.

Inexplicably, a sense of failure dogged her while she stumbled over to the counter where she’d set the food. She busied herself unpacking the containers one at a time, confused and unsettled by her reaction to his words. The idea of obeying a man when she’d fought constantly for every sliver of independence...

Joe set the table for two. “Beer or wine?”

“I’ll take a beer, please.”

He opened two bottles and collected glasses.

Meanwhile Kiera opened the rice and the curry. Hot steam drifted off the food along with a mouthwatering scent. She placed the containers on the table and returned to the counter to investigate the rest of the contents in the bag.

“Curry isn’t my favorite meal.”

“I know,” she replied absently while she checked the containers. Roti flatbreads and a small jar of mango chutney.

“But you’re going to serve curry anyway?”

Something in his tone jerked her attention from the food. She stole a peek and found dark amusement glittering in his green eyes.

“The curry is a mild one.” Guiltily, she recalled her suggestion to add more chili powder.

“You wanted to make the curry hotter.”

Kiera gasped. “Who tattled?”

“I’ll take the container at the bottom.” Joe held out his hand, his will forcing her to obey. Bemused, Kiera rifled through the bag for the bottom one. It was marked beef stew. She hadn’t noticed Hari slip stew into the bag.

The microwave dinged a few minutes later. Joe removed the stew and carried the container to the table.

“Take a seat,” he said in a silky voice, pulling out a chair for her.

The foreign note in his voice, one she hadn’t heard before, made her stomach leap with apprehension. He seemed amused rather than angry. Despite his calm manner, he’d pushed her off balance. After another swift, assessing glance, she settled on the seat he indicated. And men said women were difficult to understand.

Once he’d seated her, Joe took possession of the chair opposite. He poured her beer with quick expertise, the level of foam at the top of the glass perfect.

“Would you like rice?” Her voice trembled and she hoped he wouldn’t notice.

"Please."

She picked up a plate and dished up rice and beef stew for him. After adding a warm roti on the side of his plate, she handed over his dinner.

"Thanks." This time he broadcast approval with a smile and some of her trepidation faded.

He waited until she'd served her own meal before lifting his glass in a toast. "Here's to a happy and fruitful partnership."

"To a happy, fruitful partnership," she repeated dutifully despite the irritation the words fueled inside her. This situation with her brothers was her fault, and it wouldn't happen again. She'd set them straight during their visit, before they returned to England.

She started to eat, forking up curry. The perfect blend of spices and heat zapped across her taste buds.

"My hours will be a bit crazy during the next few weeks," Joe said.

Glad of the normal conversation to break the edgy silence, she nodded in encouragement. "You don't have to entertain me."

"I'm cutting hay to generate some extra income."

"Of course. Sometimes my hours are long too."

The tender meat and vegetables melted in her mouth. Too bad they wouldn't eat like this every night. "Hari is a great cook."

"Yes." The glint in his eyes put her on warning again. He reminded her of a cat about to pounce, which made her the prey. Uneasy, she stirred, her appetite deserting her. Kiera set her cutlery down and reached for her beer. Maybe a drink would cure her dry mouth. The beer slid down her throat, wet and cold. The drink didn't settle her disquiet.

"Something wrong?"

"No, of course not." The evening stretched ahead of her with nothing to do except worry. If she'd been back at her apartment, she'd have switched on the huge overhead lights and worked on one of the vehicles in her workshop.

Joe ate the last of his stew with apparent enjoyment.

Make him talk. Fill the silence. "How many brothers do you have?" She knew of course, but anything to stop her mind worrying.

"You've met Saber. He's the oldest and married to Emily. Next is Felix. He's married to Tomasine. Leo comes after Felix. He's married to Isabella. Then it's me and Sly. You haven't met my twin, Sly."

"You miss him."

"I don't want to talk about him."

Okaay. Bad choice. Moving on. "My brothers—you'll meet them in a few days. In age order there's Matthew, Oscar and Tyrone."

Joe reached over the table to cover her hand with his. "Don't worry. Everything will work out. We'll get you through your brothers' visit."

"You haven't met my brothers," Kiera said glumly. They wouldn't approve of her living in sin, even though a string of women sashayed through their bedroom doors. The rules only applied to her.

"Are you finished?" Joe gestured at her partially eaten meal.

"Yes." Her fingers twisted together in her lap, her hands tensing.

"Stand up and take off your jeans."

Kiera blinked, wondering if she'd heard correctly.

"Kiera."

He *had* ordered her to remove her jeans. She hesitated while he watched her, challenge etched on his features. Heck, maybe he was right. Get the first step over and done with now. If he didn't touch her soon, she'd become even jumpier. Finding a man had been her idea, but the deceit bore teeth that chomped on her own backside. Her attraction to him made things worse.

With a deep breath, she stood, pushing back her chair to give herself room. Joe also scooted his chair away from the table, his eyes glittering with a silent message. Dang if she understood the contents but something lurked in his features. Promise and intent—certainly. Attraction? That was the mystery because he held his emotions close.

A tremor went through her hands, making unfastening the button at the top of her jeans difficult. Finally, she managed the task, wrenching the fabric apart. Her zipper whispered downward, guided by quivering fingers. The denim slid down her hips and legs to reveal plain, pink cotton panties. She stepped out of her jeans, kicking them away with a swish of her right foot. Aware of his regard, her breasts rose and fell rapidly, her pulse rate picking up under his close scrutiny.

"Come here."

Kiera hesitated even though excitement claimed her. Sex had been in short supply recently, not for lack of offers but because she'd been concentrating on her business. She hadn't met anyone who tempted or excited her.

Apart from Joe.

She'd liked him from their first meeting, right back when she'd purchased the garage and set up shop. She'd hoped he'd pursue her since she'd sensed the same interest in him. Instead his brother's arrest and subsequent imprisonment changed him from happy-go-lucky to a brooding stranger. She wasn't the only one to remark on the changes in him.

"Do you intend to fight me on everything?"

"I have a problem with orders."

"You have a problem with obedience," he corrected.

"You're a male. You would say that."

“Come here.”

This time she sensed a test, and if she failed, he’d send her packing. She didn’t want to botch this, not with her brothers arriving in mere days. With a put-upon sigh to inform him she didn’t appreciate the order, she rounded the table and approached him.

Approval shone on his face when she halted in front of him. “That wasn’t difficult, was it?”

“No.” Not when his gaze caressed her, sending ripples of awareness skittering across every inch of her skin. She took in his relaxed pose and the distinct bulge in his work-worn jeans. Her breath hissed out with relief. The attraction heating her body went both ways. Joe liked the scenery and wasn’t perturbed about his telltale erection in the slightest. She approved of his sexual confidence even if his bossy manner ruffled her feminine fur. “What next?”

“Kiera, if you don’t stop trying to direct me I *will* gag you.”

Her mouth dropped open, and when he chuckled, she closed it again with a distinct snap of teeth.

“Give me your hand.”

If he wanted to hold hands—fine. She stretched out her hand and he clasped it with his larger one. Then he moved—a blur of feline motion, so fast the speed took her by surprise. She found herself draped across his knees and staring at the cream tiles on the kitchen floor. A couple of them were cracked. “You should replace those tiles before the cracks get worse.”

“Quiet.”

“Joe!” Kiera struggled, trying to get off his knee. He subdued her with annoying ease. She stilled, her heart hammering in time with her rapid breathing. “What are you doing?”

His hand came down on her bottom with a sharp crack. She squeaked in surprise and affront, the sting on her backside smarting. She wanted to rub the sore spot. Heck, she’d like to aim a kick at his nuts and see how he liked that.

“You can’t spank me like a naughty child.”

“Someone needs to discipline you.”

Before she formed a retort, a series of blows rained down on her bottom. One after the other from slightly different angles. Her cheeks grew hot—both the ones on her face and those of her ass. She squirmed and wriggled, but he held her firmly.

“Joe!” He paid no heed to her objections and applied his hand again.

The initial pain subsided, replaced by a blooming heat. He paused to caress her bottom, the gentleness in his touch taking her by surprise. She became aware of the increased dampness from her pussy and shuddered when his fingers skirted the elastic band of her panties. He feathered a touch over the skin of her delicate inner thighs and she failed to hold back her moan of delight.

“Why are you spanking me?” *Hold on to the objections. Don't let him think you liked his brutish attention.*

“If you have to ask, you obviously need more.” He jerked her panties down and smacked her again.

This time the slaps still hurt, but worse came the knowledge he was studying her bare butt. A prickle of edgy awareness slammed through her gut. Shameful intrigue.

“You have a sexy ass, Kiera.”

His words confirmed her suspicions, and the heat on her backside and in her pussy increased. Another smack came, lower and closer to her moist heat.

A groan escaped her clenched teeth. She worried her bottom lip, determined not to cry out again. The smacks continued to rain down. Hard. Soft. Teasing. Seductive. The swats transcended punishment until they became foreplay. Embarrassing wetness seeped from her pussy.

“And right now your ass is a pretty pink color.”

“You're a brute.” Despite the words, not a shred of anger colored them and she suspected he realized the change in her.

He cupped one butt cheek, his gentleness taking her by surprise once again. To her mortification, another needy cry emerged, distinctly sexual in tone. She craved Joe's cock, fantasized about him stripping off his faded jeans and shoving it into her. A few hot, nasty words whispered in her ear wouldn't go astray either.

His finger strayed to the valley between her cheeks. Her pulse rate sped up and she lifted into his touch. Not even his amused laughter stopped her from seeking her goal – his fingers rubbing her aching clit.

“Still trying to control my actions, Kiera?”

She muttered her favorite curse and squealed when his hand landed on her sensitive butt.

“Give in to me, babe. I can keep this up all night.”

Not if his massive erection rated a say in the matter. Men were simple creatures, governed by their small brains. Once the blood dispersed from their heads, they didn't have a choice. She'd discover Joe's breaking point, crook her little finger and turn him to mushy toast.

She shifted her hips, grinding down on his erection. The tiny bit of friction she managed against her clit whispered pleasure across her nerve endings.

Joe – the great big lug – didn't react. At the least, she'd expected a groan. A curse. *Something.* That big boy must be giving him some discomfort.

She wriggled again and he slapped her ass. He aimed the smack low and close to her pussy. A traitorous groan squeezed free. His brutish behavior worked well. He'd managed to make her hot and needy with a few well-placed swats. She ached for the next step, positively cried out for his big erection to push into her and fill the emptiness inside her.

Without warning, he stood, holding her carefully until she caught her balance. With an enigmatic expression on his face he said, "Come with me."

Kiera hitched up her panties. He grabbed the pink cotton and whipped them down her legs before she could blink.

"You won't need those."

"But—"

He hustled her down the passage and didn't stop until they reached his bedroom. Joe released her to switch on a bedside lamp. Dusk had fallen during their meal and the light brought interesting shadows into play on the walls and faded carpet.

"Take off the rest of your clothes."

Another order. She shrugged inwardly. Naked meant they were heading in the right direction. A dart of anticipation twisted through her lower body. Her clit throbbed. Kiera unbuttoned her blue shirt and dragged it off with unseemly haste. Her bra followed, hitting the carpet with a thud. No doubt he was laughing at her, but she didn't care. Soon—very soon—he'd help cure her of this simmering sexual frustration holding her in its grip.

"Pretty." He reached out to lightly tug on one of her nipples. The firm jerk streaked down her body, adding another layer to her neediness.

"Isn't it time for you to strip?" In truth she couldn't wait to view his body. His ass looked good in the faded jeans he normally wore, the denim cupping his butt while clinging to his hips and muscular thighs. Her gaze swept his bulging groin, noting his jeans were faded in interesting places.

He focused on her, the stark beauty of his face making her breath catch. Despite his bossiness, he tripped her switch. She swallowed, noting the primitive hunger in his face and the way his nostrils flared as if he enjoyed the heavy scent of her arousal.

His hands went to his jeans and he unbuttoned the fly leisurely. One button sprang open at a time, the V of flesh gradually growing. Kiera licked her lips and she couldn't help but notice the way his mouth tipped up in a faint smile. The wretch was enjoying her heady expectation. Finally his heavy cock sprang free.

A soft *oh* popped from her unbidden when she noticed he wasn't wearing underwear. "Commando?" she croaked.

"I haven't had time to do the laundry."

"Oh." Her language skills deserted her and she stared, imagining him thrusting into her. She stepped from foot to foot, edgy with need. Aching.

"Would you like to touch?"

"Yes." She wanted to see more of him, the urgent need a thirst in her.

Instead of stripping the jeans and the rest of his clothes, he closed the distance between them and placed his hands on her shoulders. Every time she breathed, the rich scent of him filled her lungs.

"Down you go."

His words finally pierced her sexual haze and she sent him a blank look. "What?"

"On your knees." The faint pressure of his hands at her shoulders reinforced the order.

"But—"

"No buts about it. I want you on your knees now."

Irritation simmered in Kiera and she was tempted to tell him to go fuck himself. Except refusing his request—no, order—wouldn't ease the need twisting through her. Not even her trusty vibe would put out the fire he'd stoked. "If I'd realized you were such a bully, I would've told you to fuck off." Putting her thoughts into words didn't ease her frustration, and they made his features tighten. He didn't display a shred of indulgence or amusement. "Oh, all right," she muttered with bad grace. She sank to her knees in front of him and came face-to-face with his cock.

"Good girl."

Kiera swallowed, wincing a bit at the throb from her butt. She had no doubt her first spanking would stay with her for days. The notion sent a new surge of heat pulsing through her. "You want me to wag my tail too?"

"Not this time," he said smoothly. Joe took his cock in his right hand and stroked himself. Not a shred of discomfort or embarrassment showed in him. The move was entirely natural, one of a man at ease with his sexuality.

Kiera couldn't tear her gaze away. She watched each stroke with bemused interest while she pondered where he was going with this demonstration.

"Open up for me, babe."

Kiera opened her mouth like a baby bird, her breath emerging in a harsh pant.

Once again he surprised her. Instead of guiding his cock to her, he painted her lips with his pre-come. She swallowed and couldn't help flicking out her tongue to test his flavor. It burst over her. A little salty. A bit tart.

"Good, babe. I want you to take me inside your sexy mouth." As he said the words, he held his shaft to her lips. He didn't force his way inside but waited for her to follow his suggestion.

Kiera shivered and opened wider, shaping her lips around the head of his cock.

"Lick the tip. I want you to remember my taste."

His husky orders flowed one into another. *Lick here. Take me deeper. Suck.* Suddenly Kiera didn't mind his bossiness. His murmurs showed her exactly what he liked, becoming an advanced class in fellatio. She swirled her tongue over the flared crown, flicked the underside and teased the slit with her tongue.

He cupped her skull, his hold firm but not scary. As instructed, she took him deeper and sucked, her ribs expanding while she took deep breaths through her nose. His cock shuttled in and out, and when she would have normally started to feel overwhelmed and panicky from lack of breath, his husky instructions allowed her to continue. She clutched his jean-clad butt and swallowed.

The sounds of his heavy breathing and the scent of his arousal mixed with her own. His pre-come leaked freely now, his cock much larger than before. Her head bobbed with each move, the swirl of her tongue and suction sending an echo to her pussy. Her channel clenched as he slid across her tongue.

"That's enough, babe." His hands gripped her skull as he pulled out of her mouth.

She sat back on her heels and glanced up at him. "Don't you want to come?"

"Inside you," he said. "Are you on birth control shots?"

"No."

"We'll visit Gavin tomorrow and organize birth control."

She wanted to protest his highhandedness, but his suggestion was practical. Felines didn't need to worry about disease. Condoms weren't necessary if she took precautions against pregnancy.

Joe paused in the middle of stripping off his T-shirt. "Aren't you going to protest?"

"No."

His brows shot up but he didn't comment further. His shirt hit the ground. "On the bed. Spread your legs for me."

When she hesitated, he scowled. Oh heck. She'd hate him to change his mind about posing as her boyfriend. Maybe she should curb her stubborn gene. She climbed on the bed and followed his instructions, parting her legs and flashing the swollen folds of her pussy at him.

He sent her a lazy grin of approval and heat flowed anew. She sucked in a sharp breath, the waiting and the unknown like a phantom assault on her senses.

Joe stripped his jeans down his legs, and she couldn't take her gaze off him while he prowled to the bed. "I'm not sure where I want to touch first."

Her nipples puckered and a flush crept from her face down to her chest. This experience with Joe was something totally new and unexpected. Her two previous lovers moved quicker, jumped straight to the main event. In. Out. Moving on. Not that she hadn't experienced orgasms with them, but this encounter with Joe was something else entirely.

"Where would you like me to touch?"

"Am I allowed to talk now?" Sexual frustration lent a sharp note to her question.

The flash of a teasing smirk gave her a glimpse of Joe from the past, his sinful mouth twisting before falling back to neutral. "I'll take that as undecided. Turn over."

Kiera glared at him for an instant. He merely stood by the bed and waited patiently for her to follow his order. With a put-upon sigh, she turned over to lie facedown on the bed.

"Spread your legs."

After a brief internal battle, she complied. It wasn't as if he hadn't seen everything she possessed already. The mattress shifted a fraction under his weight. His fingers skimmed over her ass and she jumped.

"Easy," he whispered. "I'm not going to hurt you." His exploration continued, a quiver rocking her when a finger parted the lips of her pussy. She sucked in a quick breath and held it, anxiously waiting for his next move.

Nothing happened.

Disappointment struck deep.

Joe jerked one of the pillows from the top of the bed. "Lift your hips for me."

When she complied, he tucked the pillow beneath her.

"Comfortable?"

"Yes." At least her butt didn't ache when she lay on her tummy.

"Much better," he said, and he pushed a single finger into her. It wasn't the deep penetration she craved, but at least it was advancement. "Feel good?"

"Yes."

"I'm going to use my tongue on you soon. I'll lick away some of those silky juices."

Oh please, please lick me now. A soft whimper built in her throat and escaped before she censored the telling sound.

His soft chuckle told of his amusement and her hands curled into the silky black duvet cover. Frustration filled her, yet somehow she managed to contain the smartass demand tingling at the tip of her tongue. Progress. Given his performance to date, he wouldn't have a problem calling a halt to proceedings. Wretch that he was, he'd probably confiscate her vibe and make sure she couldn't touch herself either. If that happened, her revenge would be swift.

The lap of his tongue over one smarting ass cheek halted her notions of revenge. His tongue was rough and slightly abrasive, allowing her to catalogue its journey toward her clit. The tiny nubbin throbbed as she imagined his sinful mouth closing around it, the careful stroke of his tongue stimulating the bundle of nerves.

Her breasts ached in sympathy and she stealthily moved one hand down to tug her nipple. The firm pressure leaped down to piggyback on the pleasure Joe's touch was wringing from her. His tongue traveled the valley between her ass cheeks. The rough texture abraded the tight rosette, bringing all sorts of naughty scenarios to mind. Her last boyfriend had wanted to try anal sex and she'd declined. Quite frankly she didn't think she'd refuse Joe anything.

His tongue circled the untried flesh. The uneven thumping of her heart underscored her purr of approval, her need for more. She almost wailed out loud when his tongue crept lower to curl around her swollen clit. The finger returned to her pussy, pushing deep as he sucked her clit.

Kiera pinched her nipple and the brush of his tongue sent her into overload. Her frustration exploded into pleasure, her vagina clamping down on his finger. For long

moments her body twitched, caught in the firestorm of heat and energy. Finally the spasms died away and she gasped for breath.

“Turn over, Kiera.” He pulled the pillow from under her and she forced her heavy body to follow his instructions. She stared at him, identifying the glitter of arousal in his face. His erection was heavy and the tip shone with pre-come. She watched him lift his finger to his mouth and cleanse it of her juices with the lap of his tongue.

Tension ratcheted up in her again, her orgasm a mere appetizer.

He caught her gaze and held it while he leaned over her to open a drawer. He retrieved a strip of condoms from inside and ripped one off, tossing the others within easy reach. Her pulse quickened, beating a tattoo at her throat. Her eyes lowered to his mouth, still shiny with her juices. She wanted to kiss him and taste herself. The need to beg for a kiss swelled inside her, but she bit her bottom lip and counseled herself to wait for his next move.

The foil of the condom packaging rustled as he removed the condom. He rolled the latex down his length then leaned over her, biceps bunching—a silent show of his strength.

He lowered his head, their mouths meeting with urgency. His tongue speared past her lips, the hot stabs of movement making her imagine his cock invading her body. Joe settled between her legs and pushed into her with one easy glide. Her inner walls parted under his invasion, stretching to accommodate his length and width.

“Joe.” Kiera sighed her pleasure. How had he known the waiting would make the sensations better, more intense? Even though she’d climaxed shortly before the sensual tension ramped up inside her.

He set a rapid pace, rocking into her and retreating, the sounds of fucking filling the air. Her hips canted upward while the muscles of her inner thighs quivered. She clenched them around Joe, clamping them around his hips. Oh yes. *Right there.* He continued to kiss her, quick, biting kisses that made her desperate. A decadent tickle of heat sparked to life. Joe trailed kisses down her neck, the hunger between them turning razor-sharp when he licked her mating site.

He ran his abrasive tongue back and forth over the pad of skin at the junction of neck and shoulder. Pleasure burst over her, her pussy clamping down on his cock.

“You’re such a sexy fuck,” he whispered in her ear. His warm breath feathered more heat through her. Every nerve ending shivered in anticipation. “You feel good, clutching my cock.”

Kiera gripped his shoulders and ran her tongue down his neck, teasing his mating site in return. Dangerous, a small voice whispered, but she couldn’t care, not when pleasure surged through every cell.

She swished her tongue lazily over the tender spot until he growled a warning. His fingers closed around one nipple and twisted, the spike of pain sending her catapulting into climax.

Joe growled again and thrust hard. He remained balls-deep in her, and she actually felt the twitch when his orgasm overtook him. He shuddered and she wrapped her arms around him, protective and pleased with herself at the same time.

Despite his bossiness, Joe hit all the hotspots and more around a woman's body.
Best sex ever.

Chapter Four

Joe pulled out of Kiera's clinging heat, his heart still pounding against his ribs. Good sex. No, great sex.

Sly would love her.

Reality chased on the heels of this reflection. If Maggie Scarlet didn't have a surge of guilt soon, his twin would spend years in jail. Brushing aside the anger that bubbled to the surface, he tossed the condom in the trash bin to the left of the bed.

"You okay?" he asked, his voice emerging gruff and stark. A picture of sensual femininity, she certainly appeared all right, but he hadn't cajoled or wooed her. He'd taken and demanded, goaded by her stubborn manner. Worked for him. He hadn't felt so loose and limber since—

He broke off the thought to scowl at her. Soft rose color flushed Kiera's face and wisps of hair had escaped the ponytail at her nape.

She rolled toward him and winced. "My ass hurts."

"No problem."

She let out a snort, prompting him to chuckle. "It's a problem for me," she muttered. "How am I meant to sit down tomorrow?"

"Carefully," he said, barely holding the quiver of his lips at bay. "You'll think of me and all the things I can do to you if you behave."

"You're a brute."

Joe did smile this time, but she didn't see because he'd reached over to get something out of the drawer. "Turn over."

"Are you going to smack me again?" Suspicion colored her words and she didn't move.

"Not today. Turn over."

She grumbled but turned over to lie facedown again. Joe allowed his smile freedom and it stretched across his face so far, his facial muscles ached. He opened the bottle of gel and squeezed a dollop onto his palm. Kiera groaned when he started to spread the cooling gel over her buttocks. He'd discovered the after-sun gel worked pretty well on bottoms and applied it gently, allowing her to become used to his touch. Gradually, he let his fingers delve into her more intimately, dipping to feather over her clit. He hadn't finished with her tonight. He'd wanted to fuck her the moment he first saw her. If Sly had been here still, they'd have made their move already. Fact.

His finger dipped into her entrance.

She stirred to glance over her shoulder. "Again?"

“You have a problem with that?”

She sighed. “I don’t think I can come again.”

“I’ll look on that as a challenge. Besides, we want to make sure our scents are mingled by the time your brothers arrive to visit.”

He caught her soft curse and smirked. A personal challenge. “You okay with me taking you from behind?”

Some women hated the position. Personally, he liked it, but he’d pushed her enough tonight.

“That’s fine.”

Her instant acceptance of this made him wonder where her boundaries lay and the notion made him keenly anticipate the summer ahead. Kiera Pascoe intrigued him. He’d assist her with her brothers, and Kiera would alleviate his loneliness.

He played with her, catching each quiver and shudder while cataloguing her reactions for future reference. She responded to the slightest touch and he couldn’t wait to test more of her boundaries.

Joe strummed his thumb over her clit, and her breathing went shallow. She clenched her thighs together, holding his hand in place. “Joe.” His name was a soft protest.

He reached over, grabbed another condom and suited up. Seconds later, he dipped his cock into her wet heat. She let out a quiet hiss when he pushed deeper, and he closed his eyes, focusing on the clinging warmth of her pussy around his cock. He hadn’t given her breasts much attention and he intended to make up for the lack. He gave a decisive shove, forcing his balls into contact with her skin. Fully seated, he halted to enjoy the warmth penetrating the condom.

Fucking her would feel even better once she went on birth control. A shudder worked the length of his body as he imagined the heat they’d generate together.

He pulled out leisurely, savoring the drag of flesh against his cock head. Unable to resist, he quickened his pace. In and out. In and out. He set up a fast rhythm, too fast, but he was helpless to resist the silken goodness of her cunt—the lock of grasping heat. He drove inside, his heart pumping in a ballsy, staccato beat.

Joe reached around to cup a plump breast. It snuggled into his palm, her nipple tight with arousal. Already he’d learned she didn’t mind the bite of pain in her loving, and he tugged and pulled on her nipple while he continued to stroke into her pussy.

“Oh yes,” Kiera mewed, and pushed back against him. Joe released her breast and burrowed his fingers between her legs, teasing her clit because he knew he wouldn’t last much longer. He plunged inside her again, the tingle in his balls escalating, past the point of control. His hips surged and he thrust hard and fast, his muscles locking when he tipped over into orgasm.

The contractions continued for long moments until he came back to himself, relaxed, sated with pleasure. He brushed her swollen nub insistently, the small bundle

of nerves jumping beneath his questing fingers. Her breathing switched up, becoming sharp and harsh, and he covered her back with his sweaty body, enveloping her in sultry heat. His tongue swished over her mating site, the strokes timed to match the strum of his fingers on her sex. A fine tremor went through her and she stiffened, her cry of satisfaction echoing in his bedroom.

When she quieted, he separated their bodies and ditched the condom. Joe figured she wouldn't mind a little cleanup, so he rose from the bed and padded down the passage to the bathroom. When he returned with a damp cloth, she was lying on her side, eyes closed, her breathing slow and even.

He'd tired her out. Smiling, he gently cleansed her lower body and she barely stirred. Tossing the cloth on the floor, he pulled back the covers and put her in his bed. He carefully removed the elastic band from her hair, leaving it on the nightstand for her to find in the morning. Only then did he switch off the light and join her in his bed.

She snuggled against his chest and he fell asleep with a smile on his face.

Hours later, Joe awoke with a jerk. His gaze sought the digital alarm clock. Four thirty in the morning. The muffled breathing coming from beside him confused him for a moment until he remembered Kiera.

I'm glad you're happy, Joe. You need to move on.

Sly entered his mind without warning. Happiness slammed through Joe at the contact with his twin.

Sly, you'd like her. She's smart and funny and mouthy. Sexy as hell.

Forget me, Joe.

The door between their minds slammed shut before he formulated a reply. Tears stung his eyes—tears he refused to let fall. He moved closer to Kiera, taking comfort from her presence and resolved to speak to Emily again. Somehow they had to persuade Maggie to tell the truth. Her lies were hurting an honest man.

* * * * *

Sly lay on his cot in solitary confinement, his cock tight with arousal. He didn't move, didn't make an effort to jerk off. He'd tried that before, his mental state dropping lower than ever.

He recalled Maggie and the last time they'd been together. Anger burst through him, ripping away the sexual tension. His feline stretched violently beneath his skin, agitated and restless. There was nowhere for him to shift here, nowhere for him to run. His feline bled through his control, claws pushing past the tips of his fingers. He curled them into the wooden sides of the cot and tried not to think of the endless, empty years ahead.

* * * * *

Joe woke slowly, more rested than he'd felt in days. A curtain of dark hair covered his shoulder, and for a brief second, confusion gripped him. The woman stirred, turning away from him and recognition hit. Sexy Kiera Pascoe. He relaxed, enjoying the unexpected vision.

His.

The possessive nature of his thoughts took him by surprise, and he automatically shoved the idea away. Kiera was his for a few months, and once her family left New Zealand, his life would revert to normal.

The birds tweeting in the trees outside gave an indication of the time. Despite his erection, he rolled out of bed, taking care to move stealthily. He stared at her, tempted to climb right back into the ruffled bed and kiss her awake. No, Kiera needed more sleep.

Naked, he padded down the passage to the bathroom. He flipped on the shower and stepped under the water, shivering when it took long moments to heat. At least the cold water put a dampener on his erection and sharpened his mind. Normally he and Sly would get out of bed at the same time, their inner body clocks tuned to each other even though they possessed their own rooms.

God, he missed their one-upmanship and their fights to use the bathroom first in the mornings. Joe grabbed a cake of soap. He swished it across his chest and under his arms while opening his mind to cast about for his brother.

Sly had shut him out again.

Frustrated, he cleansed the rest of his body, turned off the shower and rapidly towed dry. Back in his bedroom, he grabbed a clean pair of jeans and stepped into them, making a mental note to put on a load of laundry before he departed to cut hay.

Joe left his room and stepped into Sly's, his heart aching at the empty space. He filched one of Sly's clean T-shirts and moved on to the kitchen.

Ten minutes later, a load of laundry was underway and the tea made. He was about to take a mug of tea in to Kiera when she appeared in the kitchen doorway.

"Hey," he said, taking in her loose hair and ruffled appearance. Normally, the morning after was no big deal. He and Sly charmed their lovers and sent them on their way. Kiera was different because he'd agreed to let her stay with him. He stared at her, watched her yawn and found himself wanting to hug her. "Morning," he said, at a bit of a loss.

"What's good about it?" she snarled, her English accent full of disdain.

His eyes widened. "I made tea. Do you want something to eat?"

"What time is it? My eyes refuse to focus." She sat on a chair and immediately winced. She shot him a dirty scowl.

"Five thirty. I need to leave by six. Why don't you go back to bed?" He shunted a mug of tea toward her. "Maybe put some more gel on your butt."

His comment earned him another glower. "I'm awake now." She took a sip and shuddered. "Where's the sugar?"

Joe handed her the sugar bowl and a teaspoon. "At least give me points for getting the milk right."

She grunted, dumped two spoonfuls of sugar into her mug and stirred the tea. "Do you want me to do some shopping or any stuff around here?"

Once again she surprised him with her offer. The woman kept throwing him curveballs. Hell, she flat-out intrigued him. A society girl who enjoyed tinkering with engines and machinery should have clued him in to her originality.

"If you have time to buy some groceries that would be great. Let me get my wallet."

She swished her hand through the air in a negative motion. "Don't worry about it. I want to contribute to some of the expenses while I'm here."

"You don't have to." Joe popped two slices of bread in the toaster.

"You're doing me a huge favor. I want to."

Joe propped one hip against the kitchen counter while he waited for the toast. "Where are your brothers staying when they visit?"

"I told them I'd book them in at the bed and breakfast. I doubt any of them will want to stay at my apartment."

"They could stay here."

"Bite your tongue," Kiera said, her blue eyes widening with a touch of panic. "If they stay here, I'd have to watch myself twenty-four hours a day. I'd worry about slipping. They can visit, but if you invite them to stay, I'll think up a really bad punishment for you." Her glower didn't lessen. "I'm sure Ambar will help me."

Joe laughed out loud. "Jake and Hari have their hands full with her."

"She's a brave woman, taking on those two, and deserves a medal," Kiera countered crisply in her upper class English. Her precise accent, dripping with grumpiness, teased a smile from him.

"Does Ambar know about the arrangement between us?"

"Yes, but she won't say anything to my brothers or anyone else. She promised me she'd subtly put the word around with her customers. By the end of the day, the Middlemarch shifters and most of the humans will hear about how we're living in sin."

A mechanical pop dragged Joe's attention from her. After a glance at his watch, he set another two slices of bread toasting. He spread butter and cherry jam on his toast and took a seat with Kiera.

"Are you normally grumpy in the mornings?"

"It takes me awhile to wake. A cup of tea always helps."

Joe pushed his plate of toast toward her. "How very English of you. Have some toast. Do you need to pick your brothers up at the airport?"

"They're renting a vehicle for the duration of their stay."

Joe grabbed the next lot of toast, topped up their tea and rejoined her. For the first time in months, he'd found a real purpose.

"I might be late again tonight."

Kiera shrugged. "It's hay season and you're busy. I get it."

Maggie used to complain about the crazy hours. She'd expected them to run after her and cater to her needs.

"If you want, I can always bring you something to eat."

"Thanks." Her offer warmed some of the chill residing inside him. Maggie would never run around after him. "You won't bring me curry." A statement. He didn't mind mild spice, but Hari's curries made steam come out his ears.

She sniffed, shifting carefully on the wooden chair. "That will depend on your behavior."

"I made you tea and toast."

"You also woke me at an ungodly hour with those clanking shower pipes. I owe you."

"Payback might earn you another spanking." Joe wanted to grin. He didn't tell her he wouldn't spank her again for a few days because she was sore. But she'd remember their lovemaking each time she sat down. He stood and rounded the table to halt in front of her. "Do I get a kiss before I go?"

"We should practice."

Some of Joe's feel-good mood evaporated at her words. Their relationship was a pretense. A time limit applied to their time together.

Kiera rose and closed the gap between them. She wasn't wearing a bra beneath her T-shirt. Her hard nipples pushed against him, his thin, well-washed tee no barrier to sensation. Reaction—swift and intoxicating—plunged to his groin. Joe ran his hand down her spine, his hand coming to rest on her butt. He pressed her closer, letting her discover his growing erection.

"You don't have time," she said in a quiet voice.

"No I don't, but we'll have tonight." Joe kissed her before she replied. Their lips crushed together, her acceptance of him immediate. Tea and the faint tang of mint toothpaste exploded on his taste buds, and he deepened the kiss, copping a feel at the same time. Aware of the passing time, he reluctantly loosened his embrace and stepped away from her. "Ring me if you need anything. You have my number, right? Reception is patchy some days. If you can't get me, contact Saber or Emily. I'm mowing a paddock for Saber for part of the day, and they'll know where to find me."

"I have your number. See you later." She pressed a kiss to his cheek. "I'll get the washing for you."

"You don't have to wait on me." Although her offer would save him time.

"I promise not to get into the habit of hanging out your washing."

Joe laughed briefly while trying to work her out and finally nodded. "Thanks."

He drove away from the house puzzled and a fraction off balance. Kiera didn't act like the other women who'd paraded in and out of his bedroom. He couldn't predict what she'd do next, which enticed him to spend time with her. She didn't bore him like the other women simply because she kept him guessing.

Kiera made him want to learn her intimately, all of her secrets. Even stranger was the yearning deep inside to cherish her. The possessive angle, he had covered already.

Shaking his head, he pulled up sharply and backed up the drive. He parked his SUV and climbed out to get on his tractor. With a muttered curse about concentration, he headed out again in his tractor. The woman diverted him. The next few months would prove interesting. He wondered if he'd manage to let her go as he'd promised.

* * * * *

Kiera tidied the kitchen and hung out the washing once the machine cycle finished. She set another load going and decided on a quick shower before going to work. She'd unpack her bag later tonight and add a few personal touches around to place. Strew around some motoring magazines and a couple of DVDs of her favorite car show. Dump her toiletries in the bathroom and purchase some of her favorite foods. She'd put out a bowl of mints plus some fruit. Maybe a couple of candles. Small touches to help convince her brothers she and Joe were a couple.

Early morning passed rapidly and, pleased with her progress, she set off to her workshop at eight. She parked in front and groaned, rubbing her butt once she climbed out of her truck. Every time she sat, her bottom reminded her of Joe's spanking fetish. Her ass wasn't bruised—she'd checked in the bathroom mirror—but it was definitely tender. Every twinge made her recall their wild lovemaking and pushed heat and arousal through her. Her breasts ached in time with her butt, and her panties were wetter than she was comfortable with.

Drat the man. Her initial attraction had morphed into a monster. She wasn't sure how she'd manage the next few months without losing her heart to him. His bossy charm threatened to overwhelm her. Coupled with his magical touch and sexy lips, she *knew* she was in big trouble.

While she liked sex, she didn't want to marry a human or mate with another feline. She couldn't envision either type of male permitting her to continue with her interest, and especially a take-charge male like Joe. No, much better to remain single and run her life the way she saw fit.

Kiera unlocked the side door of her workshop and immediately opened the huge roller doors to disperse the gloominess inside. She pulled on a pair of overalls and commenced work on the postmaster's car.

"You'd better be spitting out some details, girl." Ambar's voice yanked her from sensual dreams of Joe.

Kiera wheeled herself from under the car and stared up at her friend. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

"I've come for the deets you didn't spill last night."

"There's nothing to tell."

"Kiera!"

"Joe and I talked yesterday and decided to help each other out. I moved in with him, and in exchange, I fix his vehicles and farm machinery for free."

Ambar's dark brows shot upward. "That's what you told us last night. There's more to 'fess up."

"We live in the same house and have separate rooms." Kiera wanted to grin at the frustration on her friend's face.

"I don't believe you." After a glance over her shoulder, she bent over and sniffed. At the same time she opened her mouth, dragging Kiera's scent over her receptors. A crafty smile spread across her face and she rocked back on her heels. "You didn't spend the entire night in separate rooms. Tell me. What's he like in the sack?"

"My lips are sealed."

Frustration simmered on Ambar's face. "Pooh, you're no fun. What about the girlfriend code?"

"Don't you need to get back to the shop?"

"Rohan and Kiran are minding shop. They were groping each other behind the counter, and I figured I'd give them some privacy." Despite her rolling eyes, Kiera didn't have any trouble seeing Ambar's love for her brother and his mate.

"Since you're here, you can take dictation. I need some groceries. I'll pick them up before you close. There's a notepad in my office."

Kiera wheeled her trolley back under the postmaster's car, grinning at her friend's grumbles. A pity Ambar had mates because she would've been perfect to set on one of her brothers.

"What can you tell me about Sly?" she asked when Ambar returned.

"He's identical to Joe in looks and manner. Most people have trouble telling them apart. They're close." Ambar hesitated. "Not in a sick way, but they do almost everything together. It's rare to see one without the other. At least it used to be."

Kiera discerned the mental shrug in her friend. "Everyone says he's innocent."

"Sly is innocent," Ambar said instantly. "Oh, it's true he had sex with that woman and tied her up, but she was a willing participant. Joe and Sly both swear it's the truth, and I believe them. She wanted to save her own skin and didn't care about the fallout for Sly and Joe. Why the questions? Do you have concerns?"

Kiera finished her mental checklist and wheeled out from under the car. "No. I've noticed Joe's loss of weight and mood changes since I moved here. I'd like to help, but I don't want to blunder in where I'm not wanted."

"I would trust Joe with my life. Sly too."

Kiera nodded, glad of Ambar's confirmation of her gut instincts. Of course, if her brothers learned of the whole sordid mess things might become awkward.

* * * * *

Emily Mitchell wasn't sure why she was bothering because Maggie wasn't the same woman she used to call friend. She parked down the road from where Maggie lived with her husband and waited. A fraction before nine she watched Maggie's husband drive away in a late-model car. She waited another five minutes before hurrying up the driveway of Maggie's house. She pressed the doorbell, the strident clamor of the buzzing echoing inside the house.

The door opened instantly. Emily didn't wait for an exchange of social niceties. She barged past Maggie, entering the luxurious house without greeting.

"Which way is the kitchen?"

Maggie's lips compressed and she glowered. "I'm on my way out."

"This won't take long. I need a cup of tea." Emily caught the scent of bacon and followed it to the kitchen. She burst inside, surprising a woman doing dishes.

"Joan, could you make us a cup of tea please. We'll be in the den." Maggie turned away and Emily followed her.

Maggie dropped onto a black leather two-seater.

Emily strode across the thick, woolen carpet to sit in the one opposite. "You've been crying. What's wrong?"

"As if you care."

"We were friends once. I was married to your brother."

"You never loved him," Maggie spat.

"Of course I did," Emily said in exasperation. They'd repeated this conversation several times since Michael's death and Emily's subsequent remarriage to Saber Mitchell.

"You never loved him enough to have a child." A tear trickled down Maggie's cheek.

"Michael cheated on me. You can't dispute the fact. Maggie, what is this really about?"

"I lost my baby two months ago."

Emily's heart twisted in sympathy, recalling the nagging ache of pain too well. Her hand crept down to cradle her belly. "I'm sorry. The ache of loss never goes away but time does make the pain easier. You have your husband." Saber had certainly saved her from herself.

"He doesn't love me."

"Of course he does."

Another tear rolled down Maggie's face. Emily fished a clean hanky from her pocket and handed it over. "We have a marriage of convenience. He's gay." A croak of horror escaped Maggie and she stared at Emily through tear-filmed eyes. "Please don't tell anyone. I didn't mean to blurt it out. I promised I wouldn't tell."

Emily hesitated, aware of the weapon Maggie had handed her—a smoking gun. Could she use it? She hesitated a fraction longer and hardened her resolve. Maggie had trampled over their friendship and she didn't owe her a thing.

"You need to tell the truth about Sly. He didn't abduct you. You went willingly. It's time for you to stop playing with Sly's life. He shouldn't spend the next ten years in prison."

"I can't." Panic twisted Maggie's face. "I won't."

"If you don't confess I *will* go to the papers. By the time I'm finished, everyone will hear the truth about your husband."

"The scandal will ruin him."

"And you haven't done enough damage to your husband's good name already?" Emily mocked. "Not to mention Sly. Being locked up in jail is killing him." She stood. "Don't worry about tea for me. I'll give you one week to have Sly released or I'll spread the intimate facts about your husband and marriage."

Emily stomped from Maggie's house. Her skin crawled and she wanted a shower. The dirt Maggie rolled in now stuck to her and she loathed the squirmy, itchy sensation called guilt. Heck, she wasn't even sure she'd manage to carry out her threat to expose Maggie's husband. Time would tell. Sly's incarceration had broken their family and Emily badly wanted to fix them again. Joe and Sly had helped her when she reached rock bottom and she wanted to return the favor.

Her next stop was the library where she did some research on Maggie's husband. The latest newspaper stories told of his bid to stand in the mayoral race. Other stories mentioned him following in his uncle's footsteps and standing for parliament. Emily didn't understand why he chose to hide his sexual preferences. New Zealand had at least two gay members of parliament and they'd also had a transsexual MP at one stage. Most people didn't care. They wanted standup representation in exchange for their votes.

An hour later she suspected the identity of his lover. Maybe her next step before she talked to a reporter. She'd approach the other man and appeal to his good nature. He couldn't like his new background position. Maybe he'd exert some influence over Maggie and her husband.

Emily's last stop was the warehouse to pick up some supplies and the new bakeware she wanted for the café. She hadn't informed Saber of her intentions and decided she'd keep quiet at present to save an argument.

Time would tell if Maggie believed her threat enough to do the right thing.

Chapter Five

Saber dropped Joe off at home after a long day. Exhausted, Joe trudged toward the rear entrance. The scent of cooking meat wafted to him when he opened the door. Soft, off-tune singing came from the kitchen and, without warning, fatigue fell from him. He removed his footwear and entered the kitchen to find Kiera unpacking a box of groceries.

"Hey," he said in woeful understatement. Her presence worked like a balm, chasing away his loneliness and the ghosts stalking the house.

Kiera straightened to smile at him. "Dinner is almost ready. I made a casserole because I wasn't sure what time you'd arrive home."

Warmth suffused him. Her black hair tumbled loose around her shoulders, hanging in unruly curls. She wore denim shorts and a plain white sleeveless top. No bra. His feel-good sensation took on a distinctly sexual heat. He wanted to lick along the V neckline of her top and dip his fingers beneath to explore her unfettered breasts. She hovered, clearly uncertain of him, yet she wasn't running despite the rumors spreading around Middlemarch. "I'd kiss you but I don't want to get you dirty. Do I have time for a shower?"

"Of course."

"I'll be back in five."

Back in the kitchen after his shower, he grabbed a beer. "Want one?"

Kiera glanced up from arranging red and green apples in a bowl. "Please." She turned away to dish up their meal, and he took the time to appreciate the way her denim shorts pulled over her ass.

"Did you think of me today?"

"Every time I sat down," she said ruefully.

Joe felt his lips quirk up into a small smile. "Now you understand what will happen if you misbehave." He realized he was smiling more since coming into contact with her.

She snorted rudely and handed him the two plates of food. "Sit. I'll get the cutlery."

Joe hadn't savored a meal as much for months. Kiera helped mute his isolation, especially after a fruitless day praying for mental contact from Sly. "I thought we'd have an early night."

"And if I'm not tired?"

"Who mentioned sleeping?" Joe set his cutlery down. "Thanks for cooking for me."

"I like cooking." Kiera waved aside his appreciation. "People are starting to talk about us."

Joe shrugged. "Let them." Easy to imagine their gossip, especially from the uncharitable ones unacquainted with him or his brother. "Do the rumors and gossip bother you?"

"No, people have talked about me ever since I arrived in Middlemarch. They already think I'm weird."

"Babe, newsflash. Weird isn't in the picture. I bet you've received a host of single men bringing their vehicles in for repair."

"Yeah. So?"

"They're checking you out. Didn't any of them ask you out for a date?"

"A few. I said thanks but no thanks."

Curiosity rose in Joe. "Didn't any of them tempt you?"

She hesitated. "No, my occupation intrigues most men, but after a while they try to change me. They want me to appear more feminine. It's easier to ignore men and concentrate on doing what I enjoy."

"Until you need a man to fool your brothers."

She flashed a quick, gamine grin. "Yep."

"Your brothers don't approve of your business either?"

"No doubt they'll mention me going back to England with them a time or two."

"You're a damn fine mechanic," Joe said, meaning every word. "My tractor hasn't run as well for ages."

"Thanks." Kiera stood to clear the table.

"You cooked. Let me do the dishes."

"We can do them together. There aren't many."

Together. Joe liked the sound of that. "Saber and Emily invited us to dinner. I mentioned your brothers' visit. Saber said to bring them too."

"Safety in numbers. Great idea."

A chuckle burst from him. "They can't be that scary."

"You haven't met my brothers."

Joe's brothers—heck, his sisters-in-law—would be more than a match for Kiera's brothers. They cleaned up together, chatting about their days and the one to come. Finally the kitchen counters sparkled, the dirty dishes done.

Joe took her hand. "Let's go to bed."

"It's still daylight out."

"Your point?" He wanted to grin again, the lightheartedness inhabiting his brain a welcome change to the black darkness of the previous months.

"Never mind." She followed him obediently down the passage and into his bedroom. She'd tidied up in here too, the neat piles of laundry sitting on top of his dresser showing she'd done more than hang out his one load of washing.

"You don't have to do my washing for me."

"I had time. I won't always."

Joe heeded the unspoken warning. She didn't intend to wait on him hand and foot. Fair enough. He was used to doing household chores because he and Sly liked to live in an orderly home. "Strip for me," he said. "Then climb onto the bed and part your legs."

"Why?"

"I want to thank you for dinner and the other things you've done around here today."

Kiera's tongue darted out to moisten her lips. "No spanking?"

"You haven't misbehaved. *Yet*. Undress for me." Joe stood back and folded his arms across his chest. His gaze roved her body and anticipation soared. The longer he spent with her, the more she intrigued him. She enjoyed a masculine occupation and excelled at her job yet maintained her innate sexiness.

She lifted her shirt over her head, baring her breasts to him. The rounded globes were a luscious handful, the pert raspberry-colored nipples, delectable against his tongue. He couldn't wait to taste her again. When she hesitated, peeking at him from beneath lowered lashes, he nodded encouragement. "Go ahead."

Kiera unfastened the denim shorts and wiggled her hips to start their journey down her legs. Her cotton briefs followed and she stepped out of them, crawling onto the bed as he'd instructed. She settled in the middle of the mattress and parted her legs.

"Good girl." Joe rifled through one of his drawers and found a silky black scarf. He ran the delicate fabric across his palm, tempted to tie her. Not tonight. Instead he approached her. "I'm going to cover your eyes."

"Why?"

"To keep you off balance."

"You manage that without even trying." She bit her lip as if she regretted her outburst.

He maintained his impassive face with difficulty. "Good to know. I won't hurt you. You have my promise."

Her eyelids fluttered closed and she inhaled, her chest rising. "I trust you."

A sense of peace and pleasure seeped through Joe. He appreciated her faith in him. He lifted her head and tied the scarf, blindfolding her quickly and standing back to admire the result. "Tell me how you feel."

"Vulnerable. Turned-on."

But she hadn't mentioned calling a halt. That was the main thing. He circled the bed to stand at the end. The gleam of desire already coated her folds and her clit stood out, a hard knot against the rest of her sex. Joe had intended to remain fully clothed, but the pressure of his cock against his fly changed his mind. He stripped rapidly, leaving his clothes where they fell. He stroked his heavy cock while he studied her long legs, her breasts, her pussy. "Where should I touch you first?"

“Right here.” She slipped her hand between her legs, strumming a single finger along her slit and skimming over her clit. When she lifted her hand, juices coated her fingers.

Joe cursed beneath his breath. She was gonna kill him. It was his job to do the teasing. He moved closer and caught her hand. Her musky perfume rose, filling his senses. His feline stirred in a way he’d never reacted for Maggie. The concept gave him pause, a savage pain building in his chest. A croaked protest made him realize he was crushing her hand, and with a muttered apology, he lifted her fingers to his mouth.

His tongue lashed out to taste her. “Sweet,” he whispered.

Kiera moaned when he took her finger deeper, shifting her weight, the subtle lift of her hips a plea for him to change his focus to another part of her body. He ignored her appeal to rasp his tongue along the length of her digit, licking every inch of her skin clean. An answering heat sank straight to his balls and he used his free hand to tease his cock, timing the flicker of his tongue with the stroke of his fingers.

The rush to full arousal moved quicker than he liked and he halted his self-pleasuring. “I’m going to taste you now.” He released her hand and made contact with her knee in a subtle warning of what he intended to do next. Joe roughly parted her legs farther to make room for his body and settled in to feast.

He parted her labia and licked one plump fold. Her cream flooded his mouth, sweet and musky. Unable to resist, he traced her opening with his finger while licking in concert. When he licked closer to her clit, she groaned and her hips jerked, a harsh cry of feline enjoyment rumbling from deep in her chest. Her legs clasped him, locking him in place. Joe continued to sip from her, teasing her with his finger, pushing it to rest a fraction inside her channel.

“Joe, I need more. Please.”

He smirked against her flesh, thrilled with her response to him. But he craved more from her first. He wanted to take her to the edge of control, make her shudder against the thrust of his finger and tongue. He pushed his finger farther into her and hooked it, seeking the smooth patch of flesh that would really send her into orbit.

“Joe. *Joe.*” She shuddered.

He lifted his head to lick his lips while he pressed against her G-spot. “Tell me what you want.” His name on her lips filled him with satisfaction, made his body throb with the need to fuck her. He fought the urge, determined to drive them both to distraction before he put his cock anywhere near her pussy.

“I want you to make me come,” she wailed. “Lick my clit. *Please.*” She shifted restlessly, the silky black duvet rustling beneath her straining body.

In answer, he raked his tongue along her cleft and curled his finger with deliberate probing strokes designed to drive her headlong into orgasm. A surge of wetness met his tongue. She quivered as he continued to feast, stroking and teasing her with occasional forays past her swollen clit.

"Joe," she said, his name a faint complaint because he wasn't moving to her program.

He smiled against her slick flesh and let his teeth come into play. Her uninhibited response made him think of the future and the fact she might come to trust him enough to let him bind her. He'd use his soft hemp ropes and tie her carefully until she resembled a work of art. Thinking about the act of trust, the submission, drew his balls up until they ached. Like a double-edged sword, arousal kicked his butt.

Sly would have laughed.

Joe increased his efforts, concentrating on her nub, feathering the bundle of nerves with sensation, stringing her along until she groaned and pleaded and vibrated with need, feline-like whimpers rippling from her throat. She bucked against his mouth and exploded into climax without warning. Her vagina fluttered around his finger, clenching and unclenching for long moments. Joe eased up on the attention to her clit, gentling his touch until the tension seeped from her limbs and her clenched thighs unlocked from around his shoulders.

"Nice," she said. "I think I'll go to sleep now."

"Fuck that," Joe muttered, his grin counteracting the sharp note in his tone. Of course she couldn't see the humor in him and he preferred it that way. Kiera Pascoe might be a new fixture in his life, but she'd made her mark on him already. With her eyesight screened, he didn't need to guard his facial expressions. He could pretend this was a mere fling of convenience for both of them even though this thing between them held the potential for a lot more.

Forcing his mind back, he reached for a condom and rolled the latex up his shaft. When he noticed the uncertainty in her, the way she'd caught her bottom lip between her teeth, he reached down to run his tongue over her swollen mouth. She jumped and a snigger escaped him.

"Steady. I'm going to kiss you."

"And then?"

"My cock aches. I'm going to push into you as slowly as I can bear and fill your pussy until I'm balls-deep. I'm gonna warm my cock in you before I start moving. If you're good, I might organize another orgasm for you."

"That's big of you. I'm so relaxed I don't think I can come again."

"Remember last night? Never say never."

"My brothers arrive tomorrow. I can't greet them looking as if I haven't slept for a week."

"Why not?" Joe studied her tousled hair and noted her rapid breathing. His gaze zeroed in on her marking site. The second he realized, he transferred his focus to her breasts with their taut, raspberry-colored nipples. "The object of this exercise is to convince your brothers you have a man and you don't need their help to find one." Best he remember that himself.

"A well-placed hickey would probably do the same thing," she said dryly. "And it would take half the time."

Joe cursed. "Won't they expect us to be mated if we're living together?"

"I don't think so. If they start asking nosy questions I'll distract them. Simple. If they quiz you, tell them to butt out, that you don't discuss your sex life with anyone."

"That would be the truth. Enough with the talk. We're getting off the subject at hand. Kisses. Fucking. Much better."

"Yes, Joe."

"Meekness doesn't suit you."

"I go with the weaponry at my disposal."

An unmanly gurgle of delight burst from him. "You're not carrying a single concealed weapon."

"Apart from my feline nature."

"True, but I have one of those. Enough," he repeated, and he cut off her mumbled reply with his lips. He took control, swallowing her choked, breathless cries and ground his erection against her thigh. Damn, this woman packed a sensual punch. For an instant, he considered setting her astride him and watching her breasts bounce and sway with each downward slide against his cock. But his dick ached powerfully and he decided to go with his first idea. Quick, hard and dirty.

He continued to kiss her, returning the eager pressure, the swirl and mating of tongues. His teeth nipped and he swallowed her gasp with a heady sense of satisfaction.

Impatient for more, he guided his cock to her and gritted his teeth while he entered her tight pussy an increment at a time.

Hot flesh. Tight. Perfect.

With his control at breaking point he wanted to slam into the sweet grip of her sex while, contrarily, he wanted to make a point. He was in total control. Sweat dripped in a rivulet from his brow while the throb in his groin prodded him to delve deeper. He pushed through her clinging flesh, pausing to thumb her nipples in an effort to distract himself from the urgency swelling inside him.

Joe clenched his butt muscles and pushed deeper still while he feathered kisses down her neck. His mouth headed toward her marking site before his brain engaged. Shock jolted him to a halt.

God, it was really true. His brains had shifted to his cock. All he could think about was pumping hard and fast and sinking his teeth into her flesh. He wanted to possess her and stake his claim in the way of felines. His body bucked while his skin stretched tight over his balls.

Control. Remember? Slowly, he pulled back, the grooves in the snug walls massaging his cock, catching the sensitive underside. He counted to ten in his mind, almost

desperate to proceed, to bite down and taste her rich blood when it flooded his taste buds.

Joe moved his mouth back to her jaw and sucked lightly, hoped the oral fix would appease his demanding feline. God, he never felt his cat in this way, the dominant stretch beneath his skin, the tingling in his balls.

He pushed back inside her warmth and Kiera moaned. Her hand swept over his back, her fingernails sharp as they gouged into his skin. The sharp pain did nothing to deter him. Instead it prodded him on. He quickened the pace of his strokes, gritting his teeth when his traitorous lips headed closer to her marking site again. Fire exploded in his groin, each hard surge into her almost too much to bear. He moaned against her neck, his breathing harsh. The scent of sex swirled around them while the wet suction of acute arousal played in tandem with his rapid thrusts. Teetering on the edge of control, he reached between them to caress her clit. Her womb fluttered seconds after he stroked her and it was too much for Joe. The clawing tension loosed its grip on him and his cock jerked, semen jetting from him with explosive contractions.

His raw and guttural groan filled the room, the blistering waves of pleasure taking him by surprise. He'd had good sex before, but this spun into another realm. He stilled and eased his weight off her.

"I told you I wouldn't come again."

"Woman, who said I was finished?" A point of pride for him. She'd wrung him out and made him come so hard, he'd have trouble moving, let alone raising enough strength for another go round.

Joe pulled free of her and ditched the condom.

"Can I take off the blindfold yet?"

He hesitated then decided she could watch him this time. He unfastened the silky scarf and tossed it aside before moving down her body. Then he grabbed her vibrator from the drawer where she'd stashed it. "I want you to prop yourself up on your elbows and watch everything I do to you."

Joe waited for her to reposition her body, pleased she didn't offer an argument. He inserted the vibe into her pussy and switched it on a medium speed. Once she'd settled, he parted her legs a fraction more and cupped her buttocks, lifting her to his mouth. The vibrator reverberated against his lips and dragged a moan from her. While he licked and laved and teased her clit, he captured her gaze and held it. He watched her blue eyes widen and darken with arousal and witnessed the instant when her breath caught and she shattered with pleasure. Once the spasms faded and she came down, he switched off the vibrator, removing and setting it aside.

Exhausted and happy, Joe settled her pliant body beneath the covers and wrapped his arms around her. This was becoming a pleasant habit.

Chapter Six

Her brothers drove into town midmorning. A car pulled up, the slam of the doors and the murmur of familiar voices alerting Kiera to their arrival. She straightened from her task and switched off the overhead light she'd been using to try to spot the problem.

"Kiera." Her oldest brother Matthew spoke first, distaste in every vowel of her name. "This is your workshop? You told me you were a receptionist."

"Hello to you too." Used to her brother's methods, she ignored the prissy English attitude and threw herself at him. His strong arms came around her and he held her tight, pressing a kiss to her brow.

Oscar, her middle brother claimed her next then Tyrone, the youngest and closest to her in age. She turned to the fourth member of their group and forced a friendly smile, despite the dip of her stomach. His presence didn't bode well.

"William." He'd grown a light beard since she last saw him.

"Kiera, it's good to see you again." William not only hugged her but claimed a kiss. It wasn't a brotherly kiss and she extracted herself from aggressive tongue and wet lips and strong arms with difficulty. While she liked William, she didn't think of him that way and never would, no matter how often her brothers thrust them together.

Kiera surreptitiously wiped her mouth on her sleeve. "Are you hungry? There's a great café down the road."

"What about your work?" Tyrone asked.

"Reg is working the front of the shop, and any customers will talk to him if the job is urgent." Kiera gestured for them to back up and swiftly closed the workshop doors.

"Who's Reg?" Matthew's eyes narrowed. "Is that his scent on you?"

"The one who put the hickey on your neck?" Oscar added his own question.

"Reg is the kindly gent I inherited when I purchased the business. He takes care of serving the petrol and selling parts. We'll walk to the café," Kiera said. "Your vehicle is safe here. This way."

"Aren't you going to change?" Matthew's nose twitched when he scrutinized her blue overalls.

Kiera wiped her hands down her thighs, taking childish pleasure in stirring her brother's ire. "The café's casual. I'll only need to change back into my overalls anyway." She turned in the direction of Storm in a Teacup, keeping her pace to an amble when she wanted to run far and fast.

"I notice you've sidetracked the question," William said, falling into step beside her.

Kiera frowned when he slipped his arm around her shoulders. "What question?" Joe wouldn't like him touching her. The idea slid stealthily into her mind and made her stumble in shock.

A couple? Her and Joe?

They weren't. She didn't want to change her life to fit in with a man.

Men always wanted to change a woman, especially feline shifters. Most shifter males expected their women to mate young and produce lots of children. The males at Middlemarch seemed a bit more enlightened or maybe their women trained them better. The couples back home certainly inhabited a time warp. The women took on a traditional role and remained in the background. That wasn't her.

"I'm interested in you, Kiera," William said. "Do I have a competitor for your affections? Have I traveled thousands of miles for nothing?"

"Didn't you come to attend the polo school?"

"You're the main attraction. Our families expect us to mate." He shot a swift glance over his shoulder at her brothers. With their acute feline hearing, they were busy eavesdropping on everything she and William discussed. "We'll converse later. Perhaps I could take you out for dinner?"

Matthew caught up with them and started asking her questions about the local facilities. Glad of the interruption, Kiera slipped into tourist mode and told them about the town of Middlemarch.

"Why did you pick this town?" William asked with a disdainful flick of his right hand. "It's isolated with minimal facilities."

"Not really," Kiera said. "The drive to Dunedin doesn't take long. Besides, the landscape is beautiful. The air isn't full of fumes like it is in the city. Lots of other shifters live here. It's safe to shift here and I can run any time the urge strikes." Memories of a feline soccer game with the Mitchells and friends raised a grin. Joe hadn't joined them that time. A run with him was something to look forward to in the future.

"I wouldn't want to live here," William said.

Kiera bit back the instinctive reply, understanding she couldn't win. William hoped familial pressure would send her scurrying back to London with them. Wouldn't happen. She'd made friends here, loved the lifestyle and her business. She had a sexy if unpredictable lover. Life was good.

William opened the café door for her and Kiera strode through.

"Go and grab a table," she suggested. "Matthew and I will order coffee." The sooner she managed to get her oldest brother alone, the quicker she'd manage to set him straight. She didn't intend to entertain William's suit and she wouldn't return to England with them. End of story.

Her brothers wandered off with William to find a table, and she approached the counter with Matthew. Several customers stared, but by this time, Kiera was used to the personal interest people took in newcomers. She grinned at Emily.

"Emily, this is my brother Matthew. He's over here on holiday."

Emily extended her hand in welcome. Kiera caught a glint of appreciation in her brother, the flare of his nostrils when he discreetly checked Emily's scent and saw the exact moment he realized she possessed a mate.

"I'm pleased to meet you," Emily said.

"Likewise," Matthew said smoothly.

"We've come for a quick snack. We'll have four, long blacks and my usual latte. Let me see." Kiera studied the menu and ordered several sandwiches, some small, savory pies and a selection of muffins. "That should do it." Kiera opened her wallet but Matthew handed over his credit card first.

Emily ran the card through her machine. "How long are you staying?"

Exactly the information Kiera wanted to learn. She'd asked when they spoke on the phone and Matthew neatly sidestepped the question.

"We need to reach Christchurch by Sunday night."

Four days. Oh well. She'd suck it up, ignore the maneuvering to get her back to England and try to enjoy their company.

The doorbell went and she half turned. Saber strode in with Joe not far behind him. Pleasure at seeing him stormed through her, taking her by surprise with the intensity of the rush. She'd only seen him a few hours ago, which made the excitement worrying.

Joe obviously didn't harbor the same fears. Either that or he was secure and knew exactly where she came in his life.

Part-time lover.

Yeah. She had to keep her focus on that point.

Temporary. Friends.

Her breath eased out only to stutter when Joe wrapped her arm around her waist. His spicy scent filled her senses, the welcome heat of his body firing messages of lust even through her overalls, and she automatically leaned into him to savor the pleasant affection.

"Hi, babe." He tugged her against his chest and brushed a casual kiss on the side of her head while exchanging a greeting with Emily.

"Don't paw my sister," Matthew gritted out before Kiera had a chance to do introductions.

Joe's bigger body tensed and his hands lowered to grasp her hips. He nudged her aside, clearing the space between them and Matthew.

"This is Joe Mitchell," Kiera said hurriedly. An altercation was exactly what she wanted to avoid and this situation would degenerate fast if she didn't do something. "Matthew, Joe and I are dating." Oh yeah. Feeble. They were living together.

"How long? You haven't mentioned him."

"Why is it any business of yours?" Joe asked in a quiet voice.

The urge to kick Joe in the shins didn't take her by surprise. It was one she experienced often in her brothers' company. Still, she sucked in a rapid breath, mustering control. "Matthew is my brother. Remember I told you my brothers were arriving today." *Save her from overprotective males.* "Come and meet my other brothers."

Matthew leaned closer, his nostrils flaring. He stilled, his expression of fury putting Kiera on alert. She tried to push between Joe and Matthew but Saber grasped her upper arm and shifted her aside.

"Let them sort it out between themselves," Saber murmured in her ear.

"But this is Emily's café. It's not the time or place." And it was embarrassing. The other customers were starting to stare.

"You're doing more than dating," Matthew growled.

Kiera gasped, mortified because the shifter customers would hear every word. "Joe and I live together," Kiera said. "And this isn't the time for this discussion. People are watching. Listening." She didn't need her other brothers to stick their noses into the conflict. This friction couldn't end well.

"Outside. Now." Matthew propelled her out the door onto the street. Once they reached a private spot, he released her. "I can't believe you'd embarrass your family like this. I've made arrangements for you to marry William. I signed the documents last month."

Kiera's stomach dropped at the revelation. "What documents?"

"The formal betrothal documents of course."

"You have no right." Now she was sorry she'd asked.

The door opened and William strutted outside, his confident bearing making her want to scream. Joe followed a few seconds later, his jaw tight, eyes watchful. He didn't intend to do anything unless she was in trouble and she appreciated his restraint.

Kiera turned back to Matthew. "You can't do this to me." They had no right to organize her life for her. This wasn't the Middle Ages.

He made a dismissive gesture. "I'm head of the family."

"Which doesn't make you the boss of me," Kiera snapped. "I'm pleased to see you, but you can't take over my life and order me around. I'm an adult and I've been running my life successfully since I left university."

William's nostrils flared in distaste as he surveyed the quiet street. He turned his attention back on her. "It's time for you to come home and take your place in society. You can't be happy working at a menial job. I mean, look at you." He flicked his hand at her overalls, his lip curling in distaste. "You're in dire need of a manicure. And your hair."

"What about my hair?" Kiera fought to remain impassive, to let her brother's insults bounce off her. Indignation won. There was nothing wrong with her hair. Deep breaths. Calm and collected was what she needed to deal with her brothers and their

latest scheme. "Middlemarch is my home now. I'm happy here." And she had no intention of returning to England.

"Your home is in England with your family and William."

Ugh. "Our coffee must be ready by now." Kiera turned away, intending to return to the café. Her retreat came to a jarring halt when her brother grasped her arm in a steel-hard grip. A pained cry escaped, but Matthew didn't relent on the pressure.

"You will—"

"You're hurting her," Joe snapped.

"This is none of your business," Matthew snarled.

"Kiera?" Joe's gaze offered help. While she didn't want to depend on any male, she was smart enough to appreciate in this instance she needed Joe's assistance.

She wrenched free and took two steps back. "I'm going to work."

"I'll walk you back." Joe brushed a lock of hair away from her face. "You okay?"

A snarl erupted from her brother. "Of course she's okay."

Joe swiveled to face Matthew. Kiera caught the watchfulness in him, the determination to hold to his promise to her. Yearning caught her then, the wish for something more than temporary with Joe. Aghast at her wayward mind she forced herself to smile at Matthew.

"We'll talk later."

"Take your hands off my sister." Matthew shoved Joe.

"Go and stand by Saber," Joe said without taking his gaze off her brother.

"But—"

"Kiera." The clear inflection in Joe's voice told her this was one instance he expected her to follow his order. She found herself halfway to Saber before she realized she'd obeyed him.

Saber placed his arm around her and gave her a quick squeeze. "Don't worry."

"Of course I'm worried. They're not gonna have a quiet chat."

"Sometimes a physical fight is the best way to settle an argument."

Kiera's eyes widened before she glared at Saber. "You have got to be kiddin' me. Adults don't need to brawl and especially over me."

"You haven't factored in feline nature."

"But they can't fight in public." Kiera scowled at her brother and Joe. The two shifters hadn't taken their eyes off each other. Maybe it would end at posturing and one of them would step away.

"They won't attempt to shift if we stage the fight here," Saber said calmly.

Joe eyed Kiera's brother, not making any assumptions about him being a sissy city boy. He was shifter. That's all Joe needed to know. He'd possess strength and intelligence – both feline traits.

What he didn't understand was why Matthew was intent on Kiera returning to England. Why hadn't he come out to New Zealand when Kiera first mentioned purchasing a business? And what was up with the betrothal agreement? Surely formalities like that had gone out with the ark? His mind mulled over the possibilities and he came up with a stench. A distinctly fishy one.

Joe watched Matthew. The man's jaw tightened and he exploded into action. Joe ducked to the side, but Matthew's fist clipped his jaw. Bloody hurt. Joe pulled clear and sprang, fists flying. He struck Matthew's shoulder, the ricochet of fist and flesh reverberating up his arm. Didn't matter.

Pulling back, he crouched, eyes watchful. Sex and a good fist fight. Nothing better.

Joe sprang. He grunted, sucked up the jarring strikes. A punch slipped through, an uppercut that struck his jaw, snapped back his head. Joe hit out blindly, connected. A fist thumped the air from his lungs. He wheezed, fell back.

"Can't hack the pace, farm boy?" Matthew taunted in his smug, English accent.

Suck it up and thump him back, Joe.

"Get out of my fuckin' head."

Matthew's lips drew up in a feral grin. "Pansy."

Goaded by Matthew, pissed at Sly, Joe gritted his teeth and let rip with a series of jabs. Chest. Arm. Chin. Nose.

A crowd gathered. Some voiced encouragement.

Matthew dodged, attacked with an uppercut. Joe fell back a step. Matthew's smirk said he'd won. Joe paused. When he saw a gap, he struck hard and fast. Bone cracked. Blood spurted and Matthew jerked back with a curse.

"Bastard." Matthew cradled his nose. Blood trickled between his fingers.

Joe stood, poised on the balls of his feet, keeping an eye on both Matthew and the other new arrivals.

The sharp burst of a police siren rent the air. The crowd circling them broke up and Laura, one of the Middlemarch cops, strode over to them. "Okay, boys. Break it up." Surprise darted across her visage when she spotted Saber.

Joe wanted to laugh but remained silent. He didn't want to cause more trouble and land in jail.

Laura's gaze narrowed on him before sliding to Saber. "What's going on?" She scowled at Matthew. "Who are you?"

"Matthew Pascoe." Matthew took a pristine white handkerchief out of his pocket and held it to his nose. "I want to press charges."

Joe's brows rose. He was the pansy. His nose didn't look bad. The bleeding had slowed, and with his feline nature, he'd heal quickly. "He hit me first."

"You promised me you wouldn't fight again," Laura snapped.

"I didn't throw the first punch."

"Saber?" Laura asked.

Matthew's top lip turned up in a snarl. "I should've guessed. I won't get any justice in this town."

Kiera waded in. "Matthew, you hit Joe first. Everyone saw you."

"It's a private matter," Saber said, his demeanor one of calm.

"You countenanced a fight?" Laura demanded.

"Whoa, big word," Joe said.

"That's enough from you," Laura snapped. "Shut up or I'll charge you for fighting."

"My brother and Joe had a difference of opinion," Kiera said, glaring at her brother.

Joe bit back a grin. She liked him, felt protective of him. Warmth dispersed through him and some of his residual loneliness shifted. "I'm sorry, Laura. We shouldn't have fought in public."

"It won't happen again, Laura. We're sorry someone called you out," Saber said.

"I expected better from you," Laura snapped. "This is the second time I've caught Joe fighting."

"The last time was last year." Joe curved his arm around Kiera's shoulders when she crept up beside him. At the same time he kept a wary eye on her brother.

"Laura, let me buy you a coffee," Saber said.

"It will take more than a coffee."

"Is that it?" William demanded in a snooty voice. "Why aren't you charging him?"

Saber bared his teeth and growled low in his throat, directing the main thrust of the caution to the visitors. A warning to the shifters to behave. The harshness of his mouth smoothed out the visitors' tension. They took stock and backed up. The tension eased in the group, and he smiled at Laura. "A sandwich and a muffin if you're hungry."

Some of the strain left Laura's shoulders. "Charlie is expecting me to take back lunch for him."

"I can run to something for Charlie too," Saber said smoothly. "I believe your coffee is ready," he added, directing his words to Matthew. "My wife has a first-aid kit inside."

"Matthew, I'm going back to work," Kiera said. "I'll see you later."

Matthew glowered at her. "This discussion isn't finished."

"Yes, it is." Kiera tugged from Joe's touch, lifted her nose and strode toward the garage.

Joe turned to Saber. "I'll go with her. Can you ask Emily if she could make me a couple of sandwiches? I'll pay her later."

Joe hurried to catch up with Kiera, more curious about her family than before. He intended to ask a few questions, maybe do some online research and learn exactly who he was dealing with.

"Why do your brothers expect you to go back to England with them? If they're desperate to get you to go back, why haven't they visited before? You've been here awhile now." Joe started on questions to appease his curiosity the instant he caught up to Kiera.

"I'm a bit out of touch. They don't tell me much." Kiera glanced at him and winced. "Are you okay?"

Joe grinned and found the action almost natural again. "I'm fine. Did your brother hurt you?"

"Mainly he took me by surprise. He's never tried to manhandle me before."

"What about this William? Have you met him before?"

"He's been friendly with my brother for years. They do business together."

He was becoming familiar with her expressions and the things she didn't mention interested Joe more. "And?"

She sighed. "William was persistent with his attentions while I lived at home in England. I rebuffed him several times."

"What's wrong with him?"

"He's a carbon copy of my brothers. He thinks he's better than most people and possesses the wealth to back up the attitude. He turns up his nose at my *little* hobby. If I did agree to marriage, he'd expect me to reenter society and do nothing more than produce children and volunteer for suitable charities. Charities vetted by him of course." A shudder worked through her. "That's not the life I want for myself."

Joe stilled, focusing on part of her speech. "You don't want children?"

"Of course I'd consider children, but with the right man, one who would compromise because I don't plan on radically changing my lifestyle in order to have children. I have work to do before I go to my appointment with Gavin. I don't want to talk about this now."

Joe wanted to learn more and especially about the children part. He almost wished he hadn't suggested the visit to Gavin for birth control shots. He'd like to have children with Kiera. The idea didn't scare him or make him want to run in the opposite direction. In fact, what he'd like to do was drag her off to bed right now and fuck her until they both panted with exhaustion. If they made a baby, he wouldn't be adverse. He snuck a glance at her tight shoulders and puckered brow and decided now wasn't the time to suggest a bedroom interlude.

They arrived back at the garage and Reg was out in front, pumping diesel for a local truckie. Joe waved hello to the elderly man. Kiera opened the side door and immediately lifted the roller doors to dispel the gloom.

Joe waited patiently until she'd finished. "Are you gonna be okay on your own?"

"I'm not going back to England if that's what you mean." She sighed and wiped her hands over her face. "Hell, I don't know what I'm going to do. I need to find some way to make Matthew accept my decision because I don't intend to run again. It hasn't worked well in the past. It's time for me to make a stand. My brothers can't boss me around any longer."

"Good girl." He hadn't spoken to the younger brothers yet and couldn't judge them, but they hadn't come to their older brother's aid. An interesting point because he'd stand up for any of his brothers, no questions asked.

"I'm not a girl," she snapped. "Everyone seems to forget."

"Figure of speech. I didn't mean to imply you're childish because I don't think of you in that way. You're an adult. An extremely sexy woman."

The rigidity fell away from her and an imp of humor appeared. "Tell me more," she purred.

"When we get home tonight, I'll show you."

After a peek outside she eased closer until she settled flush against his body. "Don't I get a hint or a sneak preview of what's to come?"

A jolt of lust struck his balls seconds before she whispered against his lips.

Joe wrapped his arms around her, one hand slipping down to cup her butt and hold her close to his aching cock. "One kiss isn't enough. That's the trouble."

"You have willpower. You could stop at one."

Desire flourished and, unbidden, he guided his mouth toward hers. On a collision course, their lips met and clung. She wrapped her arms around him while his hands ran over her body, exploring every dip and curve beneath her unisex overalls. It was intense. It was satisfying and the more they kissed and caressed, the more his body hummed.

Rapid footsteps parted their lips, but they still pressed together when Saber rounded the corner and strode into her workshop.

"Am I interrupting?"

"No," Kiera said.

"Yes," Joe said at the same time.

Saber chuckled. "I'm enjoying payback. You guys gave me a hard time when I was dating Emily."

"We're—" Kiera broke off abruptly. Joe understood the direction her mind took. They weren't dating, except she couldn't admit that when they'd agreed to pretend otherwise.

Saber put down the coffee and plastic box of sandwiches he was carrying. "Emily packed food for you. I'm not sure what she's given you."

"I'm sure the food is fine." Joe had difficulty releasing Kiera when she fit in his arms perfectly. He forced himself to take his hands off her butt and step back. Joe sensed rather than witnessed his brother's amusement. "I'd better get back to mowing your paddock for you. Are you going to give me a lift?"

"Yeah. Emily wanted to know if dinner tomorrow night would work or do you want to leave it?"

"I'm sure my brothers can act civilly," Kiera said with a bite to her tone. "I'll tell them. What time?" The scowl added a silent *lay down the law* vibe.

"Seven is good."

"Thanks."

"I'll see you later, babe." Despite Saber's presence, Joe leaned closer to snatch a kiss and he walked away with a sense of satisfaction.

"She seems nice," Saber said.

"Fishing for info?"

"It's only fair."

"It's a younger brother's job to give his older brother a hard time," Joe countered.

"Sly would like her."

"Yes, he would." If Sly were here, they'd probably be sharing her. A surge of possessiveness took root and he frowned at the burst of agitation of his feline. His scowl deepened. "When are you going to visit Sly again?"

"He's not allowed visitors until next week. That's when he's out of solitary."

Just like that Joe's scowl cleared. He was the lucky one. Sly remained incarcerated. Yeah, he had no right to resent his brother because he was going home to Kiera.

Chapter Seven

Kiera stewed while she worked on the vehicle. She changed the oil filter, checked the spark plugs and replaced those too. Her brothers. They were out of control. A betrothal contract. Dammit, she'd find her own man *thankyouverymuch*.

"Hey, Kiera."

Kiera belted her forehead on the raised hood and muttered a curse.

"Sorry," Reg said. "Didn't mean to take you unawares. You told me to remind you when it's time for me to leave for my dentist appointment."

"Yikes, I forgot. You go. I'm almost done here. Just need to check the oil and water and it's good to go."

Kiera completed her work on the car and stalked around to the front. In between customers, she rang the young girl who owned the car she'd completed and told her she could pick it up.

Oscar, one of her brothers, ambled around the corner, his blue eyes lighting up when he noticed her. "There you are."

"If you've come to order me back home to England, you can go away again."

His good cheer didn't falter. He slung his arm around her shoulders and squeezed her lightly. "Why don't you want to come home?"

"I was tired of the social whirl," she said tartly. "I wanted more from my life."

"You couldn't have taken up a new hobby?"

Incensed at his ready reply – a typical, masculine one – Kiera bared her teeth at him and let loose a growl.

"Humans," Oscar murmured, staring out at the forecourt.

"Convenient for you," Kiera snapped. Pasting a smile on her face, she turned to welcome the customers. Moving on automatic, she pumped gas and accepted a tire for mending. When the customer drove off, she turned to Oscar. "What's going on?"

"We're taking some time off to visit our favorite sister."

"Stop foolin' around. Tell me the truth." Oscar didn't do innocent well – not with the perennial twinkle in his eyes. Closing the distance between them, she poked him in the chest with her forefinger. Since he was feline like her, she didn't hold back. "Why did the three of you come on holiday at once? Why are you pressuring me to mate with weasel William?"

"I say," Oscar said, his upper-class accent imbuing his words with shock. "Can't a chap make an innocent visit to see his sister?"

"Not if you come waving marriage contracts." She poked his chest again. "Spill."

Oscar sighed and his bravado faded. "Matthew has a gambling problem. Things are tough at the business. We've downscaled and hope to pull things together. Our associates can keep things ticking over for us until we return. Besides, with communication these days, it's easy to set up a teleconference."

"You're lawyers." Kiera didn't have to pretend shock. "How can things get tough for you? Everyone goes to lawyers when things are bad."

"Matthew dipped into the trust account. Tyrone and I managed to pay it back but word spread and we lost clients. We're lucky we haven't faced an inquiry and disciplinary action from our peers. Tyrone and I hope to talk sense into Matthew while we're out here."

"But you and Tyrone didn't do anything wrong."

Oscar's mouth twisted. "Doesn't matter. He's our brother. Guilt by association."

"How did you afford to come out here? Polo school can't be cheap."

"It isn't, but Tyrone and I figured a change of scenery might help."

"It's a short-term fix. He'll need to get help."

"Don't you think we understand that? He's our big brother and we love him, but he has to want to help himself." Oscar paused, his chest rising and falling with a sigh. "He won't admit he has a problem."

Kiera's legs took on the consistency of cooked pasta noodles and she sank against her brother, taking comfort from his embrace. "And the marriage contract?" she whispered. "Where does that come into it?"

Oscar's arms tightened around her momentarily before relaxing. "He hasn't admitted anything, but William must've loaned him money." Oscar turned her to face him, a troubled expression setting on his usually happy-go-lucky face. "William didn't like you turning down his proposal. For some reason he wants you regardless."

"Payback?"

"Don't know, but I wouldn't trust him."

"I have no intention of becoming William's mate. He gives me the creeps."

"Me too," Oscar said, giving a theatrical shudder. "Luckily, I'm rooming with Tyrone this trip. I don't like the way William stares at my ass when he thinks I'm not looking."

Kiera frowned. "You think he wants a beard?"

"William has a beard... Oh!" Oscar chuckled. "You mean a gay beard?"

"His family is traditional."

"You mean they have delusions of grandeur," Oscar retorted. "They made their money in trade. They don't have our blue blood."

A snort escaped her. "Now who's being catty?"

From force of habit, Oscar scanned their surroundings before replying. "I am a cat."

Kiera pinched him, sidestepping his return attack. "So you are." A small truck pulled up by the pumps. "Behave. I have customers."

"Want me to take care of them while you work out in the back?"

"You want to pump gas?"

"Something to put on my CV," Oscar retorted. "I might need a reference to get another job."

"Be my guest. I'll get to work mending punctures. Shout out if you need anything."

Half an hour later, Tyrone arrived. "Need some help?"

"Sure. There are clean overalls in my apartment."

"Seen Oscar? He disappeared and didn't tell me where he was going," Tyrone said when he returned dressed in a pair of overalls. "What do you want me to do?"

"Oscar is minding the front of the shop for me while Reg is at the dentist. You want to take a look at the blue sedan over there? It's in for a full service. The checklist is sitting on the driver's seat."

She and Tyrone worked for a couple of hours, exchanging chatter and catching up. It was good spending time with her younger brothers. They weren't stuffy like Matthew. Around four, she stopped and made tea for them.

"I'm even breaking out the biscuits," she said to her brothers. "Leave the door open and you'll hear if any customers arrive."

"How serious is it between you and this Joe character?" Tyrone asked. "His scent was all over your apartment."

"I like him. A lot."

Oscar sent her a direct look. "Are you going to mate?"

"Neither of us is in a hurry." She could admit the truth but didn't want Matthew to discover her subterfuge.

"Matthew won't give up until you're officially mated," Oscar said.

"You told her?" Tyrone glowered at his older brother.

"She deserves the truth. If things get much worse, we'll have to sell the family estate," Oscar said.

"That bad?" Kiera asked. Their grandfather would turn in his grave. It saddened her to learn Matthew had fallen so low and expected her to help fix his mess. He was her older brother and meant to care for her.

"It's that bad," Tyrone confirmed. "Oscar and I are okay because of the money grandfather left us. We've both invested, but Matthew... Matthew refuses to admit to his gambling problem."

"We can't live his life for him," Kiera said. "At some point he will have to take responsibility for his actions."

"Hell, speak of the devil," Oscar said.

Kiera glanced up and watched Matthew and William swagger into her workshop. "Don't you mean devils?"

"Now, now," Tyrone chided.

A customer rang the bell out the front and Oscar leapt to his feet. "Saved by the bell. I'll leave you to the lectures."

"Thanks," Kiera said dryly. "You've made my day."

* * * * *

Joe arrived at the farm before Kiera and, after a quick wash, started dinner. Emily had taught them how to cook. It was a simple matter of scrubbing potatoes and putting them on to bake while he made a salad and a marinade for the steak.

Everywhere he looked, he saw Kiera. She'd added small touches everywhere in the kitchen—three pots of herbs, a bowl of apples and a jar of striped red-and-white mints. Her subtle perfume. Kiera made a difference. She made the farmhouse more like a home.

The hours advanced, and it was after seven when Kiera's truck pulled up outside the house. She paused to remove her footwear before entering the kitchen. Her face bore the weight of exhaustion plus a couple of black smudges.

"Tough day at the office?"

"Something like that," she said with a tired smile at him.

Unable to help himself, he skirted the kitchen counter and went to her. He drew her into his arms and gave her a hug. The minute he touched her, a sense of contentment flooded him, the intense yearning for her smoothed out into an ache in his balls instead of a raging hard-on. During his dinner preparations, he'd decided he'd drag her off to bed the second she walked in the door. Now, seeing her fatigue, he changed his plan.

He led her to the kitchen table and pulled out a chair, gently pushing down on her shoulders until she sat. "Would you like a beer? A juice?"

Kiera rolled her shoulders and gave a tired sigh. "A beer sounds good. I've been repairing punctures most of the afternoon. I'm parched."

"You saw your brothers again. I can smell them on you." Shit, that didn't come out the way he intended. "I mean, it's good that you saw your brothers. They didn't hurt you again?" He'd rip them apart if they tried to manhandle her.

"No. Oscar and Tyrone visited me at the garage. They wouldn't let Matthew hurt me."

Joe didn't understand her confidence. He knew a determined man when he saw one. Matthew Pascoe appeared driven and, for some reason, he expected Kiera to obey his orders without question. Another glimpse of her face made him postpone his questions. "One beer coming up."

"I should clean up first."

“Stay there. Have a beer while I run a bath for you.”

“You don’t have to wait on me.” Surprise tinged her words.

He wanted to pamper her because she’d given him so much when she’d forced him out of his apathy. Helping with her man problem gave him a purpose. Sly’s absence still hurt but lacked the same keenness. “It’s no trouble. Dinner will be ready when you are.”

Joe grabbed a bottle of beer from the fridge and poured it into a glass for her. He pressed a kiss to her cheek and handed her the beer. In the bathroom, he turned on the taps. While the water was running, he located a bottle of bubble bath and a memory surfaced of him and Sly and Maggie. Gritting his teeth, he forced the recollection away and opened the bottle, adding a dollop to the water. Immediately a mass of bubbles foamed up, covering the water.

His hand wavered as he reached for candles and a box of matches. Ghostly laughter echoed through his mind and he fisted his hand. Maggie was a traitorous bitch. Tonight he’d make new memories with Kiera and scrub his mind free of Maggie Scarlet. Determined, he headed back to the kitchen.

“You ready for your bath?” he asked, obviously interrupting some deep musing because Kiera started when he spoke.

“I haven’t finished my beer.”

“Take your glass with you. I’ll be in to scrub your back in a few minutes.” Joe intended to open the bottle of wine in the fridge and join Kiera in the bath. The urgency he’d exhibited before Kiera’s arrival home had subsided and he found he wanted to give her romance.

Real romance.

None of the manufactured, phony stuff he and Sly used to get into a woman’s pants. This time he wanted to give and didn’t expect anything back in return. The feeling was new. Unexpected, but he intended to go with his instincts.

He grasped Kiera’s hand and tugged her to her feet. “Come on.” He led her down the passage to the bathroom. The slight catch in her breath when she caught sight of the flickering candles and the foamy bubbles covering the water brought a wealth of satisfaction. “Let me help you undress.”

In answer, she set her beer down and lifted her arms. He whisked her T-shirt over her head, unfastened her bra and peeled the plain cotton away from her breasts. The contrasts between her plain underwear, her occupation and her innate sexiness always charmed him. She didn’t have an ounce of pretense in her, and after Maggie, he found Kiera restful and soothing. His fingers glided down her rib cage to span her waist. Because he could, he leaned in to steal a kiss before swiftly removing her jeans and panties.

“You’d better test the water temperature yourself. It should be okay.”

Kiera trailed one hand through the bubbles. “It’s perfect. Thank you.”

"You don't have to thank me," Joe said gruffly. Part of him felt guilty about his original impulse to screw her silly. It showed he shouldn't always go with his first idea. Sometimes a carefully laid plan worked better.

She climbed into the tub and let out a sigh of pleasure. "This tub is big enough for two. Why don't you come and join me?"

Joe grinned. "I thought I might. Back in a minute."

The phone rang and he strode into the kitchen to answer it. "Is Kiera there?"

One of her brothers. Joe didn't know them well enough to make a guess an identity. "She's just arrived home from work. I'll get her to ring once she's finished cleaning up."

"I intend to take her as my mate."

Ah, the prospective boyfriend. He didn't seem like Kiera's type. Too polished and a weak chin. "Not if I have any say about it." Shit. Joe cast a quick glance down the passage. This wasn't any of his business. *Don't be a pussy. You like her. Go for it.* Truth. He didn't owe the other man a thing. "I don't want to argue with you." What he wanted was to get rid of this bozo and get back to Kiera. Bathtub. Naked woman. No decisions necessary.

"My thoughts exactly," William said in his prissy, English accent. "I've signed a betrothal contract. We'll mate once we return to England."

"I'm with Kiera," Joe said. "I'll tell Kiera you rang or you can visit her at the workshop." He hung up on the man midsentence. Damn, he'd have to tell Kiera he'd rung. Hopefully it wouldn't spoil their evening.

Joe grabbed a bottle of chardonnay from the fridge and opened it. He poured two glasses and headed back to the bathroom. "Hey, are you asleep?"

Her lashes fluttered. "No, just resting my eyes."

"I brought you a glass of wine." He removed the empty beer glass and placed it on the vanity.

"I might keep you." Kiera sat up to accept the glass from him, baring her breasts to his interested gaze.

Bubbles clung to her rosy skin, her nipples hardening while he studied them. "And I might let you."

"When am I gonna see some skin?"

Joe shucked his jeans and T-shirt. "How's that?"

"More."

"I promised you I'd scrub your back. I don't want to get distracted." Joe grabbed a washcloth and lathered it up with soap. He squatted beside the bath. "Lean forward."

"You don't have to."

"I want to." Pleasure flooded him each time he touched her. It didn't matter the contact wasn't sexual. It was the connection that counted, made his feline purr with satisfaction. He ran the cloth over her back and once he'd finished, he eased his hands

around to wash her breasts. Once she'd bathed and he'd fed her he'd spend the rest of the evening caressing her, layering his scent over her body. That bloody Englishman would soon understand Kiera belonged with him, and not a single betrothal contract would make any difference.

Once he'd finished, he slipped his boxerbriefs over his erection and climbed into the tub behind her. Warm water and soft woman. Oy, it didn't get better than this. He nuzzled her neck and pressed her back against his chest.

"You still feel tense, babe."

"Family problems."

He cupped one breast and using gentle fingers, he tugged on her nipple, pulling it until a tight bud formed. Smiling against her neck, he kept fondling her, testing her reactions to his caresses. He sought out her ticklish bits, gradually working lower. When his fingers coasted down her slit, she sighed and parted her legs for him in a silent offer. His chest swelled at her open acceptance.

"Feel good?"

"Yes. Let me touch you too."

"This is for you. I want you nice and relaxed." As he spoke his finger grazed her slit and went lower still to sit at her entrance. A purr rattled through her, making him smile. An ache fired to life in his balls but he ignored it, enamored with her reactions to each of his ministrations. Her juices allowed his fingers to glide over her smooth folds, each teasing tap of her clit bringing a reaction from her. A moan. A sigh. A tightening of her muscles. He slipped two fingers inside her, giving her something to bear down on when he increased the pace. Soon she shuddered in his arms, her channel clenching around his fingers, clasping them.

When she stopped quaking, he removed his fingers and teased both of them by playing his teeth and tongue over her marking site. Dangerous stuff, but he couldn't find it in himself to care. There were worse things than spending the rest of his life tethered to Kiera.

Her ass wriggled against his cock, and his balls ached savagely. "That's not very comfortable."

Laughing, Joe moved her off his lap and curled his arm around her waist. "You haven't drunk your wine."

"I've been busy. A strange man accosted me in the tub. He snared my attention."

"Didn't your parents tell you to watch for strangers?"

"My grandfather in particular. He said the tall, dark, handsome ones were the worst. And if they had green eyes. Well! That was a sure sign of a rogue."

"Too late to flee, babe."

"Joe, the last thing I want to do is run." Kiera turned and kissed him, a tender joining of lips that reverberated inside him. Kiera Pascoe was the dangerous one. He

had no idea how he'd let her go when the time came. Hell, he didn't want to let her go at all.

* * * * *

Two weeks later

They were letting him out.

Sly didn't understand what was going on or why they'd decided to release him, but he wasn't about to ask them to check their paperwork. A shudder of anticipation rocked his feline. Neither of them liked staring at the four walls of a cell day after day.

Fresh air. The heat of sunshine on his naked skin. His fur. The ability to wander anywhere he wanted without needing to watch his back for danger.

God, if this were a dream, please don't let him wake.

"You need to sign this."

Sly eyed the man sitting across the desk from him. John Wroxham. A lawyer. Short and snappily dressed in a designer suit, he radiated self-importance, except he wasn't happy about being here. His displeasure shone in his clipped words. Abrupt. Sharp. His impatience to get this over with writhed inside the private room like an invisible beast. Only the presence of the security guard kept the lawyer close to professional.

The lawyer's discomfort and the hour of the night told Sly something else. Someone didn't want gossip.

Sly pushed the paper back at him without glancing at the official statement. "What does it say?" No point reading the document carefully if he didn't like the contents.

"You will leave tonight and will not speak to reporters or members of the press about your early release." The man seared him with a hard scowl. It probably scared the crap out of most people. Sly wasn't most people. Not any longer. He didn't trust these legal people.

"And?"

"You will not approach Maggie Charles at any time. You will not phone her, write to her, email or text her. You will not communicate with Mrs. Charles or anyone in her family. Is that clear?"

"Now that's a real easy promise to give," Sly drawled. The woman was poison. He'd cheerfully wring her neck and smile while doing it, except murder might land him back in here. "Done."

"And talking to the press?"

"I'm not interested in speaking with reporters." Sly snorted inwardly. If only the lawyer knew. Sly had a real good reason to keep well away from publicity. The taste of incarceration he'd experienced to date told him he'd never survive in a lab with scientists poking and prodding him.

The lawyer shoved the paper across the desk again and tossed a pen on top. "Sign the paper and you can leave. You'll find a gray car parked outside. The driver will take you home. All you need to do is sign the paper and we can both leave."

Lawyers. Sly didn't trust them. Maybe he was telling the truth.

After a brief hesitation, he scooted his chair closer to the edge of the desk and picked up the pen. He read the document through twice. It stated exactly what the lawyer indicated.

All he needed to do was sign the paper, agreeing to the terms of his release, and they'd let him out.

"What happens if I get out and the press gets word of my release?"

"Tell them no comment or, better yet, go on holiday somewhere quiet until the fuss dies down."

Doable. If he kept his head down, he might avoid publicity. It wasn't as if he wanted his face on television or in the papers and magazines. "And if I sign this paper and go back on my word?"

The lawyer met his gaze squarely and didn't pull punches. "You can expect to return here for the full term of your sentence." Truth colored his words. Yep, he meant his threat.

Sly read through the document again, not understanding his sudden good fortune. There must be a catch somewhere.

"I don't have all night," the lawyer snarled.

The lawyer didn't like hanging around with him. Sly bit back his amusement. He wondered if he should take it personally. "What's the catch?"

"There is no catch."

Sly stared at the lawyer without blinking. The man held his gaze for a brief moment before he became uncomfortable. "If you were my lawyer, would you take the deal?"

"Anything is better than this place. I hear you've spent most of the time in solitary confinement. That can't be pleasant."

"Why isn't my lawyer here?" Sly asked, his attention still focused on the lawyer. He wanted to snigger when beads of sweat formed on the man's forehead. "This entire setup smells like fish."

"The fewer people who learn about this deal the better. We'd prefer word doesn't get out and cause curiosity."

In other words, someone wanted their butt covered. Sly came to a decision. He scrawled his signature on the line at the bottom of the page and set the pen down.

The lawyer picked up the paper and tucked it into his briefcase. "I'll mail you a copy. Will the Middlemarch address work for you?"

"Yes."

"Wait here," the lawyer said. "Someone will come for you. In half an hour you'll be on your way home."

He left the room. The security guard also left the room to take up a position outside the door. Sly didn't move from his chair, scarcely believing what the lawyer told him. On his way home within half an hour. Fuck, how had this happened?

If Saber or Emily had managed the miracle, surely they would've mentioned it to him during their visit yesterday. Nah, someone else pulled the strings to secure him an early release.

True to the lawyer's word, Sly strode out of the main prison gates twenty minutes later, his scant possessions hurriedly tossed in a plastic bag. Cool, fresh air ruffled his shaggy hair. Above him, the night sky twinkled with a blanket of stars. A car engine fired to life and the prison gates clanged shut behind him. Gravel crunched under the car's tires as it crawled across the parking lot to come to a stop in front of him. The passenger window whirred down.

"Sly Mitchell?"

"Yeah." Sly bent over to get a better look at the driver. The man was a stranger.

"Where are we going?"

"Middlemarch." The situation held a dreamlike quality and Sly intended to proceed with caution. Any minute now he might wake up.

"Middlemarch it is. Hop in and we'll get going."

Sly opened the door to the passenger side and the driver headed out. Country music played on the radio, the lyrics about cheatin' lovers and broken hearts scraping his nerves raw. He didn't need cheating lovers rammed down his throat. "Okay if I switch that off?"

The driver barked out a laugh. "Not a country fan?"

"No."

"No problem. I'll change it." He stabbed a button and pop burst through the speakers. "Better?"

"Yeah. Thanks." Sly leaned back and closed his eyes. His brain tore around like the workings of a pinball machine. He wanted to understand why. The need to know ate at him, but did he want to fuck up the deal he'd signed with the lawyer? Probably not.

The last thing he wanted was for them to throw him back in that hellhole. He didn't like the helpless, out-of-control sensation or being told what to do and when. He didn't like the way his feline fought for control. It took everything in him to resist the urge to fight the other prisoners. At first they'd picked on him. After a couple of fights that had landed him in solitary, the other prisoners called him crazy and steered clear.

"You awake, mate?"

"Yeah." Sly glanced out the window. With his feline so edgy, his eyes would probably glow weirdly. He didn't want any questions. Familiar Middlemarch scenery brought a knot to his throat.

“Where do you want me to drop you? You’ll need to give me directions.”

“Take a left on the other side of the town then the first right.” Sly feasted his gaze on the flat paddocks and the rolling hills with shadowed piles of schist rock. His feline shifted under his skin and he curled his hands to fists. He wanted to crack the window open but worried the stimulus of fresh air and familiar scents would push him over the edge. *Hold your shit together until the driver drops you off.* Once the man left, Sly would safely fling off his clothes and give his feline freedom.

Unable to resist temptation, he cracked the window open and inhaled the fresh, green scents. His feline shoved harder, claws starting to push above his fingernails. He swallowed, fighting the force and focusing on retaining human form.

Thankfully, the driver didn’t notice his inner battle, continuing to follow Sly’s terse instructions and peering intently at the slash of the vehicle headlights on the road.

“There’s a white mailbox coming up on your left,” Sly said. “Take the first driveway past that and keep following it until you reach a hayshed. You can let me off there.”

“No problem.”

Sly shot the driver a quick look. The man didn’t seem curious. Sly wasn’t sure he’d manage the same casual tranquility given the same circumstances.

The driver took the turn and five minutes later, he pulled up outside a hayshed. “You sure you want to get out here, mate?”

“This is fine,” Sly said.

The driver waited while Sly grabbed his bag of possessions and climbed out of the car.

“Thanks.”

“Good night.” The driver backed up his vehicle and drove off.

Sly watched until the taillights disappeared from sight and the rumble of the engine merged with the night. Alone, he dropped his possessions and tore off his clothes and footwear with scant regard for their condition. He savored the bite of the night air on his naked skin, the familiar scents.

Sly quivered and sucked in a lungful of country. It was quiet. Still. It was home and he never wanted to leave again.

After another deep breath, he released his feline, openly embracing his other self by picturing a black leopard in his mind. His feline tore at his control, the swift transformation from human to feline painful in its intensity. Agony ripped through him and he cried out when his muscles went into spasms. His bones cracked and reshaped so rapidly the shift stole his breath. He crumpled, the ground rushing up to meet him, a sob of distress escaping. Fur raced across his skin and finally the change ended, pain still radiating along his neural paths. *Son of a bitch.*

He breathed cautiously, cataloguing where it hurt most. His muscles. They felt tight as if he’d suffered a cramp. Panting, he rose from the ungainly heap he’d curled into to

test his limbs. They worked but aches reverberated through him. Sly tested the air and when nothing alarmed him, he dragging his tortured body into the open.

Gradually the twists in his muscles and the pain receded. He increased his speed to a lope and headed into the open paddocks. Sly ran faster and faster until the scenery blurred, glorying in the simple pleasure of embracing his cat. He sped across the night landscape, wind resistance rippling his black fur. He continued until his muscles burned with fatigue and his breath sawed in and out of his lungs.

Finally, at the top of the highest hill on their farm, he halted to survey his kingdom. When he and Joe first visited this farm, they'd known it was right for them. They'd climbed to the top of this hill and scanned the wide valley below to the distant town of Middlemarch.

Home.

God, he was truly home.

Sly peered through the darkness. The view wasn't good at this time of the night, but he could imagine the landmarks and that made the difference.

Time passed—Sly wasn't sure how long—but suddenly he was eager to see Joe. His lip curled up. Joe mightn't want his presence after the way he'd behaved. He padded down the hillside, traveling easily through the familiar terrain. When he neared the farmhouse, a muffled cough brought him to an abrupt halt. Low voices. Male voices.

Instinct told him to remain hidden and he obeyed his gut, slinking through the shadows, his fur blending with the background.

"How the hell are we meant to grab her? She's never alone."

Sly halted. The voices weren't familiar. Who were they talking about?

"We'll need to keep watch until we learn her schedule."

Sly hesitated, unsure about what to do next. The men solved his dilemma by deciding to leave. He waited until he could no longer hear them before rising from his crouch.

When they'd purchased the property, they'd installed a feline-friendly door handle. Sly rose on his hind legs, directed his weight down on the handle and pushed at the same time. The door opened with only a faint protest. Luckily for him, Joe hadn't started locking his doors, although with strangers skulking in the night, perhaps it was time they reassessed the security situation.

A few steps inside, he came to an abrupt halt. The house smelled different. Wrinkling his nose, he continued into the kitchen, his sharp eyesight taking in the changes. The place looked homey, with bowls of fruit, herbs and the lingering aroma of food.

He caught Joe's scent and a sweeter womanly one. He'd known about the woman, sensed Joe's lightening mood when Sly allowed himself to trespass in his twin's mind. But the intensity of the scent and the way it interwove with Joe's told Sly much more. The woman lived here with his twin.

Each room smelled the same and bore feminine stuff. A filmy scarf. A pair of earrings. The stack of motoring magazines in the den brought a frown. An unfamiliar painting on the wall. The stack of blue overalls sitting on a chair in the kitchen confused him since they held the womanly scent. Several photos of Joe with a woman and a couple of group shots of her, Joe plus Jake, Hari and Ambar sat on the mantle. Joe bore a wide smile, his arms wrapped around a dark-haired woman with bright blue eyes.

A sliver of jealousy wormed into Sly. He batted it away, but the envy returned and took root. They'd always done everything together, yet Joe had moved on without him, changing his life to fit in a woman. Uncomfortable with his thoughts, he prowled down the passage to the bedrooms.

The door to Joe's bedroom was open and Sly made out two closely entwined forms on the bed. Greedily, he breathed in his brother's scent. He'd missed him—the talking and joking, the way they discussed anything and everything. Hell, he'd even missed the hard grind of working their farm at his brother's side.

Curious about the woman who'd invaded his brother's life and their home, he padded around the bed to get a closer look. Long, curly strands of black hair covered the pillow. Joe curled against her back, his arm around her waist even in sleep.

Sly inhaled.

Feline. He caught the faint scent of sex. Not surprising given his brother's possessive hold on the woman.

Sly moved nearer, emotions battling inside him. If Joe had been alone, he might've woken him, but right now he felt like an intruder. He felt like an outsider—a kid with his nose pressed against the window of a candy store.

He and Joe always did everything together. Once he'd intended to settle with Maggie and have children. His lip curled as betrayal gripped him. That little happy scenario would never eventuate now.

Sly continued to watch the woman, curious despite himself. His tongue darted out to test her skin, her flavor on the back of her hand. Without warning, her eyes popped open. She stared at him, her lips curling into a sleepy smile.

"Joe?"

"Yeah," Joe murmured.

The woman's eyes widened. Her loud scream echoed through the bedroom, and Sly jumped back with a hiss of fright.

Chapter Eight

“What the fuck?” Joe’s voice. “Kiera, what’s wrong?”

“There’s a leopard in the room.”

The light flicked on and they stared at one another.

“That one,” the woman said.

Sly ignored the woman to stare at his twin. To maintain sanity, he’d forced Joe from his mind most of the time, attempted to place a brick wall between him and his twin. But until now, he hadn’t realized how empty he’d felt without his brother.

“Sly?” The color fled from Joe’s cheeks. “Fuck, bro. What are you doing here?” He slid from bed and rounded the end to approach him.

Sly couldn’t speak, couldn’t move. Instead he stared at his brother, his heart pounding. Happy to be home yet fearful too. He hunkered down, his belly hitting the carpet. *Change wasn’t always bad.*

“Shift,” Joe snapped, starting to sound pissed now.

Sly glanced at the woman and back at Joe.

“I’ll make coffee.” The woman scrambled from the bed and yanked a T-shirt over her head, covering beautiful breasts. She pulled jeans up her long legs, screening the last of her nakedness.

“Enough with the staring.” Joe slapped him on the shoulder, jerking Sly’s attention back to him. “Shift and talk to me. Fuck, you’d better not have done anything stupid.”

After months of staying in his human body, his feline part didn’t want to transform. He opened his mind. *Joe.*

Joe cuffed him again and glared. “Shift. I’m going to ring Saber.” He stomped out of the bedroom and down the passage to the kitchen, heedless of his nudity.

Sly stared after him, loneliness flooding him. He’d assumed he’d feel better once he arrived home, but the isolation crowded in on him. He felt more alone than ever. He padded from Joe’s bedroom and entered his own. Concentrating fiercely, he managed to bring his human form to mind and grudgingly his body transformed.

All his possessions were exactly where he left them. A thin film of dust covered the furniture but he found clean underwear and a pair of jeans. He trudged to the bathroom, pausing in the doorway to stare at the bottles of girly potions standing alongside his brother’s aftershave and deodorant stick.

She was everywhere.

Sly turned on the shower and found a clean towel. The nubby fabric bore the subtle perfume of flowers. Even the shower bore evidence of her presence. Sly picked up the

bar of soap and sniffed cautiously. Not too bad. At least he wouldn't smell like a floral bouquet.

He stepped under the water, groaning at the sheer pleasure of hot water. The water in the jail was always tepid at best. His eyes slid shut as the water poured over his face. Privacy was such a luxury. Even when they'd transferred him to solitary, there was always someone watching him, either in person or via a security camera.

This was a different sort of privacy and something to savor. Sly reached for shampoo, hesitating when he glanced at the label. He sighed. So he'd smell like a fruit bowl. There were worse things in life.

* * * * *

Joe wondered if his heart might beat out of his chest. He stomped into the kitchen and picked up the phone.

"Is something wrong?"

"I don't know." Worry creased his brow as he punched Saber on speed dial. "Sly's not talking. Yet."

Kiera opened the cupboard and pulled out a whiskey bottle. She dug several mismatched glasses out of the cupboard and poured a measure into two of them. She handed one to him. "Bottoms up."

While the phone rang and he waited for someone to answer, he clacked glasses with Kiera, taking a measure of comfort from her calm presence.

Down the passage, the shower started and tension ratcheted up in him. If Sly had done something stupid, he didn't know what he'd do. Maybe he should ring Laura or Charlie. They might find out what was going on.

"This had better be good," Saber growled down the line.

"It's Joe. Sly just turned up here."

"Fuck," Saber said. "Don't let him leave. I'm coming right now."

The phone clattered, leaving Joe listening to dead air. His brother's curse told him everything. Saber was worried.

"Ring Felix and Leo. They'll want to see Sly," Kiera said. "I can do it if you want to go and talk with your brother."

"No, I'll wait until Saber gets here." Joe downed the whiskey in his glass and Kiera filled it again for him. The coffeemaker stopped gurgling and she poured him a coffee.

The shower stopped about the same time a car pulled up outside. He and Kiera stared at each other. Kiera strode into the den and returned almost instantly. "It's Saber and Emily. I'll ring Laura while you talk with Saber and ask some discreet questions."

Sly appeared, wearing jeans and carrying a T-shirt. "Don't worry about calling the cops. I haven't done anything wrong. They let me out."

Joe swallowed, staring at his twin, emotion swelling in his chest. His throat choked up and his eyes started to sting. He took two steps toward his brother and suddenly they were in each other's arms. Sly held him so tight, he could scarcely breathe. A shiver racked Joe and silent tears trickled down his face. God, Sly's absence had left a yawning hole inside him. It was good to have him home.

Kiera stared at the two men, alike with subtle differences. At present, Joe looked fitter and his skin more tan than his brother's. She watched the way they clutched each other, as if they'd never let each other go.

Saber and Emily entered the kitchen, glanced at the twins and walked over to her.

"What's going on?" Saber demanded.

"They've let Sly out of jail early," Kiera said. "That's all he's told us."

Saber frowned at his brothers, but Kiera witnessed the sheen of emotion in his eyes, his relief. "He just turned up?"

"Yeah." Heck, she'd thought Joe was playing a trick on her. For a second, until she'd woken properly and realized Joe held her, pressed against her naked back.

Emily marched over to the twins and tapped Joe on the shoulder. "Shift over. It's my turn."

"Emily, darlin'," a husky voice said. He and Joe loosened their grip on each other and wrapped themselves around Emily too. Kiera knew it wasn't Joe, but the voice was similar enough to give her goose bumps.

She wouldn't have any excuse not to return to her apartment now. Joe hadn't mentioned her moving out, but since her brothers were at the polo school, she didn't need to keep up the pretense. Yeah. Tonight she'd stay at her apartment and give Joe and Sly time together.

Joe probably wouldn't even miss her now that his brother had returned.

"Okay, that's enough smooching with my wife," Saber said, shoving his way into the press of bodies.

Kiera leaned against the counter, uncertainty swallowing her normal confidence. She wasn't sure what to do or how to act. Should she leave them to it? A glance at her watch told her it was too early for work, the hour ten minutes shy of four. She hesitated and moved to the coffeemaker. Some more caffeine wouldn't go astray.

More cars arrived and Kiera let the new arrivals inside. Felix and Tomasine turned up first, shepherding a sleepy daughter before them. Leo and his wife Isabella appeared next, swiftly followed by the local cops—Laura and her husband Jonno, Charlie and his mates Gavin and Leticia. Jake, Hari and Ambar arrived last.

Kiera ushered them inside and went straight to the coffeemaker. The kitchen became one big mass of happy families. Despite the number of people in the house, Kiera had never felt so alone. Stupid, really. This was a celebration. She put on another

batch and fished through the cupboards for cups and mugs. She pulled out more glasses since she figured some of the men would want a whiskey too.

"You okay?" Ambar yawned and gave her a hug.

"Of course." The smile on her lips sat stiff and uncomfortable but never faltered. Stiff upper lip. She could do it with her eyes closed. "Everyone told me the twins were identical. I didn't realize it would be like looking at a carbon copy. Even their hair looks the same, shaggy and in need of a cut."

Ambar nudged her in the ribs. "You'd better watch out. You might end up in bed with the wrong one."

"Coffee or whiskey or both?" Kiera asked, not willing to get drawn into that conversation. Not only was it tacky, but she and Joe were together for mutual benefit. Neither of them wanted happy ever after.

"I'd better have coffee. Rohan will lecture me for a week if I turn up at the store under the influence."

Jake slipped his arm around Ambar's waist and kissed her neck. "Rohan would blame either me or Hari. We're meant to keep you under control."

Kiera smirked since she'd listened to variations of this conversation ever since she met Ambar. "Good luck with that."

Saber interrupted the confusion with a shout and everyone fell silent. "Tell us what happened."

Sly scowled. "Hell if I know. I have no idea why they let me out. I wasn't about to argue. They made me sign a document to say I wouldn't speak to the press or approach Maggie. The minute I signed they let me out and a driver brought me to Middlemarch."

"Um...confession," Emily said, sneaking a guilty glance at her husband. "I went to see Maggie a few weeks ago and asked her if she could do something about getting Sly released. Maybe I actually got through to her."

"I told you to stay away from her." Despite Saber's harsh words, he pulled Emily into his arms and hugged her.

"Thanks, Emily," Sly said. "Saber is right though." His voice hardened—his visage brutal in the harsh artificial light. "She's an unpredictable bitch. Don't trust anything she says. Keep away from her. She's trouble."

"They can't put you back in jail?" Joe asked, voicing the one thing they were probably all thinking.

"They gave me the impression if I behaved and played ball, I'd remain free. There's no way I'd talk to reporters anyway," Sly said. "We don't want them ferreting out feline secrets. They didn't appreciate I was a sure bet when it came to keeping out of the public eye."

"Is Maggie aware of your feline status?" Emily asked.

"No," Joe said.

"We never told her," Sly said.

Joe hated Maggie for what she'd done to his brother. Kiera had never met her and wanted it to stay that way. The woman's dishonesty put the Mitchell family through hell.

"Do we tell people you've been released?" Tomasine asked.

"I'd like to fly under the radar," Sly said. "I'm happy to hang out at home. If I want to go out, I can pretend to be Joe. It's not as if we haven't done it before."

"Now you admit it," Leo said with a chuckle, his handsome face glowing with humor.

"Being a twin is handy sometimes," Joe said.

Everyone laughed, but Kiera knew he'd suffered while Sly was gone. And that was why she needed to walk away and give them time together. It didn't matter if her brothers returned. She'd stood up for herself during their visit, refusing to go to Christchurch with them when Matthew issued the order. It helped knowing both Oscar and Tyrone backed her decision. They'd even indicated they'd consider moving to New Zealand.

Gradually daylight crept through the windows. None of the Mitchells made an effort to move, and Kiera couldn't blame them. They'd missed Sly and didn't want to leave his side.

Kiera left the kitchen and grabbed some clean clothes from the bedroom. She'd have a quick shower and make an early start at the garage. Joe and Sly needed time alone with their friends and family.

In the bathroom, she shut the door for the first time. Taking a deep breath, she stared into the mirror. She looked the same. How was it possible when everything had changed in the blink of an eye?

Joe didn't need her anymore.

It shouldn't hurt but it did.

Sighing, she turned on the shower and shucked her clothes. She jumped under the water, shivering until it turned hot. Not inclined to linger, she washed briskly. The door opened when she was toweling dry. She held the towel to her chest and whirled to face the door.

"Relax. It's only me," Joe said. "What are you doing?"

"I've got a couple of cars at the garage. I want to get an early start."

"You don't have to leave."

"I know, but you'll enjoy spending time with your family." Her smile didn't fit any better than it had out in the kitchen. She reached past him and started to dress.

"What's wrong?"

Her smile widened, still stiff around the edges. "Nothing." She trailed her fingers down his cheek, fighting to control her emotions. Why the hell did this feel like a breakup? She pressed her lips to his. "I'll see you later."

Joe wrapped his arms around her, and she clung to him, her heart beating rapidly. Maybe it was better if she got out of the relationship now anyway. She already hurt at the idea of their separation. A couple of months down the track when her brothers actually left would be much harder.

Kiera pulled away first and continued to dress. "Joe, it's great your brother is back. I'm pleased for you."

"Thanks, babe. It's good to have him back." He stole another kiss before grinning. "Catch you later."

Seconds later she was alone with her thoughts. It was a depressing place to dwell.

* * * * *

The last of the family didn't start leaving until close to midday. Joe hadn't realized how much he'd shut them out until they'd descended on him today. Sly. God, he couldn't believe he was actually here. He hugged Isabella and clapped Leo over the back before moving on to Felix. Tomasine had left earlier to open up Storm in a Teacup. Finally only Emily and Saber remained.

"I'm glad you're back, Sly," Emily said. "We've missed you."

Saber patted him on the shoulder. "Life has been peaceful without you around. I missed shouting at the pair of you."

Joe exchanged a look with Sly, and they both grinned. "You might regret your confession."

"Maybe," Saber said.

Emily checked her watch and let out a squawk of horror. "I'd better get to the café. The regulars will be wondering why there are no fresh muffins."

"What are you going to tell them?" Saber asked.

Emily shot him a coquettish glance. "I'll tell them I wasn't feeling well."

"They'll jump to conclusions," Saber said, his eyes narrowing at her impish grin.

"And you're not man enough to handle a few conclusions," she teased. "We'll see you boys later. You can come to dinner on Saturday night."

When the door shut behind his oldest brother, Sly started to pace.

"You okay?"

"I've got to get outside," Sly said. "What jobs need doing?"

"I need to check the cattle in the north paddock. I've been having problems with the water flow to the trough."

"I'll do it," Sly said.

Joe nodded. "I'll come with you."

"No!"

Sly's sharp tone made Joe's eyes widen. Wordlessly, he stared at his twin.

"Sorry. I need time, okay?" He paused, but even then the fingers of his right hand drummed against his leg. Sly couldn't seem to keep still.

"I'll ring Neale Jones. I can probably start cutting his paddocks."

Sly nodded. "See you later tonight." He made for the door.

Joe frowned after his brother. He understood it would take time for Sly to adjust. They'd locked him away for almost eight months and he'd spent a lot of time in solitary confinement. It would take him time to take his freedom for granted. He'd let Sly set his own pace. He was home. That was the main thing.

The rest of the day passed rapidly. Joe didn't meet anyone apart from Neale Jones. Neale asked him to cut an extra paddock and it was late when he arrived back home.

Kiera's vehicle was absent. Not unusual since sometimes she worked late to get a repair finished or she might've dropped in to visit Ambar. He hurried inside and found Sly cooking a steak and holding a can of beer in one hand.

"I missed this," Sly said. "I can't remember the last time I drank a beer."

"Did Kiera ring?"

"Nope, but I haven't been in long. You've done a good job on the farm. Everything looks great."

"I didn't have anything else to do." A gruff note sounded in Joe's voice. Yeah, he'd worked long hours, but Sly would have done the same thing in his position.

"You want me to cook a steak for you?"

"Thanks." Joe wandered over to the answer phone to check the messages. A couple of farmers wanted their paddocks cut in the next day or two. He rang both men back and sorted out times. Kiera must be with Ambar. She'd arrive home soon.

Sly set a meal in front of him – steak and vegetables – and they started eating.

"What do you want me to do tomorrow?" Sly asked.

"Why don't I catch you up on what I've been doing and where I have stock grazing and we can divide the labor for the rest of the week?"

"Sounds good." Sly applied himself to his steak, pausing without warning. "You gonna tell me about the woman?"

A flash of annoyance struck Joe. "Her name is Kiera."

"She's living here."

Joe met Sly's gaze, part of him surprised. This felt suspiciously close to an argument. "Yes."

He didn't share Kiera's family problems with Sly, and that told him, more than anything, how far they'd drifted apart. Either that or he'd changed.

"We never have a woman living with us."

"Things change."

Sly didn't comment, merely continued with his steak.

Confliction simmered in Joe. He loved his brother. They were best friends, but he'd come to enjoy Kiera's company too. He missed her company, her tuneless humming and her scent. Maybe it was time they talked and changed their agreement, made their relationship more permanent.

"You like her," Sly said finally.

His appetite gone, Joe set down his knife and fork and pushed his plate away. "I like her. If you have a problem, you'd better tell me now."

Sly closed his eyes, a pain expression flashing through him. "I thought we'd end up with Maggie."

"I wouldn't touch her with a ten-foot stick," Joe snarled. "She's made her choice and it's not us. Tell me you're not gonna do something stupid and try to see her?"

"No. No, of course not." For an instant Sly's shoulders slumped. "The last thing I want is to end up in jail again. Not even Maggie is worth the risk."

The phone went and Joe rose to answer it. "Kiera." Her familiar English accent soothed his agitation.

"Hey, Joe. I meant to ring you earlier and kept getting interrupted."

"Problem?"

"My big brother trying to throw his weight around again. This time he tried to tell me Grandfather agreed to the arranged marriage with William and I needed to go through with it to uphold the family honor."

"Is that likely?"

"It's a flat-out lie. I spent a lot of time with my grandfather. We used to talk about everything and arranged marriages came up. His parents arranged his marriage and he told me he'd never inflict the same thing on me. He was adamant, although he'd never give me details."

"Did you explain that to Matthew?" Joe was aware of Sly's close attention to the conversation. With his acute hearing, he wouldn't miss a thing.

"Yeah, but he still insisted Grandfather approved the match."

"Your brother isn't going to let this go, babe. He sounds determined to me."

Kiera sighed, the soft resignation tearing at Joe. He wished she were here so he could hold her. Comfort her. Amusement bubbled up in him without warning.

Yup. He was a goner.

"Matthew's call put me way behind. I promised Harold Cawthorne I'd fix his truck because he wants to start on the road early tomorrow morning. It'll take hours yet. I'll crash at the apartment once I'm done."

"I can come and keep you company."

"No, you work long days as it is. Get some sleep."

Disappointment seared Joe. Despite possible friction with Sly, he wanted Kiera. She might say she didn't want marriage or to mate formally with a feline but, by the time he

finished with her, she'd understand they were right together. She would realize he'd never force her to give up her business or shove her into a mold. His brothers' mates were all strong, independent women, and he couldn't see himself settling for anything less. "I'll see you tomorrow?"

"Of course."

Some of Joe's tension eased. "And you'll stay the night?"

"What about Sly? Don't you want to spend time with him?"

Joe cast his gaze on Sly. His twin didn't give away his thoughts. Too bad. "I'd like you to stay." He wouldn't say more. She wasn't ready for him to stake a claim. Not yet.

"Okay."

Joe caught the pleased note in her voice and smiled. "Tomorrow, babe. Don't work too late."

"I'll look forward to it."

Joe hung up, victory thrumming like a loud drum in him.

"She owns the garage and workshop?" Sly asked.

"Yeah. She does a bloody-good job of it too. The locals were wary at first but now she has more work than she can handle. Word has spread."

"She really working tonight?" Sly asked.

"Yes." Joe cut straight to the point, understanding exactly what his twin implied. "She's not cheating on me. She's not Maggie." He glowered to enforce his words. Damn, he hated them arguing and about a woman at that.

Sly thankfully backed away. "I might veg in front of the telly with a couple of beers. Can we talk about the farm during the commercial breaks?"

"Sure. Grab a beer and go ahead. I'll clean up since you cooked." Joe rinsed and loaded most of the dishes into the old dishwasher, letting his breath ease out when Sly left the kitchen. Fuck, it had never been like this before. They'd both changed and he wondered if they'd ever fall into their easy relationship again.

Did Sly blame him for ending up in jail? Had he expected Joe to turn himself in as well?

"Nah," he muttered. That couldn't be it. Sly didn't seem to like Kiera. Joe frowned and swiped the dishcloth over the counter to clear a few crumbs and splashes of water.

He deliberated discussing the matter with Saber. Nah, Saber would tell Joe to give Sly time to adjust.

Joe grabbed two beers from the fridge, stopped by the small room they used as an office to collect the cashbook and diary and went to join his brother. Sly was channel surfing when he stepped into the den.

"Not much on," Sly said.

"I grabbed some DVDs during the last trip into Dunedin. They're in the cabinet."

"Another time. I'm a bit restless."

"Take a look at the accounts then," Joe said, tossing him the books. "I sold the thirty calves we purchased at foot with the new cows. Got a decent price. I've been working on the fences in between contracting out to cut hay and silage."

Sly opened the books. Joe took control of the remote and found the car show Kiera liked to watch. He'd come to enjoy the program too.

Apart from the television and the occasional flip of page, they sat in companionable silence. Joe started to relax, the events of the day and fatigue settling in. He should go to bed, but he and Sly needed to spend time together.

"What would you think about buying a few alpacas? They'd work well down here."

"Alpacas?" He knew nothing about alpacas, but if they'd caught Sly's attention, he'd listen. "I don't know much about them."

"Their fleece sells for big bucks. The initial outlay is large but the returns are good."

"How big are we talking?" Joe fell into the conversation about pros and cons and it seemed like old times. By the time they hashed out several scenarios, he was excited about the idea. "You want another beer?"

"Thanks, but I've had enough. I might try to catch some sleep."

"It's been a long day."

"No shit," Sly said, rising and stretching his hands above his head. "I'm not sleeping well. If I can't sleep, I'll probably go for a run."

Joe stared hard before replying. "No problem. See you in the morning."

Sly jogged down the passage to his bedroom, his feline restless and agitated. His nostrils flared at the sweet scent of the woman permeating their house. Joe didn't seem to notice. Worse, he didn't seem to care. Joe wanted her for keeps. The woman didn't realize Joe was subtly stalking her—object, marriage and mate.

Sly saw it and the knowledge hurt his chest. He didn't understand Joe's trust. Women were trouble—the single ones at least. His brothers' mates seemed loyal, but possibly that was the mating bond at work.

Maggie...

Hell! He had to purge her from his memories.

At least Joe's woman hadn't intruded into his personal space. Only Joe's scent lingered in his room along with his own. Sly flung off his clothes and, naked, prowled to the window. He lifted the window, opening it as far as possible, letting the fresh air sweep into his room.

An idea came to him. Maybe he'd check on Joe's woman. Make sure she was actually doing what she'd told Joe. She might be feline, but he was good. She wouldn't learn of his presence. Decision made, he crawled through the window and called his cat to mind.

Denied of the opportunity to shift at will, he savored the pain of his muscles and bones twisting and reshaping. He groaned soundlessly when he fell to all fours and black fur rippled over his skin. As always, the surge of his senses – the whoosh of sight and the rush of noise – made him purr.

The rumbling sound vibrated in his throat. Once clear of the house, he increased his speed, glorying in the play of muscles and the ripple of cool air over his fur.

It was a good fifteen miles into town but the distances didn't faze him. With shortcuts and his feline speed, the journey wouldn't take long.

Nearly two hours later, he crept into town. The enticing scent of rabbit had distracted him otherwise he would've arrived much sooner.

Lights spilled from the workshop along with a *clang, clang, clang* and a spicy, feminine curse. The notes of a rock ballad spilled from a radio in the corner, the song tinny although recognizable. She cursed again, calling the truck a stubborn bitch. In spite of himself Sly's lips curled into a toothy, feline smile.

She hadn't lied. *So far.*

He'd hang around and make sure she didn't meet with anyone after she finished work. Sly slinked closer, keeping the wind in mind. The last thing he wanted was for her to realize he was spying on her. He crouched, blending with the dark shadows, and settled in to wait.

An hour passed. Sly watched the woman wheel herself from under the truck. She peered into the engine, made an adjustment and jumped into the driver's seat. She turned the ignition and let out a cry of victory when the truck purred to vibrant life. Sounded good to him.

She switched the engine off and tugged off her cap. Locks of curly, black hair tumbled down her back. He'd seen her hair loose this morning yet hadn't appreciated the beauty of her tresses. A man could wind them around his hands or tug on the long strands to control her. Sly wondered if Joe used her hair that way, and a shudder passed through him.

Joe's woman.

Not his.

The woman pulled the zipper of her overalls down to reveal a tight, pale blue tank top. *Nice.* Sly continued to study her while she closed up for the night. The roller doors rattled when she closed them, coming to rest on the ground with a metallic thud. The steel caps of her boots beat a tattoo, and he mentally followed her progress across the cavernous workshop.

She'd told Joe she intended to stay at the apartment. A joke. From memory, it was pretty basic – a one-room place with a poky bathroom and simple kitchen facilities. Her upper-class accent didn't fit with the image of garage owner yet, by all accounts, she'd made a success of the place.

Sly circled the workshop until he could watch the windows of the apartment. He watched her peeling off her overalls, tugging them down her long legs to reveal brief shorts.

She turned to the windows and peered outside. For a tense few seconds, he suspected she'd spotted him. Instead, she pulled across the curtains and screened his view. Too bad. Joe had good taste.

He settled in a shadowed area, his black coat helping him to merge with the darkness. Middlemarch remained the quiet, country town of his youth and the disturbance of passing cars was intermittent.

The faint stream of light escaping the barrier of the curtains shut off. Sly tensed, waiting for her to depart the building via the side door. It didn't happen, which surprised him. At gut level, he'd suspected deceit. All women had agendas. Hadn't Maggie taught him that?

Another half an hour passed. Maybe she was sitting tight for the evening. About to leave, an approaching vehicle froze him on the spot. The car crawled to a halt, bringing the return of suspicion. She wasn't going anywhere because her lover was coming to her.

Joe would thank him for this.

Two men climbed from the vehicle, bringing a frown to his face. They didn't march straight to the side door for her to let them inside. Instead, they split up. Sly growled, a low, menacing rumble. He rose and slinked after one of the men, taking care to keep to the shadows.

A streetlight illuminated the face of the man Sly followed, the harsh visage giving Sly pause. The man looked like a thug, his thick body and the scar slashing his chin reminding him of several of the prison inmates.

Sly hung back when the two men met again to compare notes. Their whispers were frustrating, especially with the scanty cover where they stood.

One of the men trotted back to their car and returned with a crowbar. With careful glances over their shoulders, they approached the side door. In the excitement of his homecoming, he'd forgotten to mention the people hanging around the farm. They mightn't be the same men, but the coincidence made the back of his neck prickle. Sly hovered in the shadows, undecided how to act.

One of the men made short work of the lock and with minimal noise. A pro. The air whooshed from Sly as he finally accepted the truth. These men weren't here to play lover. They intended to steal from the woman or worse. The knowledge slipped into his mind like a stealthy feline.

Damn. He'd wanted to tell Joe the woman was making a fool of him. Hell, he wanted to hate her because her presence created a chasm between him and Joe. But he couldn't let her get hurt. He couldn't walk away.

Sly thought for a moment. The workshop wasn't alarmed because the men had entered the building already. The post office across the road did have an alarm. A quick

check for traffic. Sly darted across the road and shifted. He fired a rock through the front window of the post office and took heart at the shrill buzz of the alarm. The owners of the bed and breakfast would hear and call the cops.

Sly sprinted back across the road and slipped through the open door. The two men had headed straight for the apartment, which told him they'd done their homework.

Heart thumping, Sly stalked closer, realized he was naked and shifted. He hadn't noticed weapons of any sort, apart from the crowbar. Hopefully pride made them consider her an easy target.

"Open up," one of the men demanded.

An English accent and the same as the other time. Interesting. A problem from home coming to bite her on the arse?

"I've called the cops," the woman shouted.

"You've created enough problems, missy." The man inserted the crowbar in the doorjamb.

Sly crept close enough to spring at the second man. He screamed as Sly's claws sank through his clothes and into his flesh.

"What the hell?" Crowbar Man shouted. "That's a fuckin' leopard."

Sly wrestled with the man, fury like an impetus driving him on. They rolled. Sly's mouth closed around his upper arm, anger a red tide before his eyes. Then he tasted blood, and years of lectures from Saber interceded. Insanity receded and he cautiously loosened his grip.

"Keep away from me." Fear colored Crowbar Man's voice. He held the crowbar like a weapon now, his eyes visibly wide even in the scant light.

In the distance, a siren approached, and he silently thanked the busybodies at the bed and breakfast. Sly backed away, thankful when the man scuttled toward the wall. Sly turned his attention to Crowbar Man and loosed a growl.

"Who's there?" the woman demanded.

At least she wasn't stupid enough to come out. They hadn't managed to break the lock on the door yet because he'd distracted them.

A vehicle pulled up outside. The siren came to an abrupt halt.

"You should've listened to me," the woman said. "The cops are here."

A woman who didn't panic in a crisis. Of course. That quality would attract Joe. Sly backed into the shadows, concealing himself behind a vehicle, content to let the cops do their thing. Of course he might have some explaining to do when the men started blabbing about black leopards.

The lights came on without warning. Crowbar Man let out a curse. Sly pressed closer to the vehicle and hoped to avoid detection. He didn't want the woman to realize he was checking up on her.

“Police,” Laura’s authoritative tone pierced the silence. Sly experienced pride in his best friend’s wife. “Out where we can see you.”

“We weren’t doing anything,” Crowbar Man said in a distinct whine. “Look what she did to my friend.”

They weren’t babbling about big cats or leopards? That was weird.

“You okay, Kiera?” A voice called out—a feminine one.

“I’m fine. They never touched me. Can I come out?”

“No. What are you doing here, Isabella?” Laura sounded resigned.

“I was driving past, on the way home from visiting Felix and Tomasine. I decided to investigate the alarm.”

“And?” Laura asked.

“Someone fired a rock through the window. The door’s still locked and the hole isn’t big enough for someone to crawl through,” Isabella said. “The postmaster arrived when I was leaving.”

“We didn’t break no windows,” the man on the ground said. With a quick glance around the workshop, he pushed to his feet. Sly peered from beneath the vehicle and watched the men, trying to puzzle out the situation. They obviously knew about shifters and were playing it cool.

“We’ll sort this out at the station,” Laura said.

“Fine with me,” the man said—the one Sly had attacked. His English-coated words emerged with a quiver. Even more interesting. What were the odds? The woman held secrets and he intended to ferret them out. One woman had made a fool of them already. It wouldn’t happen a second time.

Crowbar Man belted his fist on the woman’s door. “Come out, missy, and tell them we’re friends.”

“You wouldn’t need the crowbar if you knew her.” Laura pulled handcuffs off her belt and approached the man leaning against the wall.

“I haven’t met everyone in England.” The woman’s shout held exasperation.

“I’ll bring Kiera to the station with me,” Isabella said. “Leo won’t mind if I’m a bit late.”

“Thanks,” Laura said.

Isabella helped Laura escort the two intruders out before returning.

“Okay, you can come out now,” Isabella said.

The door cracked open and the woman poked out her head.

“No, not you.” Isabella turned to stare straight at his hiding spot. “Him.”

Sly backed out of hiding. He should’ve guessed concealment wouldn’t throw off Isabella. The former assassin didn’t miss a thing.

“Joe?” Kiera asked.

Sly snorted. The woman wasn't as clever as she assumed if she confused him with his twin.

"Oh Sly," she said in the next breath. Her brow creased in a frown. "What are you doing here?"

"Saving your butt," Isabella said dryly. "I smelled his scent over at the post office. He set off the alarm on purpose."

If anything, Kiera's frown intensified. "Thank you," she said finally.

"I'll drop you both back at the farm after you've finished at the police station," Isabella said.

Sly ambled over to Isabella and rubbed his head against her thigh before backing away, turning down the ride. He turned and trotted from the workshop, determined to keep away from Kiera. Dammit, he wished the sneaking admiration starting to fill him would take a hike. The woman grabbed his attention far too often—he didn't want to like her too.

Chapter Nine

"Do you know those men?" Isabella asked during the drive back to the farm.

Bother. Part of her wished Sly had accepted the offer of a ride instead of going off on his own. The woman noticed everything, and she could have done with a buffer. "I assume they work for my brother's friend William."

"Why didn't you tell Laura?"

"Because I don't want my family business dragged through the court system. At least now I'm forewarned and can take steps to protect myself. Laura said they're here on a visitor's permit and they'd face deportation after the charges. I'm fine with the punishment."

"I can help if you want," Isabella said.

"Why would you help me?" Kiera asked, surprised at the offer from a woman who usually held herself aloof with anyone who wasn't a Mitchell or a close family friend.

"You're a shifter. You seem decent and Joe likes you. Why aren't you at Joe's place now anyway? Did you have a fight?"

"Of course not. I needed to finish work on a truck. Things are weird now that his brother has turned up. I decided they might like some time together without me in the way."

Isabella took her attention off the road to glance at Kiera. "And yet Sly turned up at the garage."

"He doesn't like me."

"Maggie screwed him over," Isabella said. "I suspect he doesn't trust anyone at present, especially women."

Kiera shrugged, unable to dispute the facts.

The farmhouse stood in darkness when they pulled up outside, but a light flicked on seconds later. Joe appeared, wearing only a pair of jeans. "Isabella, what's going— Kiera?"

"Someone broke into the workshop," Kiera said, climbing out of the car and going to join Joe. "I'm okay." She turned to Isabella. "Thanks for bringing me home."

"No problem. I'd better go before Leo sends out a search party." With a wave, she backed up the car and drove off.

"Are you okay?"

Kiera scowled. "The two men who broke in work for William. I didn't tell Laura and Charlie."

"William? Why would he do that?"

“Put pressure on me to go home, I guess. That’s the only reason I can think of.”

Joe curled his arm around her waist. “I don’t like the way it happened, but I’m not sorry. I like having you in my bed.”

“Do you now?” Kiera didn’t try to restrain her grin. “I wasn’t looking forward to an empty bed.”

Joe urged her inside. “Did you get the work done on the truck?”

“It’s ready for Harold to pick up first thing.”

“Excellent. Come to bed.”

Kiera grinned, enjoying both his touch and scent. She leaned in to him, wallowing in the familiar sensations. “Sounds good to me.”

“We might have time for a quickie.”

“That could be arranged,” she said in a prim voice. Didn’t he understand she’d do just about anything for him? “One quickie coming up.”

In the bedroom, Joe slipped off his jeans. Kiera started to undress, but Joe stayed her with a hand. “Let me,” he said.

“One other thing about tonight,” Kiera said. “Sly was there. His quick thinking brought Laura, and by the looks of the scratches on one of the men, he jumped him.”

“Sly told me he was restless and intended to run.”

“I get the impression your twin doesn’t like me, although I’m glad he turned up at the workshop. He saved my butt.”

“He hasn’t had a chance to talk with you yet. Give it time.” Joe’s face held concern. “How come he didn’t come back with you and Isabella?”

Kiera shrugged, ambivalent about her feelings toward Joe’s twin. He stared at her all the time. Whenever they inhabited the same room, his gaze stalked her until her skin prickled and she felt like prey. She shoved away her uneasiness and put it down to shot nerves. “No idea. You’ll have to ask him.” Anyone would suffer from tension after the night she’d experienced. “I’m going to have to do something about William and Matthew. They can’t force me into marriage.”

“Let’s sleep on it,” Joe said, yawning wide enough for her to study his teeth.

Laughing, she thumped him in the middle of his chest. “That was attractive.”

In answer, Joe scooped her off her feet. One minute she was laughing at him and the next she was dangling over his shoulder, staring at the tiles on the kitchen floor. The tiles gave way to worn carpet and he dropped her on the bed. She started to scramble off.

“Stay.”

There was a bite in his order that stopped her cold. She scrutinized him carefully while she froze on the spot, despite the part of her that cried out for escape. When Joe sported that particular expression, he had something specific in mind – usually relating to sex and often kinky.

Without taking his gaze from her, he unbuttoned the fly of his jeans and let the denim slide down his muscular legs. It was obvious he'd dressed in a hurry since jeans were his only attire. His cock sprang free, lengthening under her gaze.

"Are you gonna tie me up?" she blurted, remembering the last time with the blindfold and the orgasms he'd coaxed from her. Her folds moistened at the pleasurable memories.

"Would you like me to restrain you?" A lazy smile played, highlighting the mischievous gleam in him, ramping up her arousal.

"You've ruined me for other men."

"I must be doing something right."

Lord, if he loved her any better, she'd self-combust. When it came to sex, she had no problems with Joe. Every time seemed better than the last.

"Come here."

Kiera obeyed without demur. He stripped off her clothes and, once she was naked, stepped back. "Stretch out and raise your hands above your head. If you behave yourself and do everything I tell you, I'll make you come. If you're really good, twice."

"A bit full of yourself, aren't you?" Her pulse rate did a distinct bump and grind, and she couldn't tear her attention from his face.

"Do you doubt me?"

"No," she whispered. She trusted him implicitly. Without haste, she lifted one hand then the other above her head.

"Hold on to the headboard." Approval shone in his eyes, the green in them darkening with passion.

She curled her fingers around the lower edge of the headboard, closed her eyes and waited.

"Spread your legs."

Kiera spread her legs and her skin prickled as she imagined the appreciation shining on Joe's face.

"Good girl."

The mattress shifted under his weight. Her tongue darted out to moisten her lips. A chuckle cut through the silence. A heavy pulsating commenced between her legs, and he hadn't touched her yet. Her imagination was doing the work for him. Something circled her nipple. A finger. A tongue? She wasn't sure.

"Your body responds to my touch."

Kiera cleared her throat. "Duh."

He laughed again and she felt him trace another circle around her nipple. His finger. It was definitely his finger. Both of her nipples contracted and a helpless shudder worked through her. She stirred restlessly, wanting to run her hands over his

back, to tease him as he teased her. She didn't. Instead she gripped the headboard even more tightly, realizing he'd stop if she disobeyed him.

He cupped one breast, licked her nipple once before enclosing it with his mouth and drawing sharply. The tug ended in her pussy, a jerk of pleasure that dragged a moan from deep in her throat. The feline rumble made her laugh because it was a sound she'd never dared make with a human lover. Breathlessly, she waited for his next move and, drat the man, he took his time.

"Do something."

"What would you like me to do?"

"You like to call the shots. If you don't know what to do next, we're both in trouble."

His fingers slid across her rib cage, tickling as they traveled across her skin. She wanted to squirm except his fingers finally headed in the right direction. He moved farther down the bed. Sensations curled inside her until her body hummed. About to voice a protest at his pace, she swallowed her complaint when he lifted her to his mouth. He ran his raspy tongue down her folds and back up before commencing precision work on her clit.

Oh yeah. He did that well. A throaty moan escaped unbidden as he settled in to feast. Each slash of his tongue brought a twist of sensation, whimpers she couldn't contain. Heat flushed her skin, and when he took her nub between his lips and sucked, she lost it. The coiled power in her exploded and she could swear she saw lights flash behind her eyelids.

Joe eased up on the oral action, letting her come back down. He moved up the bed and claimed her lips. She tasted herself on him and his deeper, masculine flavor.

"You can let go now," he whispered in her ear. "I'd like to have you touch me this time."

Joe slipped between her legs and pushed home. Her belly clenched at the perfect stroke of his cock and she ran her hands down his muscled back. He withdrew and shoved his shaft into her again. Not rough exactly, but not careful either. Just the hard, determined strokes of a man driven by sexual need. She loved it—the edge of roughness and unexpected treats that came with inhabiting Joe's bed. A woman could become addicted to a man like Joe.

He grinned down at her, his beautiful, cat eyes glowing with lust. Their mouths met and they devoured each other, giving no quarter. When the need for air squeezed her lungs tight, she pulled away and pressed her face to one of his shoulders. Her tongue traced across his marking site, and he gave a throaty groan.

The temptation to bite down struck like an unexpected blow. Stricken by the urge, she moved her lips from the danger zone and sucked on his biceps instead. Slipping and sinking her teeth into his flesh, tying herself to him—it wouldn't take much.

Joe took a couple of playful nibbles of her neck, diverting her thoughts. "Feel good?" He thrust hard as he questioned her, his teasing edge falling away.

"Yes." She stared at him, her heart pounding with realization. This was where she belonged, right in Joe's arms. A flash of movement distracted her and she glanced in that direction. Her body froze with shock when she noticed Sly scowling at them from the doorway.

"Babe," Joe said. "Ignore him and concentrate on me."

Easy for him to say. Heat flooded her face and, like a flash fire, the warmth swept down her body. She wasn't turned-on by the fact Sly was watching them. *She was not.*

Joe's lips quirked up at the corners, devilish humor filling him as he quickened his strokes. In. Out. She shivered when he hit exactly the right spot.

"Yes." The word was a pleading moan for more and he acceded to her unspoken plea, powering into her. Her hips bucked beneath the assault of pleasure, the fierce strokes and the raging need in his face. Higher and higher he pushed her until there was nowhere left to go. The pleasure grabbed her by the scruff of the neck, filling every inch of her body. She soared, her pussy pulsing around his hard cock.

With a last, hard shove into her, his breathing shifted into choppy and she felt his hot ejaculate fill her. He stilled, fully embedded, clutching her to him as if he'd never let her go, his tongue dancing over her marking site. A tremor grabbed her, a spasm of pleasure making her channel pulse again. She practically willed Joe to bite down and bind them together, bit her lip against the plea fighting for release. Thankfully, Joe chose that moment to pull from her body, prodding her good sense to the forefront of her mind.

Only then she remembered Sly watching from the doorway, but when she stole a glance, he'd disappeared.

"Sly was watching us."

Joe smoothed the hair from her face. "He wasn't there for long."

"But he saw us." Guilt filled Kiera because she'd liked Sly watching them. She didn't want to analyze the effect because, no matter how she spun the situation, it made for kinky. What sort of woman got off on someone watching her while she and her boyfriend fucked? Add in the twin thing, and she was heading direct to Kinksville.

Joe smoothed a hand over her tense shoulder and separated their bodies. He tugged her into his arms. "Don't let it worry you. I'm sure Sly won't mention a thing."

"I don't think your brother likes me."

"I told you before, babe. Give him time. We're all adjusting here."

"Sorry, I shouldn't have mentioned it."

Joe pulled away to study her face. "He's had a tough year. Eventually things will get back to normal and Sly will settle."

"Of course. You're right. We need to give him some slack. If anything, I owe him for helping me tonight."

* * * * *

Sly had already started on the chores when Joe climbed out of bed the next morning. Joe hated the distance between them. Hell, he needed to take his own advice and give Sly time. Joe made tea and shoved a couple of slices of bread into the toaster. He took Kiera a cup of tea and shook her awake before kissing the hell out of her.

"Come back to bed," she whispered, her voice throaty with passion.

"Can't. You have to meet Harold at your workshop, remember? If you want to get the contract to maintain his fleet, you'll need to hustle ass."

"Shoot." Kiera bolted upright and flung the covers aside. Her breasts jiggled, distracting him. "How am I going to get back to the workshop? My truck is still there." Kiera yanked her discarded tank top over her head and hopped about on one foot while trying to pull on her jeans. "Tea," she said, appreciation suffusing her voice. "You're a lifesaver."

The clink of plates indicated Sly moving around in the kitchen. Joe came to a quick decision. He wanted Kiera in his future, and that wouldn't work if Kiera and Sly didn't like each other. "Either Sly or I can run you into town. You have time for a quick breakfast."

"Thanks, but I don't need breakfast." The loud rumble from her belly brought a scowl. "Okay, maybe one piece of toast."

Laughing, Joe nudged her from his bedroom toward the kitchen. "Morning," he said to Sly.

"I'm glad you didn't say good," Sly snapped, cupping his hands around a mug of tea. The dark shadows lingering under his eyes indicated his exhaustion.

"Not sleeping?" Kiera grabbed the toast from the toaster and put it on a plate. She handed the plate to Sly and nudged him toward the table. She shoved two fresh pieces of bread in the toaster and topped up her cup of tea.

"No." Sly's glower didn't scare a flinch from her.

An improvement, Joe decided. "Sly, could you run Kiera into town so I can start on digging the dam for Saber?"

"I could take your vehicle," Kiera said.

"No, Sly and I will need it later," Joe said. They'd ended up selling Sly's vehicle to help pay for legal fees.

"I don't bite," Sly snapped.

"You did last night," Kiera snarled right back.

"I didn't bite you." Sly's gaze darted to Kiera's mating site and away before she realized. Joe noticed. His twin sensed how much he wanted to claim Kiera. Last night he'd suspected Kiera wanted the same. She'd definitely considered it, which meant this situation between them had gone far past friends helping one another out. If Sly had remained in prison, he might have mated with her, but now...

Hell, he didn't know what he'd do.

He didn't want to give up Kiera, and he didn't want Sly to move out. This place belonged to both of them. They'd worked hard to purchase this farm and it was home. Their future. The obvious thing would be to offer to share Kiera. Two big problems there. He didn't think Kiera realized he usually shared women with his twin, but worst of all—he didn't want to share this time, possessiveness grabbing him by the scruff. Weirdly, though, last night he hadn't minded Sly's presence...

The pop of the toaster dragged him from his problems. "Anyone want more toast?"

"Yeah, put in two more slices," Kiera said. "Why were you at the workshop anyway?"

"To learn if you were lying to Joe."

Silence fell, appalled on Joe's part. "Fuck, Sly. Just because Maggie shafted you doesn't mean all women are the same. Kiera, I didn't suspect you of lying."

"I know," Kiera said instantly. "I can't expect Sly to understand I'm not a game player. It will take time for him to trust me." She tossed his own words back at him, much to his amusement.

"You're lucky I checked on her," Sly said, calmly buttering a fresh slice of toast.

"That's not the point," Joe snapped. Fuck, this kept getting better and better.

"Why do they want you?" Sly stared at Kiera, clearly expecting answers.

"I have to go. I'll tell you the entire, sordid story on the way to town," Kiera said.

Amazing. She wasn't having a tantrum or sulking at Sly's insults. Maybe he'd leave them to it and try not to worry. Jealousy wasn't going to help.

"Do you need to collect a handbag or something?" Sly eyed Kiera and attempted to hide his fascination. It hadn't taken long for him to change his opinion of her. She'd told Joe the truth, and that went a long way with him.

"Yeah, let me get the blue leather one that goes with my overalls."

Joe chortled, and a foreign burst of humor zapped Sly too.

The woman wasn't like any of his past bedmates. Hell, he understood Joe's fascination. Last night he'd wanted to step into Joe's bedroom and touch her intimately, taste her, test her skin for softness. For the first time in months, Maggie hadn't stalked his dreams. Instead he'd remained sleepless because of a new woman.

Kiera Pascoe.

Which was screwed up in all sorts of ways.

Sly picked up the SUV keys from the fruit bowl on the counter and shook them until they jingled. "Time's a wastin'."

"Let me grab the workshop keys. I'll meet you outside."

"You can kiss Joe goodbye in front of me. I won't blush."

Joe glared, but Sly didn't care. Kiera cast him an uncertain look before rushing from the kitchen.

"What are you trying to do? Drive her away?"

"You like her."

"Yes." Joe didn't even hesitate.

Sly blinked at his twin's ready reply. "I'll leave you and Kiera to say your goodbyes in private. *This time.*"

"You're acting like an ass."

Sly kept walking, the urge to whistle taking him without warning.

Kiera joined him in the SUV and he started the vehicle, accelerating smoothly down the driveway. He was conscious of her leaning back and her breathy sigh gave him a conversational in.

"Tell Uncle Sly all your problems, my dear."

Kiera rolled her eyes. "You're not the type to listen to confidences. I've heard stories about you. You and Joe gave Saber gray hair."

"That's his story."

"Ambar told me a few things too."

Sly barked out a laugh. It sounded rusty to his ears. Not surprising, given he hadn't laughed much recently. "You shouldn't believe everything you hear. Ambar isn't exactly pure and white."

"So, it's not true you and Joe share your women?"

Ah, straight to the heart of the matter. "What did Joe say?"

Kiera stared straight ahead, her attention fixed on the horizon. A faint blush crept into her cheeks. "I haven't discussed the matter with Joe."

"Why not?" Sly turned onto the main street and pulled up outside her workshop.

"The topic wasn't relevant when you weren't around."

Sly cursed, getting her drift straightaway. "Fuck, Kiera. Joe would never force you to take me into your bed. We're not brutes."

"Harold's here."

Avoidance. Sly saw the burly man waiting impatiently outside the huge roller doors and conceded. She had a business to run. "This discussion isn't over."

Kiera didn't reply. She jumped out of the SUV and hustled over to her customer. The burly man said something then guffawed at her reply.

Sly headed back to the farm. He and Joe needed to talk about Kiera. He'd back away, go and live with Saber and Emily for a while. They wouldn't mind having him around.

The day passed more quickly than usual, the farm chores, Kiera and his brother filling his mind. At six, he hammered the last staple in the fence he was mending and packed up for the day.

The scent of roast meat wafted from the kitchen as he neared the house. He quickened his steps, discarding his dirty boots and socks in the utility room along with his T-shirt.

"Something smells good."

Kiera turned away from the counter, a smile spreading across her face. "Joe." She took two steps toward Sly, obviously intending to kiss him.

Lie. Pretend to be Joe. The temptation slipped into his mind, furtive like a cat burglar. Her lips were mere inches from his when he blurted, "I'm Sly." He took two hasty steps back, his heart racing as if he'd run a mile sprint.

"Shit," Kiera said, the color fleeing from her face. "I thought— I'm sorry." She backed away, putting the counter between them. "Din... Dinner will be ready in about half an hour. Why don't you go and have a shower?" She fixed her attention on the flowers she was arranging in a vase.

"Yeah. Okay." Sly forced himself to turn away when he really wanted to grab her by the shoulders and lay one on her.

In the bathroom, he flipped on the shower and rapidly stripped. He started to get into the shower, frowned down at his erection and backtracked to shut the door.

Sly stepped under the water, barely flinching at the cold water. He gripped his cock, idly stroking while his mind raced. No matter which way he looked at the situation, he had to do the right thing. Back off and let Joe court Kiera. There was no doubt in his mind Kiera would become his sister-in-law. Part of him was pleased Joe had found someone while the other part of him wanted to have a childlike tantrum because he felt squeezed out. Alone.

Sly pictured Joe and Kiera the way he'd seen them the previous night. Traditional, missionary position. Joe pumping deep, his muscles flexing while Kiera clutched him close, bucking and writhing beneath Joe. And the sounds... Hell, the sounds of them fucking, the breathy moans. The slap of flesh on flesh...

He ducked his head under the water then pressed his left hand against the tiles of the shower stall. His right hand continued the measured stroke and massage of his cock. It didn't take long with the memories flickering through his mind like a raunchy, porn movie. His balls drew tight for the first time in months, the ache of arousal both pleasurable and a relief.

A snort of private laughter erupted from him. He could get it up after all. He squeezed his dick to a point shy of pain where he found the greatest pleasure. Another sequence of pictures flickered through his mind, this time founded in imagination. Three lovers writhing together on a bed. Him. Joe. Kiera pressed between them.

His hand moved faster, catching the underside of his dick with each pass. Need built as he imagined his cock encased in the tight, swollen heat of Kiera's pussy, her blue eyes glittering with need, pleading with him. The tingle in his balls morphed to something bigger. Better. He lost himself in the mindless pleasure, the breath squeezing

from his body with his agonized groan. Semen erupted from him in long, almost painful spurts against the tiles.

Gradually, he came to himself, his knees embarrassingly weak and his cock spent. Sly picked up the soap and rubbed the bar across his chest. A distinct floral scent rose within the tepid steam. It was a vast improvement on the plain-brand, prison soap. He didn't even care if friends or family teased him about a girly fragrance. Life was about choices. He'd had his taken from him, and now that he possessed his freedom, he didn't intend to sit back and let life pass him by.

If Joe and Kiera wanted him in a relationship with them, he'd accept. If not, he'd stand back and wish them well. Other fish swam in the sea. All he needed to do was find them.

* * * * *

Joe stepped into the utility room, savoring the scent of meat. Along with physical hunger for food came a mental hunger for his woman. Barefoot, he prowled into the kitchen, pausing for a second to admire her. Tonight she wore her black hair tied back in a ponytail, the heat from the kitchen bringing a flush to her cheeks. She wore a plain blue T-shirt and tight denim shorts that enticed a man to touch.

"Joe?"

"Yeah, babe?"

"Sly came in and I almost kissed him. I'm sorry. I feel stupid."

Joe paused midstride to scrutinize her more carefully. "Almost?"

"Sly told me he wasn't you."

The tension seeped from Joe. "Come here. It's okay, babe."

She set the wooden spoon she held aside and almost ran to his side, burrowing against him. "I'm sorry."

His heart twisted at her agitation, her rapidly beating pulse. "There's no need to apologize. You didn't do anything wrong." He hesitated over what to say next. Truth. That's what he needed. They couldn't move forward with this between them. "Let's talk."

"All right." She pulled from his embrace and started to walk away.

"Kiera?"

"Yeah?" She swiveled around to face him.

"I want the kiss you almost gave Sly."

A gamine grin darted across her face, lighting her pupils with the colors of the sea on a clear, sunny day. "That, I can do."

Joe wrapped his arms around her, dragging her scent deep into his lungs before lowering his head to devour her lips. As kisses went, it wasn't gentle or wooing. It was

a statement of ownership, and Joe accepted the truth already written in his heart. He wanted to keep Kiera, despite the complications. Time to tell her everything.

Footsteps sounded behind them. They slowed abruptly when Sly noticed them together. Joe waited, wondering what Sly would do. In the past, Sly would've passed himself off as Joe when confronted with a woman offering kisses. Curiosity filled him. Why had his twin confessed and backed off?

A cheerful whistle filled the silence, and Joe released his grip on Kiera to turn to face his twin. "Kiera and I need to talk. Would you keep an eye on dinner? We won't take long."

Sly let his gaze wander to Kiera before focusing on him again. "Sure. Half an hour?"

"That'd work." Joe wove his fingers with Kiera's and tugged her from the kitchen. Once they reached his bedroom, he pulled her inside and shut the door.

Kiera sashayed to the bed, sat then sprang to her feet. Her hands fisted at her sides. "Do you want to call off our agreement?"

"Hell no," Joe said, his instant reply taking some of the starch from her. "Just the opposite. I want more from our agreement. I don't intend to back away once your brothers go home. I want you, Kiera."

Her bright smile lit the room. Her obvious relief eased some of the tension in his shoulders. He sat on the edge of the mattress, waiting for her to join him.

"I need to talk to you about Sly."

"Yes." She sounded cautious now, which told him rumors had reached her.

"Growing up, Sly and I were close. Very close." Joe paused, worried about her reaction.

Coward, Sly taunted mentally.

Too true. Joe sucked in a deep breath and continued. "We shared everything, including our girlfriends. Sly was...is my best friend. We assumed when we came to take a mate we'd pick someone we both wanted, we'd mark her and live together."

"You want to share me?" Her voice rose toward the end of the sentence.

"No, of course not. I'm telling you because I wanted to try to explain why it has been weird since Sly came back."

"Does Sly want to share? Wait, why didn't he kiss me when he had the chance?"

"You'll have to ask him about the attack of conscience. Normally, if one of us met a woman and started dating her, we'd swap and she'd never notice. We haven't done that with you. Sly realizes I'm serious about you."

"Normally I can tell you apart, but today I was thinking about work. Sly appeared and I acted on instinct."

"How can you tell us apart?" Joe asked, diverted by her confidence in knowing which twin she was speaking with. "Even Saber gets confused sometimes."

“Sly has a harder edge than you. He looks more of a badass and his eyes don’t soften when he sees me.”

“Parts of me don’t soften. They grow hard.”

“Lucky me.” She paused. “You smell a bit different, although that’s changing now that Sly uses the same soap and laundry powder as us.”

Joe scooped her up and settled her on his knee, cuddling her close.

“This sharing thing— I want to think about it before I decide if we take our relationship further.”

Fear jumped at Joe. He couldn’t lose her. He hadn’t told her he loved her. Hell, he couldn’t imagine letting her walk away. “What are you saying?”

“I’m saying that you and Sly are close. You own this farm together and I don’t want to cause friction between the two of you. I’d like to get acquainted with Sly. Everything has happened fast. I’d like to live here as your girlfriend and lover and see how it works out. If there’s too much tension or we have problems...” She trailed off, and Joe didn’t like the silent implication.

Dammit, she was perfect for him, for both of them, if he were honest. The last thing he wanted was for her to leave. He’d make this work if it killed him, work at his jealousy and possessiveness. No way would he let Kiera leave.

Chapter Ten

One week later

Kiera stormed into the farmhouse after a frustrating day at work. Her toe throbbed where she'd dropped a wrench on it and her knuckles ached in concert because she'd managed to skin them while changing a flat tire.

She spied one of the twins preparing vegetables for dinner. "I can't believe my brother."

"Brothers can be a nuisance. I'd like to get rid of mine sometimes."

Sly. His voice bore a husky note that differed from Joe's. She grimaced at him, curling her upper lip to display her teeth. More relaxed around him now, she didn't hesitate to continue her tirade. "Matthew finally deigned to reply to my messages for him to ring me. He still insists I marry William. I told him about the two thugs the other night. They work for William. We both know they're William's men, but he's telling me I have an overactive imagination."

"You and Joe are serious about each other. The two of you should seal the knot, do the marking thing and preempt your brother's next strike. What about your other brothers? Do they agree with this match with William?"

"No, they're on my side."

"That's a good idea," Joe said from the doorway.

"That's not the point," Kiera said, her tone sharp with anger. "Matthew should consider my happiness. Instead he's using me as a bargaining chip to save his own skin and pay off his gambling debts."

"Only you can decide what to do," Sly said.

Something in his tone told her he wasn't merely talking about the situation with her brother. When did her life get complicated? All she wanted was to run her business and get on with her life. Instead, she faced problems everywhere she turned.

"What's for dinner?" She headed for the fridge, wincing a bit when her sore toe rubbed across the floor tile.

"We're having a barbecue outside tonight. Go have a bath." Sly smirked at his brother. "Let Joe scrub your back while I do the hard work."

Joe ambled closer. "Go." He nudged her away from the fridge. "I'll bring you a drink."

"A glass of wine," she said. A bath was a good idea and the warm water might ease the throb in her toe.

Joe waited until Kiera left before grabbing a bottle of white wine from the fridge. "Beer?"

"Please," Sly said.

"Thanks for dispensing the advice. I'd marry her in a minute if she'd have me."

"I don't blame you. Ambar was telling me she comes from a wealthy family," Sly said.

Joe scowled. He didn't give a fuck about Kiera's finances. "She doesn't talk about her background much. I don't care, so I didn't push her to tell me everything."

"I would've done the same," Sly said. "Go spend some time with your woman while I finish dinner." He checked his watch. "You have an hour."

Joe handed his brother a chilled beer while giving Sly a swift man hug. "Thanks."

With a wineglass and his beer in hand, he ambled down the passage to the bathroom and entered.

"Matthew isn't going to give up on this idea," she said.

"Probably not." He handed over the wine and set his beer aside.

She pulled a face at his answer. She'd added bubbles to her bath and they frothed around her stomach with a couple of soapy patches clinging to the curves of her breasts.

"God, you're beautiful." Joe pushed the words out past the knot in his throat. He wanted to scoop her from the bath, throw her on the nearest bed and lose himself in her luscious body, bathe his cock in her tight, liquid warmth and never let her go.

"Why are you staring at me? Do I have grease on my face?"

He leaned over and kissed the tip of her nose while running his fingers across her rib cage, tickling her.

"Joe!" Wine splashed over the top of her glass, hitting one breast and trickling down into her cleavage.

"Hold still." Joe followed the path of the wine with his tongue. "It tastes better on your skin." He watched her reactions, let his mouth drift closer to her nipple.

"I didn't spill wine there."

"Are you sure?" His lips closed around her pouting nipple. Their gazes held and he saw her swallow as he drew on it, gently at first and gradually with more purpose.

"Maybe a little wine," she conceded, her hand creeping up to cup his skull and hold him close.

His hand wandered down to stroke her hip. This wasn't enough. His cock throbbed against his fly. This wasn't nearly enough. Joe let her nipple pop free and rocked back on his heels to study her. "You can have a bath later." He scooped her out of the bath and carried her to his bedroom.

She giggled as she bounced on the mattress. "Sly will have dinner ready soon."

"Fuck dinner." Joe started to rip off his clothes. "On your hands and knees."

Kiera shot him an uncertain look then turned and faced the headboard.

“You’re beautiful.” He spoke the words, aware of the wealth of things he couldn’t articulate when it came to Kiera. Bubbles still clung to her skin along with droplets of water. He covered her from behind, using his knee to silently encourage her to spread her legs farther apart for him. He smoothed his hand over her butt while his gaze shot to the seam of her sex. Unable to resist, he stroked the velvety flesh. Teasing touches, designed to ready her for his possession. His cock pulsed, thickened. “You’re wet for me.”

“Always.”

“I wanted to tease you until we were both crazy. I can’t wait.” Joe positioned his cock and sank into her hot, wet flesh. Her pussy clutched his cock. Tight. Perfect. Joe slid deep and paused, squeezing his eyes shut as if to hold the pleasure inside him.

She laughed. “Crazy has its place.”

“Yeah?”

He set a measured pace, designed to tease both of them. Joe plastered his chest to her back and kissed her shoulder. Unbidden, his gaze locked on her marking site. His mouth ventured nearer to the pad of flesh. His tongue lashed out for a taste. Spicy. Addictive.

“Yeah,” she replied.

His cock sank deep and his body hummed with the rightness of being with her, inside her. He kissed her neck, his attention sliding back to that pad of flesh. He sucked it while continuing to rock against her. Her pussy fluttered and she pushed back against him.

“Harder, Joe.”

Joe wasn’t sure what she wanted him to do harder so he sucked on her marking site again and increased his pace until he was hammering into her. The slap of flesh against flesh filled the bedroom and the scent of bubble bath combined with spicy sex. Joe wanted to come yet contrarily wanted to hold on to this feeling of right—the perfect fit of two lovers.

“Joe,” Kiera wailed, a trace of frustration in her voice.

“Shh.” He made the soothing noise and changed the angle of his strokes while reaching between her legs to stroke her swollen nub.

She shuddered, cried out, her pussy clasp his cock even more snugly. His tongue swept over her marking site. His hips bucked. He dove deep, fingering her clit until she came, bathing him in liquid warmth. Several hard thrusts tightened his balls to the point of pain. Grabbing her hips, he surged into her. The tight coil gripping him unraveled, and he bit down on her marking site.

Kiera let out a shocked cry and pushed her hips back against him, her pussy rippling around his cock. Blood poured into his mouth, sweet and magical. He came in an orgasmic rush, pouring himself into her with hard spurts. So much pleasure. So much.

Joe's feline rolled under his skin, a lazy stretch of satisfaction. Joe stilled, realized his teeth still clasped her to him. He released her, obeying the instinct telling him to lap the wound clean. The bleeding stopped quickly, but each time he licked her, she shuddered, her pussy clutching his cock.

Joe pulled out of her, separating their bodies. "I'm sorry," he whispered, aghast at his actions. He'd behaved like a caveman. Hell, he hadn't asked. He'd taken.

Kiera turned to confront him, and he cringed, wondering how to face her when he'd acted no better than her brother, forcing himself on her.

"I'm sorry," he repeated.

"You don't mean that."

His shoulders slumped. She was right. Sorrow wasn't the main emotion flooding him at present. Elation took precedence by a long mile. She had every right to kick his ass from Middlemarch all the way to England. He forced himself to look her in the eyes. "You're right. I'm not sorry. I want to keep you."

Her eyes narrowed. "An ownership thing or do you love me?"

Shit, he'd pissed her off, her English accent very evident at present. Might as well jump in with both feet. "Both."

"Good."

"Good?"

"Yeah." Her fingers played over the mark he'd left on her shoulder. Her eyes went big and she shuddered.

Joe watched the strum of her fingers and wanted her again. "Am I allowed to touch?" He couldn't work out whether she was angry or not. The signals were getting lost in the translation.

"Stretch out on the bed," she instructed in a no-nonsense voice.

Joe hesitated.

"Bed. Now."

Amused now, Joe followed her orders. He watched her gaze wander over his face, his chest and finally settle on his erection. Yeah. He was good to go again.

"A pity we don't have time for me to tie you up."

"No one ties me up," Joe said.

"You owe me," Kiera said, her eyes glittering dangerously.

True, but that didn't mean he intended her to let her control him. He wasn't wired as a submissive.

"Hold on to the headboard and don't let go."

Okay. He could manage to do that. Joe raised his hands and gripped the wooden headboard.

Kiera waited until he'd settled before straddling his body. She didn't muck around with teasing but grasped his cock and guided it to her. She sank down, impaling herself, forcing his hard flesh deeper, bathing him in heat.

She set a rapid pace, rising and falling. She cupped her breasts and played with them, tweaking her nipples, tugging them until they turned rosy.

"Take one in your mouth," Joe said hoarsely. "Suckle on it."

She grinned as if considering the idea, idly continuing to ride him. "You think?"

"Yeah." Oh yeah. "You won't let me touch you. You'll have to touch yourself."

Joe sucked in his gut, his fingers gripping the headboard harder because he was determined to accede to her this time.

She lifted her breast and licked around the nipple. Joe caught his breath, mesmerized by the sight. She closed her eyes and wrapped her lips around the taut point.

A sharp breath drew Joe's attention and he saw Sly at the bedroom door. Sly swiftly retreated but not before Joe noticed his twin's erection.

Kiera released her nipple and grinned. "That felt naughty and so, so good."

"Felt good on my end too, babe. You went liquid around my cock."

Kiera gave him a saucy grin and delved between her legs. She ran her finger over her clit, shivered and lifted the digit to her mouth.

Joe cursed softly.

"You want to taste?"

"Yeah."

Kiera stroked down her seam again, running her finger across the base of his shaft where they joined. A bolt of lightning struck his balls. His lover bore a distinct naughty streak.

She stroked her clit, moaning then repeating the liquid slid across her swollen nub. Leaning forward, she lifted her finger to him. He rasped his tongue across it, savoring her juices and the hint of him.

"Good?" She shuddered when he ran his finger the length of her finger.

"Very good."

She pulled back and started to ride him in earnest. She rose and fell, her breasts bouncing with each move. She ground against him, muttered with frustration and used her finger again.

Joe gritted his teeth, hanging on by a mere thread of willpower.

She stroked her clit and gave a full-body shudder, her pussy flexing around him. Then she cried out and lunged forward. Her teeth sank into his marking site, the white-hot pain jolting him clear to his toes. The thread of willpower snapped under the surge of endorphins. His climax roared through him, white noise in his ears while Kiera's bite and subsequent licks extended the throb of pleasure.

Joe released his grip on the headboard and wrapped his arms around her, holding Kiera tight.

His mate.

Never had everything seemed so right in his world.

* * * * *

Sly stared at his beer, mind in turmoil. They'd marked each other.

Joe and Kiera.

A mated couple.

While he was pleased for his brother, a part of him felt betrayed. Lost. He and Joe were a team. They'd always talked about doing this together.

The shower turned on and faint laughter drifted down the passage. He switched on the gas barbecue, glad of a reason to move, a reason to act when he was falling apart inside. They'd probably end up back in bed and he wouldn't see them again tonight. He might as well cook a couple of steaks and some sausages for himself.

Once he'd eaten, he'd visit one of his other brothers and give Joe and Kiera time alone. They didn't need him cluttering the place. If they wanted to fuck somewhere other than the bedroom, they should have the freedom to indulge themselves.

The shower shut off and Sly steeled himself. If Joe or Kiera or both of them appeared out here, he needed to pin on a happy face. Not too much of a stretch because he was pleased for his twin.

Joe deserved happiness with a good woman like Kiera. His initial fears about her taking Joe for a fool had been unfounded. Kiera Pascoe was a keeper.

Joe sauntered onto the verandah where they kept the barbecue. "Sly, you okay?"

"Why shouldn't I be? Congratulations."

Joe grinned – a wide, happy smile that looked good on him. "Emily won't be able to matchmake anymore."

Sly groaned as Joe intended him to. "She'll focus on me."

Some of Joe's joy faded as if he guessed Sly's turmoil. "Sorry. I didn't mean to shove your nose in my happiness. I didn't plan on marking Kiera tonight. It just sort of happened."

"Don't worry about me. I'm happy for you. Kiera is a special woman and you're lucky to have her."

"I know."

"You want something to eat?"

"Of course. Kiera will be out in a few minutes."

Sly tested the grill and reached for the platter of steaks. He focused fiercely on his task and fought to keep his game face intact. Joe didn't need to worry about him. He

was home. He was safe and, even if he moved out, he'd talk to Joe most days. That's all he needed to survive.

Footsteps heralded Kiera's arrival, and Sly added the sausages to the grill before he summoned the courage to glance at her. His breath caught, lodging behind the knot in his throat. Her long, black hair hung loose and her eyes sparkled with blue fire. An attractive flush colored her cheeks and happiness radiated from her. Her plain, cotton tank top clung to her curves as did the denim shorts. He ripped his gaze away while silently cursing his unruly body.

"Can I do anything?" Kiera asked.

"I thought we'd eat out here," Sly said. "Can you grab the two salads from the fridge?"

"You want another beer?"

"Thanks." He craved something stronger but beer would have to suffice. Jake and Hari would have whiskey in stock.

Joe bounded after Kiera, and Sly winced when laughter floated from the kitchen. He stuffed his jealous—yeah, an accurate assessment of his mood—down. Plain ole jealousy. A first for him and his twin.

"Hey," Sly hollered. "There's no time to mess around. The steaks are ready."

They emerged from the kitchen five minutes later, Kiera's hair ruffled and Joe wearing a satisfied and smug expression. Sly sucked in a breath and served the meat before joining his brother and Kiera at the wooden table. They handed around salad and helped themselves.

"Congratulations, Kiera." Sly would do pleasant and happy if it killed him. "Welcome to the family."

"Thanks." Kiera grinned and sneaked a glance at Joe. His twin was watching her with a dopey expression on his face.

Sly picked up his knife and fork, speared his steak and cut off a chunk. "Have you told your brothers yet?"

Kiera's smile faltered and Joe glowered at him. Shame struck Sly. There was no need for him to act mean.

"Not yet. I figure I'll ring them tomorrow."

"Emily will want to invite them to the celebration party," Sly said, trying to atone. "Make sure you speak to Emily first."

"Good idea," Joe said.

The meal continued with Sly becoming increasingly fidgety. "Can I use the SUV tonight?" he asked finally. "I'm gonna drop in on Jake and Hari. See if they want to go to the pub for a drink. Maybe Jonno too. I'll stay the night with Saber and Emily." He forced a smile and made himself meet Joe's gaze. "You guys don't need me around tonight."

"You don't have to leave," Kiera said instantly.

Joe's gaze bored into him. Sly hoped like hell he was projecting the right thing and not the X-rated actions his mind jumped to whenever he let himself imagine their mating.

"Thanks," Joe said.

Sly stood. "I'll be back in the morning after breakfast."

"Keys are in the fruit bowl," Joe called after him.

Sly made his escape with relief. Bring on the whiskey.

* * * * *

"You're jealous," Jake said, pitching his voice above the chatter in the Middlemarch pub.

"Yep. I admit it." Sly leaned back on his chair, balancing on two legs. "The more I learn about Kiera, the better I like her. She makes Joe happy."

Jonno smirked at him. "Last Mitchell standing. The women are gonna love you."

"Fuck off," Sly said.

"Don't knock mating until you try it," Hari said.

"Pussy-whipped," Sly taunted.

"Which is why you're jealous of Joe. You want Kiera too." Jake didn't hold back with his version of the truth.

Sly sighed, drank more whiskey and savored the burn while the peaty liquor slid down his throat. "Maybe I do, but it's not gonna happen."

"What are you going to do?" Jonno asked.

"Get past my jealousy. Take one day at a time until I can look at them both without flinching. You guys trying out for the rugby team this year?" To Sly's relief, they started talking about the Middlemarch rugby team and their chances for the upcoming season.

A few games of pool, some drinks and the shot of truth from his friends—a good way to spend the evening. If he managed to follow his own advice, his envy and the residual restlessness would pass.

Chapter Eleven

Two weeks later

Sly scowled at the contents of the fridge since it was his turn to cook. He grabbed a beer and shut the fridge. Later. They'd probably have steak for dinner again.

The tab of the beer can opened with a hiss. This one-day-at-a-time crap was doing his brain. If anything, the passing days made things more difficult for him. Seeing Joe with Kiera and hearing them... God, hearing them made him sweat, his cock impossibly hard. Cold showers and dips in the water hole couldn't put a dent in his sexual yearning.

He'd tried avoidance.

Yeah, he'd stayed with Saber and Emily for a few nights, but he'd felt like a third wheel. If Saber and Emily didn't get pregnant again soon, it wouldn't be for lack of trying.

The purr of a vehicle announced an arrival. Tension darted into his shoulders and his hand tightened on the can in reflex. Although the vehicle didn't sound familiar, it was probably Kiera. Sometimes she brought a customer's vehicle home when she wanted to take it on a test run. Joe, he could cope with, but Kiera brought torture to a new level, the kicker being she didn't realize her power over him.

He tugged out a chair and plonked his butt down while attempting to control his panic. So far he'd managed to keep Kiera at arm's length, meeting her only in Joe's presence. This would test him.

Footsteps approached the rear door by the kitchen. Heels? He straightened, his gut prickling while he stared at the door with foreboding.

Kiera in heels wasn't something he wanted to imagine. He'd bet she scrubbed up to spectacular.

A woman entered.

He did a double-take. "What the fuck are you doing here?"

"Sly?" The question mark at the end of his name brought a twist of lips. He didn't understand how Kiera managed, but she hardly ever confused him and Joe. This woman had known them for several years now and still couldn't keep them straight.

He arched a glare at her, not bothering to hold back his contempt. "What the fuck are you doing here, Maggie? You're not welcome." He'd never struck a woman before, but there was always a first time. His hands balled to fists. God, how had he ever wanted her? Why? The idea of touching her now made his skin crawl.

"There's no need to take that attitude." Maggie had always treated them like possessions, pulling them out to play with whenever the mood struck her. Someone

should tell her toys didn't enjoy the on-off treatment. "I need to talk to you. It's important." Maggie advanced and came to an indecisive halt when he didn't rush to sweep her into his arms.

His expression twisted in irony. "Surely you didn't expect a welcoming kiss? You screwed me over and left me to rot in jail."

She paused, peeking at him from beneath her lashes. She'd lost weight and it didn't suit her. Although still polished and immaculately groomed in a black suit, she appeared hard and brittle. He didn't intend to get close enough to learn if she'd break.

Sly stood and rounded the kitchen table to put the counter between them. "You setting me up again? Are the cops on their way?"

Fuck! Why had he wanted her as his mate? The woman wore selfish like a second skin. She hadn't even apologized for the way she'd set him up. It was her fault he'd ended up tossed in jail. Her lies. Hell, he still experienced nightmares about incarceration.

"Of course not. Sit, Sly. There's no need to prowl around like a confined cat."

Sly let out a dark laugh. If only she knew.

Another vehicle approached the house and fear slithered through him. "What sort of game are you playing this time?" Damn, he wasn't going back to jail without a fight. He didn't care what Saber said about revealing their shifter status. The confinement would kill him this time. Send him mad for sure. Sweat broke out across his chest and back, making his shirt stick to his flesh.

The rear door slammed and rapid footsteps approached. To his relief it was Kiera who burst into the kitchen rather than the cops.

"Sly— Oh, you have a visitor. I'm home early because my brothers are on their way." She grimaced and dumped a box of groceries on the counter. "Can you unpack these while I have a quick shower? They invited themselves to dinner."

Sly swallowed and glanced from Maggie to Kiera.

"Who are you?" Maggie demanded.

"Kiera." Kiera's English accent came to the fore, which told Sly of her irritation at Maggie's rude manner. "Who are you?"

"Maggie."

Kiera glanced at him, her face registering disbelief. "The Maggie? The traitorous bitch who lied to save her own skin? The one who landed you in jail?"

He nodded.

"I want to talk to Sly alone."

"In your dreams." Kiera shot Maggie a glare of intense dislike and rounded the counter to stand beside him. She leaned against his side and nuzzled his neck, reaching up on tiptoe to slide a quick kiss over his lips.

Sly froze at the physical contact. Her scent filled his startled breath—the faint traces of flowers overlaid with oil and the hand cleanser she used at the garage.

Laughing up at him, she whispered against his ear. “Put your arm around me. I won’t bite. Promise.”

Her touch sizzled through him, a whoosh of electricity through his veins. Every nerve ending fired to life, shoving arousal straight to his groin. All the blood in his body zapped south, making him giddy. “I might bite,” he said in a strangled voice. His knees trembled, and Kiera slipped her arm around his waist.

“If that erection is for her, I can leave you alone,” she whispered.

Fuck. Her breath on his jaw stirred a raft of goose bumps. They sprang up on his arms and legs. “No!” he blurted, torn between moving away to preserve his sanity and staying right where he was to send the right message to Maggie. He wasn’t available and would never be free for Maggie’s pleasure. “God, no.” He despised Maggie. She’d used him and tossed him away when he would’ve given her the world. “She disgusts me.” Nothing less than the truth. The betrayal had changed his life. She’d hurt not only him but Joe and the rest of his family, the people he cared about.

Kiera turned to Maggie. Her brows rose. “What are you doing here? Sly and Joe don’t want you. I certainly don’t want you here.” Her voice shimmered with English disdain—a real princess act. It made Sly realize how genuine she was and brought home the fact she’d grown up in a completely different way to him. Joe said she’d grown up in a life of privilege. Listening to her now, he believed it.

“This is nothing to do with you. Sly, tell her to leave,” Maggie snapped.

“I’ll ring Laura and get either her or Charlie to come,” Kiera said. “You can’t trust her.”

Sly nodded, seeing the sense in Kiera’s suggestion. He reached for the phone.

“No wait. Please, no one can learn of my presence here. I had to see you.” Maggie clasped her hands together and twisted them in agitation. “I need you, Sly. You don’t realize what my marriage is like.” Tears formed at the corner of her eyes. “It’s hell.”

Kiera let out a derisive sniff. “Please! Why is that our problem? I’m with Joe and Sly now. I’m their lover and I don’t share.” She slipped her hands under the hem of Sly’s T-shirt and ran her hands across his belly.

Sly’s heart jumped, his pulse hammering at Kiera’s touch. Her calloused fingers pushed a ripple of sensation across his bare skin. Unable to help himself, he nuzzled her neck and licked. His tongue caught the edge of her mark and they both jumped. Kiera gasped while another jolt of arousal shot to his groin, drawing his balls uncomfortably tight.

“This is none of your business.” Maggie rounded the counter, her eyes narrowed as she stalked close enough for Sly to smell her musky perfume—something Asian and cloying that he instantly loathed.

“Leave. Fuck, you’re the last person I want here.” Sly’s voice came out in a sensual growl. He wanted to get Kiera alone. His brain skidded to an abrupt halt and he backed up his plans. No, he’d get rid of Maggie and leave. Kiera was helping him to persuade Maggie to depart. Kiera belonged to Joe.

A tear trickled down Maggie’s cheek. “Please listen to me. It took a lot of planning to organize a visit while my husband is away. I might not have another chance.”

“Oh please,” Kiera said in disgust. “Don’t turn on the waterworks. You’ve got a bloody nerve coming here after all you’ve done to this family.”

“Joe’s here,” Sly said, hearing the familiar purr of the SUV when it pulled up.

“Good,” Maggie said with a hostile glower at Kiera. “Maybe he’ll listen to reason.”

Sly started to move away from Kiera. The last thing he wanted to do was hurt his brother.

“Don’t move an inch,” Kiera ordered in an undertone. “Joe will understand.”

Sly swallowed, tension resonating within him. He wasn’t sure his twin would appreciate his mate touching him. Fuck, contact with Kiera was asking for trouble.

“Joe!” Maggie threw herself at him the instant he stepped into the kitchen. Joe caught her automatically and Kiera growled low in her throat.

“Easy,” Sly whispered. “Joe’s not interested in her. He’s pushing her away already.”

Joe removed Maggie’s hands from his body and, when she clung, he shoved to clear space between them. “The way I understood it, Sly isn’t allowed within five hundred meters of you. This is our home. He didn’t invite you, so why the fuck are you here?” Joe’s gaze snapped from Maggie to land on Sly and Kiera. His gaze followed the way Kiera stroked Sly’s skin and he scowled.

Hell. Sly didn’t want to fight with Joe. He attempted to move, to separate their bodies, but Kiera wouldn’t release him.

“I want you to give me a baby,” Maggie said in a loud voice.

Sly blinked then laughed in contempt. “Are you for real?” The woman would probably forget she had a child or leave it with a nanny when she had something better to do. “Why would you think I’d be interested?” Just looking at her made his feline snarl and his gut roil with revulsion.

“You are out of your freakin’ mind,” Joe snarled. “I wouldn’t trust you with a child.” He circled Maggie carefully, as if she were something noxious, and strode over to join them. He exchanged a hard look with Sly and, for once, Sly couldn’t fathom his twin’s thoughts. Did Joe want to rip him limb from limb? Or did he understand Kiera was only trying to help him – a friendly gesture to a family member?

Sly edged away, but Kiera grabbed hold of his shirt and held fast. “You’re not going anywhere.”

“But –” Sly sought aid from Joe.

Joe wasn't watching him any longer. All his attention focused on Kiera. Silent messages passed between them, but Sly remained clueless. Finally, Joe reached out and stroked his finger down Kiera's cheek. Her eyes drifted shut, her lashes dark against her cheek.

A private moment between two mates.

Sly felt like a voyeur and he hastily stepped away.

Stop!

Sly started at the harsh order. His gaze snapped to Joe and he gulped at what he witnessed in his twin. Acceptance. Understanding. Love.

Joe shunted Kiera closer to Sly, standing closely behind until they enveloped her between their bigger bodies. On the far side, where Maggie wouldn't notice, Joe reached for Sly's hand. The contact sent another electrical charge down Sly's spine.

A surprised croak escaped Joe, and Sly realized he'd experienced the same thing when their hands met.

"Aren't you going to answer me?" Maggie demanded in a peevish tone.

"Just go away," Kiera said. "You're not wanted here. How many times do we have to tell you?"

"I lost our baby," Maggie said. "A few months ago." A sob burst from her and tears flowed down her face in earnest. "I want to have another baby."

"Isn't that what husbands are for?" Kiera asked.

"Joe and Sly belong with me." Maggie's voice took on an edge of hysteria.

"You're lying," Sly said hoarsely.

"No, she thinks she can just waltz back into your lives as if nothing has happened," Kiera said. "Don't you dare feel sorry for her. She doesn't deserve it."

At one time, the news of a baby would've overjoyed him, but now, he doubted her word. The woman always moved to her own agenda, one that benefited her and excluded others. And, once again, she thought she could snap her fingers at them and have him and Joe jump. The woman was delusional and obviously unbalanced.

"Please," Maggie said. "You're the only men I can ask."

"We wouldn't touch you with a barge pole," Joe snapped.

"Adopt. Go to a sperm donor agency," Kiera said, her tone impatient and abrupt. "Joe and Sly belong to me. They're not giving a child to anyone except me."

Reaction in Sly was instantaneous. If he didn't leave, he was gonna do something stupid like lay one on Kiera and kiss her senseless. "I've gotta go. Maybe Emily can give us something to serve for dinner."

"Make sure you come back. Remember my brothers are visiting," Kiera said.

"Great," Joe said. "Exactly what we need to add to this circus."

"Hey," Kiera said. "Oscar and Tyrone are fine."

Sly edged away from Joe and Kiera, but they both grabbed hold and refused to let him leave.

"Stay," Joe snapped. "Stop trying to fight us."

"What is wrong with you?" Maggie said with a sob. "I came all this way and you're ignoring me. It's all her fault!" She flew at them, but before she could touch either him or Joe, Kiera darted between them.

The two women collided, pushing each other. Shoving. With a loud shriek, Maggie grabbed Kiera's hair and yanked. Kiera countered with an elbow in the ribs. When Maggie tried to kick, Kiera jabbed her again. Maggie howled in pain, staggering back and rubbing her side. Her face contorted into an ugly mask.

"Go on," Kiera taunted. "Try again. I dare you."

"Tell your slut to back off," Maggie snapped.

Kiera's face darkened. "Who are you calling a slut?"

Maggie jumped Kiera then, arms swinging while she screeched abuse. Sly started to intercede, but Joe grabbed his arm.

"Let Kiera hit her," Joe murmured. "Maggie deserves a thumping, and we can't do it."

True. If anyone needed a smack in the head it was Maggie. Despite the thought, tension filled Sly as he stood beside his twin. Beside him, Joe was equally edgy.

But Kiera didn't hold back. Her fists flew, blocking every attempt Maggie made to hit her. She clipped Maggie on the jaw and sent her flying. Maggie stumbled backward, tripped over a chair. She didn't move for a couple of seconds, but finally stirred with a pained groan. Blood dripped from a cut on her lip.

"Damn, that felt good," Kiera said, her gaze narrowed on Maggie. "Would you like to get up so I can hit you again?"

"You can't get away with hitting me," Maggie said, wiping the blood from her mouth. "I'll call—"

Sly straightened. Right. That did it. No way would he let Maggie threaten Kiera. He reached for the phone and hit speed dial for Laura and Jonno. "Laura? Sly here. I have a problem."

"Sly! You can't tell anyone I'm here."

Sly ignored her and continued talking. "Maggie Charles has turned up at our house and she refuses to leave. I don't want to end up hauled away by strange cops again so I'm telling you."

"Sly!" Tears trickled down Maggie's face and she wrung her hands. "Nathaniel doesn't understand how much I want a baby. I've tried talking to him, but he's not interested. He doesn't want me and no one else is allowed to have me either."

"That's enough," Joe said, his tone sharp. "We don't want to hear your problems. You treated Sly like a criminal. You came with us of your own free-will and lied to save your own skin."

"Yeah, because of you Sly has a criminal record. You can't even tell the twins apart," Kiera said in disgust.

Sly put down the phone. "Laura is on the way."

Maggie cried, big, ugly sobs. She crawled to the nearest chair and dragged herself up to sit on it, a dull, red mark on her jaw where Kiera had hit her. Her lip still bled sluggishly. "I can't believe you're denying me. It's a small request."

Sly didn't feel a thing except distaste. She wasn't the Maggie of his memories, the same Maggie they'd first met and seduced. Sly picked up the phone again. Emily would know what to do.

"Good idea," Joe said in a low voice. "Emily might talk sense into her."

In uncomfortable silence, broken only by Maggie's weeping, they waited for Laura and Emily to arrive. Periodically, Maggie sent them a beseeching glance. They ignored her. The three of them maintained physical contact, helping Sly to remain calm.

"I hope they hurry. I don't want Matthew to arrive in the middle of this," Kiera said.

"God forbid," Joe said, his tone dry.

Sly didn't say anything, merely concentrating on his breathing and trying to push down the sexual arousal stalking his mind and body. He didn't want to do anything stupid. He didn't want to fall out with Joe and Kiera.

Finally, Laura arrived, and Emily and Saber turned up not long afterward.

Emily took one look at Maggie and hustled her into the den, shutting the door after her.

"Thanks for coming, Laura," Sly said. "I don't want to end up in jail again."

"What happened? Did you arrange a visit?" Laura asked.

"Fuck no!" Sly said. "I'm not that stupid. She turned up and walked into our house as if she had every right. I thought it was Kiera arriving home."

"There's something wrong with her." Joe tapped his forehead. "Mentally, I mean. She's not behaving rationally. She practically begged us for our sperm."

Kiera snorted. "As if I'd agree to that! She's a manipulative bitch."

"Do you want to press charges?" Laura asked.

"No. I want her to leave and never come back," Sly said.

Emily reappeared, a frown creasing her brow. "I'm going to drive Maggie to her mother's house. She's in no condition to drive."

"I'll follow you in our car." Saber turned to Sly and Joe. "I'll ring you later once we get home."

Sly nodded.

"See you, Saber," Kiera said.

"Thanks," Joe said.

Laura waited until they'd gone before saying Jonno was cooking dinner and she needed to get going.

Sly sighed once she departed. He turned to Kiera and Joe, ready to apologize. "I don't know about you but I could do with a drink. And I don't ever want to get on the wrong side of you, lady. Did you know she could punch like that?"

"Nope. Should I worry about the way you were cozying up to my mate?"

"Joe!" Kiera smacked him on the arm.

"Kiera was... We weren't doing anything. She was helping me convince Maggie of my lack of interest."

"Then why did you have a hard-on?"

Sly swallowed and decided on honesty. "Have you seen Kiera recently? I'm a male. There'd be something wrong if I didn't get a hard-on when she was running her hands over me."

Kiera hit Joe again. "Stop giving Sly a hard time. I *know* you experienced the same thing as me."

Sly's head jerked up. He scanned their faces. They'd felt the surge of desire? Both of them?

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Joe said.

"Right," Kiera said. "I need to conduct an experiment." She shrugged free of Joe's hands and headed in Sly's direction.

Sly backed up abruptly, and Joe chortled. "Are you afraid of Kiera?"

With the kitchen counter at his back, he had no where left to retreat. Kiera kept coming, obvious intent shining on her face. "Make her stop, Joe. Dammit, she's your mate. She—"

Kiera stopped his panicked babble with her mouth. She leaned in to him, plastering her curves against his harder body while her lips moved over his with devastating effect. He moaned when she traced her tongue along the seam, opening to her. She took the kiss deeper, sliding her tongue against his, making him wish for things he'd never have. His heart pounded and his hands crept from the counter to circle her neck.

He forgot about his brother and the fact he was kissing the hell out of his brother's mate until Joe moved up behind Kiera.

Sly jerked up his head, breaking the kiss and stared at Joe in trepidation. "I'm sorry. I have no idea what came over me. I'll go. Emily won't mind if I stay the night again."

"Kiss her again," Joe ordered.

Shocked, Sly stared at him.

"Kiss me," Kiera seconded her mate.

Sly let his gaze wander to Kiera's mouth. Her lips were pink and swollen from their previous kiss. The end of her tongue darted out to moisten them and he was lost. He lowered his head and laid one on her. Tongues. Teeth. His entire repertoire.

Joe grasped Kiera's shoulder, one of his hands holding Sly's in place. A jolt of pleasure struck Sly like a bolt from the heavens. A dark moan filled his ears, echoing his own. Only too aware Kiera would feel his erection, he attempted to shove her away, but Joe held them both in place.

Kiera trembled violently and the scent of arousal drifted into Sly's awareness.

Joe sent Sly a hard look, one Sly had difficulty understanding. He didn't know his twin anymore. He didn't understand why Joe had made Kiera kiss him or why Kiera had followed his order.

Hell, if his mate was even half as sexy as Kiera, he wouldn't let her out of the bedroom. Barefoot and pregnant totally worked for him.

"Sly, can you take care of dinner?" Joe asked.

"I bought stuff for a barbecue. I figured that would work with my brothers turning up," Kiera said.

They were heading to their bedroom to fuck. And why wouldn't they? They were mates. Physicality was what mates did. Hell, he'd watched the rest of his brothers and some of his friends when they found the right woman. He had no right to get in the way.

"No problem." Sly reached for the box of groceries, unsurprised to witness the tremor of his hands.

Joe took Kiera's hand and dragged her away.

Sly waited until they walked out of sight to rearrange his cock through the stiff denim of his jeans. He winced at the flood of sensation his touch unleashed and abruptly removed his hand. He'd been so close to coming it wasn't funny, and from a few touches and some kisses.

His pacing led him to the fridge, and he opened it to grab another beer. He wasn't sure whether to drink it or hold the icy can against his groin to relieve the swelling.

In the end, he drank the beer, downing the contents before he tried to focus on dinner preparations. Although he hadn't taken much to Matthew and didn't like the way he'd tried to order Kiera around, he was glad of her family's visit. He needed the diversion.

* * * * *

"We need to talk," Kiera said the instant the bedroom door shut behind them.

"Later," Joe said. The urge to fuck his mate simmered like a nagging toothache. From the moment he'd stepped into the kitchen and seen Sly with Kiera. "Strip. Now."

"Joe, we—"

"Kiera." He rapped out her name in a no-nonsense manner and she froze, her eyes widening at his tone. Their gazes met and held before she moved again. Her fingers

went to the hem of her T-shirt. In a distinct tease, she lifted the hem to reveal her belly one inch at a time. Joe narrowed his eyes. "Kiera."

Thankfully, she obeyed the order. The clothes practically melted from her body and soon she stood naked in front of him. They stared at each other before she lowered her gaze, the tension fading from her shoulders.

Her trust brought a surge of protectiveness. His woman. His mate. He visually traced across her breasts before focusing on her mark. Unbidden his fingers rose to his own marking spot. They stroked back and forth on the raised bite. The wound had healed rapidly but remained tender to touch, pushing a jolt of sexual awareness through him with each stroke.

"On the bed. Hands and knees. Close your eyes."

Kiera obeyed this time without objection. His gut twisted, his cock lengthened.

Joe approached the bed, his yearning to sink into her hot pussy grabbing by the scruff of the neck. Contrarily, he made himself wait. He grasped her shoulder to ground her.

"Did you like Sly caressing you? Kissing you?" Joe kept his voice level but couldn't halt the surge of jealousy. She'd touched Sly with his blessing, yet the idea of his brother fucking her made him crazy.

"Do you want the truth?"

His gut bucked with fear, which was stupid. Kiera loved him and would never betray him. "Of course."

"The contact with Sly felt right. When I touched both of you, the sensations were extraordinary."

Yeah, that's what he'd learned from the little scenario in the kitchen, which begged the question – what the fuck did they do now?

Joe ran his hand down her back, bringing his fingers to rest on her butt. She quivered beneath his touch. God, he loved her.

"Are your eyes still shut?"

"Aye, aye, Captain."

Joe barked out a laugh and swatted her butt. "Smartass."

And just like that, his jealousy faded. He'd think about what Sly meant to them later. Right now only two of them inhabited this bedroom. He ripped off his clothes and crawled onto the mattress, covering her from behind. Already her arousal scented the room. He guided his cock into position. One shove and he was fully seated, her wet, hot flesh clinging to him. He curled over her back, his mouth working her mark while he pistoned into her welcoming body with rapid thrusts.

His muscles flexed, giving no quarter. Thankfully, she seemed to be with him, her low moan of surrender echoing within the walls. He reached between her legs, finessing her clit until she shuddered, her snug channel tightening on his cock. Joe sucked on her mark at the same time, holding back his orgasm by a gossamer string.

"Joe." She cried out and his belly clenched, the electrical feeling of climax shooting from his balls and up his cock.

One last ruthless thrust and he stilled, his semen pumping from him while her cunt twitched around his cock. They fell to the bed together in a sweaty heap, both breathing rapidly.

"I love you, Kiera."

She wriggled, separating their bodies, and turned to face him. Acceptance and love twinkled in her eyes. "I love you too." She paused, and nibbled her bottom lip as if uncertain about what she wanted to say next.

"You can talk to me about anything." Even if he didn't want to hear what she intended to say.

"I think, given the opportunity, I could love Sly too. There's a connection between the three of us. It's something special, something magical."

"Extraordinary," Joe said.

"You understand."

"It doesn't stop me from jealousy." If she could give him honest, he'd display it in return.

"You don't have anything to be jealous about. Sly and I haven't kissed or done anything behind your back."

"Babe, I appreciate that." Joe reached out to sweep an errant curl from her face.

"You and Sly used to share your women. At least that's what both you and Ambar said."

"Gossip much?"

"Yeah. Especially when it's about two sexy feline males."

Joe sneaked a kiss, dallying when she immediately opened to him, her hands clasping him to her. Unwillingly he lightened up on the kiss and pulled back. "We need to move before your brothers arrive."

"What are we going to do?"

"What do you want to do?"

"I know one thing. I don't want to do anything to harm what we have together."

Joe sighed at the faint *but* in her sentence. She was right. It wasn't right to hide from the situation. And it wasn't fair to Sly. "Me either. We're mates and nothing will change that. Let's not make any decisions yet. Maybe think about it some more."

"Okay." Kiera pulled away with a smile. "I'll take first shower."

Joe pulled on his jeans, hesitated then went to join Sly in the kitchen. "What can I do to help?"

"You want to make some garlic bread?" Tension filled Sly's body and he kept sneaking glances at Joe as if he expected a fist in his face.

"Relax. I'm not gonna do anything stupid."

Sly didn't relax at the disclosure. "I'm sorry, bro. I'll find somewhere else to live. Give you and Kiera run of the house and some privacy."

"Don't be stupid. This is your home. I don't want you to leave."

"I can't stay here either. Watching, listening to you and Kiera is driving me crazy. And now that we've kissed, it's gonna make everything worse."

The distinct rumble of a car made Joe send an impatient frown in that direction. He turned back to Sly.

"Don't go. Give us some time. Please."

When Sly hesitated, Joe knew he'd stay and he was glad. It was a start. He mightn't like the tangle they'd managed to make, but he did like having his twin around. The months without Sly had been full of acute loneliness and loss. He imagined Sly had experienced the same emotions.

"Thank you," Joe said. "After Kiera's brothers leave, we'll talk more, okay?" Hopefully by then he'd work out how to proceed.

Chapter Twelve

Kiera heard her brothers arrive and hurried through to the kitchen to join Joe and Sly. She ambled up behind Joe and gave in to the impulse to stroke his shoulder. He let out a rumble remarkably like a purr. A chuckle escaped. "Go and have a quick shower."

"What about Matthew?"

"Sly will look after me."

Joe checked with his twin. "Sly?"

"No problem," Sly said.

Joe gave her a quick kiss and disappeared down the passage. An uncomfortable silence fell. Sly eyed her like a trembling virgin, both worry and fear creeping onto his face. Kiera fought her impulse to stroll over to him, touch and soothe away the frown between his sexy, green eyes.

While she loved Joe, her feelings for Sly were complicated. And when they'd touched—all three of them earlier—the surge of lust and the sense of rightness had surprised her.

Sly and Joe were twins and two halves of a whole. It made sense they should spend their lives with the same woman. The trouble was she wasn't sure she could deal with two strong men without losing herself. Yet Ambar managed the task.

An impatient knock on the door dragged her from her frenzied thoughts.

"I'll get the door," Sly said. "No need for you to deal with your brother alone straight off."

It was happening already. Joe had handed her off to Sly, and Sly intended to protect her. She didn't need them to fight her battles for her.

"I'll get the door," she said, moving before Sly rounded the counter. Hopefully William hadn't come with her brothers. She hadn't told them she'd mated with Joe and wasn't looking forward to the inevitable fallout from Matthew. Oscar and Tyrone would approve, and maybe they'd help sway Matthew.

"Hey!" She pasted a smile on her face, accepting hugs from first Oscar then Tyrone and finally Matthew. "Come in." She herded them to the kitchen where Sly was finishing off a salad.

Tyrone handed over two bottles of wine.

"Would you like a glass of wine now or a beer?" Kiera asked.

"Beer for me," Tyrone said.

"Hi, Joe," Oscar said. "I'll take a beer too."

"This is Joe's brother, Sly. Joe won't be long. He's in the shower."

“Hey, I didn’t realize you were twins,” Oscar said. “You’re identical.”

“No kiddin’, Sherlock,” Tyrone muttered, rolling his eyes.

“Why didn’t we meet you before?” Matthew demanded.

Sly stiffened and Kiera came to his rescue. “Sly’s only recently returned to Middlemarch. He and Joe run the farm together.”

Matthew leaned toward Kiera without warning, his nose twitching. “You smell different.”

Kiera shrugged and didn’t mention mating with Joe. She caught Sly’s surprise, his narrowing eyes. He assumed she was ashamed of Joe. Nothing could be further from the truth. She wanted a peaceful visit and didn’t want to argue with Matthew.

Matthew didn’t ask any more questions, but Kiera could practically see his mind ticking over. Her brothers shook hands with Sly, the males taking their measure of each other. Kiera held back a derisive snort with difficulty. No way did she intend to tell them Sly’s history. Matthew would use Sly’s jail time as an excuse to talk her into leaving. That would never happen. Middlemarch was her home now. She was happy here with Joe.

“There’s a great patio area outside. It’s such a nice night – it’s perfect to eat outside. You said your polo course was full-on. How come you’re down here?” Kiera wrinkled her nose. “That didn’t come out right. I am glad to see you.” And bonus! William hadn’t come with her brothers.

She ushered them out to the patio and hurried back to the kitchen for drinks.

Joe sauntered in to join her and brushed a kiss on her temple. “Everything okay?”

“I think so.” Except gut instinct told her something was afoot with Matthew. Maybe if she interrogated either Oscar or Tyrone when the chance presented itself... “I’ve come to get beer.”

To Kiera’s surprise, she enjoyed both the visit and the meal. Sly seemed a bit aloof but she understood his hesitation after everything that’d happened. Joe was his usual charming self, and Oscar and Tyrone filled in the gaps. Matthew didn’t say much, but he wasn’t rude either.

“We’ll see you tomorrow before we leave,” Matthew said, giving her a quick hug. He scented her neck and froze. Before she could wrench free, he peeled the collar away from her neck, baring her mating site and collarbone.

“You’ve mated. I knew something was off about your scent.” His hand flashed out. Her head snapped back, her cheek smarting from Matthew’s slap.

Joe and Sly sprang at Matthew, identical snarls rumbling in their chests. Matthew hit the wall, and Kiera screamed at them.

“Leave him alone!”

Sly cursed. “He hit you.”

Tyrone and Oscar waded into the melee, but not before Joe got in a punch that knocked Matthew on his ass. He crashed into the door and everyone froze.

"She bloody mated with him." Matthew picked himself up, and Joe and Sly both stepped between her and Matthew.

"Congratulations, Kiera," Oscar said.

"Thank you," Joe said.

Tyrone gave her a swift hug before stretching out his hand to Joe. "Welcome to the family, man."

Matthew growled, his hair standing on end and emphasizing his fury. "You've ruined everything."

"That's enough, Matthew," Oscar said. "Let's go." He shoved his older brother in the shoulder, shunting him toward the door.

"We'll see you tomorrow before we leave," Tyrone added.

Joe turned to her, reaching out to touch the aching part of her jaw. She couldn't prevent her wince when Joe caressed her cheek. "In the kitchen," he said, hustling her in that direction before she could protest.

Sly shut the door and followed. "I don't like your brother."

"I think it's mutual, if that's any consolation," Kiera said. She sat on the seat Joe pulled out. Seconds later Joe pressed a package of frozen peas to the left side of her face.

"That's should stop the swelling," Joe said. "I don't like your brother either."

Kiera exhaled. "He has problems."

"You're telling me he has problems," Sly muttered.

"The pair of you are giving me gray hair," Joe said.

Kiera exchanged a surprised glance with Sly before focusing on Joe. "Why?"

"Between Matthew and Maggie I don't know which is worse," Joe said. "My life used to be peaceful."

"You were miserable," Kiera retorted. "You missed Sly."

"I realize Maggie is trouble, but Kiera is worth the drama," Sly said.

Joe propped his hip against the kitchen counter. His dark brows rose. "You think so?"

And just like that the atmosphere took a turn into different territory altogether.

Kiera shivered, heat suffusing her entire body instead of only her cheek. Sly's hands clenched at his sides and he cast a quick glance toward the door, as if he contemplated escape.

"Kiera, what would you say if I suggested inviting Sly into our bedroom?"

Sly's breath eased out with a hiss while the color in Kiera's face intensified. Joe didn't take his focus off her.

"Kiera?"

Kiera swallowed in an attempt to dislodge the lump that bloomed inside her throat. She swallowed again, not knowing what to say or how to express herself on the subject.

Heck, she still needed to come to a decision either way. She wanted to fume at Joe, but he was right. They needed to move forward somehow.

"Joe, I need to know how you're going to react to my decision. I...I love you and I don't want to lose you."

"Don't answer him," Sly said in a rough voice laden with emotion. "I'm going to move out and give the two of you time alone. You don't need me around."

"You want her," Joe said. "Don't try to deny it."

"I'm not." Sly drew himself up. "But I'm not her mate. You are. I'm not willing to lose you again, Joe. I'm backing away from a volatile situation."

"You felt the charge when the three of us touched. What if you're Kiera's mate too? Are you willing to walk away from your mate because of stupid pride and loyalty to me?"

Silence fell in the kitchen, stretching out for a long time. It was uncomfortable, and through it all, the subtle burn of sexual awareness pulsed through Kiera.

She sucked in a deep breath, not sure if it was the kinky idea of being with two men at the same time or if it was something more. "Do I get a say in this?"

"Yes," Joe said.

"No," Sly said.

Amusement filled her then. "Which is it going to be? I won't know if we're mates until we fuck." The harsh word reverberated between them, echoing in the kitchen.

"So we move this to the bedroom," Joe said, meeting her gaze with a silent question in his eyes. She nodded in silent acceptance.

"This isn't a good idea," Sly said. "I'll go to Saber and Emily's for the night."

Joe scowled. "Don't be stupid."

Kiera held her breath, sensing the twins needed to work through their reservations. She was willing to wait and see what they decided, but she didn't want to cause friction between Joe and Sly either.

"You love Kiera. I'm not stupid." Sly started to pace around the table. "When I touch Kiera, I sense your jealousy. I don't want to fight you, especially over a woman."

Joe scowled. "Kiera's not just a woman."

"No, she's not. She's your mate. You love each other and you don't need me jumping in the middle of your relationship."

Kiera decided it was time for her to enter the conversation. "Joe is right. We need to get physical instead of talking around in circles."

"Are you gonna be able to look me in the face tomorrow after I've had my mouth on your pussy?" Sly's gaze drilled right into her, full of challenge.

Kiera checked Joe's reaction, noticed his slight nod and took a breath to center her anxiety. "Yes."

A shudder went through Sly. He stopped in front of Joe and they stared at each other, communicating silently. She didn't get what they said, but they must've come to a decision.

"Go to the middle bedroom. Strip and lie on the bed with your legs parted. Wait for us. We'll join you shortly," Sly said.

Kiera hesitated, her heart pumping with anticipation along with a sliver of fear. Neither man paid her any further attention. With a soft huff of exasperation, she marched away, wondering what she'd let herself in for.

* * * * *

"Are you sure you want to share your mate?" Sly studied his twin closely, searching for the slightest hesitation.

"No," Joe said. "But I need to let go of my jealousy because there's something between us – something big. If I walk away now, I'll always wonder."

"Okay, but, Joe?"

"Yeah?"

"If you turn around tomorrow and start to blame me, I'm gonna knock you from here to Auckland and back," Sly said.

"Deal. Anything else?"

"I think we should blindfold Kiera and do this together."

"Makes sense."

"Go and put the blindfold on her. Make sure she's really on board with us doing this," Sly said. He was mad agreeing to this. "Damn, I can't believe I'm doing this."

"Don't worry," Joe said.

"I haven't had sex since Maggie." Might as well shove the last bugbear out of the cupboard.

Joe froze, a slow, shit-eating grin sliding across his face. "That'll make things interesting. See you in a few."

Sly stared after Joe, acknowledging the nerves jumping in the pit of his stomach. He collected the beer cans and wineglasses from outside and locked the door. Joe and Kiera should be settled by now. It was time for him to join them.

He forced himself to take the first step toward the bedrooms. He wanted to do this—he really did—yet he harbored worries. Plenty could go wrong. Premature ejaculation for one. Just sticking his cock anywhere near Kiera was gonna shove him to the edge.

Sly reached the bedroom separating his and Joe's. The faint murmur of voices came from inside and he hesitated.

"Come in, Sly," Joe called.

Sly pushed open the door and stepped inside. He came to an abrupt halt. "She's beautiful." Long, slender limbs. Her black, curly hair loose around her shoulders. Breasts made to fit his hands, and curvy hips. He couldn't see her eyes because of the black blindfold covering them, but he imagined the sea-blue color of them alight with mischief. Easy to understand why Joe was smitten with his mate. It would be a difficult decision when he came to choose where to touch her first.

"I know." Joe sounded smug. "What can I say? I have great taste."

"Hey, guys. I'm right here. And for the record, I came on to you first. It was my good taste that set us on this road. If I hadn't needed a man, we wouldn't be where we are now."

Sly watched Joe stroke Kiera's breast with his fingertips, mesmerized by the way her nipple tightened under Joe's ministrations. His cock tightened as he watched the slow, back-and-forth strum of Joe's fingers, his skin tan against the paleness of Kiera's breast.

Sly's mouth dried. He swallowed. Unbidden, his feet took him to the edge of the king-size bed. When he glanced at Joe, his twin nodded encouragement, seeming to understand his trepidation.

He tugged off his T-shirt but decided to leave on his jeans. He sat on the edge of the bed, not far from her shoulder, and let his fingers drift across her face. Silky-smooth skin. He leaned down and let his lips follow the same direction his fingers traveled. Her scent filled him—a unique mixture of her and his brother Joe along with the floral soap she liked to use in the shower. His tongue flickered out to taste her skin and a purr vibrated in his throat. Even better than he'd imagined. And he'd imagined spending time with Kiera in this way, experienced guilt for loving his brother's mate.

Sly moved his trembling hand down her body, keeping his touch away from her sweet spots because he wanted to savor the experience, explore her body and learn her like a good student. Joe didn't hold the same reservations. He licked around the base of her breast, gradually moving closer to her puckered nipple.

Kiera sighed, lifting into Joe's touch. Sly skipped her breast to skim his mouth across her ribs, noticing not an ounce of reservation in her. No taut muscles or lingering tension.

Why had he fostered a yen for a future with Maggie? The differences in the two women staggered him. Kiera gave joyously while Maggie snatched their affection in selfish grabs. Another time he'd have to ask for the full story about how they met and came to live together. They'd never told him, and he wanted to learn everything, no matter how small.

Kiera was special and she—not Maggie—fit them perfectly.

Joe must have sensed Sly halting. He lifted his head and their gazes met. Joe's brows rose in a silent question. Then understanding filled Joe's face. He sensed his twin's thoughts.

"Hey, are you guys still there?" Kiera half sat before Joe grinned at Sly. Together they grasped one shoulder each and propelled her back, flat on the mattress.

"We're here," Joe said.

"We'd never run out on you or pull a stupid prank while you were blindfolded," Sly added.

Kiera wrinkled her nose. "But you'd pull a prank when I could see?"

Sly grinned. "Maybe, but not today." He angled his mouth over hers and kissed her, keeping the contact light and exploratory. His cock ached against the unforgiving denim of his jeans yet he ignored the nagging pain. Despite his need for Kiera, Joe mightn't let him touch her again. He had to prepare for that and take the rejection like an adult. He traced the seam of her lips, and she opened for him with a soft sigh. Sly swallowed the crisp, wine flavor of her breath, gradually deepening the contact. Their tongues tangled in a lazy dance, rasping and parting only to return again. He tested the hardness of her teeth, the contrasting softness of her inner cheeks before pulling back.

Sly couldn't remember enjoying a kiss quite as much. His fingers tangled in her hair as he went in for a second kiss. This time he kissed with more confidence, one kiss sliding into another. He tugged on her hair to the point of pain and she kept kissing him, letting out a whimper of protest when he separated their lips. He lifted his head to find Joe staring at them. Sly's gut bucked until his twin winked.

"Bastard," Sly muttered.

Joe grinned and gestured at her breasts. This time, Sly took the time to tease while he explored and he sensed his twin doing the same thing. He licked from base to tip with an unhurried rasp of his tongue then twirled his tongue around her tight nipple. Finally, he drew it into his mouth and applied suction.

"Oh God," Kiera said in a strangled voice. "Ambar tried to tell me how amazing this was."

"You girls talk about sex?" Joe asked.

Sly let up on the mouth action and lifted his head, wanting to hear the answer.

"Of course."

"And they say men gossip," Sly muttered.

"Don't you?" Kiera asked.

"We'd never discuss what happens in the bedroom with you," Sly said firmly. She had to realize her reputation was safe in their hands. While some locals might gossip, it would be pure speculation. No rumors would ever come from them.

"We've never discussed our sex life," Joe said.

"I've heard stuff," Kiera said, her tone doubting.

Sly gave her nipple a sharp tug. "Only very general stuff. Supposition."

"Don't you think her nipples would look good with clamps?" Joe said, giving her other nipple a tweak.

Kiera moaned, and the twins grinned at each other. It was almost like old times, yet this instance felt extra special simply because it was Kiera and he was with his brother again.

Sly inhaled and caught the scent of her arousal. He sent a questioning look at Joe and at his brother's nod, he moved down the bed with greater purpose. She tensed when he trailed his hand over her rib cage and paused to taste a freckle right near her hipbone.

"Open up, babe," Joe whispered.

Sly glanced up Kiera's body to see her take Joe's cock inside her mouth. His gut bucked as he watched, entranced by her eagerness. He could almost feel her sexy lips wrapped around his own cock. He imagined the heat and the rasp of her tongue as it rubbed back and forth over his sweet spot.

Joe pushed his cock deeper into the heat of her mouth, his attention focused in exactly the same place as Sly's.

She made a garbled grumble of pleasure around Joe's cock, making Sly wonder what noises she'd make when he licked her pussy. Only one way to find out. Sly went back to his exploring, the spicy tang of her arousal driving him onward. Her hips jerked when he licked down the crease between her torso and leg. He inhaled carefully, controlling his urge to dive right in. Memories. That's what he wanted. He knew the sex between them would be good, but he wanted to recall their first time in the years to come.

He bypassed her sex and nibbled the tender skin of her inner thighs. A distinct groan came from her and she splayed her thighs, lifting her pelvis in silent submission.

Sweet. So sweet. Sly let his gaze study her pussy, the slick folds and swollen pink flesh. His tongue darted out to lick his lips, imagining the tart juices bursting across his taste buds. A muscle in his jaw jumped and he finally let himself move closer. His tongue left a damp track on her thigh. He rimmed her entrance, a barely there lap of tongue, holding himself in tight check.

A rough growl vibrated in his chest, more feline than human. As if to emphasize the point, his feline stretched beneath his skin, and Sly had to lift his head and fight for control.

"Don't stop," Kiera gasped.

"Hey," Joe protested. "Put your mouth back right where it was." He hissed when she obeyed immediately, sucking his cock between her lips, her cheeks hollowing.

Smiling, Sly ran his tongue up her slit and enjoyed it so much he repeated the motion in the opposite direction. Her sweet flavor flowed over his tongue, tempting him to delve deeper and experience her flavor more fully. He tongued her clit, mouthing it carefully to give her a teasing sensation.

With each taste and flicker of his tongue, his cock grew harder until he wondered if his jeans might rip under the strain. Groaning, he palmed his erection, attempting to relieve the pressure.

"Take them off, Sly. Wait until you feel Kiera's pussy hugging your cock. You'll like it."

"Are you sure? Both of you." Sly didn't want this to be a pity fuck.

"Sly is still dressed?" Kiera demanded.

Joe smirked at her tone. "His zipper is probably tattooed on his cock."

"I won't last long once I get inside you."

"No problem," Kiera said. "You're talented with your hands and your mouth. You won't leave me hanging."

A quiver worked through Sly.

"Take them off," Joe ordered.

Shrugging, Sly rose from the bed and gingerly unfastened his jeans. He maneuvered the denim and his boxerbriefs down his hips. A sigh of relief eased from him when his cock sprang free. He kicked the clothes aside and gripped his shaft in his right hand, stroking it to relieve the worst of the ache in his balls. His palm slid easily across the damp crown and a shudder worked through him.

"Ease back on the suction, babe," Joe said. "Sly is taking his time."

Sly stroked his cock again. Damn. That was good but it would feel better yet. He glanced at Joe, received an encouraging nod and crawled onto the mattress.

"Condoms?" he asked.

"She's on birth control," Joe said.

Sly shivered. Tight, wet flesh hugging his cock with no barrier between. Fuck. He couldn't think of anything better. His hand trembled when he directed his cock to her pussy. He inched forward a fraction, a rush of emotion filling him when her wet heat caressed him. The simple pleasure of male and female joining. A groan tightened his throat while his heart lurched with a painful jolt.

Sly pushed forward, going deeper until he felt the grooves of her pussy, massaging the length of his cock. Balls-deep, he paused to savor her heat. Her sheath rippled around him and suddenly he was moving. Hard, urgent strokes that shifted Kiera up the bed. The clawing tension in him tightened until he walked the slim border between pleasure and pain. He tried to hold back his climax, tried to make it good for Kiera but it was useless. He hadn't been with a woman for ages. His balls tightened and the pleasure tore through him in an orgasmic rush, ripping down his cock in painful spurts.

Kiera twisted against him while sucking off Joe. His scent mingled with theirs in a way that felt right and natural.

When his cock finally stopped the frantic jerks, he pulled out of her. Joe was thrusting into her mouth now and Sly wanted Kiera to find her pleasure too. He went straight for her clit, tonguing the nub until it swelled even more. With slow, determined laps of his tongue and pressure from his lips, he teased her. She trembled, made a sharp cry around Joe's cock and came.

Sly registered Joe's groan and assumed he'd shot down Kiera's throat. God, he'd give anything to repeat this again and again, as often as Joe and Kiera would let him.

With a final loving lick, he eased away and moved up the bed.

Joe removed the blindfold and Sly's heart skipped a beat while he waited for Kiera's reaction.

"I'm tired," Kiera said. "Can we go to sleep in here?"

Time for him to leave the pair alone. He rose, but Joe reached over and grabbed his arm. "Where the hell are you going?"

"I thought you'd want time alone," Sly said.

"Stay," Kiera said, her jaw opening in a wide yawn.

Sly sought a reaction from Joe.

"Stay. Sleep with us." Joe confirmed Kiera's words.

"Are you sure?"

"Look, I was an ass before," Joe said. "I didn't want to share because we've always done everything together. We've shared every new experience and I wanted something of my own. I was wrong. What we did now felt right."

An obstruction stopped Sly from speaking. He coughed in an effort to clear his throat. "For the record, my experiment in doing something alone was a bust. Jail was the worst experience of my life. You have no idea... Words can't express..." Sly trailed off, unable to go on. He'd hated the helplessness while locked up in jail, the way he'd battled with his feline the entire time to keep control.

"Can you quit the babble? I wanna go to sleep."

Sly grinned at Joe, his heart lighter. They might not have worked out everything but they'd made a start.

Chapter Thirteen

Joe took ages to drop off to sleep, his mind busy with the events of the day. When Sly had taken Kiera, he hadn't experienced the jealousy or resentment. Instead, Kiera's pleasure filled his mind while the mental presence he always experienced with his brother only served to enhance the encounter.

He'd been wrong.

Maybe they could live as a threesome.

Although he and Sly should have separate interests, they needed the comfort of knowing they had each other's backs. They required freedom to experiment yet also the ability to surrender to the powerful currents surging between the three of them.

Joe sniggered mentally. Fuck, he and Sly never did things the easy way. Why should they start now?

They'd taken the first step and they had the luxury of time to become a tight unit. He glanced across the bed. Sly slept with his body pressed against Kiera's back, his arm curved around her waist.

Most nights Sly rose and left the house. Tonight he'd settled for the night.

Joe stared at them for longer, wondering if another surge of jealousy would jump him. It never happened.

Hours later, Joe's eyes popped open. Time to start the chores. He hadn't slept much. The situation affected both him and Kiera. It was easier for him since Sly had always been a part of his life. If Kiera wanted Sly too, he'd accept his twin, but Sly had to remain faithful to Kiera. He couldn't sleep around. As for an official mating between Kiera and Sly, he'd let Kiera set the pace. It wasn't right to force his brother on his mate. Sly would understand. If he didn't agree, he'd have to leave. There were no other options.

Joe climbed out of bed and pulled on the first pair of jeans he scooped off the floor. He padded to the kitchen and started the coffee, scratching his chest and yawning. He stared blearily at the coffeepot and decided to go and feed the dogs.

When he returned, Sly and Kiera were both showered and dressed and in the kitchen. Kiera had started breakfast while Sly was busy making sandwiches since they intended to work at the back of the farm for most of the day.

"Morning," Joe barked. He'd wondered if he might still find them in bed, making love. Relieved or confused? Fuck! Hell if he knew.

"You don't sound certain about that," Sly said.

"Didn't sleep much." Truth.

Kiera's blue eyes held anxiety when she searched his face. "Problem?"

Joe closed the distance between them, placing his hands on her shoulders and rubbing his cheek against hers in a smooch. "No problems, babe. I had a lot on my mind." A note of flowers struck him first. He leaned closer and inhaled the sweetness of her. Laundry powder scented her overalls and the fabric still bore a touch of oil. She made the shapeless garment sexy.

"I can move out. Emily won't mind me staying with them."

"No."

"No!"

Joe and Kiera spoke at the same time. A united front.

"I—we, don't want you to leave," Joe said. "And I'm not gonna tell you to stay again. If you still think you should leave, then go. I won't stop you."

"Joe." Reproach glinted in Kiera's eyes. "We all need to adjust."

"I want to stay," Sly said. "What I don't want is to push my way in if one or both of you has objections."

There was one way to settle Sly's unease. Sly and Kiera needed to spend time together without him around. He'd organize it subtly, make their meeting seem natural. Yeah, the tractor would need some urgent repairs later in the day. Lucky the perfect mechanic lived nearby.

"Then stay." Kiera checked her watch and reached up to kiss Joe goodbye. "I promised to meet Ambar for breakfast." She hesitated and kissed him again, a seductive kiss that pushed Joe's mind to imagine naked bodies and tangled sheets. Funny how his vision contained three people.

Kiera picked up her keys, sashayed over to Sly and kissed him too. It was a hesitant kiss—like a first one. They pulled apart and she reached up to pat Sly's cheek. "See you tonight."

She winked at Joe. "Have a productive day." And with a wave, she disappeared out the door.

"I love that woman," Joe said. "Is breakfast ready? Watch out! The bacon is burning."

Sly turned his attention to cooking and missed Joe's smile of satisfaction. Yeah, he might've missed out on a few hours sleep but he had a plan.

* * * * *

"I slept with both of them."

Ambar let out a girlish squeak. "At the same time?"

Kiera scowled at her best friend. "Shush, you're attracting attention."

"You can't drop a bomb like that and clam up. Spill."

Kiera prodded at her scrambled eggs and gave up the pretense of eating. She set her knife and fork down. "I've been trying to ignore it, but I feel something for Sly. I love Joe. We wear each other's mark, but they're so much alike. It's hard to love one and not the other."

Ambar sipped her coffee, her expression one of understanding. "And?"

"Last night we shared a bed."

"I take it you didn't sleep the entire time."

"No."

Ambar checked the surrounding tables for eavesdroppers and leaned closer. "What were they like?"

"I'm not telling," Kiera said, her English coming to the fore. "I don't ask you about your sex life."

"You could," Ambar said. "I'd tell you, especially since we're both sleeping with two men at the same time."

"How do you get past the hurt feelings, the—I don't know—jealousy?"

"Joe would act possessive of you because of your mark. Hari marked Jake before he marked me. I remember when they arrived in Samoa and I noticed the mark, for the first time the green-eyed monster jumped out to grab me. Eventually, I realized they'd come for me. Neither were shy about showing me they needed me. You're in the early days. If you want out, say so now before you get hurt."

"I don't want out. I want both of them. When the three of us are together, there's an extra element to our loving. It feels right."

"Go with your gut instinct."

"My brothers will have kittens. Matthew will at least."

"It's your life. Don't let someone else live it for you. I loved my parents but they forced their traditional views on me. They believed in arranged marriages. If they were still alive, neither Rohan nor I would be here in Middlemarch. We wouldn't be this happy, that's for sure."

"Matthew found out about Joe and me marking each other when he came to dinner last night. He left in a huff."

"Your brother is a snob."

"Oscar and Tyrone aren't like Matthew."

Ambar spread a thick layer of strawberry jam on her toast. "My advice is to take things at your pace. There's no hurry. You're settled in Middlemarch. You love Joe. Take your time with Sly and make sure it's exactly what you want."

"Oh, I want him. I just don't want to hurt Joe or Sly for that matter. We've talked the matter to death."

Ambar grinned. "Maybe it's time for action. Bring out your sexy lingerie and seduce them. Always works for me."

"Is that why you look like the cat dining on cream this morning?"

"Nothing better than hot sex to bring out a sexy glow in a girl."

Kiera finished the last of her coffee. "I'd better open up the workshop." She started to stand and Ambar stilled her with a hand on her arm.

"If you want to talk, you know where to find me."

"Thanks."

With a goodbye wave to Tomasine who was manning the counter, Kiera left to start work. Her morning moved rapidly while she worked on the vehicles in her workshop. The radio blared out pop tunes.

"Hey, Kiera?"

"Yeah?" She stopped cursing at the stubborn nut, wheeled herself from under a farm vehicle and blinked in the sunlight. "Joe?"

The smile on his face died. "Sly."

"If you'd get out of the sun, I might be able to see you properly," she said.

Sly extended his hand and she grasped it to push to her feet. "Are you busy?"

"Right." She grinned after looking him up and down. "You are Sly and not Joe trying to trick me."

Sly maintained his grip on her hand and cocked his head to the side in puzzlement. "How can you tell the difference between us? Most people can't. Even Saber gets confused on occasion."

"Easy. Your voice has a sort of smoky note that Joe doesn't have and your scents vary a fraction. It's a bit difficult to hear in here with the background noise." She turned the radio down.

He nodded, his gaze darting to her lips and away when she caught him in the act.

"Want to kiss me?"

"Yeah." He released her hand and shifted his weight from foot to foot—a sure sign of his agitation.

She understood his trepidation because she carried some of her own. "Does Joe have his phone?"

"Yeah."

Kiera retrieved her cell phone from the office and pushed Joe on speed dial.

"Kiera." She closed her eyes, savoring the warmth in his voice. She imagined the tender expression that usually accompanied the sentiment.

"I have a question. Can I kiss Sly if I want to?"

"Is Sly there?"

"Yes." Kiera watched Sly. His feline hearing made things easier.

"You can kiss Sly, but I have rules."

Sly stilled his jiggling, his eyes narrowing a fraction.

“Rules?”

“Yeah,” Joe said. “You can kiss and touch as much as you want, but you both have to remain clothed. And tonight after dinner, I want you to tell me exactly what you did together.”

A spark of arousal shot through her. Joe’s manner wasn’t angry or disappointed. Instead amusement tinged his words. His rules.

“Can you do that?”

“Can we unfasten clothing?” Sly asked.

Her attention shot to Sly and her stomach hollowed. Wow. Just wow. Her pussy clenched and her clit gave a distinctive throb.

“You can undo buttons and zippers. You can slide hands under shirts and underwear, but they have to stay on bodies. If I walk into a room and you’ve been in physical contact, I expect to see clothes.”

Her pulse roared in her ears. “And if you see skin as well?”

“A little skin is fine. Don’t forget—you have to tell me everything and how it felt. I want you to paint word pictures for me.”

Kiera swallowed at the curl of heat suffusing her. “I can do that.”

“Do I get the same word pictures?” Sly asked, a gravelly note emerging in his smoky voice.

“Sure, why not?”

“And if the three of us are together, the clothes can come off?”

“That’s the plan,” Joe said. “Catch you guys later. I look forward to show and tell.”

“Sometimes Joe surprises the hell out of me.”

“Exactly why I love him. He’s always surprising me. Do I get my kiss now?”

Sly didn’t answer. Instead he dragged her into a private corner where they weren’t visible from outside. He drew her into his arms and wasted no time pressing their lips together. While he started carefully, his kiss grew in confidence. His hands slid down her back until he palmed her buttocks.

Kiera sank into the kiss, her guilt at her need fading with Joe’s attitude. Sly lifted her a fraction and held her against his erection. Her nipples prickled and pulled taut inside the cups of her bra as he plundered her mouth. Ferocious heat claimed her, molded her into a creature of pure need. He tasted good—fully sanctioned yet forbidden. A whimper she couldn’t contain escaped and she swayed against his rock-hard cock.

At the murmur of voices, Sly eased their mouths apart even as he kept his tight grip on her body. Whoever it was didn’t come into the workshop but kept walking. She shuddered against him, partly in relief, an intense yearning to taste more of him pushing her to take things further between them. Kneeling in front of him, she unbuttoned his jeans and slid down the zipper.

"You don't have to," Sly murmured, but his green eyes held the same yearning darting along her veins.

"And if I want to touch you more intimately?"

"Remember Joe's rules."

"Oh, I remember." Her heart gave three hard thumps. She tugged his boxerbriefs down, tucking them beneath his cock and balls, lifting them up higher. Then she leaned closer and dragged her tongue across the swollen crown. She breathed in his scent and repeated the move with her tongue to memorize his fragrance and flavor. Sly cursed under his breath. His tone told the story.

"Take me inside. Suck on me."

Kiera shivered at his words—not quite an order but a definite call to action. She took her time and blew warm air from the tip of his shaft to the base.

"Kiera, we don't have a lot of time."

"What about me?"

"You get the satisfaction of knowing you had me at your mercy. You get to make me come and spend the rest of the day wondering about how I'm going to give you pleasure tonight. Both Joe and me."

Kiera stared up at him. "That's torture."

"If you don't hurry, you're gonna get a spanking."

A gasp escaped before she could prevent it and his eyes narrowed. Bother. She'd piqued his interest now. "You're as bad as Joe."

The corner of his mouth twitched, as if he held back a grin. "Has Joe spanked you?"

"No."

His lips curved a fraction more. "Did you like it?"

"No!" So help her—she'd enjoyed having her ass spanked, which made her all kinds of kinky.

"Maybe he didn't do it right?"

In order to shut him up, she grasped his cock and guided it into her mouth. She didn't need him getting ideas. While she'd discovered spanking turned her on, a sore butt was embarrassing. Ambar had started asking mortifying questions.

His cock lengthened under her ministrations and he groaned, his hands gripping her skull. Aware of the need to hurry, she didn't tease but went straight to work sucking and licking until strangled words tore from his throat. A primal sense of satisfaction filled her, the knowledge her actions made a strong man like Sly weak with need. She took the shallow thrusts, opening up to take him deeper.

"God, Kiera. Your mouth feels good."

She went liquid deep inside and made a fierce wish her clothes would vanish, except nakedness would land her with a punishment. Sighing inwardly, she hummed around his shaft and tugged and teased his balls with her right hand.

"Fuck," Sly muttered.

Elation filled Kiera at his curse, and she pushed the teasing along with tongue action. He cursed again and came with a harsh groan.

Sly was still shooting down her throat when someone entered the workshop.

"Kiera?"

Oh fuck. Matthew. Kiera reared back in shock and received a weak blast of semen in the face.

"You there, Kiera?" Oscar called, sounding closer than Matthew.

Sly hauled her to her feet and tugged up his T-shirt to wipe off her face.

"There you are," Matthew snapped. "Why didn't you answer?"

Sly kept his back to her brother and calmly zipped up. "Because she had her mouth full at the time."

Kiera let out a strangled gasp. Oscar and Tyrone appeared beside Matthew and took in the situation at a glance. They both smirked.

"Have you no shame?" Matthew asked.

"I'm not doing anything wrong." Kiera was sick of her brother's sanctimonious ways. *Hello? Kettle, meet pot.*

"He's a bad influence on you." Matthew glared at Sly before turning the bulk of his displeasure on her. "I've come to take you home. I don't care if I have to drag you kicking and screaming, but you're leaving this dump of a place." He continued his rant, not holding back on his distaste for her workshop and Middlemarch.

Fury whipped through her, and Sly stiffened at her side. Aware of his need to protect, Kiera stayed him with a hand on his forearm. While she appreciated his support, she needed to stand up to her brother. "My workshop might be a dump, but it's my dump. I like living in Middlemarch and I'm staying. My mates are here. My friends. This is my home." As usual when her temper stirred, her precise, upper class diction came to the fore.

"Your *mates*?"

Damn her temper. Matthew *would* pick up on her slip of tongue. Seemed this was a day for truth all round.

"Joe and Sly Mitchell." She didn't flinch from her brother's incredulous expression.

"God, it just keeps getting better. My sister is a slut." Matthew turned his scorn on Sly. "Which one are you?"

"Sly."

"Ah, the jailbird," Matthew said. "You can do better than this, Kiera. Our parents, Grandfather—they'd all turn in their graves if they realized your disastrous choices. Come back to England. William wants to marry you. You'll have a life of luxury and you'll never need to work again. You can't live with two men. People will talk."

"Let them talk. It's their problem, not mine."

Oscar stirred, a tic flicking in his jaw. "Why don't you tell her the truth, Matthew?"

Matthew's top lip curled up in a sneer. "Middlemarch is a backwater and Kiera's place is back in London with her equals."

"The real truth," Tyrone said, his eyes icy cold with irritation.

Kiera glanced at Oscar and Tyrone and noted the strain in them, the tension. Usually easygoing and full of humor, they weren't today. What had Matthew done? Tyrone's hands fisted, and he glared at Matthew as if he wanted to punch him.

Kiera moved closer to Sly, taking strength from his proximity even if she didn't want him to speak for her. "Matthew, you can talk until you turn purple in the face, but Joe, Sly and Middlemarch are my home."

Sly slipped his arm around her in silent support. She appreciated his faith in her to handle her brother.

"Our firm is bankrupt. Matthew helped himself to the last of our company funds before we left and gambled it away," Oscar said in a flat voice.

"I'll fix it once Kiera marries William."

Sly's arm tensed around her shoulders. "You expect Kiera to fix *your* mess?"

Oscar snorted. "Yeah, that's the kicker. He doesn't understand he's done anything wrong."

"He doesn't think he has a gambling problem." Tyrone added his bit.

Matthew responded sharply. "You're both out of line."

"No. We're stupid for trying to cover up your problem," Oscar said. "Tyrone and I are flying back to England later this afternoon to sort out the mess you've made."

"I have everything under control."

Tyrone made a scoffing sound deep in his throat. "God, you have nothing under control. You've stuck your head so far up your ass you can't see the problem."

A ragged, feline growl vibrated in Matthew's throat. Tyrone whirled to face his oldest brother and snarled back, surprising the hell out of Kiera. Oscar and Tyrone had never stood up to Matthew before. In the past—as long as she could remember—Matthew called the shots.

Looking back, she didn't understand how she'd gathered the courage to leave home and travel. Matthew hadn't approved then, but at the time he'd been heavily involved with a woman. Lucky for her, the woman had distracted him beautifully.

"Matthew, I refuse to return to England." She turned to Oscar and Tyrone. "I'll miss you guys."

Oscar strode over to her and sought silent permission from Sly before drawing her in for a hug. "We're hoping to come back."

Tyrone joined them and took his turn at hugging Kiera. "We're definitely coming back. Once we sort out work permits."

"That's great. Where do you think you'll set up shop?"

"Early days yet," Oscar said. "It's gonna take a while to sort out the mess at home. We might have to sell the family home."

"We're not selling the estate," Matthew snarled. "Generations of the Pascoe family have lived there. It's our heritage."

"It's a building," Tyrone said. "Four walls and a roof."

Oscar tapped her on the shoulder. "We'd better go or we'll miss our plane."

"Let me know how you get on with things," she murmured to Tyrone. "Call me if I can help with anything."

Sly and Kiera ignored Matthew and shadowed her younger brothers when they walked out to their rental car.

The shriek of an engine grabbed her attention. The driver was killing their vehicle. A sedan shot around the corner and screeched to a stop in front of them. Someone grabbed her from behind and hustled her toward the car.

"What the fuck?" Tyrone growled, a distinctly feline snarl.

"Matthew, don't be a fool. She has a mate," Oscar snapped.

Kiera kicked and wriggled and attempted to free herself from her brother's grip. Her brother stopped abruptly, grunting when Kiera kicked him in the shins.

From the corner of her eye, she saw a hand.

"Let her go," Sly ordered.

Matthew shrugged free. "I'm her legal guardian."

"Matthew, Kiera is an adult," Tyrone said. "She's not a kid anymore."

Matthew turned his glare on her. "If you don't return to England with me, I won't sign over your trust fund to you next year when you turn twenty-five."

"The one you have signing authority on?" Oscar asked. "I doubt there's any money left in your trust. Matthew's probably gambled it away."

"If you back out of our deal, I'm suing," William said to Matthew.

"What deal?" Oscar asked.

"I don't care," Kiera said. "I have work to do." She wrenched from Matthew's hold, and when he grabbed for her again, she whirled around and punched him in the nose. He fell back with a howl, hands holding his nose and blood trickling between his fingers.

"Good girl," Sly said. "I couldn't have done it better myself. Do you have time to work on our tractor?"

"I'm all yours once I finish Mr. Jessop's car. See you soon, Oscar. Tyrone."

A slow grin of appreciation stretched across Sly's face. If he'd wanted to, he could've flattened her brother immediately. Instead, he'd let her control the situation while waiting in case she required his help. She appreciated his restraint.

Kiera smiled back and took his hand, weaving her fingers with his, walking away from her brother without regret. Oscar and Tyrone would do what they could but gambling was an addiction. It was up to Matthew to take the first step.

“What about your trust fund?” Sly asked.

“What about it?”

“It sounds as if your brother has stolen from you.”

“I have everything I need. Grandfather left me enough money to purchase my business. I don’t need the trust my parents set up for me.”

Outside, her brothers yelled at each other. Smiling, she climbed on the trolley and wheeled herself under the vehicle she needed to repair.

“They’ll have the cops dragging them off for creating a public disturbance soon.” Sly’s voice drifted to her. She grinned. Too bad. She’d let her brothers slug it out together. She had everything she needed right here in Middlemarch.

Chapter Fourteen

Joe expected Sly back to help him with the fence. Four hours later, he finished the fence on his own and headed home. The house stood empty when he arrived. Sighing, he kicked off his work boots and peeled off his socks before heading for a beer. He imagined Sly and Kiera together—hell, he steeled himself against a surge of jealousy. It didn't happen. Sure, it would've been better to arrive home and find one of them here, but his gut didn't cramp like it had at first.

Everything was gonna work out.

Smiling, he sat his butt on a chair and sucked at his beer, savoring the icy liquid. Nothing better than an icy beer after a hot day. The first one always tasted extra good and slipped down easy.

The distinct purr of a vehicle brought a rush of anticipation. Familiar voices. He lifted his can and drank again.

Kiera burst into the kitchen, a broad smile on her face. She ran straight over and kissed him. Long seconds later, after a satisfying meeting of lips and tongue, she moved behind him to massage the tight muscles of his shoulders. Lazy satisfaction simmered in him, along with the beginnings of arousal.

"Babe, you have talented hands."

"Nothing wrong with her mouth either," Sly said. "Another beer? Kiera, wine or beer?"

"Wine please."

"What took you so long?" Joe asked. "I needed help with the fence."

Sly placed a beer in front of him and handed a glass of white wine to Kiera. "Sorry, I intended to return, but Kiera's brothers arrived." He dropped onto the chair opposite Joe. Their gazes met—Sly's a little searching. Once again jealousy remained absent and Joe cocked a brow at his twin, the beginnings of a smile threatening to break free.

Kiera rounded the table to sit beside Sly. They were comfortable together and the idea pleased Joe.

Sly rolled his eyes. "And I thought some of our family dramas were bad."

Kiera reached out and placed her hand on top of Sly's. "Why don't I tell Joe exactly what happened?"

A note in Kiera's voice grabbed Joe's attention. This time a jolt of eagerness dive-bombed him. "I can't wait to hear your story." Joe scooted his chair back from the table. "Come and sit on my knee."

"My overalls are dirty."

"Take them off," Sly said.

Kiera's hesitation alerted Joe. He glanced at Sly and saw he'd picked up on it too.

"Kiera?"

Her chest rose and fell beneath the overalls. Finally, she stood and slid the front zipper down.

"Hell, Kiera," Sly muttered.

Joe whistled his appreciation. "Tell me no one else realizes what you wear underneath your overalls."

"I didn't have time to do the washing. It was either this or commando."

"That bra is more thought than substance," Sly said. "I like it."

"I take it the story you're gonna tell me will be a short one," Joe said. "I was looking forward to an interesting tale."

"Pervert," Sly teased.

Kiera whooshed the overalls down her legs and kicked them aside. She sashayed around the table and sat on his knee. Joe's arms came around her. He nuzzled her neck, the familiar scents of motor oil and hand cleanser, along with the underlying floral soap created contentment in him. The new note of scent on her skin smelled familiar as well. Sly.

"You've touched her," he said to Sly.

Sly nodded and Kiera slapped Joe's arm. "A little patience. I'm going to tell you about it. That was our deal."

And they'd obviously stuck to the deal because Sly hadn't known she wore those sexy bits of nothing beneath her overalls. Joe cupped one breast and played with her nipple, plucking at the fabric-covered nub until it drew to a hard peak.

"Sly arrived at the garage not long before I rang you." She paused to wriggle around on his lap, his subtle teasing already having an effect on her.

Sly winked at him surreptitiously, and Joe felt a real kinship with his twin. It made him realize the yawning distance between them until they'd started to woo Kiera together. Something had clicked into place inside him now.

Acceptance. Love.

They'd needed Kiera to bridge the distance between them.

"Carry on," Joe said, unable to hide his satisfaction.

"I didn't have any customers. Sly and I went behind the vehicle I was working on so we were out of sight if a customer arrived."

"Very prudent," Joe said.

"Stop laughing," Kiera said. "Do you want the story or not?"

"I'm listening." Joe made a buttoning motion across his lips.

"We started to kiss. He kisses different from you."

Sly leaned forward. "How so?"

"You kiss more aggressively. Not in a bad way," she hastened to add. "You make me feel as if I'm the first woman in your life and if you don't get a kiss right now you'll expire. Your kisses make me go weak at the knees."

"That would be because you're the first woman I've wanted to kiss or fuck since Maggie," Sly said. "Before last night, I hadn't had sex for months. Sweetheart, I'm a desperate man."

"If I weren't a secure man, I could take that as a challenge," Joe said lazily. Part of him was amazed he felt comfortable talking about his mate getting cozy with another man.

"Quiet." Kiera poked him in the chest with her forefinger. When he remained silent, she continued. "We were pushed for time since I needed to finish the vehicle I was working on. I undid Sly's jeans and scooped out his cock."

"Did you pull his jeans right down?" Joe cast a sneaky look at his brother and noticed the faint tide of color in his cheeks, the glitter and intense scrutiny in his eyes. To try a theory, Joe moved his hand to Kiera's other breast and offered it the same treatment. First he cupped the soft globe in his hand, testing the weight. Kiera's breath eased out in a sigh of pleasure. He started to tug on her nipple—short, hard pulls designed to echo in her pussy. Sly's gaze followed his hand, and Joe almost grinned when his brother shifted on his chair and surreptitiously yanked on his jeans. "Kiera? I asked you a question."

"No, I opened the fly and pulled down his boxerbriefs. I put them under his balls and his cock lifted for me."

A shudder worked through Joe as the image sharpened in his mind. He stored it away for future use. "Carry on."

"This story would go much quicker if you quit cutting in with questions," Sly said wryly.

Joe grinned. He slipped a finger beneath the wispy material of her bra and caressed the soft curve of flesh.

"I played with Sly's cock until he told me to put it inside my mouth. He ordered me to follow his instructions."

"How did you feel about the order, babe?"

"I liked it. I like the way both of you push me and tell me exactly what you want. I usually hate people telling me what to do. My brothers piss me off when they try to boss me around, but this is different. It...it makes me hot. I like not having to think. Your instructions sort of float through me and all I need to do is concentrate on how everything makes me feel, the pleasure of the physical contact."

Joe exchanged a look with Sly. God, he loved this woman. He thanked fate for fucking with his tractor and sending him in Kiera's direction.

"I took his cock into my mouth and licked the pre-come from his slit. He pushed deeper and I liked it. I sucked and licked. He groaned when I licked him and his cock swelled. I liked having power over him, feeling him pulse. I squeezed his balls and tugged on them. I did everything in my power to tease him."

Joe removed his finger from her bra and idly ran his hands up and down her torso. She shifted her weight and the sweet scent of her arousal drifted up to him. His hand dipped lower to toy with the band of her panties. She wriggled again, parting her legs a fraction in silent invitation.

Sly let out a harsh groan, his hand disappearing below the table again.

"What happened next?" Joe prompted.

"I took Sly's cock as deep as I could and sucked hard. He started to come." Kiera stiffened and he stilled his hand to refocus her. "He was still coming in my mouth when someone hollered for me."

Joe chuckled. "Really? They almost caught you?"

"Sly cursed and yanked out of my mouth. He spurting on my face."

Joe's chuckle stuck in his chest and he barked out a cough. "Who was it?" he asked when he could speak again.

"My brothers," Kiera said in disgust. "Matthew is always spoiling my fun. Sly wiped my face with his T-shirt and I spoke with them while Sly righted his clothes. My brothers suspected what we'd been doing. Matthew acted all high and mighty. We amused Oscar and Tyrone. They like you guys."

"Good to know," Joe said. "What happened with Matthew?"

"He told me if I didn't return to England with him I wouldn't get my trust fund. Oh wait. First it came out that he's emptied their bank account. Oscar and Tyrone are really pissed with him. They're flying home today to sort things out."

Joe let his fingers wander through the thin strip of pubic hair and dip into her slit. His finger glided across the warm, wet flesh with the ease of a hot knife sliding through butter. She let out a moan and wriggled in an attempt to deepen the contact. A twin-edged sword. The friction of her backside against his cock was playing hell with his willpower. "Hold that thought, babe." Joe lifted her off his lap.

"Take off your panties and bra," Sly said, reading Joe with ease.

The whisper of the delicate fabric as she disrobed seemed loud. Joe unfastened his jeans and stood to yank both them and his underwear off. He flung his T-shirt on the floor. Naked, he sat again and ran his hand down the length of his cock while he watched Kiera. His gaze stroked along the lush curves of her body—her breasts, her hips and her ass. "Have a seat, babe."

She turned to face him.

"No, face me," Sly said. "I get to watch you come around Joe's cock."

Kiera bit her bottom lip and clambered awkwardly onto his lap. Joe gripped her hips and lifted her. She guided his cock to her snug opening and sank down with a sigh of enjoyment.

"That's it," Sly said.

Fully seated, Joe wanted to move this along. His balls ached like the devil, but first—the rest of the story. "What else did your brother say?"

"We have to talk about them now?"

"Yeah, we do," Sly answered for him. "Finish the story and we'll get to the good stuff."

Joe's hands tightened on her hips and he lifted her, letting her slide back down. Fuck. He might expire from pleasure before they went much further. The snug fit of her pussy felt different from this angle. "Kiera, what happened?"

"Matthew denies he has a gambling problem. He has signing authority for my trust fund. It sounds as if he's spent that too."

Joe frowned. What sort of brother was he? Stealing from family wasn't right. "Do we need to do something?"

"If it wasn't my brother, I'd say yes." She moaned when he lifted her again and her pussy rippled around his cock. Damn. Hot damn, she made him feel good. Because they both seemed to enjoy it, he lifted her again, allowing himself to meet her downward slide with a thrust of his own.

"So you're gonna let him get away with stealing from you?" Sly asked.

Joe watched the hunger etched on Sly's features—the way his gaze didn't leave her bouncing breasts. "Sly, touch her breasts." When Sly scooted his chair closer and reached out, Joe said, "Mouth only."

"You're meant to torture Kiera, not me." Sly leaned over and blew on one of her nipples.

Joe concentrated on lifting Kiera, a tremor arcing through him with each rise and fall of her on his cock. He loved seeing the rear view for a change, the long line of her back and her rounded ass. He imagined fucking her in the ass, and a hoarse curse tore from this throat. "Touch yourself, Kiera."

"You didn't tell Joe what your brothers are doing?" Sly winked at him.

"I... Oh..." Her wet channel clutched his cock as he sank deep.

"I want to hear the entire story," Joe said.

"But I..."

"Can't concentrate?" Sly asked, his dark brows rising.

"How am I meant to concentrate with Joe's cock shoved up me and you fiddling with my boobs?"

A smirk formed on Joe's face. Teasing and driving her crazy was fun.

Sly didn't bother to hold back his amusement. "We tormenting you?"

“Oscar and Tyrone are taking charge,” she said speaking rapidly. “They said they’d sell the family estate if they have to.”

Joe lifted her, gritting his teeth as her pussy caressed every inch of his cock. So. Damn. Good. “Anything to add to the story?”

“Not right now.”

“Thank God for that.” Joe ramped up the pace, gripping her hips and thrusting upward, giving no quarter. The loud sounds of fucking filled the kitchen, interspersed by moans and urgent cries. Kiera cried out and went wet around his cock, her inner muscles milking him as she came unglued in his embrace.

Joe let go and came with a rough shout, his cock pulsing for long moments afterward. He brushed a kiss on Kiera’s mark, unable to resist a quick nibble. A jolt arced her body, followed by a distinct shiver. Joe lifted her off his lap and resettled her facing him. After a quick press of lips, he wrapped his arms around her sweat-slicked body.

“I need a shower,” Kiera said, trying to pull free.

“In a minute.” Joe was enjoying holding her and lazy satisfaction made him want to stay like this for a bit longer.

“I’m starved,” Sly said. “Kiera and I grabbed some frozen pizzas at the store. I’ll put them on.” He stood, leaving them alone for a private moment.

Joe brushed back her hair from her face, taking a second to savor the silkiness of her skin. “Did you enjoy sucking off Sly?”

She hesitated, white teeth catching her bottom lip.

“I want the truth,” Joe said, guessing at her reticence. “I always want truth between us.”

“I liked it a lot. I have feelings for him.” She made a sound of disgust deep in her throat. “I don’t want him to leave. I want to live with both of you.”

“Mate with both of us?”

She shrugged this time. “No. Yes. I don’t know.”

“Will you make love with both of us tonight?”

“At the same time?”

“Yes.” Joe scrutinized her face, searching for the slightest hint of trepidation. What he saw reassured him and he smiled.

Kiera melted inside. Her mate tripped her switch every time. “I’m gonna take a shower before dinner.” And she’d primp a little, smooth on some body lotion and wear something sexy. Maybe fix her hair. Her heart skipped a beat as she stood, her pulse accelerating with expectation. She kissed Joe on the top of his head and sauntered away to prepare for the evening to come.

An hour later, the scent of pizza and spices drifted down the passage. She hovered indecisively, feeling stupid in her little black dress, heels and smart hairstyle. Nerves

skittered around the pit of her stomach. No, this was a silly idea. She turned on her three-inch heels, intending to go back to change into her usual attire of comfy jeans.

"Kiera, dinner's ready." Sly appeared in the passage. His shrill whistle of appreciation stopped Kiera in her tracks. "Where are you going?"

Kiera turned and gestured at her dress. "I'm going to change."

"Why? You look gorgeous." Sly offered his arm and guided her into the kitchen. "Guess who I found."

"I've never seen... How did I get so lucky? You're beautiful."

Sly escorted her to the table and pulled out a chair for her. "Luckily, I set the table and made a salad. Something to lift our meal."

Joe set the hot pizza on the table. Sly pulled out the salad and dressing while Joe filled three wineglasses with a red from their family vineyard.

"To Kiera," Sly said, lifting his glass.

"Kiera," Joe repeated.

Kiera smiled, happiness filling her. "To the future." Her instinct to dress for dinner was the right one. While the meal wasn't anything fancy, she suspected she'd recall this night for years to come.

"Oscar and Tyrone want to settle in New Zealand. They've had enough of Matthew," Kiera said.

"She didn't tell you Matthew tried to force her into a car. He intended to take her home against her will."

"Bastard," Joe said. "Sorry. I shouldn't talk that way about your brother."

"My grandfather is probably spinning in his grave." Kiera sipped her wine. "He'd be disappointed in Matthew."

"What would he think about you?" Sly asked. "Would he approve of you moving to Middlemarch and opening your own business?"

Kiera spurt of happiness filled her. "He loved tinkering with old engines and traveled a lot before age slowed him down. I got the idea to travel from him. Matthew didn't approve, but he couldn't stop me because Grandfather left me the money free and clear. Matthew didn't have access to it, which is good in hindsight."

"Lucky for us," Joe said.

"Lucky for me," Kiera said, and just like that, the sensual tension in the kitchen ratcheted up to hot and steamy. After a quick glance at both Sly and Joe, she ran her finger around rim of her wineglass and stared into the red liquid.

"Kiera?" Joe soft voice whispered across her ear.

"Yes?" Her finger traced another circle of the rim.

"Would you like to come to bed?"

Across the table, Sly focused on his brother. "Both of us."

“Yes.” She didn’t hesitate. After offering her agreement she found herself in the bedroom, naked and pressed between two equally naked males. And there was nowhere else she’d rather be right now.

They started with soft kisses. Kisses on her bare shoulders, trailing across her collarbone and the curve of her breasts. Joe sucked teasing bites from her neck, his tongue periodically lashing her mark. Sly nibbled the underside of her breasts. It was seductive plundering and soon every inch of her body hummed with intense pleasure. Mixed in with all the good sensations was knowledge. This was the right thing to do. While others might act horrified—her older brother for instance—her relationship with the Mitchell twins made her feel secure and sexy and loved. They made her feel as if she could do anything.

Laughing, the sound tinged with joy, she caressed and teased in return. Limbs tangled as they fell to the mattress. Desire blazed like wild fire, tearing the very last of her reservations aside.

“Joe.” She grasped his head and laid a kiss on him—a kiss of acceptance. A kiss that attempted to display her love for him. When she finally eased back, she turned to Sly. A wary expression settled on his face, only fading when her lips curved into a seductive smile. “Your turn now, Sly.”

She curled into his muscular body, kissing him with everything she had, trying to show him without words how much she cared for him. The entire time they were kissing, Joe stroked her shoulder, silently telling her this was right. When their mouths parted, they were both breathing hard.

Sly and Joe seemed to communicate without words because they arranged her flat on her back again and started to caress and kiss each inch of her skin, starting from her shoulders and moving south.

“That tickles,” she protested. They didn’t answer. Instead two mouths latched on to her breasts, the twin seduction better than she’d imagined.

Joe lifted his head. “We’re both going to take you tonight.”

“Are you okay with that?” Sly remained enigmatic and difficult to read. “Kiera?”

She swallowed. “Do you mean anal sex?”

“Yeah.” Joe stroked her cheek and the burst of nerves in her settled.

“I haven’t done that before.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Sly said. “We know exactly what we’re doing, but if you don’t like it, tell us. We’ll stop.”

Another stroke across her cheek. “I love you, babe.”

Kiera trusted them implicitly. She didn’t doubt they’d do exactly as they promised. “Yes.”

Sly gently shunted her aside. “Climb aboard.” He stroked his cock, his green gaze jewel-bright with desire.

Kiera took her time and explored his body. She sucked on flat nipples until they tightened, nibbled at the tender skin of his hip bones and giggled when he grumbled at her lack of haste.

"Joe hasn't taught you well," Sly said.

"It's early. We have the entire night," she countered with a smirk.

"If I live that long."

Joe chuckled and slapped Kiera on the ass. "You'd better move it along. He gets testy when he's impatient."

"I do not," Sly said.

Kiera straddled his hips and ground against his erection, leaving a shiny trail of her juices on his skin.

Sly shuddered, his gaze fixed on her sex. "I can smell your arousal. It's spicy and sweet. I can't wait to feel you tight and perfect around my cock, your flesh parting while I push deep inside you."

Kiera clenched her jaw, wanting exactly what he described. Clumsily, she lifted and guided his erection to her pussy.

"Go slow," Joe said. "Once Sly has worked all the way inside you, we're going to arouse and prepare you to take me too."

She whimpered at the word pictures they were painting, the slow seduction building to a crescendo when they both possessed her fully. The thought had her aching, a choked and desperate cry escaping her. Without haste, she sank down farther on Sly's cock, the slow stretching better than anything she'd felt before. Or maybe it was the emotions—her emotions and the men she was loving. She gripped Sly's shoulders, enjoying every increment of his invasion.

"I was right," he whispered. "You're hot around my dick. So tight."

"Good, babe." Joe exerted a steady force in the middle of her back, urging her to lie in Sly's arms.

She clenched her butt muscles and Joe smacked her ass. The sharp slap surged straight to her sex.

"She liked that," Sly said. "She went liquid around my cock. You didn't tell me earlier. Has Joe smacked you?"

"Yes. Okay?"

"Did you like it?"

"Not at first."

"And later?" Sly asked.

"She liked it," Joe said, full of swagger and satisfaction. "She came really hard straight afterward."

Sly's expression told her he was filing the information away for future use. "Should I distract her?"

Joe ran his fingers over the spot where he'd smacked her. "I'm going to start fingering you. Okay?"

Sly claimed her mouth in a gentle kiss, his tongue making teasing forays across the seam of her lips. She drew a sharp breath and he deepened the contact, the slow thrust and withdrawal of his tongue echoing the sex act.

Joe skimmed her clit with his finger and rimmed her opening. A curl of arousal spiraled low in her belly and she gasped. Joe skimmed her pucker this time, allowing her to become used to his touch. She shivered and concentrated on returning Sly's kisses. The man had a talented mouth and already, he'd learned exactly what she liked. He sucked and licked, nibbled and sipped.

The pump action of a bottle sounded and seconds later, lube smoothed across her pucker. Joe cruised his finger back and forth and gently pushed a finger into her. At the same time, he worried her clit, just enough to keep her on edge and the wash of pleasure whispering of the treat in store for her.

Sly broke their mouths apart. "Does that hurt?"

"No," she said in surprise. She felt full. Different, but underlying was the sizzle of enjoyment—the pulse that promised much more.

Slowly Joe added more fingers, each surge a hot, lubed slide into her ass then the deeper pressure of fullness.

"Babe, I'm going push into you now with my cock. I'll go slow."

He pressed in, the stretch filling her to the edge of pain. Sly remained still, kissing her. When she tensed again, he whispered against her lips, telling her to relax and promising white-hot pleasure to come.

"I'm not sure," she muttered, biting her lip.

Then Joe teased her clit and, as the feel-good sensations started to build, he pushed insistently against the ring of muscle guarding her anus. She cried out, freezing, but Joe distracted her again by toying more insistently with her swollen nub while Sly pinched one of her nipples and swallowed her cry.

A flash of arousal grabbed her seconds before she realized Joe was balls-deep inside her and it didn't hurt. The two men filled her, enclosing her in their embrace.

"How are you doing, babe?" Joe whispered against her ear.

"I'm okay."

His tongue lashed her mark and her ass clenched. Having a mark was like owning a personal pleasure button. Every time Joe touched it, a thread of raw need unraveled in her. Now wasn't any different. She moaned and Sly smiled, brushing kisses across her jaw.

Joe started to move in counterpoint to Sly. One cock filled her while the other retreated. The scent of arousal filled the air, along with soft groans and the slapping of flesh. Sly feasted on her mouth while Joe licked her mark again. A surge of wetness brought a rough growl from Sly.

He separated their mouths. "Jesus, Kiera. You're scalding hot. Feels so good."

It felt good on her end too, especially when Joe teased her clit or played with her mark. Her nerve endings danced with each measured thrust. The pleasing sensations built one on top of each other, swamping her until she feared she might fly apart. Joe fingered her clit, and the raw need morphed into indescribable pleasure.

Her pussy rippled around Sly's cock, clamped down on Joe's at the same time. The urge to bite, to clamp her teeth down filled her. She tore her mouth from Sly's and bit down on his marking site. He grunted in shock, his cock swelling inside her when she laved the spot. His hips jerked erratically and he came with a shout.

"You marked Sly," Joe whispered against her ear, her pussy still tingling with the force of her release.

Kiera gently licked the mark she'd placed on Sly, cleaning it until the wound stopped bleeding. "I...I'm sorry. I couldn't help myself."

"Hell, Joe. I didn't realize...I've never come as hard before. I swear I saw stars."

Joe nipped at her neck, her breathing hitching. "You love Sly."

"Yes. I...I... This is weird."

"No," Joe said. "It's meant to be. Mark her back, Sly. Complete the triad."

"Are you sure? She's your mate."

"You love her. Admit it."

Kiera bit her lip, her heart leaping while she waited for Sly's answer. Joe was right. Already a sense of peace filled her, a sense of rightness. If only Sly agreed. "Claim me, Sly. I love you both. He's right. Make us three."

"I can't believe how much I crave this," Sly said. "I'm hard enough to drive steel spikes and I've just come."

Kiera turned her head to meet Joe's lips. Their kiss was slow and unhurried and turned her inside out. Her two men shuttled back and forth until she twisted and squirmed, desperate to come again.

Their thrusts soon turned erratic leaving Kiera drifting in a heavy fog of desire. In. Out. Her eyes closed to distill the sensations. Each thrust scraped her clit, the sheer naughtiness factor driving her higher. Sly struck, his teeth sinking over the mark Joe had bestowed. Fiery heat grabbed her, tossing her into a maelstrom of pleasure so hot she didn't know if she could bear the bombardment of sensations. A groan escaped her as Sly worked her mark with his tongue, the exquisite friction reverberating over and over until she shattered. She was vaguely aware of her two men pounding into her body and stilling.

Kiera came to herself and opened her eyes. The first thing she noticed was the satisfaction slashing Sly's sensual mouth. It made her realize he'd kept a part of himself hidden and under tight control.

"I love you, Kiera," he whispered. "Thank you for loving me back."

Joe pulled free of them and padded away. The pipes rattled their usual protest when he ran the taps. He returned and eased Kiera from Sly's arms, cleansing her with a warm cloth.

They settled on the bed with Kiera in the middle and a sense of contentment settled over her. Joe traced circles around her navel while Sly ran his fingers through her hair.

"I'm hungry," Sly said, breaking the silence.

Joe let out a snort. "You're always hungry."

"I could eat," Kiera said.

"Two against one," Sly said.

Grinning, Joe climbed off the bed and extended his hand to Kiera. "Come on."

"Are we dressing?"

"No point," Sly said. "We're only gonna end up naked again."

"My thoughts exactly," Joe said, winking at her.

In the kitchen, Sly rummaged through the fridge, handing items to Kiera. The phone rang and Joe grabbed it.

"Saber, just a sec. I'll put you on speaker phone." Joe pushed a button and set the phone down.

"It's about Maggie. She's had a breakdown and they're treating her for depression."

Kiera darted a quick glance at Sly. He frowned, and when he noticed her attention, he set down a loaf of bread and stalked to her side. He wrapped his arms around her and tucked her head against his chest.

"I don't have any feelings for her. I mean, I'm sorry for her but that's all," he murmured.

"Glad to hear it," Saber said. "The woman's trouble and you're well rid of her."

"Wow," Kiera said. "How did you and Joe get up to mischief with his bat ears?"

Saber's growl traveled down the phone line along with Emily's giggle. "They got up to plenty of mischief. I'm glad Joe has settled with you. Now all we have to worry about is Sly."

Joe grinned and crowded her from behind until they surrounded her with their support and strength.

"You don't have to worry about me," Sly said.

"Huh, he won't rest until you have a mate," Emily said in the background.

"You're my last single brother," Saber said, Kiera hearing the clear caring in his voice. She wished her older brother showed the same sort of concern for her. Maybe that would happen one day, once he admitted his problem.

"Not any longer," Joe said, a wide grin on his face.

"Who?" Emily demanded, sounding put out.

"When?" Saber added.

"That would be me," Kiera said.

"Joe? You're good with this?" Caution sounded in Saber's voice.

"Very," Joe said, grinning at both his brother and her.

"Congratulations," Emily said. "We'll have a party since we have a lot to celebrate."

"Emily's pregnant," Saber burst out. "We're having twins."

"That's wonderful," Kiera said.

"The sex toys did it, huh?" Joe's contribution.

Sly smirked at her and Joe, his green eyes glowing with happiness. "Saber, you might have us settled, but you'll have your own twins to drive you crazy now."

"Yeah, but we'll have you guys to help keep them in line," Emily said.

"Lead them astray, more like," Saber said, but Kiera heard the humor in him. "Kiera, are you sure you want to take on both of my younger brothers?"

"Very sure."

"She loves us. She told us," Sly said.

"It's too late for her to take it back now," Joe agreed.

"Welcome to the family," Saber said.

"Thanks," Kiera said.

"We'll talk tomorrow," Joe said. "We're busy now." He disconnected the call.

Kiera sent him a chiding look. "That was rude."

"Saber and Emily won't mind."

"We have a lot to celebrate," Sly said, tweaking her nipple hard enough to make her jump. "I didn't think I'd ever feel this happy again."

"Let's make sandwiches and take them back to bed," Joe said. "A bottle of wine and some grapes."

Kiera's brows rose in a question. "Are you going to peel them for me?"

"We'd do anything for you," Sly said.

Joe nodded and Kiera saw they meant every word. Now that they all wore mating marks, she felt closer to Joe and Sly than ever. Her decision to settle in Middlemarch was the best she'd ever made. She'd found love with two special men.

"Right back at ya," she said because it was nothing less than the truth. She was an untraditional girl in an unconventional relationship. Happiness and peace flooded her. Twin trouble worked for her.

About the Author

Shelley lives in Auckland, New Zealand, with her husband and a small, bossy dog named Scotty.

Typical New Zealanders, Shelley and her husband left home for their big OE soon after they married (translation of New Zealand-speak: big overseas experience), a year-long adventure lengthened to six years of roaming the world. Enduring memories include being almost sat on by a mountain gorilla in Rwanda, lazing on white sandy beaches in India, whale watching in Alaska, searching for leprechauns in Ireland and dealing with ghosts in an English pub.

While travel is still a big attraction, these days Shelley is most likely found in front of her computer following another love—that of writing stories of romance and adventure. Other interests include watching rugby and rugby league (strictly for research purposes *grin*), being walked by the dog and curling up with a good book.

Shelley welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her [author bio page](#) at www.ellorascave.com.

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