



## Night Shift

By Nalini Singh, Ilona Andrews, Lisa Shearin, Milla Vane

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From Milla Vane—a warrior princess must tame *The Beast of Blackmoor* to earn a place among her people. But she quickly discovers that the beast isn't a monster, but a barbarian warrior who intends to do some taming himself.

It's seer Makenna Frazier's first day on the job at Supernatural Protection and Investigations, and her first assignment is more than she bargained for when bodyguard duty for a leprechaun prince's bachelor party goes every which way but right in national bestselling author **Lisa Shearin's** *Lucky Charms*.

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## Editorial Review

Review

Praise for

### **New York Times Bestselling Author Nalini Singh**

“Singh has ruined me for all other books. Passion on this level cannot be easily redone or replicated.”—*Fresh Fiction*

### **#1 New York Times Bestselling Author Ilona Andrews**

“Ilona Andrews's books are guaranteed good reads.”—#1 NYT Bestselling author Patricia Briggs

### **National Bestselling Author Lisa Shearin**

“Shearin weaves a web of magic with a dash of romance that thoroughly snares the reader. She's definitely an author to watch!”—Anya Bast, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Brotherhood of the Damned* novels

About the Author

**Nalini Singh** is the *New York Times* bestselling author of the Psy-Changeling (*Shield of Winter, Heart of Obsidian, Wild Invitation*) and Guild Hunter (*Archangel's Legion, Archangel's Blade, Archangel's Kiss*) novels.

**Ilona Andrews** is the pseudonym for a husband-and-wife writing team. Together, they are the coauthors of the #1 *New York Times* bestselling Kate Daniels urban-fantasy series, including *Magic Rises, Magic Slays*, and *Magic Bleeds* and the romantic urban-fantasy novels of the Edge, including *Steel's Edge, Fate's Edge*, and *Bayou Moon*. They currently reside in Texas with their two children and numerous pets.

**Lisa Shearin** is the national bestselling author of The SPI Files (*The Grendel Affair*) and the Raine Benares novels (*All Spell Breaks Loose, Con & Conjure, Bewitched & Betrayed*).

**Milla Vane** also writes steampunk romances as bestselling author Meljean Brook. She lives in Oregon.

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SECRETS AT MIDNIGHT

NALINI SINGH

CHAPTER 1

Bastien Smith knew he'd been suckered. By his own mother no less. The only thing that *might* make it

bearable was if Sage had been suckered, too. “Tell me you didn’t know,” he said to his younger brother through gritted teeth, both of them propping up the wall nearest the door and an escape they couldn’t make.

Eyes narrowing, Sage folded his arms. “Are you accusing me of breaking the bro code?”

Bastien shoved a hand through his hair, the dark red strands no doubt a mess by now. “Sorry.” It was only right he apologize after suspecting Sage of something so heinous, even if it had resulted from sheer exhausted frustration. “Mom told me she needed help setting up.”

“Technically, she did.” Sage nodded toward the heavy dining table their mother had asked the two of them to shift into the large living area of the home where they’d both grown up. It fit, plenty of space around it for their mother’s guests to mingle, only because Bastien and Sage had first hauled the usual living room furniture into other rooms of the house.

It hadn’t taken long, both of them happy to help their mom prepare for the “book club luncheon” she’d been looking forward to all week. What she’d neglected to mention was that all her book club buddies were bringing along their nubile daughters, nieces, neighbors, and any other random young female they could corral into this excruciating exercise.

Normally, Bastien would’ve groaned, then sucked it up. He loved his mother, would never hurt her. But normally, he wasn’t strung out from two solid weeks of sleepless nights . . . because he didn’t want just any woman. He wanted *her*, the woman he knew in his gut was his mate, but who, against all known laws of changeling mating, he couldn’t *find*.

He’d first tasted the scent of his elusive lover on a street in Chinatown fourteen days, eight hours, and seventeen minutes ago, the scent igniting a possessiveness in him that was as feral as it was joyous. Yes, he’d thought, yes, and turned to follow the scent that spoke to him in a way nothing else ever had . . . only for it to dissipate into intangible mist even his changeling-acute senses couldn’t pierce.

Refusing to believe he’d lost her, he’d spent hours searching the area, day fading into darkest midnight, until he’d finally had to go home empty-handed, his soul craving the touch of hers. The leopard inside his skin had clawed him awake only hours later, certain she was just beyond his reach, hurt and in pain. Torn apart at the idea that he wasn’t there when his mate needed him, he’d immediately gone out again.

Dawn had come on a smudge of light that grew steadily brighter, bringing with it hundreds of people of every size and shape and hue, but not her.

The rest of the world might be in the grip of a tense silence as they waited to see if the days-old historic change in the lives of the Psy, the psychic race that shared the planet with changelings and humans, would spill out into new violence, but Bastien cared only about finding her.

He’d repeated the pattern from that first night every night since, prowling the empty and fog-shrouded city streets in his leopard form long after its other residents found their beds. He’d discarded thousands of trails, sensed myriad secrets, and three or four times, he’d caught the wild, sweet, utterly unique and just as intoxicating scent that was hers, but it never lasted. Not as a scent should last. It faded out with impossible abruptness in the middle of a narrow pathway between buildings, or halfway down a flight of stairs—places where she couldn’t have gone anywhere unless she had wings.

The idea that she might be an aerial changeling, perhaps part of the falcon wing with which Bastien’s pack had an alliance, would’ve been an answer that gave him a way to find her, but there was a feline undertone to her scent that told him he was stalking a fellow cat changeling.

One who was there one instant, gone the next.

Always when the changeling scent ended, he caught a softer one below it that also awakened his most primal instincts. Despite the fact he knew a changeling male couldn't have that kind of a visceral reaction to two different women, he'd followed that scent, too—only it was too gentle, too easily lost among the bitter odors of coffee and spice outside a restaurant, or the overpowering aromas that poured from a beauty parlor, the city a kaleidoscope to his senses.

In truth, *both* scents were less intense than they should be. The only reason he could track the feline one longer was that it had a bitingly primal edge to it that made it stand out even amid the other changeling scents in the city.

It was starting to drive him to madness.

"I didn't even get a bite of the brownies." Sage's mournful voice broke into his thoughts, his brother's gaze on the table groaning with food on the other side of the wall of female flesh. "I was just about to grab one when they began arriving, and I tried to bolt out the back door."

So had Bastien. Only to be stopped by their mother's firm order to stay.

"Why is it"—Bastien folded his arms, mirroring his brother's stance—"that though we're the ones ostensibly doing the choosing, this feels like a two-man meat market?"

Sage bared his teeth at a tall human blonde who turned his way, her body angled in invitation. She hurriedly glanced in another direction, and Sage smirked . . . until he found himself on the receiving end of a patented maternal glare, Lia Smith's petite body as stiff as a general's.

Smirk wilting, he pushed off the wall, a big, tough leopard changeling with his metaphorical tail between his legs. "Crap, I have to go make nice now, or I might as well say good-bye to ever again tasting one of Mom's brownies." Shoulders hunched, he shot Bastien a pleading look. "Don't abandon me, man."

Bastien turned into a rock, feet glued to the floor and arms still folded. "Hell no. And don't even think of bringing up the bro code," he added when Sage went as if to open his mouth. "I've had to suffer through far more of these than you."

As he watched his brother thrust his hands into the pockets of his jeans and slink off to join the lovely, perfumed mass of women who might as well have been a tank of ravenous sharks, Bastien fought the urge to simply shove open the door and leave. No matter how raw and trapped he felt right now, he knew his mother was only trying to help, because though he hadn't said anything to her, Lia Smith knew her children.

She'd clearly sensed he was unhappy, even made the connection that it had to do with his single status. How could he explain the impossible to his mom? A changeling male *never* lost the scent of his mate once he'd caught it. He should've been able to stalk her through fire and hail, snow and rain, much less down city streets.

"Sweetheart." His mother's hand on his arm, the scent of her familiar and of home. "Come into the kitchen. I need you to grab some glasses from the top cabinet."

He followed her without argument, avoiding even the glancing touch of other women. His leopard was in no mood to be touched by any unmated female but the one he couldn't find; Bastien wasn't certain he'd be able to control the urge to snarl if one of the women in the room dared attempt even minor skin privileges. Better

to make certain the situation didn't arise.

"I know which ones," he said once he and his mom had reached the thankful emptiness of the kitchen. Opening the cabinet, he easily grabbed the spare set his mother would've had to use her step stool to access.

"Thank you, baby boy."

Bastien didn't protest her address. He'd long ago accepted the fact that no matter his age or maturity or position in the pack hierarchy, he'd always be her cub. Now, she cupped his face with gentle hands, her eyes searching his, the brown of her irises ringed by a rich yellow-green as her leopard rose to the surface of her mind. "I made a mistake today, didn't I?"

Swamped by a wave of love for the woman who'd kissed countless scraped knees for him when he'd been a child, he closed his hands over her wrists. "Ignore me. I'm just in a bad mood."

"No." She straightened the collar of the white shirt he wore over black pants, having intended to go into the office to catch up on work after helping move the furniture. "Something's wrong, and I've made it worse. I know I shouldn't interfere"—a rueful cast to her expression—"but I love you all so much I can't help myself."

"I know." Never had he questioned his parents' love for him and his siblings, that love the foundation on which his life was built. It was why he hadn't walked out when Lia ordered him and Sage to stay; hurting her would make neither the animal nor the human part of him feel good.

"Do you want to talk about it?"

"No, not yet." He drew her into a tight hug, his leopard rubbing against his skin, akin to how he'd rubbed against Lia's side as a cub when they'd both been in their leopard forms. "I have to handle this myself."

Squeezing him with fierce affection, Lia drew back and brushed his hair off his forehead, Bastien leaning down instinctively to make it easier for her. "Go on," she whispered with a conspiratorial smile, "you can escape out the back."

"Oh good," Vera Robbins said from the kitchen doorway, having appeared just as Lia spoke. "You can give me a ride, young Bastien."

Bastien barely refrained from groaning. The elder was a vigorous and energetic hundred and twenty-five, a woman noted for her warmth and wisdom. She also delighted in reveling in Bastien's past as a "ladies' man." Bastien didn't deny he'd indulged in skin privileges enthusiastically in his early twenties, but so did most leopard changelings at that age, their sexuality an integral aspect of their nature.

Vera would be shocked to hear he hadn't taken a lover in eight months, and now the only lover he wanted was an illusion he couldn't track. "Happy to," he said, because while he wasn't sure he could handle Vera's teasing in his current frame of mind, refusing her was simply not on the cards. She was pack—more, she was a former soldier who'd put her life on the line to protect that pack more than once.

Vera had earned the right to demand whatever the hell she damn well pleased.

Kissing his mom good-bye on the cheek, he escorted Vera to the sleek black car that was his own and got her settled in before he went around to take the driver's seat.

"What a nice car." Vera stroked the soft black leather-synth of her seat. "Though not what I'd expect from a

healthy young dominant in his prime.” A raised eyebrow. “I was looking forward to a ride on that jetcycle of yours.”

Grinning despite himself, he put the gleaming beauty of his car on hoverdrive and guided it silently out of the forested area around his parents’ home deep in DarkRiver’s Yosemite territory. “I’ll bring it by next week, take you for a spin.”

“Hmph.” She tapped her cane on the floor. “You could’ve at least made sure this car was red.”

“I have enough red in my life,” he said, referring to the dark shade of his hair.

That made the older changeling throw back her head and laugh, the sound big and open. “I suppose you’re too big to fit in those zippy sports cars.”

Bastien had sat in one once; he’d lasted exactly two seconds before the claustrophobia had him wanting to rip the damn thing to shreds with his claws.

“All shoulders and muscle,” Vera said before he could respond. “Strong thighs, too.”

“Are you hitting on me, Vera?”

“You can only dream, young Bastien.” Another burst of laughter, before she poked him in the arm. “Why aren’t you mated or with a long-term lover? We both know you have no trouble attracting women.”

The question grated against his insides. “Does no one respect my private life?”

“You’re in a pack. Of course not,” was the rapid response, one he couldn’t argue with. “Now answer me. I’m a hundred and twenty-five—I don’t have time to dillydally.”

“No one can pass Mercy’s tests,” he said, wanting Vera off the painful and currently maddening subject of mating.

“That sister of yours has a good head on her shoulders.”

Noticing Vera tug her shawl around her shoulders, he quietly turned up the heat.

“So,” the elder said a moment later, “she’s overprotective, is she?”

Bastien thought of the infamous “kitten defurring tools” with which Mercy had scared off the last woman he’d been seeing—after first convincing his date Bastien ate live kittens for breakfast. She’d even put a “kitten cage” in one of his cupboards, the better to horrify his date. Bastien had already known he and the woman in question weren’t the right fit, so the fact she’d believed Mercy’s ridiculous story had simply been the last nail in the coffin. “If it’s the right girl,” he said, “it won’t matter.”

Vera’s smile caused her face to seam with the lines of a life generously and fully lived. “Yes,” was all she said, before settling back into her seat.

A half hour later—having been forced to insult his panther of a car by keeping it to a crawling speed that didn’t make Vera threaten to whack him with her cane—Bastien parked in front of a single-floor dwelling not far from the home of the pack healer. Walking around to open Vera’s door, he didn’t make the mistake of offering her a helping hand. The elder would bloody him for the insult.

His nape prickled a second later, a wild, intoxicating scent with a softer undertone making his nostrils flare and his pulse slam against his skin: *her* scent, *all of it*, the soft and the sharply primal, not two women but one.

Too stunned—too *happy*—to wonder how or why his mate’s scent had split in two on the streets, Bastien’s leopard sat up, muscles quivering and head cocked in absolute attention. All this time, he’d been searching the city, but she was *here*.

Hand clenching on the edge of the car door, he turned to look back down the drive.

A slamming punch to the heart, a kick to the gut, a sense of absolute rightness.

It was as if he’d been seeing the world through a misty fog until this moment of piercing clarity. And what he saw was a small, curvy woman with masses of honey-colored hair and big hazel eyes set against skin of a darker honey.

A cat, he thought at once; he’d been right, she was a cat. Then the feline scent whispered away as inexplicably as it’d done on the streets, and all he could taste was the lush, sweet scent of a human female he wanted to lick up from head to toe. Cat or human, one thing was clear: She was his.

“Kirby, honey. What good timing.”

*Kirby. Her name is Kirby.*

Shutting the door and curling his fingers into his palms to conceal the claws that had sliced out as his leopard reacted to her, he waited for Kirby to reach them instead of pouncing like he wanted to do with every single cell in his body.

*Patience*, he counseled the more primitive half of his nature, and forced his claws to retract. The leopard growled within him but assented to the human’s will—because scaring her away was not on the agenda. No, he’d coax, charm, and pet her into his life, into his arms.

Bastien Michael Smith had found his mate, and he was keeping her.

VIVID green eyes watched her with an unwavering focus that raised the tiny hairs on Kirby’s arms and made her stomach go tight, a strange breathlessness in her chest. She didn’t recognize the tall, muscled male with skin tanned a beautiful gold, but he had to be part of the DarkRiver leopard pack—there was something feline about the way he stood, a stealthy predator at rest. She had the insane urge to go up to him, touch him, *curl naked against him, skin to skin*.

The uncharacteristic nature of the forceful, sensual compulsion snapped her back to her senses, and all at once, she was aware of Vera looking at her with a distinctly quizzical expression on her face. Not sure how long she’d been standing stock-still staring at the stranger, Kirby held up a small white box in her arms and said, “I baked yesterday.” Her pulse thudded hard and fast, her words huskier than they should’ve been. “I thought I’d drop off half the cake for you, since I know you like black forest.”

“I like black forest, too.” A deep male voice that brushed over her senses like the most luxuriant fur, the lips that had shaped the words curved in a teasing smile, until she could almost believe she’d imagined the feral intensity of him when he’d first looked at her.

Tapping her cane on the ground, Vera looked up into that green-eyed face that had twisted Kirby’s insides into a tangled snarl. “I suppose you want some?”

“Yes, please.” Hands behind his back, expression as innocent as a five-year-old’s.

Snorting, Vera jerked her head at Kirby. “This is Bastien. Don’t let him charm you—next thing you know, you’ll be naked.”

Kirby’s face filled with heat, the rush of blood so loud in her ears that she almost missed Bastien’s protests. Ignoring them both, Vera walked toward her door at a spry pace, a grace to her movements even at this age that made it clear she was changeling. Not able to look Bastien in the face when her own was no doubt the color of an overripe tomato, Kirby began to follow the other woman . . . and realized she’d acquired a six-foot-plus shadow.

“I feel I have to defend myself,” he murmured, the words a purr of sound against her ears.

*Cat, very definitely a cat.* A big, gorgeous, stalking cat. “Really?” she managed to say, goose bumps rising over her skin at his proximity, the scent of clean, fresh soap and warm-blooded male in her every breath. “You don’t like making women naked?” It was a response driven by some heretofore hidden part of her that told her to show him her claws, despite the fact she was human, didn’t *have* claws. No matter if it felt as if the sharply curved tips were shoving against her skin.

## CHAPTER 2

A pause.

Kirby had the feeling she’d surprised the leopard at her side, but he recovered quickly. “Oh, I do.” His voice had dropped, acquired a rougher edge that threw her stomach into a dangerous free fall. “However, and despite Vera’s refusal to believe me, I’m very particular about who I make naked now that I’m no longer a hormone-driven teenager. Of course, when I was a teenager, a naked woman would’ve ended things rather abruptly, physically speaking.”

Skin burning again when it had just settled, Kirby nonetheless refused to back down. “I hope your ability to stand . . . firm”—*Was she really saying this?*—“against temptation has improved with time?” She’d never flirted in such a sinfully sexual way, hadn’t known she could.

A hand on her lower back, the touch searing her through her cardigan and the camisole she wore beneath, and his breath warm against her earlobe as he bent close to say, “You have no idea, little cat.”

Fighting the shiver that threatened, she walked into Vera’s house and to the kitchen, where she placed the cake on the counter and said, “I’ll make the coffee,” before either Bastien or Vera could make the offer themselves.

The routine task gave her something to do, though if she’d thought it’d help her ignore Bastien, that proved a futile effort. Sprawled in a chair opposite Vera at the kitchen table, he was saying something that had his packmate laughing.

“Why are you dressed up so spiffy?” Vera asked once her laughter had faded, lifting her fashionable but unnecessary cane to tap Bastien’s forearm. “Was it for the girl selection?”

Bastien dropped his head in his hands, the stunning dark red of his hair catching the sunlight pouring through the kitchen windows, all of which overlooked woods filled with verdant green firs. His white shirt was pulled taut over his shoulders in this position, his strength apparent. “I thought Mom needed a few minutes’ help

moving furniture for a book club lunch,” he growled when he raised his head. “If I’d known it was about matchmaking, I’d have worn my rattiest jeans and a stained T-shirt.”

Ears straining to catch every snarly word, Kirby found the cups as the coffee began to perk.

“Your mother loves you.” Vera glared at Bastien. “You’re in fine form, prime of your life, you should find a girl before you get old and crinkly.”

“Gee, thanks, Vera.” A masculine mutter as he leaned back again, one arm braced lazily against the back of his chair, his big body loose limbed, very much a cat at rest. “I was hoping I had a few more years yet.”

Vera’s response was a grin bright and full of anticipation. “I’ll enjoy watching you fall, Bastien Smith. I bet she wraps you around her finger.”

A shrug, those deliciously broad shoulders catching Kirby’s attention again. “Of course she will.” Impossible as it was, it felt as if his voice was pitched to stroke over her senses. “What would be the point otherwise?”

Vera’s smile turned affectionate. “I’m glad to see you understand that.” Glancing up as Kirby brought across the tray holding the coffee, Vera’s expression softened. “And you, Kirby?” She tugged Kirby into a seat. “Have you found someone yet?”

“I’ve only been in the city two weeks,” she said, conscious of Bastien going preternaturally still for a single, taut moment, the green of his eyes no longer human, before he rose to get the cake.

“From the accent,” he said, “I’m guessing . . . Georgia?”

Kirby nodded, happy he’d changed the subject, but Vera wasn’t done.

“Two weeks, schmoo weeks. It’s never too early to start looking.” The older woman’s eyes glinted, flicking from Kirby to Bastien. “You two would make pretty cubs together.”

Kirby wanted to die. Dig a hole, jump inside, bury herself for good measure.

Bastien on the other hand—now standing between her and Vera—served up the cake without missing a beat, his body heat lapping against her like a tactile caress. “Undoubtedly,” he said, “but not if you terrify Kirby away with warnings about the likelihood of ending up naked while with me.”

Kirby responded in pure self-defense, driven by that strangeness in her that said she couldn’t permit him to overwhelm her. Not now, not ever. She might not be a dominant, but it was critical he didn’t see her as weak. The tips of her fingers stung on that fierce thought, the pain sharp, biting. Putting down the coffee cup that was clearly hotter than she’d realized, she said, “That likelihood is getting less and less with every word you speak.”

Laughing, Vera slapped her thigh. Bastien retook his seat with a meek expression belied by the fact he’d shifted his chair so that his thigh pressed against Kirby’s own. It incited an escalation in her clawing awareness of him, her skin prickling in a way that felt as if it came from inside and out both. Almost as if she had a leopard under her skin, too, one that was rubbing up against it in an effort to get closer to this gorgeous cat who made her nerve endings go haywire.

Shaking off the curious sensation, she focused on his conversation with Vera. Intelligent, witty, a little bit wicked, Bastien was the kind of man who’d never have trouble attracting a woman. Kirby was far from immune. If she was brutally honest, she’d never reacted to anyone as strongly as she’d done to Bastien.

That violent wave of need, of *want* at the start, followed by an increasing desire to know more about him, know everything . . . it was profoundly unsettling. As was the tearing disappointment that had her nails digging into her palms and her eyes threatening to burn when he glanced at his watch and said, “I better get into the office. With the instability caused by the Psy political situation, I have to keep an extra-sharp eye on things.”

“All work and no play.” Vera shook her head as Kirby stared deliberately into her half-empty coffee cup in an effort to hide her disturbing reaction, her skin flushing alternately hot then cold. “Be careful you don’t become a dull boy.”

“I thought I was making women naked on a regular basis?” Rising with that quip, Bastien went around to kiss Vera on the cheek. “Can I give you a ride somewhere, Kirby?” he asked, his hand on the back of her chair.

Scared by how much she wanted to lean back, rub her cheek against his arm, tug him down to her mouth, she shook her head.

“Don’t be silly,” Vera said. “You haven’t got a car.”

Her fingers flexed, the tingling in her fingertips increasing in strength. “It’s no trouble to catch the—”

Bastien’s breath whispered hot and silken over her ear, his face a caress away from her own. “I promise I don’t bite.” It was a dare.

Kirby had stopped accepting stupid dares as a teenager, but a primal defiance rose up inside her at his words. It swamped the near-panic that had gripped her at the realization that he was about to leave, totally overwhelmed the sense of self-preservation that said she needed to put some distance between them so she could think.

“I deal with five-year-olds every day,” she said, his jaw brushing across her temple when she turned her head slightly. The contact made her want to shudder, ask for more. Swallowing down the wrenching need that was too powerful to make any kind of rational sense, she somehow managed to keep her tone even as she added, “You’re a pussycat by comparison.”

“Careful, Bastien.” Vera’s smile was wide. “Kirby’s got a brain.”

Pulling back Kirby’s chair so she could get up, though he remained close enough to touch, Bastien said, “I like women with brains.”

A snort. “Oh? I thought certain other attributes had priority.”

“Bye, Vera.” Bastien began to walk backward out of the kitchen, wagging his fingers at the older woman—who, from her smile, was clearly charmed by the packmate she’d been teasing.

When Kirby picked up her purse and joined him, he turned to face the correct way, then placed his hand on her lower back again. The contact renewed the odd sensation of fur rubbing against the inside of her skin, made her toes curl even as her breasts ached.

Kirby knew she should pull away—and not only because of her increasingly out-of-control response to him. Thanks to a changeling friend in junior high, she understood the concept of skin privileges: the right to touch, in and out of the pack, different layers of contact acceptable for different situations. A male’s hand on a female’s lower back was an intimate act in human society, even more so in the changeling world.

If she did nothing about Bastien claiming the right, he'd take it as silent acquiescence to his pursuit. If she said no, he'd back off immediately, DarkRiver a pack that adhered to strict and disciplined codes of behavior. Kirby knew that because Vera had told her after pointing out that Kirby was a young, single woman living in changeling-heavy territory and thus had a good chance of coming into contact with interested males.

"If it's a predator, leopard or wolf, be blunt," the older woman had said. "Subtle doesn't work when they get set on a woman. But no male in either DarkRiver or SnowDancer will go where he's been specifically uninvited."

So Kirby didn't have the excuse of ignorance. But she didn't pull away, didn't tell Bastien to stop touching her. Because regardless of her worry at the ungovernable nature of her reactions, his big body beside her, the pressure of his hand, it felt good . . . better than anything had felt in a long, long time.

The sensation of warm rightness was potent enough to cut through the cold knot that had been part of her for as long as she could remember, a heavy lump centered in her chest that hurt deep in the night and made her cry inexplicable tears. These days, she cried in silence, woke to find her face wet. As a child, she'd screamed awake, her throat raw and terror in her blood.

"Hey." Bastien's hand circling gently on her back. "Everything okay?"

Nodding, she slid into the expensive black car that told her whatever Bastien did, he was very successful at it, and watched him walk around to get into the driver's seat. Bracing his arm along the back of her seat, he waited until she met his gaze.

"If you don't want to be here," he said quietly, "or if you feel uncomfortable with me, tell me." The leopard looked at her out of his eyes. "Do you want to leave?"

"No." Her answer was driven by instinct, the moment pregnant with a meaning she couldn't consciously grasp. "Memories," she found herself saying to the beautiful male who'd been a stranger an hour ago. "I remembered something that made me sad."

Bastien reached out to tuck her hair behind her ear, his fingertips brushing the curve of it to shimmer sensation through every inch of her. "Do you often remember?"

She shook her head as the prickling in her skin eased—to be replaced by a greedy desire for more. "No." The dream-crying had faded to nonexistence in the later part of her childhood, only to return with a vengeance when she relocated to San Francisco. "I think it must be from the stress of moving to a new place."

Bastien went as if to play with another strand of her hair, then glanced at Vera's cottage. "She'll accuse us of necking in her drive if we don't get going."

The dry words made her laugh, the sadness fading, and she knew he'd done it on purpose, this leopard she didn't know . . . and yet did in her very bones.

Starting up the car, his grin devastating, he said, "Which way?"

Kirby gave him her address, then realized she'd never asked his original destination. "Will it be out of your way?" She should've offered to get out at the transit stop, but she couldn't make herself say it.

One hand confident on the wheel as they pulled out, Bastien reached across to run the knuckles of his free hand over her cheek. "You could never be out of my way, Kirby."

Every inch of her melted at that rough caress of sound. “Vera is right. You’re dangerous.”

“Who, me? I just deal with stocks and bonds all day.”

Fascinated by him, compelled to know everything, she angled herself in the seat so she could look at his profile, the hard line of his jaw cleanly shaven. “Really?” she asked.

He nodded. “I’m in charge of DarkRiver’s financial assets.”

Kirby thought of what she’d read in the papers about the pack and how it was effectively one of the biggest corporations in the city, a corporation in robust financial health, and knew she’d been right. Bastien was very good at his job. “Do you have other clients as well?”

“A few small ones. Why, do you want to invest?” A raised eyebrow. “We could definitely come to an agreement about my fees,” he added with a smile that invited her to play.

Kirby wanted to trace that smile, kiss it into her own mouth. “Kindergarten teachers don’t make enough to invest.”

An interested look before he returned his attention to the road. “Which kindergarten?”

“The one near DarkRiver’s city headquarters in Chinatown.” As a result, she had as many changeling students as human, and had spent the past month learning how to handle children who didn’t yet have full control over their shifting.

“The other day,” she told him, the memory a delight, “I couldn’t find a student until my assistant teacher pointed out that he was in cub form on a tree branch above the swing.” Kirby had eventually coaxed the boy, who’d apparently had a fight with a friend, to jump into her arms. “They didn’t cover that in my training.”

Bastien turned onto the main road back to San Francisco. “You should talk to Annie,” he said. “She teaches seven-year-olds I think, including a lot of changeling kids, could probably give you some pointers.”

“Would she mind?” Kirby loved her new position and wanted to do a good job; she wasn’t too proud to ask for help from more experienced teachers.

“No, she’s a sweetheart. I’ll get her number from the pack directory, tell her to give you a call.” His lips curved again. “Of course, that means you have to give me your number.”

“Or I could ask Vera for Annie’s contact details,” she teased, the compulsion to touch him so aggressive that she had to fold her arms to keep from reaching out. Still, a wild, unknown part of her lunged at him, as if it would shove out of her very skin.

“Oh, that’s just mean.” Scowl darkening his features, he reached across to tug at her hair. “Did you meet Vera at the kindergarten?”

“Two of her grandchildren attend and she comes in as a volunteer a couple of times a week.” The other woman had, for reasons of her own, taken Kirby under her wing at their first meeting, becoming her first friend in this city. “Do you always work on Sundays?”

“Only when necessary.” Settling into his seat as they hit the highway, he said, “Tell me more stories about the kids you teach.”

Smiling, Kirby did, then Bastien told her about his pack, about the forests he loved, asked her what it had been like to live in Georgia. The time passed in a heartbeat, until she blinked in surprise at realizing they were almost to her apartment.

“I—” She hissed out a breath.

“Kirby?” Bastien’s gaze snapped to her, returned to the road a second later. “I’ll pull over.”

“No, it’s nothing.” Wincing, she rubbed her abdomen, the stabbing sensation already subsiding, as it had the other three times she’d felt it since moving to San Francisco. “I’ve been eating too much pier fast food,” she admitted, scrunching up her nose.

It was all so new and different: the water, the seagulls, the rich clam chowder served in a sourdough bowl that she’d had twice already this week, including for lunch today. “I just have to get back on the straight and narrow and I’ll be fine.”

Bastien frowned. “We’ll go to a clinic, just in case.”

Shaking her head, she indicated a parking space in front of the three-story building in Chinatown where she’d found an affordable apartment courtesy of the fact it was the size of a shoebox. She didn’t mind. What mattered was that it was within walking distance of the kindergarten and in the heart of the city, meaning she never experienced the icy kiss of absolute loneliness. “I don’t feel sick really.” It was a sharp, vicious pain when it struck, but then it faded, which was why she kept talking herself into more pier food.

Having parked the car, Bastien touched the back of his hand to her forehead. “No fever at least.” He took a card from the wallet he’d thrown into a holder when he entered the car. “This is my number. Call me if you feel worse. I’ll drop by on my way home to check in on you.”

Used to taking care of herself, she said, “You don’t have to.” The comment went directly against the huge part of her that wanted to crawl into his lap and ask him not to leave, her skin aching for his.

“Kirby, I’m a dominant predatory changeling male,” he said, as if that explained everything, his tone suddenly unbending. “I also have a mother who’d box my ears if I left you alone in this situation, not to mention what Vera would do to me.” A deep smile that creased his cheeks. “Have pity.”

Kirby didn’t have to argue with herself to answer. No, the battle was to maintain some kind of control over a body and a mind that were rocketing out of her control. “All right,” she said, stomach fluttering in a way that had nothing to do with pain. “Do you work from the DarkRiver building?”

Stepping out, he opened the passenger door for her and waited until she was on her feet before leaning back against the car to say, “No. My team and I have a dedicated space in the Financial District.”

Only a few minutes away, the madness in her whispered.

“I’ll be there till about seven.” Rising to his full height, Bastien curved his hand around the side of her neck for a moment. “I’ll come by right after.” He brushed his thumb over her pulse. “Yes?”

Throat dry, she nodded. “Yes.”

His gaze dropped to her lips and for a second she thought he’d kiss her, but then he drew back his hand, the green of his eyes leopard-wild. “Rest.” A rough command. “I’ll see you in a few hours.”

Heart a staccato drumbeat against her ribs, she watched him prowl around to get into the driver's seat. Cat, definitely a cat.

## CHAPTER 3

Bastien loved numbers, loved the high-stakes energy of the financial world—but thanks to his family and his pack, he also had a solid, stable head on his shoulders. It was what made him so good at what he did.

Most of DarkRiver's investments were medium to high yield, low-risk, which meant that if carefully managed, as Bastien managed them, the pack was immune to market fluctuations. However, and with his alpha's knowledge and authorization, he also had a small percentage in extremely high-yield, extremely high-risk investments that kept their portfolio from stagnating.

Over the years since he'd taken charge of that portfolio, he'd increased DarkRiver's financial assets exponentially, and he had no intention of stopping that trajectory. So yeah, he liked his job, liked that what he did helped maintain and support his pack, but today, the hours couldn't pass fast enough. His leopard snarled inside his mind, wanting to go to Kirby, and it took all of his human willpower not to give in, not to find her, bite down on her neck, *mark* her.

Shoving a hand through his hair, he grabbed a bottle of cold water in a futile attempt to cool things down. He could be as possessive as any predatory changeling, but he'd never felt such a feral need to brand a woman. Not that his response to her was exactly a surprise.

Kirby, after all, was his mate.

It didn't always happen this hard, this fast. Mercy and her mate, Riley, had known one another for years before the mating dance slapped them both sideways. But for some, it happened in that first, stunning instant of contact.

The knowing was visceral, as if he'd sensed the other half of himself, her presence intoxicating to his senses.

*The soft and the wild, the two scents that were both hers.*

He frowned. The feline whisper to Kirby's scent hadn't made another appearance the entire time he'd spent with her and that was impossible for a changeling, so she was definitely human. *His* human. Leopard and man, both parts of him smiled, figuring he'd have plenty of time to work out the complex mystery of her scent.

Had she been changeling, he'd have—No, he'd have done exactly the same things he planned to do to win his sexy little human mate. He'd court her, seduce her, pleasure her . . . and by the time she realized what was happening, she'd already be his. The last thing he could afford to do was come on so strong that he scared her.

With that thought in mind, he rolled up his sleeves and focused on figures that today seemed as dry and as boring as dust, in spite of the financial turmoil caused by the recent political shift among the Psy. That's what a lot of people didn't understand—the psychic race might've been standoffish to a large degree until recently, but all three races—human, changeling and Psy—were connected on a global level; civil war in one sphere affected them all.

Sometimes, it was subtle, as with the market fluctuations, other times overt.

Bastien's mouth set in a grim line as he considered the toxic bomb discovered ten days prior in the city's central skytrain station.

"But that," he muttered, "isn't what you need to be thinking about right now. Get to work so you can spend as much time as possible with Kirby in the coming week."

He did exactly that, was ready for a break when his phone rang a couple of hours later, Grey's number on the display. "What do you want, shrimp?"

"Do you want to come over tonight?" his younger brother asked. "Sage and I are getting pizza and watching the basketball game."

"Thanks, but not tonight."

"Better offer?"

"Way better." His entire body grew taut at the thought of Kirby; if she no longer felt ill, he had every intention of talking his way into staying. God, he wanted to pet her, hold her, nuzzle his face into the curve of her neck and draw in that intriguing scent that made no sense.

If, however, she was still sick, he'd coax her into going to a clinic. And if Kirby proved stubborn about it, he'd pick her up and take her. She could be mad at him later—*after* the doctors checked her out. Bastien did not mess around when it came to looking after the people who mattered to him.

"Not one of the women from the luncheon?" Grey's voice broke into his thoughts, his brother's surprise open. "I thought Sage said you snuck out early—he's cranky about that, by the way."

"She's no one you two know." He wasn't ready to share Kirby with his family or his pack yet. Not only did he want her all to himself until he was drunk on her, he didn't want to risk her being overwhelmed by the Smith clan or his affectionately nosy packmates. "I'll see you later this week. And tell Sage he can be cranky when he's been ambushed by a setup as many times as I have."

"When should I start worrying?"

"Not for a few years yet." Hanging up after a bit more back and forth with his brother, he knuckled down to work again.

There were three more calls, two from packmates who needed advice about personal financial matters, the third from his father. Michael Smith had obviously been talking to his mate, and was checking up on his son. Happy to answer his father honestly, Bastien told him he was fine. Hell, he was ecstatic.

That visceral excitement had intensified to fever pitch by the time he left the office.

Kirby sounded sweetly delighted when she answered the intercom and cleared him into her building, her accent redolent of mint juleps and magnolia trees. Deciding he was going to kiss her on that lush mouth of hers as soon as possible, licking and tasting and indulging, he took the steps to her apartment three at a time, making it there just as she opened the door.

A slight gasp, followed by a shy smile that made him want to bite, her pretty honey-colored hair in a ponytail that bared the delicate skin of her nape. "That was fast."

Leopard stretching under his skin at her proximity, he allowed himself to tug on a curling tendril of hair that

had come loose from the tie. “I bring gifts to bribe my way inside.” He held up the bag from a family-run restaurant one block over. “Chicken noodle soup. Good for whatever ails you. And if you’re feeling better . . .” He showed her the frozen yogurt he had fantasies of feeding her spoonful by spoonful, and yeah, maybe he wanted to lick it from her skin for his own dessert, but he *was* a cat. Kirby couldn’t be too surprised if he gave in to temptation.

“So?” he teased gently when she didn’t step back, her caressing gaze on his shoulders, his chest. It was all he could do not to cup her jaw, claim a hot, deep kiss, tell her she could touch him anytime she wanted.

Cheeks coloring, she invited him into the tiny space that would’ve normally made his leopard stir-crazy. “I feel fine,” she said. “I had a couple of twinges right after you left, but then nothing.”

From the scent and look of her, her skin glowing, she didn’t appear ill. Yet once again, he caught a hint of that other scent, wild and inexplicable, that confused his leopard. “Have you been spending a lot of time around another cat lately?” he asked, though the scent was too integrated into her body to be anything other than her own.

Yet the way she moved, everything else about her, was human.

Kirby tilted her head to the side, lines forming between the rich, unusual hazel of her eyes, flecks of green intermingled with near yellow. “No, why?”

“I thought I caught a scent.” Except there was nothing in the air now except Kirby’s warm softness overlaid by a peach accent that probably came from her body lotion.

Of course, thinking about Kirby rubbing lotion over her naked flesh probably wasn’t the best of ideas right now. “Might be one of your neighbors,” he said to put her at ease, while his mind worried over the puzzle of it.

“Maybe.” She bit down on her lower lip, and he wanted to growl that that was his job.

Yeah, he was having trouble controlling both the animal and the man.

“I haven’t met all my neighbors yet.” Smile holding a quiet shyness again, she smoothed a nonexistent wrinkle on the front of her fitted sea green T-shirt. “I’m not very brave with strangers.” A soft confession.

Bastien’s need for her segued into a violent tenderness, and right then, all he wanted to do was hold her. Just hold her. “I think you’re braver than you know,” he murmured, folding his arms to leash the instinct. “It’s not every woman who packs up and moves across the country on her own.” She’d come to him, whether she knew it or not, and it wasn’t a gift he’d ever forget. “I’m damn glad you did, little cat.”

Skin flushing a delicate pink, she turned to put the dessert in the freezer, the black fabric of her yoga pants stretching across her curves. “We should eat before the soup gets cold.”

BASTIEN took the seat right next to Kirby when it was time to eat, his arm along the back of her chair and his eyes on her profile. Flustered, she said, “You’re staring.” Like he wanted to take a big greedy bite out of her, his eyes an impossibly vivid and primal green shade that told her it wasn’t only the human part of him that watched her.

“Hmm.” A rumbling sound that made her want to press her hand to his chest, feel the vibration of it. “Eat.” He picked up her spoon, dipped it into the soup, brought it to her lips. “I want you healthy for all the debauched things I plan to talk you into later tonight.”

The rough warmth of his other hand curving around her nape stole the words on her tongue. All her life, she'd ached for contact with another living being, hungered to touch and be touched. The lack of tactile contact in her life *hurt*. As a child in the foster care system, she'd had few choices; it should've been different for the adult she'd become, but despite her need, Kirby couldn't imagine being with someone without bonds of affection, of care. However, building those bonds was incredibly difficult for her after a lifetime of not belonging to anyone.

Then had come Bastien.

"Hey." The spoon clinking back into the bowl, knuckles running over her cheek. "I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable."

That voice, a low, deep purr that stroked over her skin. "You didn't," she answered, her own voice husky. "I'm just not used to . . ." Being so wanted. No one in her life had ever pursued her as Bastien was doing, ever cared enough to get her soup when she was sick, much less touch her with any kind of tenderness.

"To a bad-mannered cat?" he said, the thumb of the hand he had around her nape stroking over her pulse point. "I bring you soup then don't let you eat it." The heat of him a dark kiss, he picked up the spoon again. "Let me make up for it."

Stomach fluttering at the coaxing words, she parted her lips to say what, she didn't know, and he slipped the spoon inside. And somehow—Kirby wasn't sure quite how—she ended up in his lap, one of his hands splayed on her lower back, his shoulders heavy with muscle under her arm and his thighs rock hard below her.

When she belatedly realized where she was and made to get off, he playfully threatened to sulk . . . then fed her more soup. All the while verbally petting her with affectionate, sexy words that made her feel intoxicatingly sensual, a beautiful woman.

"You haven't eaten," she said afterward, warm and full and aroused on the innermost level.

He nipped at her lower lip in a startling contact that nonetheless wasn't unwelcome, his thighs shifting under her body as one of his hands squeezed the curve of her hip. "I plan to nibble on you."

Her skin prickling with that strange, near-painful awareness, and her heart a throbbing drum, Kirby brushed her fingers over his jaw. She knew then that she was about to invite this gorgeous, charming leopard into her bed after a single day's acquaintance. Her need for him was deeper than simple sexual desire, however. Some long-dormant part of her, anguished and in pain, whispered that Bastien alone could assuage the terrible emptiness inside her.

It felt as if she'd been waiting for him her entire life.

Such a dangerous thought. And still, she wasn't going to step back, wasn't going to be rational about this. "Will—" Agony tearing through her abdomen, she doubled over with a shocked cry, her vision blurring.

"Right." Face grim, Bastien rose with her in his arms and headed for the door. "You're going to see a doctor, no damn argument."

In too much pain to respond, her insides shredded open by clawing blades that cut and tore, she curled into the protective strength of his body. It was a quick ride to the nearest twenty-four-hour clinic, but the pain faded rapidly in those fleeting minutes, to the point that though she felt bruised from the inside out by the

time they arrived, she was otherwise fine.

Mystified, the Medical Psy on duty did a number of scans using his ability to see through the skin; he even requested a second opinion from a human colleague. Neither had any answers. “Do you want to remain overnight?” the M-Psy asked. “In case the pain reoccurs.”

Kirby was shaking her head before the medic finished speaking.

“I hate hospitals,” she said to Bastien when he frowned. “I’ll feel better at home.” Regardless of the fact she’d never needed intrusive medical attention of the kind that could explain her dislike, it was a gut-wrenching one, close to a phobia if she was honest. The smell of a certain disinfectant seemingly used in all medical facilities made her want to retch. Even now, her bruised muscles cramped, stomach twisting. “I won’t be able to rest here.”

Bastien squeezed her hand and only then did she realize she had a death grip on him. “All right.” He didn’t speak again until the doctor had prescribed some painkillers and they were in the car on their way back to her apartment.

“You call me if it happens again.” An order.

Shifting in the passenger seat to face him, she curled her tingling fingertips into her palms. “You’re being pushy and bossy.”

“I get that way when I’m worried about someone I care for.” It was near to a growl, his hands white-knuckled on the steering wheel. “You will tell me?”

Shaken by the blunt statement of care, she said, “Yes,” her irritability spiraling without warning into a joy so piercing that it terrified. God, she was falling too hard, too fast, her emotional equilibrium nonexistent around the changeling in the driver’s seat.

A serrated pain in her chest, three knives drawn through the *inside* of her skin.

## CHAPTER 4

Bastien glanced at her at once, though she hadn’t made a sound. “You’re hurting.” His fingers brushed over her cheek before he turned his attention back to the road, his tension apparent in the roughness of his voice. “We’ll be home soon.”

Kirby’s throat thickened. He was so wonderful. How was she supposed to protect her already battered heart? “I don’t know what’s wrong with me,” she said, scared in a way that sent her pulse stammering.

This time when Bastien reached out, it was to gently squeeze her nape. “We’ll figure it out.”

He kept the warm strength of his hand on the sensitive, vulnerable skin until he had to remove it to maneuver the car into a parking spot half a block down from her apartment building. “Wait there.”

Scowling—just because she understood his protectiveness, even adored it, didn’t mean she was about to allow him to boss her around—she pushed the passenger-side door open right as he reached her. She looked up . . . to find herself the focus of leopard-green eyes that glowed in the darkness. “I can walk,” she said, even as her breath caught at the sheer, wild beauty of him.

He refused to budge from in front of her. “You’re barefoot.”

“*Bastien*”—she wished she could growl, too—“you are not carrying me again.” She was an independent adult female and it was *critical* Bastien see her that way, not as a weakling he had to cosset. “Move,” she said, and when he simply folded his arms, she gave in to the strange, overwhelming urge to bare her teeth at him, the sound that emerged from her throat perilously close to a snarl.

“Now you’re trying to get me into bed.” His grin transformed her near-feral annoyance into a sense of happiness so strong it didn’t seem possible it could exist . . . happiness because he was hers.

Eyes still night-glow, Bastien unfolded his arms. “I’ll give you a piggyback ride. Come on.” Turning to get into position, he shot her an “I dare you” look over his shoulder that made her want to nip at his mouth, draw in the scent at the crook of his neck.

He was playing with her, she thought all at once, delighted.

Unable to resist, she stood on the edge of the car door frame and wrapped her arms around his neck. He hoisted her up with effortless ease, muscled arms locked under her butt. Burying her nose surreptitiously in his neck, she cooperated when he turned and asked her to push the door shut with her foot, the car locking automatically.

Then he strode down the street while she grew drunk on the exhilarating soap and skin and maleness of his scent, and battled the urge to use her teeth, to bite down hard. So he’d be marked. So everyone would know he was hers. Then she’d tear off his clothing with her bare hands, kiss and touch and lick, embedding her scent into his skin, ensuring that even after one mark faded, the other would remain.

Skin flushing at the untamed possessiveness of her thoughts, she nonetheless held on tight, her bones melting at the feel of his strong, hard body moving against her own. When an older couple strolling by smiled at them, she smiled in return, feeling truly young for the first time in her life.

The world might be in a state of turmoil as a result of the recent Psy civil war, but Kirby’s much smaller world was filled with a joy she’d never known.

“How’s the service?” Bastien asked a few seconds later.

“Passable.”

“Careful.” It was a growled warning, a squeak escaping her throat as he pretended to drop her. “You don’t want to make the driver mad.”

*Oh, I adore you.*

Her need for him an ache deep within, Kirby surrendered and nuzzled his neck. While she was free with reassuring hugs when it came to the children she taught, it was hard for her to show affection in her personal life. No one had ever welcomed it from her. Bastien did. Angling his neck in a silent request for more, he made a sound that vibrated against her upper body.

An ear-to-ear smile broke out over her face. “You purr!”

“Maybe.”

Delighted with everything about him—including the protective bossiness that had made her snarl—she held

on as he ran up the steps to the door of her building. She'd expected him to take the elevator once they were inside, but he jogged up the three levels to her place without breaking a sweat or losing his breath. It was a stunning display of strength, throwing the deceptiveness of his usual lazy prowl into stark focus.

Kirby couldn't help but imagine how he'd move against her . . . *in* her, in a far more intimate setting, all power and strength and healthy golden skin rubbing over her own.

Butterflies in her stomach, her lower body molten.

"Hey, now." A rumbling wave of sound against the taut tips of her nipples. "Don't be thinking those things tonight. You're going to rest."

Cheeks burning, she pressed her palm to the scanner beside the apartment door. "How did you . . . ?"

"I'm changeling, little cat," he reminded her. "I can scent you"—a deep inhale—"and you're delicious."

Certain she'd die of mortification, she wiggled off his body the instant they were inside. "That's so unfair," she said, not meeting his gaze.

Wrapping one arm around her waist, he hauled her flush against him, the thick heat of his arousal pushing aggressively against her belly through their clothing. "How's that?" Pure wickedness in his smile. "Fair enough?"

Kirby went to respond, found her mouth claimed in a kiss sumptuous and lazy, Bastien's tongue stroking slow and hot over her own. As if he had all the time in the world to kiss her, as if he was savoring the taste of her.

Making a complaining sound in the back of her throat when he broke contact, she rose on tiptoe, hands fisted in the dark red silk of his hair. He groaned, his mouth opening over her own and his palms skimming down her sides, their second kiss as opulent as the first, both their chests heaving by the time he raised his head again.

But this time, he pressed his index finger against her kiss-damp mouth when she sought to initiate another. "No tempting me." A stern expression, but his body pounded for her, his skin hot. "I am not taking advantage of a sick woman."

Kissing his throat since she couldn't reach his mouth without his cooperation, she licked up the taste of him. "I'm fine."

Another masculine groan, his hand clenching in her hair before he tugged her away, those night-glow eyes slamming passionately into her own. "When we go wild between the sheets," he said roughly, "I want you healthy and strong enough that I can bite"—a little nip of her lower lip that made her quiver—"pet"—his free hand stroking down her side—"and take you all night, then come back for seconds."

Narrowing her eyes, she gripped at his shirt, her heartbeat nowhere near steady after that sensual recitation. "You're terrible."

Smile feline in its satisfaction, and so, so bad for her self-control, he nudged her toward her bedroom. "Brush your teeth and get into your pajamas."

Her lips quirked, the heat tangling with a raw wave of affection. "I'll go as soon as I lock the door behind you, I promise."

“No need.” Folding his arms, he leaned back against that door. “I’m sleeping on your couch.”

Kirby blinked. “Bastien—”

The hard glint back in his eyes, he shook his head. “Only way I’ll leave is if you call someone else to stay over. You shouldn’t be alone after what happened.”

She’d wanted him to stay, but not because he thought he had to babysit her. Thrusting a hand through her hair, messing up her ponytail, she said, “I’ve been alone before when I’ve been sick.” Every single time since she hit legal adulthood. Even before that, any “company” she’d had had been perfunctory at best. “I—”

“Have you ever before been in that much pain?” Bastien’s growl raised every tiny hair on her body. “You doubled over. I could feel you shivering in my arms from the shock.”

Not capable of lying to him, she admitted the truth. “No. Never anything that violent.” It had *hurt*, as if something was trying to claw its way out from inside her.

“So I stay.”

“I guess if you do something dastardly,” she muttered, wondering who he was to her, this occasionally infuriating leopard male she already trusted down to the bone, “Vera will hound you forever.”

Sliding his hands into his pockets, muscles no longer bunched up, he shuddered. “You have an evil streak.”

Her mouth cracked open in a huge yawn halfway through her laugh, and all at once, she was exhausted. As if she’d been running a race of which she had no knowledge.

When Bastien took her shoulders and turned her toward the bedroom, she went, crawling straight into bed without bothering to change. She was aware of Bastien turning off her bedside lamp, tugging the blankets over her . . . then nothing.

CONCERNED by Kirby’s rapid descent into deep sleep, Bastien watched over her for several minutes, leaving only after he was certain her breathing was smooth and her scent clean of any signs of sickness. Once in the postage-stamp-size living area—which his leopard tolerated only because it meant Kirby was always in close proximity—he directed a jaundiced glance at her tiny two-seater couch.

*Hell*, no.

It took less than a minute to strip and shift into his leopard form. Padding around the room, he settled into his new skin before curling up on the carpet. Hopefully Kirby wouldn’t freak if she woke in the night and saw him before he could shift back. The leopard huffed in response to the thought—Kirby might be a little shy now and then, but she had grit.

Her snarl earlier had been beautiful.

Yawning on that proud, pleased thought, he lay his head on his front paws and catnapped, rising regularly to pad into the bedroom to check up on the small woman who lay curled up under three thick blankets. It made the human inside the cat smile, think of how he’d enfold her in his arms at night once she was his, so she’d snuggle into him for warmth.

It was sometime in the morning that his ears picked up rustling noises from the bedroom. He entered to find Kirby twisting and turning, her skin shiny with perspiration and the blankets shoved to the bottom of the bed,

the sheets themselves pulled off the mattress to tangle around her arms and legs.

Shifting in a joyous agony of pleasure and pain, his body dissolving into shattered light before re-forming into his human form, he crouched down beside the bed and checked her temperature.

*Hot.*

Too hot for a human.

About to attempt to wake her so he could determine if she simply had a fever, or if it might be something more serious, he barely escaped being hit by her hand as she flung it out in her sleep. Closing his own hand instinctively around her slender wrist, careful to moderate his strength so he didn't hurt her, he frowned at the rapid pace of her pulse. It thudded against her skin in a violent drumbeat.

“Kir—” Her name froze on his lips as he truly *saw* what it was he held in his grasp.

A small, feminine hand, the skin flushed with heat . . . and the tips clawed. Neat little claws, adorable in contrast to his, but very definitely not human. His leopard prowled to the surface of his mind, sniffing at her. She still smelled luscious and intoxicating and human, except for that maddening, wild undertone that tugged at his senses until he could *almost* identify it . . . right before it slithered out of his grasp.

One thing he'd caught though—she was unquestionably a cat of some kind.

“Kirby,” he said softly, too softly for human ears, his tone near sub-vocal.

Thick lashes fluttered, then rose . . . as the claws sheathed themselves back into her skin, with no sign they'd ever been there. “Bastien?” A sleepy murmur, her skin starting to cool, her heartbeat steady. “Hurts.”

Protective instincts already violently aroused, his words came out harsh, near to a true growl. “Where, baby?”

“Hurts so much.” Her eyes closed, her breath hitching. “Touch . . .”

She was asleep again, but not at rest, her crying quiet, heartbreaking. Unable to bear it, he got into bed with her and wrapped her in his arms, his need to alleviate her pain such that he forgot he was naked. Kirby didn't startle awake. Turning immediately into his chest, she tucked up her arms between them, rubbed her cheek against his skin, her own streaked with silent tears.

Touch, she'd said, so that was what he did, petting and stroking her into a calmer state, the sigh she released a benediction. His mate, he realized on a wave of rage that had his own claws slicing out to brush her skin, was touch-starved. A lack of physical affection was painful for humans, but it was agonizing for pack-minded changelings.

“Never again,” he promised in a fierce whisper, and, claws retracted, slid one hand just under her T-shirt so it lay against her skin, curving his other over her nape.

It made her release a soft moan before she seemed to slip into a peaceful, deep sleep, the strange, inexplicable undertone in her scent once more dull and hidden. It took time for his anger to abate, but when it did, he had to face the cold, hard facts: Either Kirby was lying about being human rather than changeling or she didn't know.

The latter should've been impossible. Dorian, one of the DarkRiver sentinels, had been latent until

approximately a year and a half ago, but though he hadn't been able to shift into his leopard form, the other man had always known of that leopard. He'd smelled like a cat, had the hearing of a cat, the instincts of one. Not only that, but his movements in human form had immediately marked him out as a feline changeling.

Kirby, on the other hand, smelled wholly—if oddly delicately—human the majority of the time, and while she was as sensual and as affectionate as any DarkRiver changeling underneath her shyness, there was nothing inherently feline about her physical presence. If she knew, she was the best actress he'd ever seen, but even the most gifted actress couldn't mask her scent to that extent, not from a fellow changeling.

Notwithstanding any of that, one thing was clear: Bastien had to inform his alpha.

The idea of exposing Kirby made his leopard snarl, his arms locking around her trusting form, but Bastien knew he had no choice. If he didn't tell Lucas and another member of DarkRiver detected Kirby's secret, she'd face harsh punishment for breaching the iron-clad rule that stated no adult predatory changeling could cross over into another's territory without permission, except in cases of imminent risk.

Bastien's scent on her should keep her safe. Lucas wouldn't mete out the penalty without first contacting him, but Kirby would be terrified in the meantime. And, given that they weren't yet lovers, he couldn't be certain his scent would hold on her skin.

No way in hell would he risk it. Lucas had to know.

Bastien would deal with any consequences.

"You're mine, little cat," he murmured, brushing his lips over her temple, "and I'm not letting go." Not now. Not ever.

## CHAPTER 5

Bastien got up before Kirby, and was fully dressed when she rose happy and energetic. It soothed man and leopard both to see her that way, and he made sure to sneak in a playful kiss, his body wrapped around hers, before he drove her the short distance to the kindergarten.

Never would his mate hunger for touch again.

Cheeks still flushed, she surprised him by leaning across from the passenger seat to claim his mouth in an affectionate good-bye once they reached her workplace. "Will I see you tonight?" She fiddled with the belt of the dark green dress coat she wore over a kindergarten-appropriate outfit of jeans and a white shirt with elbow-length sleeves.

He wanted to tell her he was her mate, would always be there for her, but her life was already complicated—Kirby needed him to be her rock right now, not use her vulnerability to shove her into the passionate intensity of the mating bond. "Unless you plan to seduce another helpless male," he said with a teasing smile.

Making a face at him, she got out, then leaned down to smile through the open window. "I can't wait to see you again."

Her courage in saying what was in her heart further enslaved him. Forcing himself to leave once she entered the cheerful little building that would soon fill with children's voices, he went to his apartment only long

enough to shower and change. Ten minutes later, he was dressed in jeans paired with a dark gray T-shirt, and on the phone with his assistant, issuing instructions about what needed to be done in his absence.

Then—staying on the phone using the car’s wireless capabilities—he drove not to DarkRiver’s Chinatown HQ but to the green sprawl of the pack’s Yosemite territory. According to Lucas’s admin assistant, the DarkRiver alpha was working from home today. Bastien’s own assistant continued to touch base with him throughout the drive, but even as he fielded the queries, part of his mind was on the conversation he’d had with Kirby over breakfast.

“Do you have any changeling ancestry?”

Kirby’s laughter had been as sunny as the morning light pouring through the narrow window at one end of her kitchen. “No, plain old human as far as I know.” An open smile that kicked him right in the heart. “Do you mind?”

“I’d think you were perfect even if you were an ice-cold Psy.”

Bastien would stake his life on the fact that there’d been no deceit in her then, or at any time prior. As far as Kirby was concerned, she was human. Except, that was simply *not possible*. A changeling’s animal was as integral to his or her life as the human half of their nature—Bastien couldn’t be human as he couldn’t be leopard.

He was changeling, accustomed to the feel of his leopard stretching lazily beneath his skin when he wore this form, and to thinking with a man’s mind if necessary while in cat form. The idea that Kirby could’ve separated the two somehow, stifling her animal side . . . it not only made no sense, it should’ve been physiologically impossible according to all known laws of science and nature.

Yet her scent argued otherwise. He’d finally realized why he’d had such trouble tracking her—it was because Kirby’s scent wasn’t integrated as it should be. The feline part was too primal for a changeling, not balanced by the human aspect, while the human part was too gentle without the feline edge to it. Kirby didn’t have the natural depth to her scent a human would have, because she *wasn’t* human, her scent meant to be a combination of the two sides of her nature.

“Bas.” His assistant’s voice interrupted his turbulent thoughts. “I just got the report on those shares.”

“Go.” Wrenching his attention to the topic at hand, he listened, then gave further instructions, after which he switched to speak to another colleague, before handling a minor issue for an elder in the pack.

The work was welcome; it kept his mind from going around in circles.

He was back in contact with his assistant by the time he parked the vehicle in Yosemite, directing the younger male to make several small financial maneuvers designed to benefit the pack. That done, he gave a “do not disturb” order and stuffed his phone into the front left pocket of his jeans before stretching out into a run, the alpha pair’s aerie in a part of the forest inaccessible to vehicles.

Though he ran in human form, he gave up control of his body to the leopard. It loved the freedom of the forest, loved feeling the wind ripple through its coat, the carpet of forest debris soft and quiet beneath the pads of its paws. That leopard, however, was also very strategy minded and enjoyed what Bastien did for the pack—to the cat, the financial stuff appeared akin to a game, a hunt.

Seeing a young soldier on patrol on the extended perimeter around Lucas’s aerie, he halted, the human half

of his nature rising to the surface once more. "Luc in?"

The tall auburn-haired male nodded, grin bright. "He's on babysitting detail."

"Thanks."

Ten minutes later, he found Lucas sitting at a small table set below the sprawling canopy of a forest giant, the dwelling cradled in its branches concealed by dense foliage. The cabin the alpha had built when his mate's pregnancy became too advanced for her to climb the rope ladder to the aerie was gone, no trace of it on the forest floor.

Lucas had a tablet computer on his lap, a sleek phone set to one side of the table, and what looked like a set of marked-up contracts on the other. Right then, however, his attention was on the baby girl who lay happily on her back on the blue-and-green picnic blanket beside the table, kicking her legs in the air.

As Bastien watched, Luc set aside the tablet to go down to the blanket. Tickling Naya gently on the bottoms of tiny feet covered by the sunny yellow fabric of her footsie pants, he pushed up her fluffy white sweater to blow a raspberry against her stomach, his hair the same rich black as his cub's.

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