

All Wrapped Up: Slave School Dropout Dakota Cassidy

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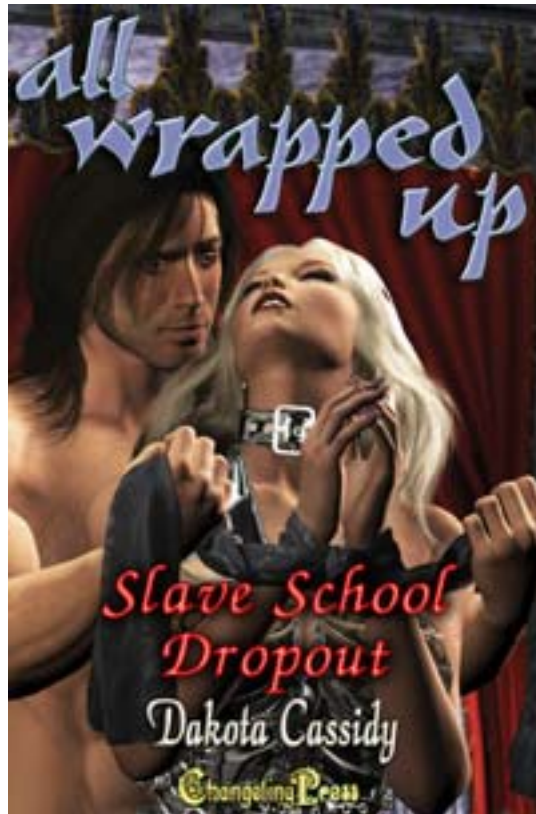
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Editor: Sheri Ross Fogarty

Cover Artist: Bryan Keller



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To all who indulge in the lifestyle of BDSM, please note that my slant on such is strictly humorous and never meant to insult or degrade anyone's sexual practices as long as no harm comes to the participants. I support and encourage all forms of sexual expression between safe, sane, consenting adults.

This book is for my kiwi, Jaynie. Smart, opinionated, loyal and supportive, she brings intelligence and fire to my cyber world. The love and friendship she shares with me each and every day are irreplaceable. I am awed by her strength, forever grateful for her in my life. This one's for you, m'love! Also, for a very special someone who began by giving me the gift of friendship in a decidedly uniquely wrapped package and then, turned into someone who brought me some much needed banter, ROFLMAO giggles, girlie sighs and a new perspective on what it is to be truly treasured.

Love Always,
Dakota

Prologue

I smelled him before I actually saw him.

Yeah, he was smokin', all right. He set my pert nose to twitching like no one before him. I honestly had a shiver from head to toe.

Full bodied tingle.

It was righteous, baby.

The shame in all this? This nose of mine can't smell the difference between high socie-tay and frickin' ASPCA.

But I digress.

So, like I said, I smelled Mr. Yummylicious from a hundred paces away in the kitty condo/collar and leash aisle. He's scopin' out kitty collars and I'm locked on his ass, all tight and pert in a pair of faded jeans, like a laser scope sight. He was way big, not Arnold Schwarzenegger muscular, mind you, but big enough for this girl to contemplate climbing the mountain that is him, and he had some killer hair. Sort of multi colored, with a million different highlights. The kind you can't get in a bottle or even at a fancy salon.

Meow.

I'm not ashamed to eyeball a guy. I'm all about gettin' mine and I wanted to get *his* while I was at the gettin'.

Okay, so, hot, fierce ass and shoulders the width of the River Nile.

Oh, yeah, did I mention I'm from Egypt?

Well, not like green card Egyptian. My *ancestors* are from Egypt. I've lived right here in New York all of my life.

My heritage has a great deal to do with this mess of shit I'm in right now, but again, I digress.

Ahem... Kitty condo aisle -- me -- Mr. Yummylicious -- tight ass in faded jeans -- and a scent like Utopia in my nose. Better than tuna even...

I'm goin' in on a wing and a prayer. The prayer being that when his six-foot-four frame turned yonder -- he'd have all of his teeth.

Teeth become very important to a girl who's dated Bubba, trust me. He's alive and well and living in an apartment in Soho with his brother Cletus. I know because I've gone out with them. I think between them, they shared a tooth...

Anyway, I actually would have settled for even just the top row of teeth if he'd let me squeeze his rolls of Charmin right there in the kitty condo/collar and leash aisle.

He looked sort of familiar, but I didn't have my glasses on. Go figure, a feline who needs glasses? Absurd, I know. I'm nearsighted.

So anyway, he turns around.

Gimme a sec, because just remembering it makes me all breathless... well, horny too, if honesty is what you're looking for.

Okay, so it was kinda like in the old movies. All slow-mo and dream-like. He turned around and my heart did the flippy thing and my stomach followed suit so as not to be left out. I think I tripped on one of those squishy mice toys and fell into him.

I swear to Ra it wasn't on purpose. That sounds trite, doesn't it? Like I planned that stupidhead Amos wouldn't clean up the aisle or something. Plus, I was kinda standing on shaky ground and my knees became one with my neck. All at once, ya hear me knockin'?

I was totally verklempt when I finally saw his face and it wasn't just because he had teeth.

He was the shit.

You know who I thought of when I first saw him? Like really saw him? That Brawny paper towel guy. Rugged and craggy and some other bunch of adjectives I can't summon up now for the life of me because he's *that* hot.

And I'm *that* fucked because of it.

Know why?

Because he's my *friend*.

My friend, I tell you! Christ in a sidecar, I'm screwed and I need your help. He's not like me and my kind either, but he is *my friend*. How could I have not noticed my friend before this? I certainly never noticed him in a carnal manner. I mean, I always thought he was cute, but hot? Hot? As in so hot I want to throw down with you? *Never*.

It just happened, all at once -- like the proverbial ton of bricks and now, everything is SNAFU, baby. Yep, Situation Normal, All Fucked Up. Yet another frickin' problem in my already neatly compartmentalized problem department...

So, that's why I'm here.

Cuz I got a mac daddy of dilemmas to beat all dilemmas.

It has to do with *sex*...

Yes, that's what I said, s-e-x. Don't look so shocked.

So I'll tell you all about it and you can charge me the prerequisite two hundred greenbacks for me spilling my guts. Money is no object. I'm rich, well, I'm not rich, but my family is, so that makes me rich by proxy. Either way, it'll be taken care of.

Will lying on your couch make me feel better? I'll lie on the couch -- sit in the chair -- hold my breath and find my center -- visualize -- prioritize. I'm all yours -- do with me as you will.

I'll do whatever I have to in an effort to find my happy place. Do you have that test -- you know the one with the ink blots on it? The one where I tell you I see a butterfly, but I'm so completely full of crap because all I really see at this point is him?

How about you give me an IQ test? I'm pretty smart, ya know.

So smart I'm here in your office trying to figure out how the hell I'm going to figure this out.

Some serious shit has gone down and when all is said and done, I might not be as rich as I am right now.

So maybe paying the bill could turn into a problem... but I really need help. I'll charge it to my platinum Visa with the cute kitty emblem on it.

It's everywhere you want to be. I'm just going to hope it won't arrive at *everywhere* until next month when everywhere might be broke. So I won't have to worry until then.

I don't want to be *here*, per se, but I'm willing to give this a shot because I have to get my life back on track and find peace.

So I'll sit on the nice couch -- you break out the nice pad and paper to take notes and we'll get this show on the road.

Hang onto your degree because this is like Dr. Phil gone wild.

Like I said, I first *really* noticed him in that way when he came to the pet store I volunteer at three times a week...

Chapter One

"I'm so -- so..." Well, she didn't know what she was. She'd been on a mission to find the scent that made her nose feel like it'd exploded off her face and she was so enamored with the "scent's" ass she tripped on a stupid toy mouse and fell into him. As opposed to sauntering up to him like she was all va-va-voom or something.

That was how she'd planned it in her mind, anyway. She would follow the smell of this Utopia in a pair of faded jeans and saunter up to him like she was the Queen of Sheba.

Sometimes the road to hell and all that rigmarole...

So instead of sashaying like a supermodel on a runway, Nyla Jane Selim fell into yon hottie with not an ounce of sashay and a whole lot of Pee Wee Herman.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to -- I think I tripped --" Her nose was overwhelmed with the masculine scent of him. It made her heart skip and do a running vault over the parallel bars.

Strong arms held her for the briefest of moments before helping her to regain her footing and a deep voice, raspy and reassuring, interrupted her apology. "Tripped on a mouse," he finished her sentence. "Somebody needs to clean this place up."

Ohhhhhh, ooh, oh. A shiver of delight rippled along Nyla's spine and she arched into him, keeping her palms on his muscled forearms for a moment more. What a set of lungs... Nyla didn't know if she should silently curse or thank Amos personally for not cleaning up the kitty condo aisle. "It's been a bit crazy here and we're understaffed," she offered as she squinted, studying his face, angular and rugged.

Her eyebrows rose. No fucking way! *Lucas*? How could this be? Lucas never smelled like *this* before. Nyla struggled to find her glasses in the white coat she wore at

the pet store. Slipping them on, she peered into her friend's face as if she were seeing it for the first time, not the like hundredth in a year.

He held a studded collar in his hand, rhinestones and black leather. It twinkled under the bright fluorescent lights of the store. His thumb ran over the studs, giving Nyla another carnal thought that had absolutely nothing to do with a collar and everything to do with slappin' this face jock down on the floor and slamming him one for Old Glory. Oh, my God! Had she really just thought that?

"I see that," Lucas commented, his tone rather blasé as he looked over the top of her head and gave a scathing scan of the store overall. "You talk about this place all the time. I thought I'd come check it out. You definitely could use one or two of those plastic Tupperware bins," he joked.

Nyla stuck her tongue out at him playfully. Okay, so it wasn't the most efficiently run place, but it had its advantages and a great volunteer program for adopting a pet, which Nyla ran. "Lucas, what the hell are you doing here? You need help with something in particular?"

His smile was cocky and glib, and his dark green eyes hinted that Nyla, for all of her ineptitude, couldn't possibly help him. "No. No. I don't need help at all, Nyla. I just thought I'd stop by and see if you wanted to catch a movie. You know that thing we do every Friday night? Me relegated to your fun date pile and all?"

At this particular nanosecond, despite the sharp stab of her nipples poking at her bra like a Dewalt drill bit, Nyla was tweaked. What the hell was going on? They'd been on two dates before she'd determined that they should just be friends. She and Lucas were so alike, ruining it with sex was something Nyla wasn't willing to do. Lucas was the only person in the world who understood her right down to her Prada heels, and she wasn't going to risk becoming his squeeze so he could dump her somewhere down the road. They were friends for life -- period.

And so now what? He was all of a sudden hot? She and Lucas had shared more than a dozen movies and he'd never smelled like *this* before. Fuck him for smelling better than tuna. Gathering her best disinterested attitude around her knees, Nyla gave

him a narrowed glance before dismissing her moment of insanity and said, "Yeah, let's do a movie." *While I'm at it, could I do you too?*

Oh! Where had that come from?

"Nyla? You okay?" Lucas looked down at her from what seemed like way far up there all of a sudden... was he always this tall? Tall and luscious to boot?

"Yeah, I'm great. You?"

"I'm fine. So, the movie? Wanna go?"

Nyla's nose twitched again. Oh, my hell, he smelled soooo good. Nyla involuntarily sniffed his shoulder. "Are you wearing new cologne?"

"That's all me, baby. Nothing new," he teased. "You were the one who didn't want to sample it, remember?"

Oh, she remembered all right. As clearly as she now smelled him in a whole different way. "If I've told you once, I've told you a thousand times. We're friends and I won't risk having to dump your ass and take all of your toilet paper with me when I do, just so we can have sex. I can have that with anyone, but nobody does a good romantic comedy like you."

Lucas brushed a kiss over her suddenly heated forehead. "I know, I know. I'm the sexless friend." As he stood closer to her, Nyla fought the urge to lean into his hard frame and the bonfire that was him.

Lucas stiffened and backed away. "So, a movie? Popcorn, soda and your favorite 'no sex this lifetime' buddy -- friend."

Nyla cleared her throat. Yeah, no sex. She'd said that a dozen times or so too... what had she been thinking? Nyla put a hand on Lucas' chest. A chest that now, all of a sudden, out of the clear blue, felt... good.

With that, Nyla turned on her heel and stalked off toward the back room where she fully intended to cleanse her nostrils with sandpaper.

"Nyla?" Lucas called from behind her all smoky and brick shithouse like.

Nyla's feet stopped mid pissed off stomp as she turned back to Buns of Steel with a precise pivot, slow and lingering. "What?" she countered, sucking in her cheeks and giving him a smart ass grin.

Lucas cocked his head to the side, angling his square jaw upward, and smiled.

Nyla clamped her mouth shut and thwarted the gawk she knew wanted to take over her face when she saw him smile. As her eyes traveled the length of him, she glanced at his chest and stomach. His T-shirt pressed against his abdomen, hugging every defined ripple. When did Lucas get abs?

Fo shizzle...

Crap, abs were her weakness...

"Can you smell me, Nyla?" Lucas' voice sounded terse and laced with a shakiness she'd never heard before.

Nyla licked her now dry lips and cocked her head back at him. "I've always been able to smell *you*, Lucas. We're shifters. Remember we met at the Shifters' Single and Looking to Mingle? It's what we do. Why do you ask?" She raised an eyebrow at him with disdain and crossed her arms over her nipples, pointed and tight. What the hell was going on?

Lucas took two swift strides of his sneaker clad feet with a silent, almost prowl and stood in front of her. Smiling down at Nyla, his grin screamed confidence and arrogance when he answered, "Because you can smell me and I can smell you, and it's like nothing we've ever smelled before."

Nyla gulped before raising her eyes to fully meet his deep green ones. "Oh, really?"

"Yeah, really."

"And what do *you* smell?"

"Your desire."

Desire this, baby. "Maybe what you smell is the cat litter box in the back. It needs to be cleaned."

His chuckle rumbled in his chest, low, sinful, downright delish. "I smell your essence. That couldn't be cat litter, could it?"

"It's the multiple formula scoop away variety."

"I smell you and you smell me. It has nothing to do with cat litter and everything to do with our lust. The fact that you're a shifter means you know it too. You know what the lust means, Nyla."

Oy. When you're right, you're right. They were everywhere nowadays. Shifters, that was. Every walk of life, every profession, every freakin' pet store. It never surprised Nyla anymore. She'd met Lucas at a shifter function. They'd hit it off immediately and that was that. Shifters were fairly common and, for the most part, they acknowledged each other with a brief nod and went about their business.

Unless the business was *scent*. That held meaning where Nyla came from. It held meaning for any shifter of the feline variety. Sometimes the scent of another was merely lust and nothing more. Sometimes it was something far more significant. That meant they had to explore what the scent meant, and it meant them doing the mattress stomp.

Nyla was going to go with lust here. It had to be lust.

Unadulterated, sizzling hot lust. How could it be anything else? They'd been friends far too long for it to be anything else... right?

"So," she said with a cocky air of indifference and a roll of her tongue on the inside of her cheek. "I shift, you shift, we all shift. Big deal, Lucas."

He took a thick, long finger and ran it down the side of Nyla's face. She held her ground, but squirming might be open to supposition at this point. Her knees trembled as his stare held hers. "I guess it isn't a big deal for humans, but scent is a very big deal with cats, as you well know. So stop with the pretense, Xena and tell me how this happened all of a sudden?"

His words were a demand rather than a request. Very un-Lucas-like. It made Nyla's knees weaker still and the place between her legs not nearly as desert-like as she'd thought. He was right again. Scent was very important to a shifter and Lucas' was

suddenly euphoric, divine, gloriously musky and male. Really making her nose shimmy like it never had before...

"Nothing happened, Lucas." *Ya cocky, over confident, tightly packed, friggin' hunk o' burnin' love.*

He tipped Nyla's chin upward with the finger that had trailed a path of heat along her cheek. "You're full of shit, Nyla. I know what you smell. It's the same thing I've been smelling for over a year."

Well, good on you. "Lucas? You're on crack. I'm Egyptian. We can't smell anything other than our own kind and you're not of my breed."

"Niiice bigotry there, Nyla. Egyptian breed, my ass." His breath fanned her face as he taunted the difference in their lineage.

"Yeah, Bast, you know?"

"Yeah, so what? Mongrel. Tomcat. Big ASPCA fan, ya know?"

"Oh, yes. I know."

"Doesn't matter. You *smell* me."

"I'm holding out for one of my own, Lucas, and you know it."

"Will it make a difference what breed I am when I'm between your legs, lapping at you?"

Lucas shot the arrow of words at her and it left Nyla stunned. Who the hell was this? This wasn't *her* Lucas. The Lucas who she'd hung out with everyday and treated like a brother. He sure as hell didn't feel much like family now. Lucas' thumb skirted Nyla's lower lip, the pad rough and sending out a clear message of feral desire.

Oh, fuck. Fucking liver treats and cat nip... Now here's where she should gather all her warning signals into one big damn pile of flashing neon lights and stop, but when had she ever backed down from a challenge? When had Lucas become Mr. Hot Pants? When had a dose of good common sense kept her from rushing headlong into a nice big pile of shit?

"That's debatable, I guess. *Cultured* tongues are always the best if you ask me," Nyla shot back. Yeah... take that, Nyla sort of teased him in the way they'd always best communicated. Via a little snappy repartee and a zinger or two.

Leaning forward, Lucas let his mongrel tongue graze the corner of her mouth in a delicious swipe that lingered near as her lips gaped open. Nyla fought a shiver, clenching her fists. "That's what my mongrel tongue can do, Nyla," he whispered.

Maybe shutting up and letting nature take its course would be what was best here. However, Nyla never did what was best. She abso-fucking-lutely was not going to risk her friendship with him because her nose was off kilter. Maybe she had allergies?

"I think you should keep your mongrel tongue to yourself, Lucas. It doesn't belong in my cultured mouth, nor does it belong anywhere near my finely cultured nether regions. Forget it. You're my friend and nothing more."

Lucas pressed his heated body closer to Nyla's, straddling her thighs with his own, powerful and sculpted. His looming frame gave off an oven of flames that set Nyla's own body to trembling. He seemed less than impressed with her efforts to piss him off, completely and totally unaffected.

Lucas' green eyes pierced hers, searing her flesh. "I think you lie and I also think you'd be a fool to pass me by because I'm not from the land of big pyramids, hieroglyphics and a river called Nile. But that's just me, Nyla. I've said it once or twice in this thing you call friendship. The beauty of this is that now you can smell it too. If you wanna pass up sex with me, that's *your* choice..." His words trailed off as the air between them pulsed, thickened with the scent of lust and sinful joining.

The spot he'd grazed with his tongue burned, and Nyla couldn't help but think he was right again. Why pass up a chance to boink? "Lucas? What the hell is going on here?" she asked out of the corner of her mouth that wasn't burning.

"I think you want me."

"I do not," Nyla said on a gulp.

"Do too."

"Not."

"Yep."

"Nope."

"You do too, and I'm going to run with it."

"No, Lucas. We're too different. You drink beer for crap's sake!"

"And you lap Dom from your diamond encrusted kitty bowl."

What of it? "I can afford the finer things in life and you knew that from the start, Lucas."

"But you won't find a mongrel tongue like mine this side of King Tut, Nyla."

Oh, fine, just fine. He might be right for the fourth time in less than ten minutes. Her sexual activity equaled zero as of late because she left an encounter feeling less than satisfied. She craved *more*. Hell, just last week she'd told Lucas the same thing. Nyla didn't know *what* more consisted of. It had been puzzling her for months now. "This is crazy, Lucas. Crazy. I refuse to risk a perfectly good friendship to get laid."

Nyla saw the flash of victory in his eyes, brief and flickering. "You've said that a hundred times before, Nyla. Now you can smell me. That makes things different."

Yeah, it made things different all right. So why hadn't she smelled him before this? "It's going to fuck everything up, Lucas. *Everything*. There won't be anymore movies. No more long nights on the phone talking about our dates."

"*Your dates*, Nyla. We talk about yours. I haven't had any."

"You have so. What about the chick with the hot ass?"

"What about her?" Lucas asked as he stared down at her. His eyes sharing something Nyla had never noticed before.

"Um, you talk about her all the time. You said her ass was like radiator fluid. Ya know, deadly to us kitty cats?"

"So?"

His tone was clipped and held answers Nyla suddenly wasn't sure she was ready to ask the questions to. "You just had a date with her last week, Lucas."

"It wasn't really a date, Nyla. Remember? She's still getting over the teenybopper boyfriend anyway. It was a 'Poor baby' date. Moral support."

Nyla poked his abs. "Yeah, the very date you were supposed to spend inching your way into her heart so you could have that ass that's as hot as a volcano!"

Lucas stared straight at her. "I'm not as interested in her as you'd like to believe or as interested as you'd like *me* to believe."

Nyla rolled her eyes at him. "Pluuease! All you talked about was her ass."

He shook his head. "No, Nyla. You talked about her ass and how great it would be if she noticed me. She has a nice ass, that's true, but with her it's work. We don't connect like you and I do, Nyla. I've said this over and over, haven't I? We get each other. We have from the moment you cracked wise about it over weenies in a blanket at the shifter meet and greet."

"Singles Mingle," Nyla corrected him.

Lucas held up a hand. "Whatever. Look it's just different with y --"

"Me..." Nyla interrupted as her voice trailed off and what was happening here became a realization. Yes, Lucas had said it a lot in the course of their friendship. There was no one like her. No one who understood him better than Nyla did. It was the same for her too.

"Yep, you."

"Oh, my God! You mean all the time you spent with the chick with the perky ass, you were thinking about me? *Me!*?" Her incredulous statement just flew out of her mouth before she had the opportunity to allow her brain to kick into overdrive and stop it.

Lucas cocked an eyebrow at her and sighed. "Maybe."

The light in his eyes shifted and Nyla had to look away, catching her breath, now ragged and shaky. What in Ra was happening here?

"I've tried to tell you, Nyla. I told you in the beginning that I thought you were shortchanging us because we get each other so well. We have chemistry, but you shut me out and I wasn't going to push my way in. I figured you'd come to see it someday, and I was right. You smell me. There's just no denying it, is there?"

Nyla snorted and leaned into him just an eighth of an inch closer. Totally against her will and completely in need of whatever he was offering. "I'd be crazy to do this. I can't believe I'm even acknowledging the idea!"

She'd spent some time in their friendship denying how she instinctively knew Lucas wanted her, but to have it laid out like this wasn't something she was ready for. But, fuck he smelled good. It was making her dizzy with lust, worry -- okay, lust.

"Well, my scent has definitely been acknowledged," he said, tweaking her nose with his fingers. His confidence and arrogance was hacking Nyla, yet, turning her on all at the same time.

Nyla's nipples again pressed painfully against her bra as she turned back to him and placed a finger between them, letting it rest on one rung in the ladder of his abs. *Oh, Lawd that was nice...* "This is crazy..."

"It won't be so crazy when you're in my bed, Nyla."

"Your bed? Hah! Shit on that. We'll use mine."

Lucas laughed. "Tough. I like *my* bed and I want you in it, on it, all over it."

Oh, good gravy... The visual of his bronzed body between her legs on some K-Mart blue light special sheets stole Nyla's breath away. For the first time in their friendship, Nyla had nothing to say. She was speechless and stopped resisting the urge to allow Lucas to take command.

How utterly unlike her to allow someone else to do the directing of a well orchestrated boink and she was enthralled, intrigued.

Horny.

Horny for *Lucas*...

Lucas, her fun date. Her friend. Her partner in crime. Her mental match.

"I suppose dirtying your sheets is better than messing up mine. Yours can probably be washed with *laundry soap*," she replied smartly.

"And yours have to be taken to the cleaners, right, Cleopatra?"

Nyla ignored his obvious scorn and focused on the friggin' flame between her thighs and finding the way to douse it without ruining the friendship she and Lucas shared.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

"How about we skip the movie, Nyla and you think about it," Lucas commanded as he leaned into her, his lips hovering mere inches from hers. He hovered there, his breath fanning her face, warm and smelling of mint. His green eyes searched hers, demanding she look at him, and Nyla found her neck arching backward, her spine curling inward and her hips jutting forward. Lucas laid his lips over hers, unmoving, firm, full, hot as his big hands pulled her lower body to meet his.

Nyla's compulsion to stab her tongue into his mouth and clutch at his head was overwhelming, but she didn't, because somehow it seemed as though *he* should make the first move and she wasn't sure why.

Tilting his head, Lucas caressed her mouth with his, as though he were branding her with the lightest of touches. Lucas inhaled her flutter of a groan. "Good girl," he praised. "I'll *always* be the one on top." And with that, he let his hand find her ass, giving it a firm squeeze before moving out of her space and then turned to remind her, "Think about it, Nyla. Don't make me wait too long."

Nyla gulped as she watched his broad back exit the pet store and the warmth of his hand linger with a tingle on her ass.

Holy Fancy Feast...

Chapter Two

Two days later and on five hours of sleep, Nyla called Lucas on his cell phone out of utter frustration. She hadn't been able to stop thinking about him nearly every waking moment and it was eating its way through her intestines. When his lips had touched hers, Nyla had experienced a fire she'd never known before, and now she needed to find out why this was happening.

"Hey, Nyla. What's up?"

Hey, Lucas, you fricken' friend fucker upper. Not much new here other than if I don't do you instantly, I'm going to crawl out of my skin. Nyla bit the inside of her cheek and croaked into the phone, "What's up? What's up?" she squawked. "Well, Lucas, two days ago you were my damn friend. Two days later, I've slept like next to not at all. I even missed my cat nap, for fuck's sake. I'm tired and frustrated and pissed at you. However, I've come to a conclusion. That's what's up! We're going to get some shit straight right now, got that?" Nyla ran a hand over her hair and sighed the sigh of the utterly frustrated.

"Sure, Nyla." Oh, his voice was so damn relaxed and calm, thus fueling Nyla's pissed off further. "Bring it on. What do we need to get straight?"

My head, she wanted to scream. My hormones... "I'm coming over there, Lucas and we're going to figure this out. I don't know why I smelled you like I did in the pet store, but if I still smell you when I see you again? I'm going to nail you. Hear me? Nail your ass to whatever hard surface is available and kiss the living shit out of you, and if it isn't fricken' fab-u-lous, I'm going to kill you. I'd better see shooting stars and all that sappy crap or you die, kitty cat. Do you hear me, Lucas? I know we don't have a choice in this scent bullshit, but we could have resisted it and kept right on being friends, but nooooooo, you just had to go and tell me you were hot for me, didn't you? That was

really in the spirit of friendship wasn't it? What a pal you turned out to be. So get your ass dressed or whatever and answer that door when I get there!" Nyla wiped spit from the corner of her mouth with her thumb and waved down a cab. She looked like shit. She felt like shit, but she was going to prove Lucas wrong. They were going to hump like the last two people on Earth and Nyla would come out on top. Lucas was *not* her lifemate. He was her friend.

"Okay, Nyla, but would it be okay if we ate after you see stars? I'm pretty hungry."

Food? Yeah, food would be peachy. Just what she needed for her topsy turvy stomach in her all of her fucked-up-ed-ness. "I don't care, Lucas. You can have a smorgasbord of mice if you want. I just need to get this over with. So shut up and put on your chap stick because you've fucked with my chi enough, thanks."

"You got it, babe."

Fuuuuuck him and his confidence, dammit! "I'll see you in a half an hour," Nyla barked into the phone.

"Don't be late..." Lucas chuckled into the phone.

Nyla clicked her phone off and stared out the window, her face flushed and her head fuzzy. She had no clear thoughts other than it would all be fine when she got this out of the way, and then she and Lucas could go back to being friends again.

She really wanted to see that new Adam Sandler movie.

Nyla rapped on Lucas' door exactly ten minutes later than she'd told him she would. Glancing down, Nyla smoothed a wrinkle in her filmy skirt as she waited for Mr. Self Assured to open the door.

As he popped the black, steel door open, he looked at his watch almost irritably. "You're ten minutes late, Nyla."

Fancy that... "I didn't know we had to synchronize our watches."

Lucas cupped the nape of Nyla's neck, grasping the long flow of her black curls in a loose grip and pulled her to him as he kicked the door shut with a foot. "You made

me wait, Nyla. You're ten minutes late," he reminded her again. His voice was filled with an unmistakable command that left her speechless.

Words escaped her... *Okay, so hold the phone here.* Nyla's fist of reason knocked on the door to her common sense. She was about to consider having hot, screamin' sex with a guy she'd known like a year, that she'd met at a singles' mingle for shifters and had become the best friend she'd ever had. Not only did she want to have sex with him -- okay, she really dug him -- but she was all of a sudden envisioning him like he was the Captain of the *Starship Enterprise* and she was a wee Klingon.

Um, helllllooooo in there.

Are you rolling in reefer instead of catnip these days?

When had Lucas all of a sudden become this force to be reckoned with? Where had all this raw sexuality come from? When had he become the one on top? She'd always been in control of her portion of their friendship and of her emotions within the box she'd designated "friends only."

Lucas stepped away from her, allowing her the space he sensed she needed, and it made Nyla shake her head.

He smelled soooo good, she reasoned with herself. How could she deny that? He could be forceful if he wanted to...

Maybe.

Well, okay, Nyla had to admit, it was kinda floatin' her boat and she wasn't sure why. Maybe because she spent so much of her time keeping herself in check due to her stiff upbringing that it was a nice break to let go. But to let go to Lucas? Her movie buddy? The world as Nyla knew it was coming to a screeching halt. But, shit she wanted him...

Why bother to analyze it when sex was in the offing? It didn't have to be a production. It needed no therapy session at all.

As Nyla stared up at the man who'd been her friend for over a year, a whole new light was shed on him, standing there with his arms crossed over his chest and that fricken' superior look on his face.

Dipshit.

"Get over here, now, Lucas and let's do this." Nyla walked right up to him and slapped a palm on his chest, backing him up against the far wall. She looked up at him with tired, red eyes, blazing with fury over her pent up lust and the possible loss of a friendship.

"We can't go back to holding hands, Nyla."

"Now you balk? *Now?* You started this, Lucas!" Nyla accused on a shrill screech.

"No, your *nose* started this."

"Your nose started it first!"

"I never made that a secret."

"Well, ya know what? It was one of those better kept things."

"Are we gonna do this or not, Nyla?"

"Oh, yes, yes we are and if it isn't --"

"Fab-u-lous, you're going to kill me," he mocked her higher pitched voice.

"Yeeeeessss! I'm going to kill you. Got that?" Nyla asked as she grabbed hold of his shirt collar and Lucas bent his head close to hers.

And then, Nyla planted one on Lucas, full on lip press. Hard and with as much hope that it wouldn't work out as that -- just maybe -- it would.

The onslaught of flaming heat and rushing tidal wave in Nyla's ears threw her for a loop, and she clung to Lucas' strong arms that now came around her in a tight band of possession.

Lucas molded his body to hers, pressing a thigh between her own and rubbing seductively at the juncture between her legs. Her skirt, the material thin and filmy, allowed her to feel every slide of the rough fabric of his jeans. He nipped her jaw, moving her around, and now her back was pressed firmly to the wall behind her.

Grinding his hips into hers, Lucas whispered against her ear, "Can we conclude I've been right all along, Nyla?"

"Fuck you, Lucas," Nyla said on a half nervous giggle and half scolding him for being so damn right.

Whoda thunk this man packed such a powerful suck-face?

“Oh, I fully intend to do just that, Nyla. I’ve waited a long time for this,” he whispered, low and sultry. When had his voice become like a 1-900-wanna-fuck-hotline?

There really wasn’t a choice now. Nyla knew what had to happen. As shifters, they both knew they had to complete this cycle. But what if the end of the cycle meant they ended up hurting each other? Or worse, they were completely wrong about this and they had to sacrifice their friendship? How did you go back to “just friends” after you had your tongue down your buddy’s throat?

Nyla’s heart pumped hard in her chest as Lucas pulled her arms above her head, cuffing her wrists together, making her ribs press against his. It forced her body to bow into Lucas’ steel length and her chest beat against his from the short, choppy breaths she took.

“A long time?” she managed to spit out as his other arm hoisted her up against the wall and required that she wrap her legs around his tapered waist. His silken tongue snaked out to strike at the soft shell of her ear.

His chuckle slid from the back of his throat, hot chocolate-like over warm pecan pie. “Stop worrying about it, Nyla. You can count on one thing I know for certain, something I’ve known since I met you. The completion of this cycle will be more than worth the worry you’ve suffered.” Lucas punctuated his statement by gripping Nyla’s ass hard with his hand, sending a wave of pulsating pleasure to her cunt. Nyla squirmed and bucked against him as the tight points of her nipples pushed at her thin cotton shirt, but he held her flush against him.

Nyla’s breathing was ragged now and this -- simply from having his hard body press her against a wall? It was ludicrous, but that was okay by Nyla.

She wanted a piece of *this*.

“Then let’s get on with the ‘this,’ could we, Lucas? So I can stop worrying about not having a movie buddy anymore.” Nyla smiled with a teasing grin as he reared his

head up and ground against her again, pinning her to the wall with his eyes as they flashed a darker green. It startled her as they glittered in the fading light.

“Believe me when I tell you, Nyla, *this* is something you’ll want more of and the benefit is we can still see a movie when I don’t have my head between your legs.”

This was becoming less like the teasing banter they’d shared and more like making a point. Nyla was intrigued, a bit afraid. “Prove it, Neanderthal,” she ground out between frustrated lips.

Lucas captured her lower lip in his teeth, taking a gentle nibble as he let her wrists go and moved both strong arms to surround her, carrying Nyla into what she assumed was his bedroom. She had no idea because she’d never been in it before.

Brief flashes of muted colors passed in a whirl from her surroundings as he took the few strides necessary to get her to his bed. Lucas kept her body flush with his and Nyla ignored the view in favor of the reaction her length had to his. She wanted to rip his clothes off and drive her nakedness against his. Bore into him, burrow against the heat that emanated from him, but she waited with impatience. Under normal circumstances, Nyla would have stripped him by now and be riding the luscious cock she knew awaited her in his jeans to victory.

Yet, she hesitated. It seemed inappropriate to take control of this sexual rendezvous and she didn’t quite know why. A shifter was keen to all senses, including the knuckle dragger kind. Somehow, waiting was the signal that called to her lust fuzzy brain.

Lucas lowered her to the bed with little effort and the grace of the cat he was. The cool cotton of his sheets soothed Nyla’s back. He towered over her, the outline of his shaft evident, long and thick behind his zipper as he looked down at her.

Nyla’s chest heaved and she licked her lips, dry with anticipation of release. Lucas tugged her shirt up with rough, hurried hands, pulling it over her head, making Nyla’s nipples tight and hard, begging to be touched. His eyes, dark now, scanned her breasts, taking them into his heated gaze with apparent lust. Arching her back, encouraging Lucas to touch her, Nyla waited as he trailed small circles over her ribs

with a tapered finger, along her abdomen, under the soft curve of her full breasts. Yet, he didn't touch the neediest part of her body.

Nyla bit her lip in utter frustration and scrunched her eyes shut.

Yanking his shirt off, Lucas lowered himself over her, holding his torso up with his hands, bracketing either side of her body. His skin was smooth like marble, with a scar or two running in a jagged line just above his pecs. Nyla wanted to scream out in frustration for him to press himself against her. She wanted to wrap her arms around his neck and drag his smoothly muscled chest against hers, yet, she waited...

His stare, unseen but felt, made Nyla open her eyes and shiver. It was intense. The green of his eyes bore into hers as he assessed her, obviously gauging her desire. They grew dark as he held himself above her on solid arms. "Do you want me to touch you, Nyla?" he asked. Yet it was rather a demand for an answer than a question. His tone was hard in her ears, filled with something Nyla couldn't identify, but clearly controlled.

"Answer the question, Nyla. Do you want me to touch you? Do you want me to run my tongue over your breasts, lick you?"

Well, fuckin'-A. Yeah! However, Nyla held back, struggled with the words "Do it, already." She begged no one. Biting the inside of her cheek, Nyla refused to answer this alien man she'd once called friend.

Lucas sat up with a swift movement, leaving the heated air between them, cool and sharpening her nipples to tight points. He cupped her breasts, massaging them, avoiding her nipples and Nyla squirmed beneath him no matter how much she willed her body to be still. His hands were large, covering her small breasts, kneading the flesh of them with skill.

"Answer the question, Nyla. Do you want me to lick you?" His melodic baritone was gruff, thick with the honeyed request.

Nyla couldn't seem to stop herself. She nodded her head.

Lucas shook his. "I want to *hear* the word, Nyla."

Was this like payback for all the times she'd joked about Lucas' lust for her? She really hadn't meant it. Honest. It was just a joke. They joked about everything, but apparently Lucas took his sex way serious like.

Nyla grabbed his wrists, clamping her fingers around them, insisting that he touch her with silent force, but Lucas wouldn't be thwarted. She let her hands fall away and took fistfuls of the sheets instead.

"Do you want my tongue on you, Nyla?" he persisted as he shifted his hips and his rock-hard abs pushed against her groin.

She gulped. What was a "yes" in the scheme of having those yummy lips on her? It was pride and she had plenty of that. Yeah, like she'd had so much of that when she'd already fallen with the kiss of the gods from this man.

Leaning forward, his solid powerful hands still kneading her, Lucas ran his tongue over the hollow of her neck and along her collar bone. A trail of silken, wet fire ignited as he rounded the curve of the top half of her breast. He whispered, "There's no shame in asking for what you want, Nyla. I can wait. I've waited this long."

Nyla gripped the sheets beside her, refusing to touch him, as if not touching Lucas was payback for the complete agony he made her suffer.

Lucas seemed to sense her inner battle as he stroked the full underside of her breast with his fingers, but it wasn't stopping him from tormenting her further. "Let go, Nyla. It's one word and if you give me that *one word*, I'll lick you until you scream."

Nyla's eyes rolled to the back of her head, and Lucas' words became a jumbled, echo in her ears. She fought the wave of burning desire to feel him tongue her nipple and lost the war she waged with one word, drawn out and needy. "Y -- yesssssss," she hissed, unaware she had until her tongue touched the roof of her mouth.

Lucas chuckled again. That thick, warm river of sound caressed her ears as he leaned forward, gathering her breasts in his hands, and nudged her nipples with his nose. The slight contact made Nyla buck hard as the heat of Lucas' breath swept over the tight peak.

His tongue flicked it at first, rasping over the pebbled surface with a delicious slide, deliberate, circling the surface of it, skimming it with slow swipes before capturing it and inhaling deeply.

Nyla saw a multitude of colors, bright flashes of flickering light behind her eyes as he moved from one nipple to the other, thumbing them, rolling them between his roughly padded fingers, swirling his tongue over them, pulling them in and out of his mouth.

Well, he'd been right, she thought with vague remembrance of his promise to lick her until she screamed -- just as she screamed... low and long from the heat that pooled in her cunt and begged release.

He'd made her scream.

Now, she wanted this man in her, on her, absorbing her, and that wasn't something Nyla was used to. She only wanted the thick press of his cock, driving into her with steady, forceful thrusts.

Taken.

Nyla wanted to be taken, hard and fast with pounding thrusts of a cock she hadn't even seen.

Her hips, still clad in the thin skirt she'd worn, jutted upward, grinding as he slid his thigh between hers and let her ride it through the thin silk of her panties. Slick with desire, Nyla clenched her thighs around Lucas' strong one as he let his teeth skim her nipples. His golden head tilting and his tongue lapping at her made Nyla insane for more as she twisted beneath him, rubbing her throbbing clit frantically against him.

Nyla came with such force, from nothing more than what was essentially a "boob job" that it almost frightened her. It sucked the air from her lungs in a sharp gust. It stole every thought in her muddled head but that of release. It swept over her like a raging fire. It was sharp and raw and so real that now, as Nyla lay heaving beneath Lucas, she could taste it in the back of her throat.

Lucas covered her body with his, both still dressed below the waist. It didn't prevent the burn of his cock through his jeans. The thick bulge pushed against Nyla's pelvic bone. "Open your eyes, Nyla, and put your arms around me."

Yes, Nyla, do as you're told. It's the least you can do seeing as this mongrel just gave you the best orgasm of your life and it didn't take much effort. Not to mention the fact that it took you an entire year to realize he was even capable of such acts of carnality.

Fuck you, she rebelled against the nagging voice. I'll put my arms around him when and if I choose to, not before.

"Put your arms around me, Nyla. Let yourself feel my skin against yours," his lips whispered over the line of her jaw and along the column of her neck.

Nyla would have liked to believe she heard him coaxing her, but somehow everything Lucas said sounded like an order and -- well -- it was turning her the hell on and scaring her at the same time. She'd never seen this side of Lucas...

Nyla's arms moved around his broad back in reluctance, knowing full well once she touched him it was all over. As she fitted herself to Lucas, Nyla melted against him, savoring the press of his flesh to hers.

Oooooohhh... Oh and oh again.

Lucas' smooth chest rubbed her nipples with tantalizing scrapes as his lips finally came to rest on her chin, inching his way toward her mouth. He reenacted the same move he'd made in the pet store, his mouth resting on hers, inhaling her breath, caressing her lips with his, absorbing the feel of them. Lucas' breathing was ragged now too. His chest beat against Nyla's as he held her to him with arms woven tightly around her shoulders and under her back.

Lucas dipped his tongue into her mouth with a purposeful plunge, stroking hers, suckling her lower lip. Nyla groaned with surprise at the silky invasion, hot and with the expertise of a skilled kisser.

Planting his lips firmly on Nyla's, Lucas devoured her mouth, pushing her against the bed with his weight and lapping at her lips. He pulled an arm from beneath

her and stroked it along Nyla's ribs, splaying his fingers over her waist and finally coming to rest at the waistband of her skirt.

Nyla clung to Lucas' strong neck as she drove her tongue into his mouth, whimpering as he lingered near her cunt.

"Do you want me to touch you, Nyla?" he asked as he pulled back, leaving her moaning in aggravation. He rolled a bit to the left, keeping his powerful thigh over her legs.

No, I'm just squirming under you like a 'ho for lack of anything better to do with my day.

What did this man want? Was hearing the words what turned him on? How could she know? They'd talked sex, but certainly not in detail.

His finger trailed over the outline of the lips of her pussy, swollen and aching as he nipped at her mouth. Nyla's body screamed for his touch, but she wouldn't say so that easily.

Skimming the line of her panties, Lucas wove his fingers in and out, taunting her, teasing, stoking the fire that now raged. Kissing her one last time, he slid adown until he lay on her upper thigh. Nyla's legs spread involuntarily, but Lucas clamped them with his hands.

"Do you want me to touch you, Nyla?" she heard him ask again from somewhere parts south.

Nyla clenched her teeth as he moved to place himself between her thighs, tugging her ass to the edge of the bed. He slipped her panties off her hips and spread her thighs wide. With her heels resting on the bed, Nyla was vulnerable as Lucas stood between them. Vaguely, she heard the grumble in his chest, deep and, she hoped, approving.

Lucas placed the palm of his hand over her pussy, cupping it, moving his thumb back and forth. "You're shaven clean. I approve, Nyla. I love to lick a cleanly shaven pussy," Lucas commented as he spread her flesh with his thumbs.

Well, good on you. Could we do that now? The licking part? Because if he didn't get down to business soon Nyla's chest was going to burst from the anticipation. His gaze

leveled on the most vulnerable part of her body was sinful and erotic and frightening, all rolled into one horny package. Not one of her lovers had ever looked much at that part of her anatomy. Not that she could recall.

“Open your eyes, Nyla. Look at me between your legs.”

Nyla didn't even realize she'd shut them. She peeked out at him from beneath her lashes, his hard body taut and his stare transfixing her, rooting her to the bed. His thumbs massaged her, spreading her, but not touching what most needed attention. Lucas moved his hands to her thighs, gripping her flesh as he leaned forward, using her thighs to brace himself, hovering over her cunt.

Nyla could just see the top of his head and those piercing eyes of his over the flat plane of her abdomen. She wanted to clutch at his head, hold him down on her clit, force him to lick her senseless before she self combusted... but she didn't. She *wouldn't*. Instead, she gripped the edge of her skirt and held fast to prevent herself from ramming his face into her. Damn him...

“Do you want me to lick you, Nyla? Scrape my tongue over your pussy? Press it to your clit?”

Does a bear shit in the woods? Are Wheaties frosted? For fuck's sake, yes!

Yes!

Yes!

Yes!

But she'd be screwed blue and tattooed if she'd say it out loud.

Lucas bent his head to rest it on her thigh, inhaling her scent, grazing his lips over the tender skin. His breathing was as choppy as hers, almost whistling on the way out of his throat as his lips touched her skin, firm, hot, and moist. He trailed a hard finger over the outline of her cunt, distended with need, wet, hungry, flaming with wanton desire.

Nyla shifted in impatience as he skirted the crease between her thigh and the lips of her pussy. Her body begged him to snake his tongue outward and lick her swollen clit, but he didn't.

Again Lucas asked, "Do you want me to lick you, Nyla? Answer the question." The husky quality of his voice, the hitch in it as he lay on her thigh, caressing her with a stray finger, avoiding the needy center that had become all Nyla could focus on, was driving her mad. He wanted to lick her as much as she wanted him to, yet his refusal to do so made Nyla want it more than she'd wanted anything in a long time.

Screw it. Fuck this agony.

Nyla lifted herself on her elbows as Lucas raised his head and their eyes met -- his glazed and dark with obvious lust, hers furious with herself for what she was about to say, but it didn't stop her. "Lick me, damn you, Lucas!" Her words ripped from her throat, desperate, grating, tearing out of her mouth before she could stop them.

Lucas spread her thighs with a powerful hand on each leg and dipped his head toward her pussy, laying his mouth over her cunt, much like he'd done when he'd first kissed Nyla in the pet store. Nyla's hips bucked with a violent twist as the heat of his mouth enveloped her, damp and steaming hot. Lucas pressed his tongue flat to her outer lips, and then slithered between them, slick and rasping.

Nyla's knuckles whitened and she gripped the sheets beside her. She fought the urge to let go and come with a vengeance as Lucas stroked her clit with small, precise circles. Her stomach muscles clenched as he held her legs apart with big hands and lapped at her, laving the tender flesh, pink and heated to a level of intensity Nyla had never known. Stroking her with lips and tongue, Lucas moved to cup her ass, lifting her flush with his face, devouring her. His hands gripped her and the sting of them pinching her flesh made Nyla gasp and cry out between clenched teeth.

The pleasure, tinted with a thread of stinging pain, as Lucas licked her made Nyla writhe beneath his mouth and cling to the sheets until she finally gave up and clutched at his head. His tongue dipped into her in long plunges of searing, delicious strokes.

Lucas groaned deeply against her wet flesh, now taking long, sucking breaths as he let go of one leg and slid a finger into her, and then another, pressing upward and finding her G-spot.

Waves of fire engulfed her, screaming through her every nerve as Nyla thrust, seeking the pleasure that awaited her, the sweet release of orgasm. Lucas left her little mobility as he held her to his face, consuming her with each bold stroke of his tongue. She was trapped against him and completely vulnerable to his merciless ministrations.

Nyla blindly grabbed at his thick hair when the rise of electric pleasure engulfed her cunt. She let out a low howl as Lucas thrust into her with his tongue, fucked her with his fingers. The sound of slick flesh against flesh crashed in her ears as Nyla came.

The seductive sound of Lucas' tongue lashing out at her and his fingers driving into her wet, ready passage was more than Nyla could bear. She came with a crash of powerful, resonant heat that slammed into her cunt and clawed its way upward, touching every nerve ending she possessed with talons of sizzling heat. Nyla screamed Lucas' name in a long sob while she dug her fingers into his thick head of hair.

Thrashing against him, Nyla lost focus on anything but the harsh throb of her heart crashing against her ribs and the now more gentle tongue that continued to taste her.

Sliding his fingers from her body, Lucas caressed her thighs, before standing up and unzipping his jeans. The slide of his zipper brought Nyla back to semi-reality and she popped her eyes open as he let his jeans fall to the floor, positioning himself between her open legs.

Her eyes widened as she got her first glance at his cock, thick and hard. It bobbed between his legs as he wrapped a big hand around it and, once again, leaned over her. He allowed his shaft to slip between the sodden lips of her pussy, teasing her clit to yet another heightened state of awareness.

Lucas transfixed her with his stare, lingering near her lips. "Taste my lips, Nyla. Taste yourself on my tongue." Again, he demanded Nyla follow an order she was hardly in a position to decline and didn't want to anyway.

Nyla let her inhibition go and stroked his lower lip with a tentative tongue, savoring the firm yet silky flesh against her own.

Lucas moaned and whispered, "Can you taste your pussy on my lips, Nyla?"

Nyla's breathing stopped at his question. Instead, she closed her eyes and nodded, taking a dry gulp of air.

Lucas must have sensed that she had nothing left to offer in the way of words, so he lowered himself to her and her arms instantly wrapped around his strong, thickly muscled back. His tongue met hers stroke for stroke and her hips once again had a will of their own, pushing against his in a fevered heat.

"You're like the sweetest piece of candy I've ever tasted, Nyla. Remember your scent. Remember the flavor of your pussy on my tongue..."

Oh, Christ if he didn't enter Nyla soon, she was going to self combust. The head of Lucas' cock nudged her entrance and his words cut through the haze of piercing longing Nyla fought to control.

"Do you feel the head of my cock, Nyla? Do you want me in you, making you come again?"

Nyla whimpered, on the verge of begging, when Lucas drove into her with a thrust driven by such power, Nyla gasped sharply as the breath left her lungs and Lucas' mouth latched onto hers with fierce possession. His thick shaft stretched her deliciously, and her muscles convulsed around him as she greedily accepted the weight of him on her. Their tongues warred as each lift of Lucas' hips brought with it another slick stroke.

Lucas read her mind as he tore his mouth from her. The muscles in his chest tensed, flexing and rippling against Nyla's, crushing her breasts. "I won't last long, Nyla," was what he uttered as his pace picked up.

Nyla wrapped her legs around his lean waist, meeting him eagerly.

"Christ, Nyla, you're so wet and hot, so tight around my cock." His teeth were clenched and the hard line of his jaw was rigid with tension.

Nyla lost all coherence as Lucas gathered her wrists together above her head and plunged into her, shifting her body upward with each stroke, jolting her with the power of his hard frame.

Nyla's nails dug into his hands, pushing Lucas' cock into her more deeply as she met his hips, losing her battle with control as the thickness of him stretched her, plundering into her passage, pressing at her G-spot with maddening clarity.

In the moment they both became rigid with the final thrust and clap of flesh against flesh, Lucas' eyes met hers. The green of them seared her, pinning her own with the innate knowledge a shifter has for another.

As they drove the hard ball of orgasm home, rocking in a tight circle of rhythm and motion, cresting and then reaching a final plateau, Nyla sensed Lucas' awareness.

Crystal clear.

Finely honed.

Acute and powerful.

Complete in definition.

The awareness that you've found your mate.

Of the *life* like variety.

Chapter Three

Nyla rolled her head on her shoulders as she stared at her reflection in Lucas' bathroom mirror. Her face was flush with the fuck of a lifetime, and she couldn't help but grapple with the magnitude of what they'd both just discovered.

No *fucking* way.

How had her movie buddy of over a year ended up being her *lifemate*?

If this wasn't a double-u-tee-eff moment, like a total "what the fuck," then she couldn't fathom what was.

This meant that the gods intended them to mate for *life*. By discovering this, they'd opened up a world of shit. Oh, Jesus, her parents were going to freak. They had no control over who her lifemate was, but they sure as hell weren't going to be happy that they didn't. Lucas was a tomcat, for crap's sake! Her snobby parents weren't going to like this one little, high-falutin' bit.

How had their friendship turned into *this*?

Well, that oughta teach her to keep her legs shut.

She knew rationally she couldn't do that. The call of your potential lifemate was heady indeed and not something that could be denied. Her and Lucas' mating had confirmed that.

Nyla took a lungful of air and stared at her image again, like she might find the answer in her kiss swollen lips and desire hazed eyes.

She needed to wash up and *think*. Turning, Nyla spotted a small door that she hoped would lead to a linen closet and a washcloth. On shaky legs, she let her feet absorb the cool of the tile beneath them as she opened the closet door and caught another gust of surprised air in her chest.

Jesus Christ in a mini skirt!

Why she'd thought someone as intense as Lucas had just been in that bedroom would have something as simple as washcloths in his bathroom pantry now escaped her. Where had her lighthearted friend gone and what the hell was that in the closet?

Nyla leaned against the hard frame of the door and plucked up what she could only be described as an ideal cobweb whacker. Picking up the item by what she figured was its handle, Nyla forgot about the washcloths and focused on this purple and black thing with long strips of leather hanging from the braided shaft.

Nyla swung it around, letting it dangle as the strips of what felt like leather clapped together. Surprise gave way to her endless curiosity and she couldn't help but wonder what it was. Tactile by nature, Nyla toyed with it.

Whatever the hell it was, it didn't look like something she could pick up at Walmart in the household products aisle, that's for sure.

Still naked, Nyla glanced inside the cupboard again to find more than one foreign object met her eyes. All sorts of paddles and things that involved leather lined the shelves.

A knock on the bathroom door startled her.

"Nyla? You okay in there?"

Okay? Sure, she was fabulous. How okay could she be when she'd just found some obviously very personal items of Lucas' that made absolutely no sense.

"I'm fine, just gimme a second," she called through the door. Guiltily, she placed the cobweb eliminator back in the so called linen closet and popped the door open. "Could you hand me my clothes please?"

"Sugarplum, are you sure you're all right?" Lucas' voice was tinged with genuine concern. Rather like the time Nyla thought she'd broken her paw after an eventful mouse hunt with Lucas. Damn her nearsightedness...

Lucas plopped her clothes in her hand, and Nyla put them on with hasty, trembling fingers and slipped past his yummy bulk, looking for her purse.

Lucas grabbed her hand and pulled her to him.

Oh, he *really* shouldn't do that. His body slapping up against hers was decadent.

"Nyla, talk to me. Tell me what's wrong. I'm still the same old Lucas who goes to the movies with you. I just have new privileges at the theater."

Nyla yanked her hand back and flicked his ear with her finger. "Whatever you say, Doctor Love. Right now, I want to go home. I have to think, Lucas. I mean really think about what just happened between us. We were friends and now..." *Now you have crazy serial killer shit in your bathroom.*

She needed to find her cell phone and call her best friend, Erin. Erin would know what to do. She had one of those lifemates -- not one with a cobweb whacker thingy, mind you, but a lifemate nonetheless.

Lucas grabbed her arm in a loose grip, his long fingers settling on her flesh with a possessive touch. The very same shiver that had set her ablaze at the pet store, ignited again in a swarm of heat across her skin. Dammit all! This was so out of the blue -- so left field.

"I understand, beautiful. You do that. Go home and think. I'll wait right here until you come back." Lucas tugged her toward him, pressing his lips to hers in a brief, yet scintillating kiss. "Later, lifemate," he said with smug satisfaction.

Nyla zipped out of Lucas' apartment like she was on her way to Macy's annual white sale.

Lifemate this, baby...

* * *

"Erin?" Nyla croaked into her cell phone on the way back to her apartment in a rickety cab.

"Hey, Nyla! How are ya?"

Peachy, fabulous, fucked up. "Well, I have some stuff I need to talk to you about."

"Shoot."

"I found my lifemate..."

"Ooooooohhhh myyyyyyyyyy Gooooooooodddddddd!! Who is he -- who are his people? What does he look like? Oh, please tell me he's not some dork who's balding

and has a paunch in his human form. Or worse still, a guy who sells breast implants or something. Like Nia Schaffer. Remember her? Holy Hell, she ended up with the lifemate of the fricken' century. Know what her lifemate does?"

As Erin rambled, Nyla listened with half an ear. How could this be happening? She pinched the bridge of her nose with two fingers and screeched, "I don't care!" She well remembered Nia Schaffer, and right now she didn't need the very frightening comparisons. Her carefully balanced chi was teetering. "It's Lu..." Nyla coughed and cleared her throat. "It's *Lucas*." Nyla hissed the last letter of his name. She tried to be careful when in public, not to reveal her tendency to enunciate the letter s, but she couldn't help it today. She was a cat. Cats freakin' hissed.

The cab driver glanced back at her and Nyla averted her eyes.

A long pause ensued and Nyla took deep breaths. In with the good -- out with the bad.

"Lucas?"

"Lucas," Nyla confirmed.

"The Lucas that you go to the movies with and refuse to admit is hot for you?"

"Yes, Erin. That's the one. The one I go to the movies with and now have no choice but to admit that he's hot for me, okay? That's not the biggest issue I have right now. So could you shut up and help me?"

"Hey! Don't get pissy with me because your lifemate is exactly the guy I told you he should be, even if you didn't think he was."

"I'm sorry. I'm just fried. Whooped."

Erin whistled. "Was it the nasty that fried you? You know, lifemate sex is like no other. Is he good in bed? What's his lightening rod of love like? I bet it's huge! I can just tell, you know --"

"Erin! Listen to me, would you? How could I have possibly not smelled him before now?"

"I dunno. What difference does it make? He's perfect for you, Nyla. The two of you are like yin and yang. He's all yours and, I gotta tell ya, you didn't make out half bad. Don't make me remind you about Athena --"

"Erin! Shut up, please. I can't take anymore mindless babble!"

"Man, you suck today. Okay, I'm sorry. I tend to get excited when my best friend finds her lifemate and he's the caviar of lifemates," she said, her words dripping with sarcasm. "If you were here and you could see me, you'd see me zip my lip and throw away the key. This is me, shutting up."

For fuck's sake... "I'm sorry, Erin. I just can't believe this has all happened. I never smelled Lucas like that before, despite what he told me. Now I can't get his goddamned scent out of my nose, and that's not even the worst of it..."

Another silence at the other end of her cell phone.

Nyla laughed because if she didn't she'd cry. "You can ask why it's so bad, Erin."

"Why is it so bad, Nyla?"

"Because he's not a Bast descendant, Erin. You know what my parents are like. They're snotty, stuck up, pretentious know-it-alls. They will not be happy about Lucas being my lifemate. He's a tomcat."

"Well, there ain't shit they can do about it, now can they? Short of going to the lifemate council and we all know how that can go. I mean, remember Georgina and her arachnophobic lifemate? What cat is afraid of a spider, I ask you? Oops, sorry... Shutting up again."

Nyla sighed and rolled her eyes heavenward. "That's not even the half of it. He's into some weird sexual stuff I've even never heard of and can't begin to understand."

"Huh? Weird like how? Does he wear women's clothing? Oooohhhh," Erin said on a breathy, 'I know something you don't know' whisper. "Did he want to borrow your panties? God, that *is* freaky. I've heard about that, you know. There are all sorts of kinks and stuff. Women's clothing being one of them. I mean --"

"Erin! He didn't want to borrow my panties. He's very much the stud. It's something totally different than that."

“Well, for Christ sake, tell me! Otherwise, I’m off on a tangent again and you know how ugly that gets. I don’t know how to shut up. It’s like I have all this stuff going on in my head and I can’t get it out quickly enough to --”

“Beatings.”

“Who?”

“Not who. *What*. He had this thing in his linen closet and I can tell you right now, it wasn’t a hand towel from Neiman Marcus.” Nyla described what she’d seen in Lucas’ pantry to Erin on a wing and a prayer that just saying it out loud would somehow help.

“It’s called BDSM, Ny. What you just described is a flogger used in the lifestyle of BDSM.”

“A what the fuck?”

“BDSM,” Erin repeated. “I know a little about it. It has to do with some kind of control and whips and chains or something, right?”

BDSM? What the fuck kind of acronym was that? Beat Da Shit Outta Your Mate? No, that was too many letters...

Nyla blanched. “Well... I don’t know. Oh, how the fuck am I supposed to know? I only know that this is bad, very bad, my friend. I know nothing about it and how can it be that we were meant to be lifemates if we don’t share the same kink? That is some kind of kink, yes? I’m vanilla, or at least that’s what I’ve heard from past sexual encounters. It sounds like ice cream. I always kinda liked chocolate, but --”

“Noooo, Nyla. Vanilla means you just like the sort of average, everyday sex. You know, missionary position, lights off stuff.”

“I can do it with the lights on...” Nyla defended her newly acquired ice cream flavor.

“Aren’t you all sexually enlightened then, miss? All it means is he likes to play with things in the bedroom, Nyla. There are all sorts of levels to it.”

Nyla leaned her head back on the seat of the cab and closed her eyes. “He likes to play with *things* in the bedroom?”

"It would seem so."

Nyla groaned. "What the hell is a flogger anyway? How could I have not known this about Lucas and if I'm vanilla, what does that make him? Rocky road?"

"A flogger is used in a pleasure/pain thing, and I think it makes him a whole lot wilder than you, babe."

"Duh! So now what do I do?"

"Well, my first suggestion is the Internet. Just look up BDSM. There's plenty of stuff about it on the net."

Nyla ran a tired hand over her eyes. Eyes that might need glasses but still saw some freaky shit in Lucas' pantry. "What's your second suggestion?"

"Can I ask you something?"

"Oh, by all means."

"Was the sex good, Nyla? Lucas has always had a thing for you as far as everyone else could see, but is it possible you've always sort of had a thing for him and you just refused to acknowledge it?"

Nyla's heart jolted in her already tight chest. "It was the most incredible thing I've ever experienced, bar none," she whispered into the phone.

"Then, I do believe, you have your answer, toots. If I were you, I'd get a cute leather mini skirt and some thigh-high boots. Maybe a little latex or something."

Latex? Like the kind of stuff household gloves were made of?

Fricken' hell.

* * *

Lucas flipped the TV on as he paced the floor of his living room with impatient strides.

Well, he'd finally gotten what he wanted.

Nyla.

From the second he'd seen her at the shifters' singles thing, he'd known Nyla would be his. Shit, he'd have wanted her even if he didn't know she was his lifemate. She made his cock do things he didn't know were possible, and she'd never even had to

do anything more than just breathe. Her beauty had stunned him -- rendered him downright speechless. The long curl of her inky black hair, the curve of her hip, the dip in her waist where she'd place her hand when she was giving him hell, the way she tipped her glasses up on her cute nose when she was trying to see something better, all made Lucas insane.

Thus far, he'd kept those desires to himself after Nyla had shut him down with the "let's be friends" thing. Now, the freedom of sharing that out in the open left him invigorated, excited by the possibilities of what was to come.

He'd always known Nyla was meant for him, despite their lineage. Trouble was, he didn't know when and he didn't know how. But he'd known, all the time they'd spent together, going to a movie, talking on the phone, whatever. It didn't matter, he'd always known someday, she'd want him right back.

Lucas just didn't know she'd be vanilla.

Her sexual preferences were pretty clear and now his task was at hand.

They'd talked about sex in a general way, and even if she had offered to give him details Lucas would have nipped that in the bud. Bullshit if he'd listen to her tell him some other guy had her in the way only he should. From the moment he'd met her, in his mind, Nyla was his. To hear anything different wasn't kosher.

Lucas cracked his knuckles and shook off the rage he was certain to inspire if he spent time dwelling on Nyla's prior sex life. Then he smiled. The only sex she was going to have now was the sex she had with *him*.

Then he frowned. How the hell were they going to do that if Nyla wasn't even a little submissive? Lucas didn't want her on her knees calling him Master, though that might not be the worst thing that could happen. Lucas grinned, then frowned once more. Her subservience wasn't something he wanted because he wished to humiliate her. However, he did like nothing more than to have control of the situation where bedroom play was concerned. And he enjoyed a toy or two.

Nyla wasn't terribly submissive. That was more than clear now that they'd done the lifemate dance of lust. She'd fought nearly every command he'd thrown at her. But in the end, he *had* won her over, hadn't he?

Maybe Nyla could learn to play...

And maybe she couldn't. No one could make Nyla do anything she didn't want to. She was as pig headed and difficult as they came. Lucas didn't want to make her do anything she didn't want to do, but he wouldn't mind seeing her tied to a bed, naked and writhing in utter compliance either.

His cock rose in agreement.

Could he live without that aspect to his life? He would if it meant Nyla was his for all of their nine lives. He was clear about that, now more than he'd ever been.

Shit, he needed to, like, go chase some pigeons or something and figure out how he was going to explain this to Nyla.

With the ease of much practice, he concentrated on bone and flesh and the transformation that would take him to his cat form. Lucas shifted and hopped up on his windowsill with a light thunk.

Think. He needed to think, and then he needed to have Nyla again.

And then again, and again.

He could do that now. She was, after all, *his* lifemate.

If he were in human form, he'd have grinned again. But that would be smug and in essence, declaring he'd always been right about he and Nyla.

Okay, so it wasn't a bad thing to bask in his rightness, was it?

By, God, he'd been *right*.

Right.

Right.

Right.

Right wasn't going to make much of a difference when her parents got wind of the fact that her lifemate was a mongrel.

Lucas opted not to think about the ramifications of them calling the lifemate council to order.

Instead, Lucas swished his tail and set off to find a pigeon or two in Central Park.

Chapter Four

Nyla sat at her computer long after she'd finished her conversation with a nice man who called himself a *submissive* in a chat room for people who dug this thing called BDSM.

Nope. No fucking way was she going to be anyone's submissive. That implied Lucas was in charge and no one was in charge of her.

Yeah, you're not the boss of me... neener, neener, neener.

But did it really mean that? Not according to the nice man who liked to be called mean names after he washed your floor and licked your boots clean.

Oy.

This was insane. She wasn't going to clean anyone's floor while being called a shithead, nor was she going to have one of those cork things they called a butt plug rammed up her ass. Not a chance in hell. She had a maid to clean, and if she needed a little colonic cleansing, she'd get a damn enema, thank you.

Oh, God, she could feel a hairball form at the back of her throat, knotting her terror in a tight fist of panic.

According to *justasub* on BDSMandmore.com, it was a matter of allowing yourself the freedom to let go, which seemed peachily appealing if it didn't involve being tied to one of those damn racks of torture she'd seen in the pictures on the net.

Well, okay, it wasn't torture. For some, it was exceptionally pleasurable.

Not for this feline...

Nyla had seen some things on the Internet that alternately freaked her out and fascinated her. Other stuff just went too far. Who thought PVC pipe was a smokin' hot bedroom toy? There were extremes to this BDSM thing and if what Lucas had in his pantry was how he liked his sex, he had some splainin' to do.

Nyla couldn't remember seeing any clothespins in Lucas' closet of magic goodies. She'd have never believed it until she saw it with her own two nearsighted eyes.

Yep, clothespins. Used to arouse one in what was called a *scene* in BDSM. That wasn't even the half of what she'd witnessed.

They even had schools you could attend to become a submissive or a Dominant.

Jesus, she'd be some slave school dropout, now wouldn't she? Cuz she couldn't do some of that shit for all the tuna and caviar on the planet.

So was Lucas submissive or Dominant? Forget that question. Nyla knew the answer without hesitation.

He was Dominant.

Nyla gulped and closed her eyes, staving off the image of Lucas between her legs. She focused instead on the fringes of fear and worry that accosted her in waves of panic at the possibility he'd want to slap one of those ball gag things in her mouth. Like even that could shut up her screaming. They'd hear her in Idaho, for crap's sake.

Maybe he wasn't really into it, and she was jumping to huge conclusions and searching the Internet for things that didn't even apply to him.

That was sure a whole lot of leather stuff to not be into *something*.

She wasn't afraid of Lucas. Quite the contrary. Nyla was afraid that after chatting with some of the people who lived the BDSM lifestyle to one degree or another, that she and Lucas were somehow mismatched in the lifemate thing. If what she'd chatted with the submissive about was true, then you just *were* submissive or Dominant. There wasn't anything you could do to change that.

There was still no way in catnip she was going to allow anyone to tell her what to do on a daily basis. She wasn't wearing a collar and being dragged around by a leash. No damn way.

Nyla was always fighting the tide. She'd argued with her parents for one reason or another as a kitten, and she kept that up to this day. That couldn't possibly mean she was submissive. She was a kitty with a cause, not a stray with no rhyme or reason.

Yet, when she and Lucas had mated, it had been the most titillating experience of her life when he'd *demand*ed she submit to him and answer him in the name of desire. It had made her insane with lust.

That's what he'd been doing and all while Nyla was completely unaware that he was. Lucas was a forceful presence, no doubt, but he never came off uber Alpha and pushy. Most of the time they spent together was spent laughing about one thing or another. Not demanding things, but now their dynamic had changed considerably.

They were lifemates.

Nyla shivered when she called to memory the slick plunge of his cock, the commanding way he'd insisted she own up to her needs verbally. They needed to talk. She just might be scaring herself over nothing.

Grabbing her phone, Nyla pressed speed dial and waited impatiently until Lucas picked up.

"Hey, lifemate."

"Funny. You're still just as funny as you were when you were my non-smell like Utopia friend."

Lucas sighed into the phone. Nyla could almost see the rise and fall of his broad chest. "So what's up? Have you been thinking?"

Oh, had she ever. "Oh, yes, and we have some stuff we need to discuss, buddy. Like right now. I need some clarification before I go any further in the lifemate thing with you."

"I'd say I have to agree, sugarplum." Lucas' voice slithered up her spine like a trickle of chocolate sprinkles on a hot fudge sundae.

"Yeah, Lucas. Like talk about the crazy shit you have in the bathroom at your apartment." There, it was out in the universe now. Deal with that, baby!

"So you've been in my linen closet then?" Lucas' words weren't at all astonished to her ears. Nor did he seem like he much cared she'd found those serial killer tools of the trade in there.

"Gee, go figure. I should have known you wouldn't have something as mundane as a damn hand towel. So you want to explain all that stuff or are we just going to pretend like I'm just so nearsighted I didn't see what I think I saw?"

"Why didn't you ask me what it was when you found it, Nyla? We've never had trouble talking before."

"Well, I was looking for a washcloth and I came up with that -- that cobweb thwacker," she said as she flung around in her office chair. "Forgive me for being freaked out about it. Care to explain the torture devices in the closet there, Mr. Nine Lives? Because if you're some freaky serial killer and you've been hiding it for a year now, I just have to warn you, I shift too and I'd be happy to give you a taste of this pussy cat in her finest form," Nyla threatened, but somehow the meat of her threat rang false, even to her own ears. She didn't fear Lucas, for whatever kooky reason, but she was definitely wary of the nutty shit he had in that closet.

Her lifemate could *not* be a serial killer. Well, wait, maybe that thought had merit, considering her overall luck amounted to nil most times when it came to men. It would be comical if it weren't mostly the case in point. Did anyone know John Wayne Gacy was a serial killer? People knew him for years and had no clue, all while he was busy hacking people up and stowing them away in his basement...

Okay, a grip was needed here. This was Lucas. Her not so friend-like lifemate/friend.

Lucas exhaled into the phone on a chuckle. "It's a flogger, Nyla. Ya know, like a sex toy?"

"Oh, yes, I know exactly what it is *now*, Lucas. I did some research and I've seen plenty, thank you. Besides who the hell uses *that* as a toy, you beer swilling Neanderthal? And how is it that I don't know about this side of you? What the hell is sexual about it anyway? It looks like something I'd use to snuff out cobwebs."

"It's a *flogger*, Nyla, and you didn't know because you weren't looking at me as anything more than your popcorn holder at the movies."

Nyla sighed with impatience. "I know what it is, Lucas!"

“A flogger is used in sexual foreplay in the BDSM lifestyle. It’s used to arouse your partner. A pleasure/pain kind of thing.”

Well, wasn’t he like the king of BDSM factoids? Nyla shook her head. “I’m still not seeing the correlation here. How can pain be pleasurable?”

Lucas’ laughter rumbled in his chest. “It sometimes can be, with the right person and done properly.”

“So you *hit* your partner? What the hell is exciting about that, Lucas? If you hit me, I’m going to knock the snot out of you right back.”

Lucas’ sigh was getting louder. “I’m not going to hurt you, Nyla. I’d never hurt you. I’d learn your buttons and push them is all.”

“Bondage-Domination-Sadism-Masochism,” Nyla repeated what she’d read on the Internet. “How can it be that I just never knew this about you, Lucas?” She didn’t think she’d ever get over the shock. They shared *everything*. He knew when she went into heat, for God’s sake!

“Yep. That’s what it means and it wasn’t like we discussed things like that, Nyla. Not in detail, anyway.”

“We did too. You know my favorite position, dammit!”

“Look, Nyla. I’m a Bedroom Dom. I’m not into some of the heavier aspects. I just enjoy some of the play. I would never hurt you. I would never humiliate you, and probably half of what you’ve seen and read on the Internet is stuff I haven’t seen either, or have any wish to participate in.”

Nyla gulped. “Domination? Okay, I need some explanation here. I mean, we are, after all, lifemates, *friend*. How that happened I’ll never know, but there it is. You know exactly what that means for us -- there’s no turning back. We can figure that out later. So gimme the scoop. Because all that shit in your closet looks like it should belong to Jeffrey Dahmer.”

“Yes, Cleopatra, you *are* my lifemate. Funny how that works, huh? Funny how I’ve been telling you that for over a year. We have a lot to learn about one another, sugarplum, and parts of my sexual activity have to do with domination.”

Nyla fought the rush of heat that inflamed her thighs at the sinful bliss Lucas' voice evoked when he said the word domination. "Sugarplum *this*, Lucas, and yeah, can we start with that flogger thing? I just can't get past it. Flogging would imply beating the shit out of me and that's just not going to happen. Not unless you want to find yourself minus a limb or two. Don't think I don't mean it either. Because I do." Her eyes narrowed as she threw out her empty threat into the phone.

"Oh, I've no doubt you can hold your own, Nyla. Now you'll just be holding mine while you do it. Flogging doesn't entail beating the shit out of you. It entails many things, but I would never hurt you. That's not what this Dom is about."

"I don't get it. How in all of Ra did I end up with you as a lifemate? We need to petition the lifemate council of adjustments for a variance or something." Nyla was only half joking about it, simply because the one sexual encounter they'd had wasn't something she wanted to give up on just yet. Why give up when she had no choice but to accept her destiny anyway?

"You don't mean that and you know it, Nyla. We're perfect for each other and we always have been," he chided her. "I don't live the lifestyle twenty-four seven, but I enjoy some aspects of it in the bedroom. That's why I have all of those toys in the pantry. It's that simple, honest."

"So you only enjoy flogging the snot out of someone *sometimes*?"

Lucas chuckled, "No, Nyla. I've said this already. I don't want to hurt you, and our bedroom time doesn't always have to involve a flogger or a paddle or anything else but us. Your ultimate pleasure is my goal. Like I said, this is something we have to discuss. Not only because BDSM is about trust and understanding, but because honestly, I'm a little puzzled as to how my lifemate would be someone who knows nothing about my sexual pleasures. I know we've talked about sex in a very general way, but somehow, I always thought my lifemate would share my kink."

Nyla snorted. "Oh, yeah? Well, that makes two of us. So get over here and let's get down to business. I want to know what the hell all that stuff is in your linen closet and I want to know what it means in my world. We both know the rules about lifemates

and now we have to do the discovery thing. So why don't you tell me why the hell your lifemate was a year in the making and finally discovered you in a pet store and not at Phil's House of Bondage and Tattoos, a place I don't frequent and, I'd bet, you have a lifetime credit with? How could you have hidden that from me?" Nyla asked, still a bit hurt by Lucas not sharing something that seemed so important to him.

"We're doing the circle dance here, Nyla. I didn't hide it. I just didn't announce it by buying a T-shirt."

Nyla wondered if upon finding their lifemates all shifters just accepted it and their snotty upper class families did too. Cuz her family was not going to like Lucas. They knew of him. They knew Nyla and he went to the movies together. That was it. *Oh, and by the way, Mom? I found my lifemate today. He likes whips and chains. Can he come to dinner?*

"So, Cleopatra, you're my lifemate..." His tone was cocky and knowing.

"Yeah, that's me. Don't get too excited, huh?"

"Well, you have to admit, I have been telling you this forever. I mean, I knew you smelled different than anyone else I'd smelled before. I just had no idea it was *that* kind of smell, but I was pretty sure, babe."

The aroma of your lifemate.

There was nothing like it and only lifemates could identify it in one another. Sort of like when humans got that giddy, stupid feeling and had it in their heads that they'd found that perfect someone. It was just like that, minus the romance of it all.

"I think my nostrils are all messed up or something, because I didn't smell it until the pet store, Lucas. So what's next on our lifemate agenda? Do we ask each other stuff like what side of the bed do you prefer? Coke or Pepsi? Decaf or leaded? Liver and cheese bits or Chicken of the Sea? Oh, wait," Nyla slapped her forehead. "I already know about all that stuff, don't I, *friend?*"

"I'll always be your friend, Nyla. Now I'm a friend with a big, fat benefit," Lucas teased, a glint of the humor she knew and loved threading his tone.

“Does this mean we can’t shift and hunt mice together anymore?” That would so suck. Lucas always found the plumpest of mice.

“Nope, sugarplum, you’ll always be my favorite mice catching buddy. Besides, how will you see where the hell you’re going without your glasses if not for me? We have a lot to talk about, Nyla. Don’t sweat the small stuff right now.”

Small? His kink was far from small. “Yeah, like the kinky stuff in your closet. Lucas? This is going to ruin everything. We were good friends. I loved hanging out with you. You’re my favorite person in the whole world, and now I’ve had sex with you. Bonded for friggin’ life with you. I don’t get it, but I’m a little freaked out right now.”

“I think it’s going to take some time to get used to, Nyla, but for me, it’s like the last piece of the puzzle that has always been us.”

Nyla wrinkled her nose and fought the giddy rush of warmth she was feeling over Lucas’ admission. “You’re never going to let me forget you were right from the start, are you?”

Lucas laughed again. “Nope.”

Laughing, Nyla nodded. “Somehow I knew that. So what’s next, Lucas?” Lucas had an answer for everything, and this time he’d better have a good one because she just didn’t know how the transition from friendship to relationship was going to work.

“Well, we have to go tell your parents.”

Nyla gulped. That was going to suck big, fat weenies. “I think we both know how that’s going to go.”

Lucas blew out a breath added, “And we have to talk about my lifestyle and how we can make this work. We *will* make this work, Nyla.”

“You know, maybe they made a mistake? The invisible lifemate people who determine this stuff?” Nyla said, dismissing Lucas’ matter of fact statement. “We need to figure this out. Maybe someone made a colossal mistake in the lifemate department because I sure as hell don’t want to be flogged with all of the crazy torture devices you have in that bathroom closet. At least I don’t think I do.” Nyla shifted to the end of her

office chair and nervously played with the edge of her nightgown. "I think we have to think about this some more. I think we have to contact the lifemate people and lodge a complaint. Do you think they have a suggestion box?"

"It's a lot to take in, Nyla. We both know this means we're stuck with each other. I won't pretend I'm not happy about that, but in the end, there's no going back."

Oh, really? Christ, he made it sound as if it were a trip to the electric chair to be stuck with her. "You know, you should be doing the lifemate dance of the utterly euphoric. You just got what you claim you've always wanted."

"Oh, I am. Believe me, but I don't want you to feel like I'm being too smug about it. That would just be plain shitty of me, even if I was *right*."

Yes, Lucas had been right, and now he had what he wanted. Nyla discovered she had what she wanted and she didn't even know she'd wanted it until it'd happened. It could be much worse. Some shifters ended up with a mate who didn't satisfy them on any level.

Lucas had definitely satisfied her on so many levels she'd lost count. Which brought her back to the flogger thing.

Well, there was only one way to figure this out. "Lucas?"

"What, sugarplum?"

"Come over here, *now*, and bring that flogger."

Who's yer Dom?

Chapter Five

Nyla flung open her door when Lucas knocked, clad only in her briefest of nightwear. "Sorry, I didn't have anything leather handy." She snorted. "I guess this will just have to do." Nyla chuckled as she stuck her thumbs under the slender straps over her shoulder.

"It'll do just fine, Nyla. Now, come here." Lucas pointed to the spot between his feet as he closed her apartment door and leaned back on it with a slow smile. His jeans were snug and the evidence of his arousal, plain.

Christ, he was hot. Nyla's knees wobbled a little. Her bravado wasn't far behind...

"Ask nicely," Nyla countered.

Lucas gave her a cross-eyed smile. "Look, Cleopatra, I wasn't ordering you. I was letting you know that the very idea of your lips pressed against mine has my cock as hard as it's ever been and the need to kiss you is urgent. Not all of this BDSM thing has to be about a struggle, Nyla. You have nothing to prove when you show me how stubborn you are. I already know and breaking your will isn't what I want or need to do. Now, come here."

Oh. Well, put like that... okay, then. Nyla dutifully sauntered over to Lucas. He dropped the bag with what she assumed was the flogger and wrapped his hands around her waist, hauling her close to his thick frame. He lowered his lips to hers with slow precision, whispering his tongue over Nyla's lower lip.

She found herself clinging to his shirt front as her defenses melted and her nipples tightened.

"Now was that so hard?" Lucas said against her mouth.

Nyla sighed against him. "No, Lucas it wasn't hard at all." Oh, Ra, he was an amazing kisser... everything about him all slapped up against her felt right. Every single thing. Now, onto the business at hand. The flogger...

Nyla pulled away from Lucas' lips with reluctance and looked up at him. "So let's do this. Flog me or whatever it is we do with that," she said as she pointed to the bag on the floor.

Lucas rolled his eyes. "Honey, this isn't about doing things on command. We have to talk about what's expected, find a safe word, set the scene up."

A safe word. How did "What the fuck are you thinking?" grab him? No, that was a phrase. "I know, Lucas. I read about it on the Internet."

"Good, then you know I only want your pleasure and that doesn't involve making you uncomfortable. Trust is involved here, Nyla, so we'll take this slowly."

"Okay, so let's *slowly* flog me or whatever it is we have to do," Nyla said as she took Lucas by the hand and led him to her posh bedroom.

"Wow, you Ivana Trump wannabe. Nice digs," Lucas whistled as he assessed her bedroom and teasingly mocked her family's financial status. "I've never seen it before."

Nyla giggled, not at all nervous about Lucas' big, hulking presence in her decidedly girlie bedroom. "Thanks. I like it."

Lucas went to the big oak post on her bed and gripped it with a firm hand as he grinned. "Cool, four posters. Plenty of wood here to tie you up while I flog the hell out of you, just before I slam you with my mighty fuck stick."

Nyla flipped him the bird and stuck her tongue out at him. "You can shove that wood up your Dom ass."

Lucas sat at the edge of her bed with his sly grin and patted the space beside him. "C'mere, lifemate. Stop freaking out and being such a sissy."

Nyla rolled her eyes at him and then sauntered over to stand in front of him. "I'm no sissy. You're forgetting who you're talking to here. I mean, I was the one who caught the most mice last round, wasn't I?"

Lucas grabbed her ass and pulled her to him. His grip was firm and stung a bit with a sharp, but pleasurable sizzle. Christ, what the hell was going on with her body?

Lucas nuzzled the space between her breasts as he kneaded her ass, and Nyla found her hands threading through his hair with greed for what was to come.

"I haven't forgotten, Nyla. Now be quiet and let me ravish you. You talk too much sometimes."

"But don't we have to do the safe word thing and stuff?"

"Not right now, Nyla. Right now I just want to have you. We can talk about the other stuff when I'm done."

Nyla's head fell back as Lucas tugged her nightie off her shoulders and let it fall to her waist, capturing a nipple between his lips. His groan incited Nyla's senses and sent a pulsing heat to her pussy that made her squirm.

Hovering over her nipple, Lucas sipped it into his mouth with a twist of his tongue, rolling it over the now pebbled surface. "I've waited for this for a long time, Nyla," he murmured as he pulled her to straddle his lap, the rough texture of his jeans scraping her clit through her panties.

Lucas rose slightly and turned their bodies so that he was able to press Nyla into the cushiony mattress. Hot, strong hands shrugged her nightgown over her hips as he parted her thighs to lie between them.

Looking down at her, Lucas' eyes simmered. "I want to fuck you senseless, Nyla, but I don't want you to be frightened by me and my lust."

Nyla groaned, wrapping her legs around Lucas' waist. "I'm not afraid of you, Lucas." And she wasn't. She was, however, a little leery of that flogger thing.

"Roll over, Nyla. *Now.*"

Nyla's heart throbbed in her chest. The anticipation of Lucas taking her was thrilling, but tinged with the fear of what was next. Somehow, she no longer felt as if he were ordering her to do something because he liked the power play. His tone was too gruff and husky to be called arrogant. Nyla smelled his lust for her, but her delicate

nostrils were also laced with something else. An emotion she was unable to decipher just yet.

Nyla rolled over to her belly and she heard the rustle of material as Lucas removed his clothing. Suddenly, his hands were on her, pulling her panties off with impatience, roaming over bare flesh, making her arch into his caress as he lifted her hips and placed himself between her thighs. Sliding a hand between their closely pressed flesh, Lucas leaned over her, pressing kisses to her spine as he opened her wet, aching flesh with deft fingers.

Nyla reared back against Lucas' abdomen, rippled and hard, encouraging him to touch her, but instead, Lucas skimmed the outer lips of her cunt, taunting her. Nyla bit the inside of her cheek and took a dizzying breath to steady the roar of lust.

"Do you want to fuck, Nyla?" Lucas asked as he allowed his cock to graze her pussy. Hot, thick and long, he moved in, only to pull out again.

Yes, she wanted to fuck. She wanted to bang him like a drum all damn night. Why was it so hard to say so? Her disjointed thoughts became more so as Lucas pushed her to answer him. "Do you want my cock in you, Nyla? Stroking you?"

Nyla nodded her head against the safety of the pillows that lined her bed.

"Say it, Nyla," Lucas demanded as he nipped the rounded flesh of her ass, removing the silken slide of his cock from the heated place between her legs.

Nyla clutched the pillows above her head with fevered hands, but still she was unable to let go.

The first sting of Lucas' hand on her ass took Nyla by surprise. It sent a shockwave of pleasure like she'd never known along every nerve in her body. The slap of flesh was sharp and clear as it rang throughout her bedroom. Palpable. She blushed because it felt so incredibly exciting. Lucas' hand smoothed over the now warm spot where he'd left his mark and Nyla arched against it, craving something she was too afraid to identify... too conflicted to ask for.

Lucas slid his cock between the lips of her pussy again with a swift, sure stroke and Nyla whimpered with a weak mewl. "Say it, Nyla." Lucas' words sang through her veins, thrumming and flagrant.

She cracked then, like a fine dish made of china. "Yes! Yes, dammit!" she yelped in frustration and need. Christ, he was killing her. She was as juiced as she'd ever been in her life and they were playing a friggin' game of mercy.

You win, she thought for the merest of moments. Nyla couldn't fight it anymore. The swollen lips of her cunt, the ache deep within her belly demanded satisfaction, leaving her without a qualm.

Lucas slapped the cheek of her ass again with a firm crack, but what followed wasn't painful, it was *exhilarating*. The heat that flooded every pore of her skin sizzled and Nyla throbbed with the need for him to plunge into her -- take her hard and without leniency.

"Say it nicely, Nyla," he demanded as he let his tongue glide over the spot he'd just warmed with his hand. The cool air he created made Nyla buck in agony for release.

Say it nicely, Nyla, she mocked in her head as she clenched her teeth together in a grip of death. *Here's the skinny, feline. You can give in and let that delicious cock drive into you, or you can struggle with the obvious power his charms have over you and go to bed frustrated. Your choice...* Fuck it. Hadn't she just been in this very same position the last mating of the millennium? It didn't kill her then and it wouldn't kill her now.

On a huge gust of air that burst from her lungs like a race horse just out of the gate, Nyla let go. "Please, please, Lucas." Her sob was audibly weak to her ears. "Pleeease put your cock in me." She almost said *now* to somehow retain some of her control, but she didn't have the time because Lucas thrust into her with the speed of a shooting bullet, hard, thick, silky hot.

Nyla gasped as he groaned low from behind her. A growl of fulfillment, final satisfaction. The force of his thrust made her entire body lurch forward, stretching her, filling her with the immediate need to orgasm.

“Dammit, Nyla,” Lucas muttered and Nyla couldn’t quite figure out why, but the words had a desperation to them that she didn’t quite understand.

As his rhythm increased, Lucas again brought his hand down on her tender flesh and it drove Nyla right over the edge. The heat and slight sting of his hand overwhelmed her, flooded her pussy, tightening her nipples until Nyla screamed as her orgasm ripped through her.

Lucas came too, his seed spilling into her with heaving jolts of his cock.

Nyla collapsed on the bed and Lucas came to rest against her, his chest crashing against her back.

Nyla, in her distorted thoughts, remembered they hadn’t even used the flogger. Lucas had used his hand and she’d liked it. Hell, she’d *loved it*. The sweet sting of his palm as he drove into her had successfully opened a door Nyla didn’t know was in her *Let’s Make a Deal* package and, as reality set in, it frightened her.

Aroused her.

Freaked her out.

And there it was again -- *aroused* her.

Holy hell, who was she and where had this come from? Who thought being hit was sexy? Did this make her some kind of freak? Did shifters around the globe like this kind of shit or was she some kind of weirdo pain seeker?

“Baby? Stop.” Lucas warned. “Enjoying what just happened is okay, sugarplum. The only trouble is, I can’t seem to control myself around you. I can’t get into you fast enough. I can’t get enough of you. I want to own your body, take it with abandon. I’ve never had that kind of trouble before. I’m always in control,” he whispered as he nuzzled her shoulder with light kisses.

Nyla’s belly flip-flopped. His words frightened her. She would not be owned like some damn slave. “Stop it, Lucas. Stop it now. No one owns me. *I own me*, dammit, and I-I... I’m... well, I don’t know what I am, but I can’t possibly want to be tied up and slapped around. I sure as hell don’t want to hit Home Depot and troll the plumbing department for shit that you can use to torture me with!” Her panic could be heard in

her voice and she knew it, but she couldn't keep the fear from spilling out of her big mouth and roaring into the space between them.

Lucas ran a gentle hand over Nyla's hair and slipped an arm under her from behind. "Baby, this doesn't mean you want to be tortured. It just means you like a little spice. Just because you enjoy some borderline pain, doesn't mean you want to be hurt. I promise you, Cleopatra, you're not a freak."

"Oh, really? What's next, Mr. Dom? Are we still going to be saying the same thing when I'm bound and gagged with duct tape and superglued to the fucking bed, with clothespins clamped over every available surface of my body and a plug in my ass?" Nyla struggled to breathe as she wormed her way out from under Lucas and scooted to the other end of the bed.

Lucas sat up, his naked body lean and honed in the dim light of her bedroom. "Nyla, I can help you understand. There's nothing wrong with it. C'mere and we'll talk."

His calm take on her spiral into leather and beatings only incited Nyla further into the tizzy she was creating with her fear. "No! No, I will not *c'mere, sugarplum!* I can't do this, Lucas. This is wrong. This isn't something I've enjoyed before, and all of a sudden I want to fuck like a rabid animal while you slap me around? Something is so wrong about that! The next thing you know you'll have a leash attached to me and I'll be licking your floors clean while you call me your bitch!"

"No!" Lucas said with a firm, sharp response. "No, babe, I do *not* want to slap you around. Did I hurt you in any way? No, Nyla, and I never would. I'm not into forcing anyone to do anything. Did I demand that you answer me? Did I demand that you ask for your pleasure? Yes, but would I ever hurt you? Never, Nyla. *Never.* That's the difference between 'slapping you around' and a Dominant male. I'm no lifemate beater and I resent that you could think that of me, even in your freaked out bullshit!" Now Lucas' voice was raised and becoming louder, tight with indignation at her accusation.

Nyla scrunched her eyes shut and fought yet another wave of hysteria. "I don't know that I know the difference, Lucas, and what does that say about me? I pride myself on being in control of myself at all times. I come from a pretty classy family full of snobs who demand that I be just that, in control at all times. And now look at me! I'm writhing all over a bed, looking to be hit by a tomcat!"

Lucas' face distorted and he gave Nyla a pointed look as he slid from her bed and gathered his jeans. "You know, Nyla, I've wanted you for a long time, loved you for probably half of that, and never have I ever felt the differences in our lineage as much as I do right now. Maybe you're right. Maybe we should petition the lifemate council for that variance adjustment," Lucas said in a voice Nyla didn't recognize. Cold and distant. Not the Lucas she'd turned to for comfort and reassurance time and time again. He walked away from her to pull on his jeans and, with his broad back turned to her, Nyla wanted to crumble.

Stop him.

Hate him for making her discover this side to herself she didn't know existed.

Loved her? Lucas loved her?

She'd ignored it as if he'd told her something inconsequential. Then, to make it worse, she'd done the class thing like spending time with him was Paris Hilton at a hoedown. Somehow, she managed to end up insulting the barbecue. God, she was a snob, just like her parents. She'd never, ever had an argument with Lucas, and now adding all of this discovery crap into the mix was making her strike out in confusion and fear. "I'm sorry, Lucas. You know I didn't mean --"

"Forget it, Nyla. I'll contact the lifemate council myself," he said between clenched teeth as he cracked his knuckles and began to shift so he could avoid her big damn mouth, she figured.

She'd always loved Lucas in his cat form. No matter that he was what some considered a mongrel stray. He was beautifully marked and sinuously defined. Striking and lean, solid and secure.

Lucas took a last glance at her with a cocked head and ears that twitched before he headed out of her bedroom and to the living room window where the fire escape was.

Nyla followed him to the living room with sluggish feet and watched as Lucas slithered under the window, and then she let one lone tear streak her face. The salty bubble held all of her worries, encapsulated and coming to fruition. She and Lucas should have always been friends and damn the lifemate gods for saying otherwise.

Nyla went back to her bedroom and scooped up the shirt Lucas had left behind, throwing it over her shoulders and laying down on her bed. She curled into a ball, letting her mind race as she fought one of her biggest fears of all.

Who would be her friend, if not Lucas?

Who would make her laugh when she didn't want to? Who would have the missing pieces to her fucked up head's jigsaw puzzle, if not Lucas?

Who would hold her hand at the movies?

Chapter Six

"So do you see the problem here, Doc? I mean, I have a lifemate my parents don't know about and will hate -- and I do mean *hate* because he's not a damn purebred. And he likes some stuff, ya know, like sexually speaking that I don't know if I can participate in. Okay, so I admit, it turned me on when he spanked me, but the shit I saw on the Internet and the stuff I saw in his closet kinda freaked me out, ya know?"

"The problem is, I love him. Like I couldn't imagine a day without him in it when we were just friends, but now? Now that we've done all this boinking and stuff, I dunno if I can part with him. Which brings me back to my original problem. My parents... they're going to go to the lifemate council to stick their noses in where they don't belong. That is, if Lucas doesn't get there first. He was so angry with me when he left my apartment, and that was three days ago. What the hell am I going to do? I'm blabbing like an idiot, I know, but I've got some real trouble here and I need help!"

The nice psychiatrist sat ever patiently as Nyla rambled on about her lifemate woes. His hands clamped lightly together in a steeple under his chin as he leaned forward over his desk to look at Nyla, pensively studying her when his lips began to move.

Oh, thank, Ra! He was going to help her. He would say something profound that would get her out of this fix. Some mumbo jumbo that would surely bring a ray of clarity to this fucked up mess.

The nice doctor's eyes were calming and very blue as he asked. "May I ask why it is that you chose to come see me, Nyla?"

Um, well, cuz you're a doctor of the mind, you hack and I've wandered around my apartment in Lucas' T-shirt for three days sniffing it like it was salmon? "Do you mean did I find you on the Internet or through an ad in the paper? Like the *Yellow Pages*?"

His blue eyes remained serene, still waters and all that bullshit. “No, Nyla. I meant, why did you choose to come see me? My area of expertise is very specialized, you know.”

Duh! Of course it was, the quack. The ad was very clear. *Is your cat or dog experiencing difficulty adjusting? Do you sense emotional discord or an overall dissatisfaction in your cat or dog’s personality? Do they seem depressed and lethargic? I can help...* Yes, that’s what the ad had said.

“Yeah, you specialize in therapy,” Nyla said with a wistful smile. Whoda thunk she’d be in *therapy*?

“Yes, yes, that’s true, Nyla, but do you know *who* I counsel?”

Nyla nodded her head. *Dumb ass*. “Yeah, I know. Cats and dogs.”

“That’s right, Nyla,” the doctor said in a soft, low, undertone almost as if he were afraid to startle her.

“Um, okay, so what’s your point here?”

“Nyla,” he said, all soothing and patronizing as he pulled out a hand mirror from his desk drawer. “Look at yourself in the mirror, Nyla. What do you see?”

Well, if her eyesight were better, she’d probably see a more clear version of herself. However, even fuzzy, she looked like something the cat just dragged in. Nyla’d laugh at her smart ass thought, if she could summon up even the hint of a giggle. “I see me and I’m a mess. My eyes are puffy and red, aren’t they?”

“Nyla.” Now his rippled, soothing tones held a warning. As if he might be preparing her for something dire. “I’m going to tell you something and I want you to hear me. Listen carefully to my words. You’re a *human*.” He sat back with a slow movement and waited but a moment, possibly because he thought she might lose her mind over her human status. “You’re not a cat or a dog, Nyla, and I really believe you need something far more intensive in the way of help than I can offer.”

Nyla caught sight of her face in the mirror again, just before the light of recognition dawned on her and she began to howl with laughter. “Ooohhhhhhhh -- I --

I'm soooooorryyyy. I don't -- I don't know -- what I was thinnkkkkking," Nyla sputtered in a fit of maniacal giggles.

"Nyla," the doctor said in a reassuring, non-threatening tone while he reached for the phone on his desk. "I'm going to call a colleague of mine and we're going to see that you get the best of everything modern medicine has to offer. How does that sound?"

Jesus Christ in a mini skirt! He thought she was a nut. Hell, she *was* a nut. He was a pet psychiatrist, for crap's sake, and she hadn't really been giving anything much thought other than finding a way to get rid of the gnawing ache of indecision over Lucas that sat in the pit of her belly.

Suddenly, her parents, her fears, seemed far away and clarity dawned on her. It was a simple answer. Nyla needed Lucas and she'd find a way to figure the rest out. Flogger or not, she couldn't live without Lucas in her life. He brought more than just the occasional movie and some giggles. He gave her complete understanding. The simpatico they'd shared had always been, from the very start.

It simply was, and Nyla just had to make it right and keep Lucas from petitioning the lifemate council.

As Nyla gasped for breath, she held up her hand to thwart his efforts to "save" her. "Doc?"

"Yes, Nyla."

She'd show him just who needed basket weaving one-o-one. "Watch this. Oh, and thanks for the help. You're da bomb. I think I know what I have to do now."

"You're very welcome and of course, Nyla. I can watch *and* call my colleague at the same ti --"

Nyla heard his intake of air, sharp and whistling like a tea kettle as she focused on calling up the visual of her feline form. Hopefully, the sometimes audible crunch of flesh and bone wouldn't freak him out too much.

The doc just might want to call in some of his connections for his own use when she was done.

Wide eyed and mouth gaping, the nice doctor fell back in his chair as Nyla scampered up on his desktop and peered at him through the eyes that brought her so much trouble when she hunted mice.

He wheezed as she rubbed against his arm, the arm that was now immobile and lying lifeless on his desk.

Nyla purred at him. Maybe he was allergic to cats? Wouldn't that suck as a pet psychiatrist? Nyla backed away and swished her tail in salute.

Just my way of saying thanks, doc.

Put *that* in your medical journals and smoke it.

* * *

"Hi, Daddy? Where's Mother?" Nyla shot the words into the cool air of his study as she stormed in to face her father in her parents' swanky Park Avenue apartment.

"Kitten? What's wrong?" Her father's weathered face held concern as he rose from behind his cluttered antique desk.

"I need to talk to you and Mom. It's important. No, it's critical. So buzz her on that fancy intercom, would ya? Or have Niles find her. Or I'll find her, but we need to talk."

"Nyla, sit down. You're flushed. Have you been spider chasing? Relax, honey. I'll find your mother."

Good, do that because she had some lifemate shit she had to work out before Lucas went and did something drastic, like petition the lifemate board of variances. That would be ugly. They had a waiting period and a rule of no contact. Nyla couldn't take the no contact rule. She needed contact with Lucas.

Forever.

Her mother entered her father's study with her usual grace and elegance. The stealthy fall of her feet carried with it her particular flair for fashion. Nyla's mother entered the room, a frown furrowing her smooth brow.

"Nyla! This is a wonderful surprise, darling. Come sit with me and we'll have some liver pate."

Nyla popped up from her chair and shook her head. "No. No, mother, I don't want liver pate or *fois gras* either. I need to tell you and Daddy something. Before I begin, I need to tell you that I don't give a hamster's cedar bedding what you have to say about it!" Nyla's voice bordered obnoxiously loud, but she didn't care. She was just going to spill it, and then she was going to go find Lucas and beg him to forgive her for being such a stuck up ass.

Nyla's mother held out her hand. "Sweetheart, there's no need to raise your voice. Come tell me what's troubling you and we'll figure it out. Did you go over your limit on your Visa? Nothing can be so bad that you need to be in such a dither, darling."

"Your mother is right, kitten. Calm down and talk to us." Her father's voice was balm to her ears, but he'd be screeching like a cat on a hot tin roof in no time when he found out *who* her lifemate was.

"No, Daddy. I can't calm down." Nyla paced in front of her father's desk as her mother's eyes followed her frantic movement. Frig it. No holds barred, all out war was going to happen, but frig it. Nyla wanted Lucas. "I found my lifemate."

Nyla let the words drop like a basketball in an empty gymnasium. The echo was resounding for a moment, and then her mother's squeal of delight was deafening. "Oh, Nyla! This is wonderful! It means we have to prepare, darling. We have much to do. There's the ritual, of course --"

"Mother!"

Nyla's mother stopped gushing and stared at her, smoothing a hand over her crisp linen skirt and composing herself. "What, honey? What is it?"

Nyla took a deep breath and, on one last gulp, she let it flow out of her mouth like the River Nile. "It's Lucas. Lucas is my lifemate. You know, the Lucas who goes to the movies with me? My friend. He's the best, mom. I didn't know it for over a year, and then one day I smelled him in the pet store and, well, you know, the scent thing and all. He smelled so good. How was I supposed to know he was my lifemate? He said he'd smelled me plenty before this, so I can't figure out why I didn't smell him. I don't care anymore why I couldn't smell him. I can now and, I mean, how perfect is it that

he's my lifemate? I mean, really, we click, ya know? Lucas knows everything about me and he's still my friend. He didn't care that I have this fancy background or anything, and I want you two to know that I don't give a crap about my background either. Do you hear me?" Nyla said with a warning as she shook her finger at her parents. "I don't give a King Tut's tomb if you two don't approve because Lucas is a tomcat. I don't. I love Lucas and he's mine, even if he does have a kink that I just don't get right now. I'll learn to accept it as a part of me if it means Lucas and I are together. Do you hear me? I don't care one iota that he likes floggers..." Nyla slapped a hand over her mouth.

Holy, fucking maze full of mice. Oh, my God, she'd just told her parents that Lucas liked floggers, hadn't she? *Good, Ny. Fabulous.* That should make them far less likely to call the lifemate council on mental challenges, now shouldn't it?

The silence, thick and expectant, lay on Nyla's taste buds and she watched the faces of her parents. Oh, if she didn't have trouble before, she was now, officially calling the ASPCA her new Garden of Eden.

Nyla's mother was the first to speak. Her voice calm, rational, take charge. Just like the mother Nyla had always known. "Lucas, you say?"

"Yes, *Lucas,*" Nyla repeated. Damn them to the pyramids and back if they didn't like it.

"Precious? You have such a skewed view of us that if I didn't think I'd cultivated that over time, I'd almost be hurt." Nyla's mother held out her hand and Nyla offered hers. "Come with me, honey. We must talk."

Her mother's small hand in her own led her out of her father's study and down the long Persian carpeted hallway to her parents' bedroom. "Come look in here, Nyla, and when you do, please don't make too much noise. The servants will talk," her mother said with a low chuckle.

Nyla peeked around the corner of her parents' big walk-in closet and had to hold the door jamb with a shaky grip when her mother pushed a large oak panel. It swung open to reveal many, many things in... leather.

Nyla's mouth fell open and her mother put a gentle hand under her chin to close it. "I'd say you'll catch flies with your mouth open like that, but it looks like you could use the protein right about now."

Nyla blinked and looked into her mother's eyes, as green as her own, almond shaped and enjoying the shit out of Nyla's astonishment. "Um, care to explain? Do I want you to explain? Is there really any explanation?"

"Well, first, let me say this, Nyla. That Lucas is your lifemate and such a perfect fit for you makes both your father and I beyond thrilled. No, he's not of our lineage. We come from a long line of snobs, Nyla, but I've always cared little about that. I'm sorry I didn't spend more time proving that to you. As for the things here in our closet, well, as you can see, your father and I still enjoy a very healthy sex life and we enjoy a bit of spice. Nothing more, nothing blatantly frightening."

Oh, hell. Did someone have a butter knife she might gouge her mind's eye out with to cleanse herself of the visual she now had in her head?

Nyla's mother ran a soothing hand over her back. "Sweetheart, you mentioned a flogger?"

"Yeah... a flogger..."

"Does it frighten you? I'm assuming you and Lucas have mated. Of course you have. It's the only way to be certain you've found your lifemate. He likes a little kink, does he?" Her mother's laugh was throaty, secretive, freaking her the fuck out.

"I can't have this conversation with you, Mom. It's wrong on more levels than I have the wherewithal to count right now. I really don't want to know how you and Daddy get down, ya know?"

"Don't be silly, Nyla. A healthy sex life is so important. Who told you about your first heat? I did, of course. Which is why you finally smelled Lucas, by the way. You were in heat. The real kind. Not the kind that let's you know you're ready to embark on womanhood. You can talk to me about this because it's as much a part of my private world as it will be yours."

Nyla felt the heat of embarrassment singe her cheeks. "Okay, stop now. I don't think I can begin to think of you tied to that big bed out there with duct tape on your mouth while Daddy flogs you, okay? So please, stop before I hurl a hairball."

"Darling?" Her mother's face was that of the highly amused. "It isn't your *father* who wields the flogger..."

K, nuff said. No more. Nope. Not even a shifter needed to know *that* about their parents, and Nyla didn't care just how free thinking shifters were about their sexual encounters.

"Nyla, you're confused. I can see that. I'm the dominant force in the bedroom, not your dad, honey. There's nothing wrong with it."

"But Daddy's such a forceful presence. All quiet and solid and..." Her mother beat her father. How utterly absurd. She had this visual of her mother, standing over her father, dressed in some leather corset with fuck-me pumps and a whip, while her dad sat meekly in a corner, cowering as he awaited instructions and called her Mistress.

Ve have vays of makink you talk.

"Yes, honey, he is. That's probably the reason he's submissive in the bedroom. But submissive doesn't mean weak and it doesn't mean that your father can't take charge of things. It means little other than sexual preference, Nyla, and letting go of everything but your pleasures. I can see the idea frightens you. If you'll sit with me, I can explain some of it to you and it won't seem so frightening anymore, I promise, darling. Right now you're questioning your sexuality, but you shouldn't. Let's go talk, and then you can set about making things right with Lucas."

Nyla leaned her head against the cool oak panel of her parent's closet and giggled. Grabbing her mother's flogger, she snapped it. "Hey, Mom? Got some cobwebs you need taken care of?"

Nyla followed her mother out of the closet as her mother snatched the flogger away from her and pointed to her chair in the corner of the room.

Ooohhhh. Better sit and stay, Nyla before Mom whips you into submission. Nyla rolled her eyes and sat dutifully on the corner chair.

She and Mom were going to have a sex talk to rival even Doctor Ruth.
Hell's bells.

This was going to be a long afternoon, to say the least.

Chapter Seven

Lucas sat in silence, beer in hand as he thought about the lifemate council and petitioning them to release him from his obligations to Nyla. It was all he'd thought about for three days now.

Fuck.

This wasn't what he wanted.

He wanted Nyla. He'd always wanted her and he was willing to do nearly anything to have her.

Could he give up his kink for her?

Lucas' cock rose despite his heavy mood as he remembered Nyla spread before him, her ass still slightly pink from his hand. No one had ever turned him on more.

Stirring in his chair, he remembered their last conversation and his admission of love. Did he love Nyla?

Yeah, yeah he did. He'd loved her from the moment he'd laid eyes on her, before he'd known she was his lifemate. From almost the moment he'd seen her over that tuna on those pointed toast squares at the shifters' meet and greet.

Double fuck.

His stomach lurched at the thought of her parents razzing him because of his background. At the thought of them going to the lifemate council and telling them who they thought Lucas should end up with.

Bullshit.

Lucas slammed his beer down on the coffee table and stood. He'd go to Nyla's parents himself and, if he had to, he'd drag her out of there kicking and screaming because he knew she felt it too.

Beer swilling Neanderthal, he chided himself.

Nyla wanted him. He was sure of that. The rest would find a way to fall into place. Hell, he'd give his flogger away if it meant Nyla would make the final transition ritual to lifemates with him.

That settled, Lucas smiled.

Damn woman.

* * *

Armed with some kick ass information from her mother, Nyla had showered and changed, and now she was on her way to hunt Lucas' ass down and show him that she understood. She'd do what was within her boundaries to make him a happy lifemate camper.

Flying out of the cab, Nyla took the steps two at a time that led to Lucas' door.

Her palms were sweaty and her mouth was dry.

Oy.

Vay even.

Squaring her shoulders, Nyla took a deep breath and, with sure knuckles, rapped on his door.

Heart in her throat, Nyla peered at Lucas as he opened the door and cocked his head with a grin.

Nyla hurled herself at him, curling into his body and throwing her arms around his neck, grazing his head with the bag she held. "I'm sorry," she sobbed. "I really didn't mean what I said. I was afraid, but I'm not anymore," she whined on a hiccup of sobs. "I'm crazy about you and you can do what ever you want to me. Look." Nyla leaned back in his arms and held up the bag she had. She balanced it on his chest and rooted around in it, pulling out her purchase. "See?" She held it up just before she pushed it in her mouth.

"I bautthis. Niiicce, huh?" she grunted around the item as she looked him square in the eye.

Lucas threw his head back and laughed. "Sugarplum, why would I want to have one of those in your mouth? That would mean you wouldn't always be yapping, and I

really kinda like the way you ramble.” Lucas placed a thumb and forefinger around it and tried to pull it out.

Nyla shook her head vehemently. “Nooooo. Uh, uh,” she grunted and shook her head again. “I cn doozis. Know whatit iss?”

Lucas tugged it out of her mouth with a pop. “Yes, baby. I know what it is.”

Nyla smiled, totally relieved for the first time in three days. “It’s a ball gag,” she said proudly.

“That it is, but I don’t want you gagged. At least not right now,” he teased.

“Yes! A ball gag and I know all about it now. I have so much to tell you. My mom, well, she explained some stuff and now I think I understand. I knew you didn’t want to hurt me, but what was happening to me physically kind of had me all weirded out. But I’m okay now and if you go to the lifemate council, I’ll kill you. Do you hear me, Sir Pouncealot?”

Lucas’ arms tightened around her waist and he laughed again. “Nah. I decided it was too much paperwork.”

Nyla giggled, pressing into the bulk of Lucas’ frame and clinging to his warmth.

“So, you’re crazy about me, huh?”

“Yesss. Yes, I am,” she declared openly, honestly.

“What about your parents, Nyla?”

“It’s all okay. They’re happy for us. I’ll tell you all about it later. Now c’mon, let’s go tie me up.”

Lucas tensed. “No, Nyla. I’ll throw away everything in that closet. It’s not something we have to do to be together.”

“Oh, stop being a pansy ass. You don’t have to do that. I understand now. I was afraid because it excited me and I didn’t understand it, but I do now. I might not always want to break out the handcuffs every time we hit the sack and some stuff is off limits, but I want to try.”

Lucas’ relief was evident and Nyla smiled again. He’d been willing to give up something very important to him. It must be love.

Nyla slid down his body and looped her arms around his neck. On tippy toes, she pressed her lips to his, experiencing the same thrill she had from the moment they'd kissed the first time. "C'mon, take me to your dungeon."

Lucas chuckled. "Nyla, we have to talk about what kind of play we'll indulge in."

"Oh, I already know some of the stuff that interests me. I want to try handcuffs today. Got some of those?"

"I do believe I do, Cleo."

"Good. I mean, even vanilla people like kink sometimes, so we don't have to have a safe word, right?"

"Vanilla, huh? Who've you been talking to?"

Nyla dragged Lucas to his bathroom and went straight for the linen closet, plucking up the fur-lined handcuffs. "I told you, it's a long story, but it was my mother."

Lucas began to open his mouth to speak, but Nyla stopped him with a reminder. "Later. For now, know that I'm willing to try some new stuff. Now, c'mon, Morris. Take me, I'm yours." Nyla was more sure than ever that she wanted this.

She handed him the cuffs and stripped off her clothes on her way into his bedroom. She lay on his bed, arms out and butt naked. Willing...

Lucas groaned and his face held obvious pleasure at her nudity. He pulled off his clothes too, and sprawled out over her, sighing when their flesh touched. His cock was hard, hot, pulsing against her thigh. "Woman, you've made me nuts these past three days. It's a wonder I didn't take up sniffing catnip."

Nyla wrapped her arms around his neck. "I love you. I'm a woman. It's my job to drive you bonkers. Adjust. Now, c'mon, tie me up."

"Who's the one in charge here?"

Nyla giggled against his neck. "Well, I am, but I'll leave you with the illusion that you're on top. How's that?"

Nyla grabbed the spindles of Lucas' brass bed and he clicked the cuffs into place with gentle hands. "Are you sure?" he asked one last time.

Heat flooded Nyla's cunt and her nipples tightened to stiff peaks. "Yes, Lucas. I'm sure."

Lucas parted her thighs, dragging his fingers along her skin. His voice was gruff as the half of him that demanded release took over. "Christ, Nyla. I've wanted you like this for what seems like forever. Do you want me too, Nyla?"

Bet yer bippy. "Yes, Lucas, I want you too." Her body shifted beneath his as she shivered to the tune of his touch.

His face was dark as he bent his head to her breast, laving the nipple, rolling it between his lips, tugging it. Lucas' tongue was rough and sandpapery as he whispered over her belly, toward her pussy, wet and slick with need. When he parted her flesh with an urgent swipe, Nyla bucked, but he held her thighs in place.

There were no demands as he brought Nyla to a climax that had her gasping for breath. It was hurried, but intense and sharp. Nyla wasn't sure she understood why Lucas didn't request anything of her. For now, their mating was enough, on any level.

Lucas towered over her, looking down at her as he brought his cock to her lips. "Lick me, Nyla."

Nyla opened her mouth to him, never wavering, allowing the glide of hot flesh between her lips, savoring the thrust of Lucas' hips and the groan that escaped his throat. She lifted her head, relishing the restraint the bonds around her wrists created as she took him deep within her, tonguing his cock as he plunged into her mouth.

Lucas gripped the edge of the headboard. Nyla felt the tension of his body as he pulled out of her and knelt between her legs to rain kisses over her arms. "Are you okay? Do they hurt you in anyway?" he asked with a husky voice.

"I'm fine, Lucas," she responded, breathy, crazed with need.

"Spread your legs wider, Nyla. If I don't take you now, I'll explode."

Nyla complied, greedily accepting the hard length of Lucas' cock at her entrance. She had no hesitation as he nudged her opening, then plunged into her.

Nyla writhed, accepting Lucas' cock with a moan of contentment, whimpering as he lifted her thigh high. His eyes glittered as he said, "Do you see that, Nyla? Can you see us joined?"

Nyla raised her head to see Lucas between her thighs, his grinding cock deeply imbedded in her. She heard the slap of his balls against her ass and the tidal wave of release flushed her veins drove her hips to crash against his.

Lucas bucked too, his shaft jerking within her, rock hard, thick and on fire.

As they came, Lucas ground out her name, rocking her into a manic frenzy of orgasm. Her chest heaved and Nyla let the wave of climax ease as Lucas ran his hands over her flushed, sensitive skin.

Lucas' hands went directly to the handcuffs, releasing her with a deft click. He rubbed her arms, now weak from tension. "Are you all right, baby?"

"I'm fine, Lucas, really. You didn't hurt me. The handcuffs didn't hurt me. What are you worried about?"

"I never want you to think I take pleasure from your pain, Nyla. That's not what this will ever be about between us."

Nyla ran a hand over his jaw in reassurance. "I know, Lucas. I understand it all now. I don't feel like some kind of freak because I dug a spanking anymore, but understand this wasn't something I knew about myself. I might never have known if not for you and your crazy closet in there."

Lucas laughed as he pulled her over on top of him. "Guess it's not so crazy now, huh? We'll take this slow, Nyla. We'll find out together what you like. I don't care about that as much as I care about you."

Laughing, Nyla teased him, "You're sooooo crazy about me."

Lucas nuzzled her neck. "Like you're not right there with me in the crazy aisle staring at the department of love, smart ass."

Nyla rolled her eyes. "Whatever. Admit it. You're nuts about me."

Lucas ran his hands over her spine. "This much is true. I can't deny it."

Nyla kissed him hard, full on his yummy lips. "We can't go back to holding hands, you know."

"That's okay. How about we just handcuff ourselves to each other?"

She giggled. "Fine. However, we do have some stuff to discuss."

Lucas tilted his head and looked her in the eye. "Now what?"

Smiling, Nyla said, "About that flogger..."

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Dakota Cassidy

Dakota Cassidy found writing quite by accident and it's "been madness ever since." Who knew writing the grocery list would turn into this? Dakota loves anything funny and nothing pleases her more than to hear she's made someone laugh. She loves to write in many genres with a contemporary flair. Dakota lives with her two handsome sons, a dog and a cat. (None of them shape shift--that we know of.) She'd love to hear from you--she always answers her e-mail! Visit her at www.dakotacassidy.com or email her at dakota@dakotacassidy.com.