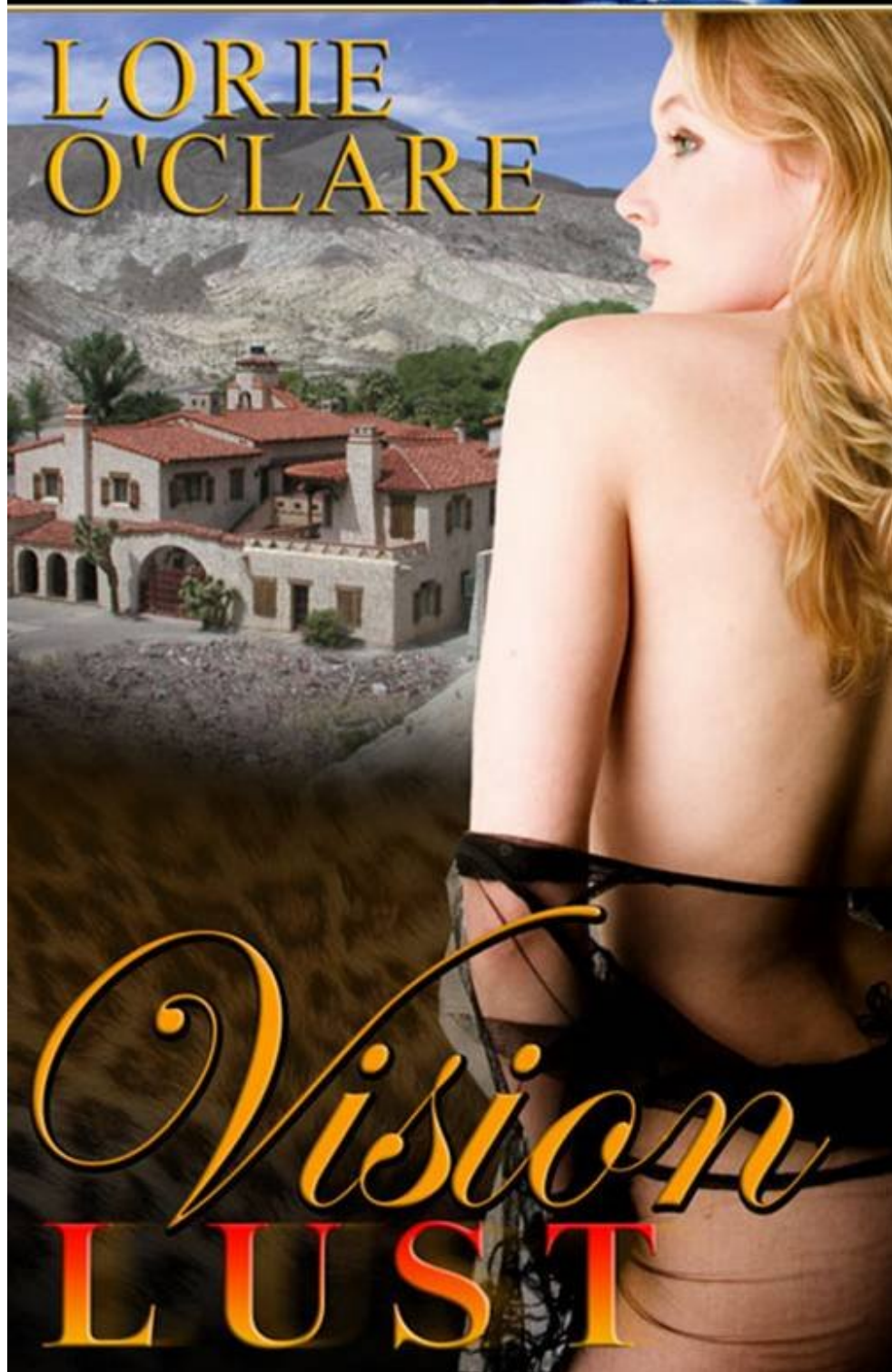


ELLORA'S CAVE TWILIGHT

LORIE
O'CLARE



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Vision Lust

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VISION LUST

Lorie O'Clare

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Chapter One

"Are you Tore Mann?" The male approaching stood well over six feet with dark brown hair and equally brown eyes.

Tore straightened in his booth and nodded to the waitress who'd been leaning against his table, giving him a hell of a view. One glance at who approached and she willingly retreated behind the counter.

"What can I do for you?" Tore didn't stand, but he did straighten in the tall-back wooden booth he sat in.

The werewolf nodded to the empty booth opposite of Tore. "Mind if I join you?"

Tore nodded. He wouldn't let the male know that this was the first time he'd spoken to a werewolf. His species and theirs didn't often mingle. But the male wouldn't seek him out if it weren't important. That much Tore could sniff off the male.

When the male sat, Tore crooked his finger at the waitress behind the counter. She scowled and watched the werewolf cautiously as she walked over to the booth. Her fear made the sex appeal he'd seen in her minutes before drop in score from a ten to a zero. No leopard should ever fear a werewolf.

"Throw another steak on the grill," he told her, watching while she stared at the werewolf.

"No thanks. A beer is fine. Whatever's on tap." He nodded at the female, appearing not to notice the smell of her fear and anger.

The Running Mate was predominantly a leopard establishment. Although they tolerated humans who strayed in from time to time, other species made them nervous. This male appeared not to notice, or didn't care. He leaned back in the booth, his expression relaxing while he focused on Tore. "If I show up at my den and I'm not hungry, my mate will have my hide," he offered conversationally.

The waitress walked off and he leaned forward, his expression darkening. "I have a problem concerning your species," he began seriously. "My name is Rick Bolton and my pack is north of here, not too far."

Tore knew about werewolves north of here. He nodded. "What's your problem?"

"One of your females." Rick paused when the waitress returned.

She placed a large draw in front of him and then offered Tore's plate, brimming with a mound of French fries and a large steak, rare. She left without making eye contact with either of them.

"I mean your species no dishonor," he continued then took a slow, long drink of his beer. Placing the mug down half full, he focused on Tore. "But you need to do something about her."

Tore slid his knife through the thick meat and then stabbed a section with the prongs of his fork. "Who is the female and what has she done?"

"They say her den," he paused, growled, "I mean her litter is Rose."

"Rose? Jin Rose?" Tore hissed. Fucking little female spewed trouble with the flick of her tail. Although he'd howl in her favor for being able to track and capture or kill anyone bringing trouble to leopards, which is what made her a good hunter.

"Hair dyed black, tattoos..."

"Sounds like her. What's the howling all about?"

Rick took another swallow of his beer and put the mug on the table in front of him. The werewolf didn't smell angry, but his expression hardened as he met Tore's gaze. "Gossiping isn't something I care to partake in. The words smell worse than crap if you ask me. But when I'm approached by a den that I happen to know has maintained honor over the years and told that one of their bitches has been wronged, I take that very seriously."

Tore brought a piece of meat to his mouth but then paused, holding his fork in midair. "Jin dishonored a female?" He would have laughed out loud if the werewolf didn't look so damn serious. "No offense. But that isn't exactly the way she runs."

"The charge is against her, nonetheless," Bolton said, his voice a harsh growl. "Several witnesses identified her by smell and appearance with the female's mate."

"Oh." If Jin dishonored the title of hunter by taking a mated male to bed, he would personally have her neck for his next meal. Stuffing the meat in his mouth, he stabbed the next piece with his prongs and watched the red juices ooze from the puncture marks and onto the plate. It was a damn good piece of meat, but his appetite faded with the nauseating smell from the conversation. He swallowed the meat half chewed and felt it all the way down his esophagus. "What do you want me to do?"

"A few coyotes claim they know her whereabouts and I'm told she's not far from here." Bolton downed the rest of his beer and slammed the mug on the table. "You would honor my pack if you brought her forward. The female is howling, as is her right, for a challenge to restore her honor."

Leopards didn't fall under the laws of werewolves. And one look at Bolton proved he knew this. Bolton slid to the edge of the booth and then stood slowly. "I won't challenge whatever decision you make regarding this," he told Tore. "If you do sniff her out, I'd appreciate you letting me know."

Tore nodded, again not getting up but returning to his meal. The werewolf dropped a couple bills next to his empty beer mug and left as silently as he entered.

A hunter's duties were to protect the leopard species, even if it meant from themselves. There were five hunters, an odd amount intentionally decided upon well over a century ago when leopards decided they needed some form of law among themselves. If a decision needed to be made, there would never be a stalemate. He was the oldest hunter among them, having turned thirty-five this past fall. But he was new

as far as hunters went. His sire passed the title on to him five years ago when he finally retired, which being the stubborn pain in the ass he was, wasn't until he died.

Riley Mann, Tore's sire, told him too many times that Tore wasn't ready for the title since it would force his roguish lifestyle out of his blood. There wasn't a worse smell in the world than admitting his sire was right. Leopards, and apparently other species too, turned to him now to make honorable decisions, and in this case, to return honor to a female.

Damn Jin Rose anyway. Why the hell couldn't the little female stay out of trouble? And they called him a rogue.

After paying for his meal and getting a hug from the waitress, who rubbed up against him with a silent invitation, Tore headed out into the blowing snow. There were quite a few humans in Kenora, Ontario. But with the relocation of many leopards who fled from the persecution of Leo Pard down in the States, the leopard population was growing. Tore smelled a melting pot over the months he'd been running this territory. Coyotes, werewolves and owls were also descending in these parts. At the moment, with the harsh wind and large snowflakes falling quickly, there wasn't much to smell but his own scent.

There was a coyote den north of town. Tore knew Pierre to be a good male and if he knew anything, he'd tell Tore. But right now, there were other items on his agenda. If Jin Rose were smart, she'd head south into the States for a while and get lost until the heat cooled down. Although he'd heard there was a mark on her head for murdering Leo Pard, an insane leopard who came up with the ridiculous idea of breeding leopards with visions and strengthening their species, Tore smelled the lies this far north. In the end though, Jin wasn't his problem.

Stomping through the already accumulating snow, Tore headed across the street to his Jeep. Over a week ago, he helped set another hunter, Race Ogden, up in makeshift housing. Not that he worried for the male too much. Race was stuck not far south of here with a litter of three hot females. As he rubbed the fading scar on his face and remembered the welcome slash from the oldest female in that litter, he figured her hot temper would not only keep her litter warm but melt any snow that dared tried landing anywhere near her.

His tires slid a few times over the packed snow, but he made it to the lumber yard in time to pick up the order for Race and then headed out of town. Tore's sire sniffed him out more accurately than Tore would ever admit to a soul. But Tore wouldn't allow him to be right about one thing. No way would he give up his rogue lifestyle because he was a hunter. Single male leopards ran with freedom and honor. They weren't collared or whipped by anyone. His status made being a hunter so much easier. The other three male hunters were now all tied down to a mate. None of them held the power he possessed to enter any circumstance, handle any matter and sniff out the accuracy of any problem, be it coming from a male or a female.

The snow blew around him with an attitude. "Fucking roads," he growled, gripping the steering wheel to keep his Jeep from skidding off the road.

If there were a way to haul the lumber to Race and do it in his fur, he'd jump on the opportunity in a second. But leopards took care of their own. Tore wouldn't let down another when they needed supplies to get through the winter. Even if that meant driving in this storm instead of running in his fur, which would make travel a hell of a lot easier.

"Son of a bitch." He snarled loudly as aggravation made him grip the wheel almost hard enough to yank it out of the steering column. Shifting down, the motor grumbled while the tires fought to keep traction.

By the time he reached where he would have to travel off-road, every muscle in his body strained from concentrating on not flipping his fucking Jeep. Even with it in four-wheel drive and chains crunching over hard-packed snow, it would be a pain in the ass traveling over the terrain to reach Race and the females.

And what thanks would he get? More than likely bared teeth and long claws eager to dig deep into his flesh. The oldest female in that litter was one sexy little bitch. He wouldn't tolerate her ruthless attacks otherwise.

If Race were a smart leopard, he'd chain that oldest to a tree and leave her there. Race was beyond gone though for the middle female in the litter. He'd just announced his mating and given up his single male status. Tore knew one thing—he'd never sacrifice his freedom, no matter how sweet the sex smelled, or how tight a hot little pussy could wrap around his cock. No female was worth living in conditions like this, and Tore knew Race could have it better down in the States.

White-knuckling the steering wheel, beads of sweat formed on his brow and down his spine when he cut off the highway. There was a rough road that led to Race and the females, but it was impossible to see it from the snow falling. The Jeep bounced over the uneven terrain and Tore's massive body slammed against the seat and door.

Glancing at the stack of wood that stretched out the open back window, Tore then focused ahead of him. The burnt ruins of the old home came into view with a bellow of smoke circling out the chimney and then hanging stationary above the home. It was as if even the smoke froze as it tried climbing toward the sky.

He pulled to a stop, pushing in the clutch and then securing the brake. Once a beautiful home had been buried back among these trees. Now a shell, the remains from a fire, endured the winter blast that came at them full force. Fortunately, before the snow hit, he and Race got walls and a roof up for several rooms. At least while in their human form they wouldn't freeze.

Stepping out of the Jeep, Tore headed to the back and released the door. They would start on the next room once the weather let up, but for now, at least the supplies were ready.

Even as snowflakes clung to his flesh and did their best to blind him, Tore picked up on a scent that tried blowing right past him. He looked over the roof of his vehicle at the female standing in the doorway. In spite of the fact she looked as if she wanted to

kill him, the way her thick long blonde hair blew around her slender frame turned him on in a way it shouldn't.

She was mean to the core and proved as much the first time he met her. Although the laceration on his face and his arm were practically gone, her temper wasn't. Tore grunted and pulled free some of the stacked wood, backing up from his Jeep until he could balance them on his shoulder. Watching her stand in the doorway, glaring at him while her green eyes sparked with energy that made him think of a geyser about to blow, he carried the wood over toward the house and turned to drop it.

"Don't put those there," she growled.

Tore slowed but only long enough to stare deep into those pools of fire before dropping the wood. It made a large bang while snow puffed up around him.

"What did I just say?" she hissed.

Tore ignored her and headed for the next load. The door slammed behind him. It sounded solid, which meant they'd done a good job in ensuring that it would hold against the elements and intruders to some extent. Not that he worried for a moment that he couldn't yank it off its hinges if he wished.

He grabbed the next load and stomped through the drifting snow, which seemed deeper than when he hauled the first load. The snow was coming down fast and hard.

The door opened quickly and this time the female stomped outside, wearing boots that hugged her shins and ended before her knees. Her blue jeans hugged her thighs and hips just as nicely. She didn't bother with a coat though, and even though she wore a baggy sweatshirt, her large breasts were full enough that nipples puckered in the cold and pressed against the thick material.

If he hauled the wood a bit slower, it wasn't because he worried about getting too close to her. The little female marched through the snow and he noticed her breasts bounce. He was intrigued and, yes, aroused. She might have a vicious bite, one meant to do damage, but knowing that just made him plot to keep the upper hand.

Tore moved to where he'd put the first stack, but she made it there first. Standing and facing him, she put her hands on her hips and glared at him.

"Put the wood over on the side." She pointed with her finger.

If he put it over where she instructed, they would simply have to move it back here to start work on the next room.

Again Tore ignored her and, no longer moving slowly, turned the wood, forcing her to dive out of the way or get smacked in the head with the planks. Again they made a large booming sound when he dropped them on top of the first pile.

"Are you really an idiot?" she snarled. "Or are you just pretending to be?"

"If you want the wood over there, move it there yourself." He turned and headed for the last load.

The snow blew around him, creating miniature tornadoes of sparkling white flecks. Tore still smelled the female when she followed him, her spicy anger mixed with

something a bit more pungent, almost appealing as he breathed it deep into his lungs. It was defiance, determination. Whatever motivated her, he was sure he'd never know. But she wasn't going to stop harassing him until he did as she instructed. Tore dragged the last of the wood out of the back of his Jeep, deciding the last thing he would do is follow her bidding.

"Race wouldn't want the wood there," she said, tilting her head so that he noticed how her long, narrow nose accented her slender face and high cheekbones. Her cheeks were rosy red and her thick blonde hair blew around her face, although she was too busy fisting her hands into her waistline to move the strands out of the way.

"Race would want the wood where we'll need it when we start building your next room." Obviously Race wasn't here or the male would probably attempt to get the fiery female out of his way. Tore wondered if she was here alone. He didn't smell any leopards but the two of them. He had half a mind to ask her just to push her further into the defensive. For some reason, getting her good and riled was damn entertaining. "But he would snarl at me, thinking I forced a female to do grunt work if I put the wood in a spot that was out of the way and would require moving it unnecessarily before we started working."

"He would have to move it if you left it here," she challenged.

"He would know if I left it here that I was in a hurry and not being an idiot by putting it somewhere that was intentionally out of the way."

"With it out of the way, none of us will trip over it when we come and go."

"No one will trip over it, little cat, because you are going to let your litter know when they return that it is there." He watched her green eyes flare when he acknowledged knowing they were alone out here. "You can help me if you want."

He tugged again on the wood, making a show of pulling it out of the Jeep. He could easily lift and remove it quickly, adjust it on his shoulder and put it where it needed to go then be out of here. Bantering with the little cat was more fun than flirting with the big-boobed waitress at The Running Mate.

"The only thing I'd help you do is leave," she growled, and finally moved her hand to slap hair out of her face. "Since I doubt you have enough intelligence to smell your way out of a whore house."

Tore dropped the wood and turned on her. He knew her words bit as hard as her teeth. But the smell of her confidence, of her willful nature and sensing she got off insulting others to make herself feel more important, should be traits about her that would make him walk away. He wasn't even positive the smoldering gaze she pinned him with was in fact insecurity, fear, intense apprehension that every leopard around her was out to get her.

"My sweet little cat," he purred, releasing his grip on the wood and rubbing his hands together as he turned on her. "I'm sure you've got enough wits about you to smell intelligence. You're attacking simply to spend time with me."

“Why you pompous, arrogant ass,” she howled, raising her hands with claws extended while her green eyes flashed brighter than he’d notice them being before. “First of all, I am not your ‘sweet little cat’!”

He was ready when she attacked. When she would have pounced, Tore leapt before she could, grabbing her and lifting her in the air, then pinned her against the side of his Jeep. “Keep pointing out what you’re not, little cat, and I might start smelling your longing for something you want.”

“I don’t smell a damn thing that I want.” She twisted furiously, causing all of her hair to fall over her face while kicking and thrashing with her arms.

He could endure her bruises, hold her until she quit moving, which might be a while, or he could give her what she wanted. Tore grabbed her waist and picked her up quickly. He would do his best to remember the expression on her face when her scent suddenly changed drastically. It was as though when he pulled her from his Jeep and lifted her into the air that all anger swooped right out of her while the most incredibly sweet aroma he’d ever breathed in his life washed over her.

Tore tossed her into the air, turning in time to see her long blonde hair float around her face while all hard angles in her expression vanished.

Chapter Two

Maurie Sheridan felt the ice-cold air bite at her cheeks and sting her eyes as she flew through the air. She landed in the snow, millions of tiny flakes flashing around her as her palms instantly froze when her hands went almost elbow deep into the drifting snow. The cold soaked through her jeans.

All the freezing moisture did when it ransacked her body was give her clarity.

The fucking rogue just tossed her through the air!

"Fuck you!" she snarled, the words raking over her throat when she screamed at Tore. She charged at him, her focus on his face, his bare arms from elbow down. Anywhere she saw flesh.

He looked way too confident, as if wherever he stood on this earth, all that was around him belonged to him and would do his bidding. His blond hair had darker streaks that were almost a burnt orange. When the snow whipped around him, it lifted the straight strands and blew them around his face.

She would have hit her target if she didn't lift her gaze to his eyes. Why did she picture him in her mind as having narrow, devious slits? With claws extended, determination to smack that cocky look off his face making adrenaline pump with a fierce fury through her body, Maurie knew her target would be hers. But then she stared into the deepest pools of emerald green she'd ever gazed into.

"Oh no you don't, little cat!" Tore grabbed her when she leapt at him.

And although she planned on appearing to leap and then rushing into him, those damn eyes pulled her to him, as though he could reach deep inside her with one look and control her actions.

Well, no one controlled her. No one!

"If you're going to come around here, you're going to learn to behave." His hands were like steel traps wrapped around her arms. And even when her hair flew over her face, Maurie could still see how muscles rippled over each other and bulged underneath the wool jac shirt he wore. "You'll do as you're told or I swear..."

Tore lifted her off the ground until her face was level with his. Then adjusting his grip on her faster than she could react to him suddenly freeing her arms, Tore wrapped his thick arms around her, damn near squeezing the life out of her, while he pressed his lips to hers.

Maurie didn't expect it. She didn't smell lust or anything close to it. But his lips touched hers and the sparks that attacked her system were worse than if she'd just been shocked by a large amount of electricity.

His lips were surprisingly warm, soft and moist. But they were anything but gentle. He nipped at her lower lip, his teeth scraping over her flesh and grabbing, holding on and just barely puncturing before releasing.

Maurie gasped, more shocked than hurt when he bit her. The metallic taste of her own blood filled her mouth, creating a rush that whirled around inside her like a tornado bent on destruction.

Tore dove into her mouth, quickly stealing the taste of blood and replacing it with something even more dangerous, the taste of him. He opened her, filled her and devoured with one action, leaving her no time to react. And as he impaled her, the funnel of emotions she never allowed to surface before spun out of control, too fast for her to grab a hold of and put back in place.

"I doubt a female who has no clue how to behave could ever teach any leopard how to heel." He moved his lips over hers as he growled into her mouth.

Tore pushed her to arm's length before she got her brain to acknowledge he no longer kissed her. For a moment, she couldn't even master scowling at him. Her lips felt swollen, her mouth violated and her insides turned upside down.

Sucking in a mouthful of freezing air and feeling the snowflakes melt on her feverish cheeks helped bring her senses back to her. The aroma that filled her lungs smelled more powerful, dominating and appealing than anything she imagined she would smell off this male.

"Leave," she demanded, feeling her muscles start to quiver as reality sunk in heavily.

"You don't want your home built?" He cocked one eyebrow and his compelling green eyes sparked with amusement.

Yes. She did. Desperately. And if she could figure out how to build it herself, she would. Already Race and Karma worked on building their own home not too far from here. Living in the barely refurbished home with her youngest littermate Darla made for really cramped quarters. Once the home easily housed their entire litter, but after it was burnt when Maurie was a cub, most of the rooms needed to be completely rebuilt.

"I'll tell you what." She licked her lip where he bit her and watched his gaze drop to the action. Acknowledging she could control his actions, even if it was such a small act as to where he focused his attention, helped her regain a sense of control. "Just put the wood there." She pointed to the ground at the end of the Jeep.

Tore didn't reach for the wood. Instead he moved toward her, stalking her with his incredibly broad shoulders and chest muscles flexing while he took one step and then another. Maurie was certain she'd never seen a leopard as large as he was. And he wasn't fat. God. Her fingers itched to explore all of that bulging muscle.

"I wouldn't dishonor any leopard by doing a job half ass," he growled, not stopping until he pressed against her. Then lifting her hair and brushing it over her shoulder, his scent grew muskier, so aroused it almost made him appear larger. "Would you ask me to not honor another of our kind, little cat?"

She jumped out of his way, hating that he forced her to move but despising more how his fingers brushing through her hair created a pressure deep inside her that didn't go away when she leapt free of him.

"You're dishonoring me right now," she hissed.

"Oh really." Again a sweet aroma mixed with his musky lust. "You don't smell too dishonored, my little cat."

She focused on how his smooth, calm tone and way-too-confident manner pissed her off. Although there was no ignoring the growing pressure that created moisture between her legs. As she moved again, she could feel how soaked her pussy was.

"I am not your little cat," she growled, fueling her anger by focusing on everything she could think of about him that annoyed her. The foremost being she hated anyone getting the upper paw with her.

"Offer me a proper introduction."

Her jaw dropped, but the blow to her gut hurt enough to render her speechless for a moment. "You would kiss a female without even knowing her name?" she asked in disbelief. Turning, she no longer cared where he put the fucking wood, or if he stood outside in the snow in his flesh all damn day and froze to death. She bolted toward her door.

And flew off the ground.

Tore grabbed her arm, yanking her back to him and causing her to slam against his feral body. Maurie knew he already knew her name. "No," he hissed. "I wouldn't and I never have."

"I don't associate with leopards when I can't smell their lies." She spoke quietly, but when he adjusted her so that her breasts brushed against his chest, it was like electrical currents buzzed from her already hardened nipples straight through her middle to her pussy.

"Not before now." He grabbed her neck while his other hand flattened against her spine. But when he tried nipping her lower lip again, she turned her head quickly. "Are you going to introduce yourself properly and welcome me into your den, little cat?" he whispered in her ear, and then his teeth captured her earlobe.

Maurie yanked her head away, which caused his sharp teeth to scrape over her sensitive flesh. "Go to hell."

"Been there. I'd rather be here." His fingers snaked around her jaw, forcing her face toward his. "Would you have me kiss you again?"

"No."

"Then offer the formal introduction. It honors you and me."

Her heart beat too quickly. It was all she could do to keep her teeth from growing so she wouldn't cut her lip more so than the nip he'd already given her. Tore lowered his mouth to hers, his green eyes glowing victoriously. But she didn't stare into them

this time. Instead, lowering her gaze to his mouth, her lids almost closed, she opened her mouth and prepared to bite.

Tore ran his hand up her back and grabbed her hair, pulling hard enough she would have fallen backward if he didn't keep her pinned in place. She cried out, feeling the sting and hating how it created a heat inside her that burned out of control instantly.

"What will it take to tame you so that you don't attack me?" he whispered, his voice deep and gravelly.

The sound of it raised the hairs on her flesh and sent tiny sparks shooting up her spine. "If you don't know the answer to that one," she said, whispering as he did, "then it's certainly not my job to explain it to you."

The corner of his mouth twitched, not quite a smile but possibly as close as he ever came to showing amusement. His lust intoxicated her and his size should make her nervous as hell. Not that she hadn't killed her fair share of males. In her line of work, when she ran, anyone died who got in her way.

But that was if they tried preventing her from saving leopards. She wasn't working right now. And Tore moved faster than she did. Not to mention his grip was more powerful than a steel trap.

"I have no problem figuring it out for myself." He pulled her head back farther, using a quick jerk that threw her off balance.

Clawing at the air, Maurie hissed loudly, gaining only a small bit of satisfaction when her nails raked over his chest. The wool jac shirt he wore was thick enough that she didn't tear it. But she did catch her nail on the zipper, pulling it down and broadening the V-neck. Roped muscle sprinkled with tight coils of dark blond hair appeared before her eyes and damn near made her drool. Tore was so fucking hot the snowflakes melted the instant they touched him.

His arm braced her behind her shoulders while his other hand dragged down her front, leaving her neck and moving between her breasts. "Since you won't honor me by announcing your given name, I'll honor you by giving you one," he told her, his gaze dropping to her breasts while his fingers stretched and then moved lower until he pressed his palm into her stomach. "You're my wildcat. And although you need taming, half of your beauty comes from the fire in your eyes."

She thought of telling him there was nothing attractive about an untamed rogue who was full of himself. Before she could get the words to her mouth he pushed his fingers under her shirt.

"Who needs training?" She grabbed his arm and was instantly distracted by how thick it was.

"Wildcat, I'm a complete package. There's no changing this male." His fingertips were calloused and rough, his fingers thick and long, and his touch confident as he slid his hand up the inside of her shirt to her breasts.

"I'm not interested in doing anything with or to you, male." She couldn't back away from him with his arm inside her sweatshirt unless she wanted to strip out of it.

Not to mention the grip he had on the back of her hair prevented her from turning her head either direction even a bit. He searched her face for a moment when she spoke, but then pivoted his gaze on her eyes, hardly blinking as he stared deep into them. She did her best not to match his gaze, although his broad cheekbones, the way the snow clung to his hair and dampened it added to his rugged, hard-ass appearance.

"Then why aren't you fighting me anymore?" he growled, his hoarse whisper adding to the tingles that shot over her flesh. He pinched one of her nipples and twisted it while pulling her head back even farther.

Tore pressed his lips to hers again, this time with his body pressing into hers and his hand kneading her breast. She swore as the snow fell and landed on her it sizzled, evaporating instantly from the heat rushing over her. The way he growled so confidently, touched her as if he already knew exactly what turned her on and tasted her as if she were the best meal he'd ever had, appealed to her more than it should.

Maurie wasn't looking for a mate or even a consensual sexual partner. After her younger littermate Karma fucked up everything for them by mating with a hunter, she should fight with everything she had, kick, scratch and bite, to get him to leave her alone. Vision Controllers, the leopard organization her parents helped create and that she and her littermates ran for, didn't trust hunters after they helped Leo Pard steal leopards from their litters.

Karma's mate Race argued they didn't smell the truth when it came to hunters. Laurie wasn't so sure. What she was sure of was Tore devoured her mouth so damn well she didn't want to make him stop.

He dipped into her, exploring her mouth with his tongue and opening her farther while he slowly tortured her nipple. As he held her where he wanted her with his hand securely holding her hair behind her head, his legs moved so that she felt his hard cock press into her waist.

It was bad enough that her pussy swelled and throbbed just from how he kissed her. Feeling that hard length of steel pulse between them drove her nuts. No amount of snow would put out the fire that burst into flames inside her.

"I don't think a female's ever smelled as good as you do right now," he growled into her mouth.

When she sucked in a breath, Laurie smelled her lust mixed with his incredibly powerful aroma of dominance and satisfaction. The musky and incredibly rich scent was so erotic, so appealing, and unlike anything she'd ever breathed in before. It created a fog around her, and if she didn't do something about it quickly, it would render her completely defenseless.

God damn him!

No male would ever capture her and steal her ability to protect herself. And they sure as hell wouldn't do it with a kiss and the smallest amount of foreplay.

"Let me go." Her voice even sounded pathetic, weak.

"I don't think so," he said, and slid his hand under her shirt to her other breast.

"I do. Let me go, now!" She needed to fight the fog, overcome the lust. If she didn't now, she'd never regain her wall of protection around this leopard.

Maurie almost stumbled backward when Tore obeyed and slid his hand out from under her sweatshirt. As quickly as he released her, he turned away from her and returned to the remaining wood in the back of his Jeep. Maurie slapped her hand against the side of his car, finding solace in the cold metal and using it to fight the burning craving that ransacked her body.

"I want you to forget that any of this just happened." Maurie straightened and tugged on her sweatshirt then ran her hands over her hair, shocked to feel how damp it was.

Tore pulled the wood out of the back of his Jeep and glanced over the hood at her. He made the load appear light in spite of how his muscles rippled and forced his wool shirt to stretch over them.

"I'll forget it happened when you do, wildcat." He rested the load on one shoulder and walked toward her.

His shirt was still unzipped and the view of hard-packed perfection completed the package that he had just pointed out to her wasn't going to change. God. She hoped not.

She breathed in his rich scent when he walked by her, still heavily laced with his lust and confirming what she feared was probably the truth. Maurie wasn't going to forget this moment any time soon. From the way he smelled, she doubted he would either. Lowering her attention to his hard ass, she felt the first shiver from a hard blast of wind while watching Tore drop the remaining wood on top of the other planks.

Before he turned around, Maurie hurried across the drifting snow, feeling how her clothes hung on her from being outside all this time and acutely aware of how heavy and damp her hair felt against her back. It seemed the snow blew more aggressively around her now than it did a few minutes ago. And she hated admitting that it could be letting up for all she knew. She didn't exactly notice the snow at all when Tore was holding her.

Worse yet, apparently she didn't shut the door all the way, and when she pushed her way into her home, she noticed the snow had drifted over the brand-new wood floor. The fire was damn near out, and Maurie shivered when she stepped on the mat by the door and kicked off her boots.

"Damn it." She shut the door, knowing the honorable thing to do would be at least acknowledge Tore, or thank him for bringing the wood, even if he refused to put it where she asked. But the only way she'd regain her wits was if she continued gulping in air that didn't smell like him. "And get this place warmed back up."

Her hair was soaked and she was pissed as hell at herself for letting some pompous, dominating rogue get the best of her. Maurie never let her guard down, never. She couldn't afford to, not when she was responsible for her two littermates—well, one now

that Karma was mated—and making sure every run they did for Vision Controllers never smelled foul.

“Not that they appreciated it.” She headed toward the fireplace and grabbed her cell phone off the table, ready to fix it back on her waist when she noticed the screen. Four missed calls. “Oh hell,” she grumbled, turning and sniffing toward the door and wondering if Tore was still out there.

No. She didn't care. Thanks to hunters, all the hard work she and her littermates had done for Vision Controllers no longer mattered. They had been fired because a hunter came sniffing around. Of course Karma could have stopped him instead of encouraging him, but she fell in love. Karma might think Maurie hated her, but it was hard as hell providing for them after their parents died. Maurie needed to be tough, ruthless in fact, just to keep them alive. Three single females running together were an open target for any single male to come after. Even now she still needed to provide for Darla, who sometimes acted more cub than grown female.

The knock on the door about scared the crap out of her. At the same time she pushed the button on her cell to see all the missed calls were from Darla.

“What the fuck?” She growled at the door while trying to figure out why her younger littermate tried getting a hold of her.

Darla was with Karma and Race. The door opened and a cloud of snow blew around the floor when Tore stuck his head in. His seductive eyes darkened noticeably when he suddenly frowned and pushed the door open farther.

“What's wrong?” he demanded.

“Nothing,” she snapped. “Go. Good hunting.” If something happened to Darla while she was outside, allowing that brute of a male to maul her, she'd die.

She waved her hand at him, willing him to hurry and disappear so she could return her younger littermate's call without an audience.

“Good hunting, wildcat. I'll see you soon.” His baritone purred with deep, dark promises that hung in the air after he closed the door.

Maurie couldn't stop the shiver that rushed over her flesh. She gripped her phone, punching the button to return her littermate's call. The phone rang and went to voicemail, the automated voicemail Maurie set up on all of their phones, informing her to leave a message. Maurie growled at it and ended the call. Then punching in Karma's number, she ended the call before finishing dialing, remembering that Karma recently switched to a plan with her mate.

“God damn it.” Her irritation grew and she marched over to the small box on the table and opened it, fishing through papers until she found the one with Karma's new number. Dialing it quickly, she'd have to save it to her phone, but for now, figuring out why Darla would call four times in such a short period mattered more.

“I can't believe you saved my number,” Karma said in form of greeting when she answered.

Maurie rolled her eyes, her littermate always acted as though Laurie didn't care about her. Ignoring Karma's flippant remark, she cut to the chase. "Where's Darla?" she demanded.

"What do you mean, where's Darla? She left us almost an hour ago."

Maurie turned when she heard something outside. "She called me four times but my phone was in here and that hunter brought wood over. I was outside," she said, deciding to leave it at that. There wasn't any more to say.

"I wonder why she would have called you. She was going to run home in her fur. She said the snow looked like fun."

Maurie jumped again when someone pounded on the door. She knew exactly who it was, the piece of wood wasn't thick enough to prevent Tore's powerful, dominating scent from creeping toward her.

"I'll call you back," she told Karma, and hung up the phone.

She pulled open the door, but Tore's serious expression brought her pause. There wasn't any smell of lust on him.

He backed away from the door and pointed. "Is this your littermate?" he growled.

Maurie stepped outside and looked where Tore pointed. In the trees, snarling and practically foaming at the mouth with outrage, Darla stood in her fur.

"Where are your clothes?" Laurie demanded, staring at her littermate and noticing immediately that her clothes weren't tied around her waist.

Darla roared furiously and then bounded past them into the house.

Chapter Three

Tore stared at the closed door while his ears prickled. Excited female voices hissed inside. It wasn't right to eavesdrop. But damn. Something wasn't right. That little female was spooked to hell. And why didn't she have her clothes?

The snow didn't bother him before, but now snowflakes floating around his face irritated him and he swatted at them while returning to his Jeep. He got in and started it, but then grabbed his phone from the console and punched numbers.

"Race," he said when the male answered. "I dropped wood off here. As soon as this shit stops, we should be able to start on that next room."

"Yeah. I heard you were there." Race said something to his mate in the background but then cleared his voice. "Karma is worried. Her younger littermate left here an hour ago to run home, which should have taken her ten minutes at the most once she was in her fur. But then Maurie called and said she wasn't there and that she missed four calls from her."

"I think she just showed up. I'm not sure what is wrong." Tore looked at the new home they were working on rebuilding on the old foundation.

"Something is wrong?" Again Race lowered his voice while he calmed his mate down in the background.

"Not sure. Maurie's younger littermate just showed up in her fur, damn near foaming at the mouth and there weren't any clothes tied around her waist."

"We're on our way. Do me a favor and stay there until we get there."

"No problem." Tore hung up his phone and scowled at the door. He seriously doubted he'd be offered a formal invitation inside since Maurie wouldn't officially introduce herself to him and hated waiting in his vehicle, but his clothes were soaked clear through. Snow smeared the windshield and he slapped the wiper switch to make them turn on once and clear his view. Instantly more snow landed and created watery trails that disturbed his ability to see. "You're not going to find out shit by sitting here."

Not to mention, little wildcat Maurie did something to him. Something more than the waitress at the restaurant in town did. And a hell of a lot more than any of the other females he'd sniffed after recently had. Above and beyond the fact she smelled mighty damn hot when he got her pussy good and wet.

Putting aside his lust for his wildcat, Tore was a hunter.

"And you know you smelled trouble." Grunting as he pushed his large frame out from behind the driver's wheel, Tore slammed the SUV door shut and noticed how deeper the snow was as he trudged through it to the door.

Before he could knock, a truck pulled in behind his Jeep. Race jumped out one side while his mate hurried out the other. She ran past him in the snow toward the house.

"We've got trouble," Race said when he reached Tore. "Sounds as if Darla, Karma's youngest littermate, damn near got her ass raped."

"What?" Tore smelled the worry on Race when he fell in stride next to him and headed toward the door. At least he didn't have to worry about being let inside.

Race entered the room and stopped in the middle of it. Tore followed, closing the door behind him but then remaining where he was. There wasn't a lot of space inside and the three females were huddled by the fire, which desperately needed tending. Maurie and Karma were all over their youngest littermate, who sat cross-legged on the floor with a large blanket wrapped around her.

"Tell me what happened," Race demanded.

All three looked up at him and then over at Tore as if just now noticing the males were watching them. Darla pulled the blanket tighter around her and although all Tore saw of her was her wet hair clinging to the blanket and her large eyes filled with golden flecks, he'd seen enough of her before to know the young female was more than distracting. But so damn innocent-looking. His blood boiled thinking that anyone around here would abuse her.

"I'll tell you what is going to happen." Maurie jumped up and ignored Tore when she grabbed her boots. "A couple of leopards are going to die!"

"Maurie," Darla whispered, her voice sounding scratchy.

Maurie ignored her and finally looked at Tore. "Move," she demanded.

"What happened?" Tore asked quietly instead of honoring her request.

"Tell me what happened before anyone goes anywhere," Race demanded.

Maurie growled but Karma spoke up.

"Darla left us and headed home. She barely changed and started running when a couple of males jumped her." Karma wrapped her arms around her younger littermate and focused on her mate while speaking. "Sounds as though they didn't know what they were taking on when they tried sniffing around a Sheridan female," she said, grinning, and stroked her younger littermate's hair. "One of them is probably nursing some pretty nasty wounds right now. But they chased her. And Darla doesn't know the area inside and out yet. She got turned around and managed to lose them for a bit."

Darla coughed and then looked up with eyes that looked more like a leopard's than human. "I changed and got dressed and tried calling you, Maurie. Where were you?"

Maurie stood in front of Tore, glaring at the floor. He felt her pain, sensed her urge to strike out.

"I was outside. The phone was in here." She glared at Tore as if all of this were his fault. "This is my litter. You better move so that I can do what must be done."

"You'll get your chance," Tore promised her. "We're going to hear the entire story first though before we attack."

"We?" she challenged.

Tore ignored her, looking past her at Darla. "Go on," he prompted quietly.

"Why didn't you call me?" Karma asked.

"You said you two were going in to town. Maurie was closer. And I wasn't thinking right, I guess."

"It's my job to protect you," Maurie snapped.

Tore ached to grab her when she started pacing. She didn't get far since Race stood in the middle of the room and he stood by the door.

"I was stupid to try to call you. But I figured in my flesh that if those males found me, they wouldn't attack. But they did." Darla continued explaining the upsetting details, and Maurie got busy putting a couple of logs on the fire and then stabbing at them furiously until flames burst to life. "When they found me, one of them changed and started holding his cock and shaking it at me, as though that puny thing were a prize or something." Darla looked at Maurie when her older littermate quit poking the fire and turned in her direction. "You would have been proud of me there, Maurie. I did just like you've done in the past. I lured him in and then attacked."

Darla struck out with her hand, fingers extended, and then made a twisting gesture when she fisted her hand. Race hissed but Tore noticed Maurie's body tense. Even with her back to him, it was apparent there was something about her past that she didn't want spilled in front of him.

Darla's blanket slipped down her bare shoulder and Maurie grabbed it as Darla clutched it again.

"Stay focused on what happened," Maurie whispered.

Karma shot a furtive glance at Tore, and he didn't miss the apprehensive smell that filtered through the tension and anger in the room. When he looked toward Race, his expression remained etched in stone. Whatever aggression lay in Maurie's past, all of them appeared content in him not knowing. And he easily believed her past could be bloody.

"When I attacked the male, who was in his skin, he grabbed me. I didn't realize the other male had changed. The two of them tried raping me there."

"So you can easily identify them in their flesh as well as their fur?" Maurie demanded as she straightened to her feet.

"When I fought them enough that they couldn't get anywhere with me, they hauled me off. I kicked and screamed with everything I had until we got to their home. And then the moment they let me down I changed and hauled ass. I ran harder than I've ever run in my life. I don't know why I got turned around the first time but made it here the second. But I didn't stop until I got here."

Maurie turned, putting her hands on her hips and looking from Race to Tore. "You two, out. Darla needs to dress."

"Let me ask your littermate one question." Tore focused on Maurie, his voice soft, calm. He honored her as oldest in her litter and would do what he could to wipe away the guilt smeared on her pretty face. When she studied him for one moment and then nodded, he shifted his attention to Darla. "I want you to tell me what they looked like, what their home looked like."

Darla leaned against Karma, who hugged her tighter and whispered assuring words into her ear. Maurie crossed her arms, her worry and anger winding her so tight that she almost shook from the intensity of it.

"They were skinny, maybe my age," Darla said, but looked at Maurie when she offered the information, the smell of her fear and outrage growing while she spoke. "They smelled like beer and marijuana," she added, crinkling her pretty nose in a look of disgust. "And the trailer they tried dragging me into..." Again she wrinkled her face, looking as if she might puke. "It smelled so terrible I could see how the only way they'd get a female in there would be to drag her in kicking and biting."

"It's over now," Karma assured her.

"Like hell," Maurie spit out venomously. "They want a female in that dump of theirs. I'll make those fucking leopards regret the day they tried."

Tore wondered again about Darla's comment that Maurie lured males in and attacked. The way she looked at the moment, he'd guess she might even enjoy the act.

"Any of that sound familiar to you?" Race asked.

Tore snapped his attention from Maurie and focused on Race's tight expression. So many emotions plunged through the air, if he weren't an expert at sniffing out what leopard felt what, he'd be mind-boggled by all of it.

"Unfortunately yes," he growled, turning toward the door and ignoring Maurie when she looked at him, her eyes wide as her lips parted. The little wildcat was going to have to attack someone before the day was out. Her energy pushed the limits of the small room as if it would strike out for her. "We'll head over to the lumber yard. I know Bart Rivers is there because I picked the wood up from him. It sounds like Nate and Ned Rivers, the youngest of that litter, are the guilty culprits."

"Rivers?" Maurie stepped between him and Race. "They are the litter who own the land adjoining ours."

"Yup." Tore doubted Maurie would appreciate him touching her in front of her litter but he couldn't resist. Her damp hair fell over her breast and he reached out to brush it behind her shoulder.

Maurie moved with lightning speed, slapping his hand and making a cracking sound when flesh hit flesh. But Tore anticipated that the bound-up adrenaline pumping inside her ached for release. He moved just as quickly, grabbing her wrist and bringing her fisted hand up next to her face. Without her boots on, Maurie's head barely reached his shoulder. But she glared up at him, the fire in her eyes creating sparks of gold against her green irises, which made her look even more appealing. He kept his own reaction to her steamy temper under wraps and spoke in a low, cool tone.

"Stay here and take care of your littermate," he growled. "Once we confirm who her assaulters were, I promise, wildcat, you'll have your avenue to release all that energy."

Her eyes widened and he bet she wondered what kind of avenue he actually proposed. The flush that quickly crept over her creamy skin confirmed his guess, but he wouldn't reveal that the thought of taking her on in wild, aggressive sex sounded a hell of a lot better to him than chasing after wimp-dicks in the snow.

Pushing her toward her littermates, Tore released her and then opened the door, welcoming the cold, snowy blast of air that helped cool his own thoughts. Race hurried outside with him and closed the door firmly behind them.

"Don't tell me you're sniffing after Maurie," Race said as he ducked against the brutal wind and snow that fell in torrents around them.

"You got a problem with that?" Tore understood that Race mating with Karma made him head male of this litter.

Race stopped when they reached Tore's Jeep and stared at Tore, his jaw dropping with disbelief. If the weather didn't suck and the matter at hand so serious, Tore might have grinned at Race's expression of shock.

"She's a wicked bitch, wicked like you've never seen before. I love the hell out of her littermate, but honest, man, you could do better. Maurie is out of control."

"Aren't they all before you decide to tame one of them?" Tore wasn't sure why he asked. Taming Maurie wasn't exactly what he had in mind. Fueling her fire sounded a hell of a lot more fun.

"Some of them aren't worth taming." Race shook his head, obviously not too concerned about the matter. "You could do better."

Tore wasn't sure he'd met better than what he'd sniffed out in Maurie so far. But letting it go at that, he reached for his door handle. "Follow me into town. And try not to get yourself stuck. I'd hate to take the time to rescue your tail before we go kick ass."

Race growled and stomped through the snow to his truck. Tore hurried and ducked into his Jeep, ready to get this over with. At least it looked as if he would see Maurie again later today.

Snow plows worked hard to keep the streets cleared while the storm appeared to be worsening. Tore reminded himself he needed to sniff out a few coyotes too at some point. The werewolf pack outside Kenora was pretty good-sized and they held some weight in town. Not that werewolves ever gave him much trouble. But politics were politics and when a pack leader approached and asked a favor, it wasn't something Tore could ignore.

"Looks as if everyone's headed home for the day," Tore told Race on his cell while facing him in his Jeep.

They sat idle in the lumber yard parking lot talking on the phone, neither seeing the point in getting out and sniffing out the obvious. It was snowing hard enough to shut the town down.

"You know I can't go home without making a serious effort to sniff out Darla's attackers first."

Tore understood and didn't mind helping in the hunt. The little female was nothing like her oldest littermate, but Darla was worth defending. Not to mention, Maurie would be harder to seduce next time he saw her if he didn't do his damndest to find the males who dishonored Darla.

"If Bart isn't at The Running Mate, then he probably headed home." Tore adjusted his cell between his ear and shoulder while turning around and heading back to the street. "And I don't know his home number."

"You know where he lives?"

Tore knew where everyone lived. Well, maybe not the humans. But they didn't count. "Yup. I do."

"Okay. Restaurant first. If we don't sniff him out there, we're heading out to his litter."

Tore let Race take the helm with this one since it was his litter who'd been dishonored. Any other time he would have snarled at the leopard for trying to play like he was in charge. Granted though, Tore had noticed a change in the male since he'd taken a mate. Once Race acted just how he looked, with his thick, long blond curls and an expression on his face as if he'd either just heard the nastiest joke or he was up to no good. Although today Race still was decent to run with, the leopard was more serious, laid-back and didn't have a problem declining on a good run to go home to his mate.

Of course if Tore had a willing female warming his bed, he would spend more time there also. Not that he was even remotely interested in a mate. Hunting them down and then enjoying the hell out of them while they were hot and willing was good enough.

The Running Mate was busier than usual with most of the businesses downtown closing early due to the heavy snow falling outside. Tore walked in to a mixture of coffee and fried fish that dominated over other food items being served. A quick survey showed there weren't any humans inside. The frailer species boogied their scrawny asses home while the leopards made it sound as if a fucking party were about to erupt.

Race stood next to him while Tore checked out the tables and then the counter, which was lined with males and females sitting on stools or leaning against it. There were two pool tables in the corner and a group of males created quite a ruckus growling and snapping at each other instead of playing the game to prove who was better at pool.

"I see him," Tore said quietly, and then started moving around the tables toward the pool tables in the back.

Most leopards gave them quick glances and looked away or simply got the fuck out of their way. Hunters kept order among their species, and Tore smelled the respect and occasional whiff of guarded fear as he continued through the place toward the back.

"Miss me, male?" Paula, with her boobs on display and practically falling out of her low-cut shirt, didn't get out of his way.

Tore didn't smile at the waitress, but then he never did. "Give me something to miss and I might," he growled at her.

"I get out of here in an hour. Take me home and I'll see to it that you come crawling back for more," she drawled, not caring who heard her.

Race ignored the waitress when he stopped next to Tore. "Which one is he?" he demanded.

Tore didn't answer Paula but left her with dishes in hand and the smell of the kitchen hanging heavy on her. "Stocky male in the corner."

He led the way and didn't respond when Paula growled at him.

Chapter Four

“Do you want those despicable rogues to go unpunished?” Maurie snarled at Darla. “Or maybe you enjoyed being attacked and mounted without your consent.”

“That’s not true,” Darla wailed, stomping after Maurie to their car, which looked more like a mound of snow.

Maurie used her arm and wiped fresh snow from the windshield and then banged it off the driver’s side door. Darla did the same on her side while Karma scowled at both of them, her arms crossed over her gut.

“We need to wait for Race,” she insisted for the fifth or maybe tenth time.

“Fine. Stay here.” Maurie wasn’t going to discuss this any further. “Get in the car, Darla.”

Thankfully, their car started right up. One of the few remaining possessions from their sire and mother that was still in tact, the engine roared defiantly against the bitter storm outside when Maurie gunned the gas. She stared at Karma through the windshield, but her littermate didn’t budge. Leaving her here alone wasn’t the smartest move, but Karma’s defiant nature was her mate’s problem now, not Maurie’s.

“Karma,” Darla wailed, opening her car door when Maurie put it in reverse. “Don’t stay here.”

Karma still cursed under her breath when she hurried and slid into the backseat. “We’re going to get in so much trouble for this.”

“When the hell did you turn into such a fucking submissive bitch?” Maurie demanded, her heart pounding a mile a minute when she shoved the gear shift from reverse to first and felt the tires crunch over the snow.

“Fuck you, Maurie. Don’t play all fucking mighty with me. I’m not in the mood for it,” Karma snapped, gripping the driver and passenger front seat as she adjusted herself in the middle of the back. “I saw how that oversized brute bullied you. You were all hot for it too.”

“Don’t you ever talk to me like that again.” Maurie almost turned to smack her littermate.

Darla wailed, her pathetic cries fading and her usual soft-spoken manner hardening when she hissed at Maurie. “I get so sick of you two fighting all of the time. Damn it. I just got attacked. Don’t either of you care about anyone other than yourselves?”

“Oh Darla,” Karma sighed, resting her hand on Darla’s shoulder. “Yes. Yes, I care about more than me. I love you and Race. And believe it or not, I don’t hate Maurie.”

“Well, I care a lot about both of you.” Maurie didn’t care when both of them fell silent and the strong smell of disbelief filled the car. She focused on the road, barely

able to see it, and didn't regret a bit the way her littermates looked at her. "I had to be tough. If you two don't see that, it doesn't matter. What matters is that both of you are happy and will live good lives. Lives you wouldn't have if I hadn't turned evil at times. You two can bitch about me all you want. I don't have any regrets for any of my actions."

And she didn't regret what they were about to do now. "Darla, tell me when to turn," she instructed when neither of them commented on her explanation.

"I'm not sure. The trailer was a few miles at least from our home. Too damn close if you ask me," she added, shivering as she buried her hands in her coat pocket. "We would probably turn soon." She nodded to her right. "Then I would guess it would be a few miles that way."

"What exactly are we going to do?" Karma asked, still rubbing Darla's shoulder.

"Restore honor to our litter," Maurie stated.

"Race and Tore are doing that," Karma said, meeting Maurie's stare in the rearview mirror.

"We take care of our own," Maurie insisted. She wouldn't ever rely on some male to do what she was perfectly capable of doing on her own. "And I don't see why suddenly you're asking what we're going to do. We've done this many times in the past."

"You're going to take them on?" Darla asked, her voice a rough whisper.

"Unless you'd rather have the honor." Maurie regretted her suggestion the minute Darla's face lost all color. Grabbing her youngest littermate's arm, she gave a gentle squeeze. "This won't stop, Darla," she said, trying to sound gentle but feeling in her heart she needed to be tougher with Darla. She was so damn beautiful yet defenseless, which was Maurie's fault for babying her for too long. "We're in new territory and are unmated females. The males are going to attack again and again until we establish ourselves here. We have to attack today. You understand, don't you, Darla? We attack and kill. The howlings will spread quickly and it's the only way every available male in this territory will know we're not to be messed with."

"You're right," Darla said, her face still pale even though she straightened.

"The same thing would be accomplished with two hunters protecting our tails," Karma said, always quick with an argument.

"No, it wouldn't." Maurie wouldn't let Karma fill Darla with doubt. "The moment any of us are alone, the same thing would happen again. But if we show these bastards that we're not only willing to defend ourselves but good at it, they will leave us alone."

"Try turning here," Darla said, pointing out her window.

Maurie slowed considerably, feeling the tires slide on the drifts of snow spreading across the road. Darla squinted, leaning forward, and studied their surroundings.

"It all looks the same with the snow blowing like this," she complained. "It would be easier if I could sniff it out. Trust me, that trailer could be smelled a mile away."

"I'm sure," Maurie muttered, gripping the steering wheel so hard her knuckles hurt. More than anything she wanted to find the assholes who disgraced Darla before Tore and Race did. She ached to attack, rip them apart and teach them manners.

She would show Tore and all the leopards up this way her litter merited respect. If he thought he could strut into her territory and throw her around as though he had rank, then she would enjoy the hell out of giving him an attitude adjustment.

"Over there!" Darla shrieked with excitement. "I remember that cluster of trees."

Maurie hit the brakes so hard the car spun around. Darla's shriek turned into a scream and she slammed her hands against the dash while Karma cursed up a storm in the backseat.

"God damn it," Maurie snapped, unable to control the car when it slid sideways and then stopped with a jerk as if it just hit something, resting at an angle.

"Let's hope it's over there," Karma snarled. "Doesn't look as if we're going anywhere else."

Maurie barely heard Karma. She stared through the windshield at the white cloud of snow as images appeared that weren't there a moment before. If Maurie hadn't spent her entire life having visions, seeing clips of her future, she might have made a scene. She and her littermates agreed when they were cubs they would always share their visions, but Maurie preferred digesting them, putting some form of sense to them before letting her littermates know about them.

She prayed she didn't react when a large leopard leapt straight at her. Rosettes so distinct, so well defined, distracted her and she froze. Roped muscles tightened and stretched as the most incredibly perfect male charged with so much energy the air sizzled with it.

Maurie felt the hair on her flesh stand at attention. There wasn't a worse feeling than the sensation that she was trapped. Glancing around her at all the white snow, she didn't have more than a second to make her move, or a very large leopard would smash her.

She screamed loud enough to burn her throat as she ducked and rolled in the snow. The ground shook from the leopard's impact right next to her and she shoved hair from her face in time to see very large claws send snow flying and rip the frozen ground beneath it in two. As quickly as the leopard landed, he pounced again, making a blood-curdling sound when he howled.

Maurie yanked her head in his direction, the change anxious to unleash inside her, and watched the large male land on top of another male. At the same time her littermates bounded toward her, trampling her when they couldn't stop before bulldozing into her.

"Where's Race?" Karma yelled in Maurie's face.

"What?" Maurie demanded, and then looked around her at the inside of the car.

"I said we're stuck," Karma said, scooting toward the back door.

Maurie met Darla's concerned expression but looked away before her littermate questioned her. She didn't have a clue what she just saw.

"Let's find those assholes," she snarled, putting an extra bite in her hiss so her littermates wouldn't question her.

The wind blew snow around her when she stepped out of the car. It was bitter cold and made it hard to sniff anything out. Her world was a mixture of grays and whites as the sky hung low enough it seemed to meet the frozen ground just in front of them.

"Maurie," Darla said, grabbing her arm and pointing. "Over there," she added, her voice tight.

Karma pushed in close and the three of them studied the rectangular trailer sitting off the road. An old, rusted car was parked alongside it, partially covered with snow and appearing to have been there for a while. A pickup, newer model, was parked in front with barely any snow on it. Someone was home, and they hadn't been there too long.

"Okay, littermates," Laurie said, feeling cold wrap around her heart while her mind cleared of everything except what they were about to do. "You know the drill."

"Are we going inside?" Karma asked, squinting against the bitter, icy wind while glaring at the trailer. She brushed her long blonde hair out of her face and searched Laurie's face with bright green eyes.

"I think it will be easier," Laurie told her, glancing past Darla while taking a minute to discuss their attack. "We'll knock. They won't have home advantage once three females enter their den. By the time they realize who we are, they'll be bleeding out."

"Shit, Laurie. That's cold even for you," Karma grumbled.

"You would rather this territory view your littermates as helpless without the aid of hunters?" Laurie growled, glaring at Karma while she stiffened. "Or would you sleep better at night knowing Darla and I would be left alone because the leopards in this area understood we were females who could take care of ourselves?"

Karma growled. "Let's get this over with," she said under her breath, and stepped into drifting snow then sunk to her hip.

Laurie knew she thought the same as her littermates. It would be a lot easier to reach the trailer in their fur but it was daytime and they needed to enter this den. Proper leopards didn't enter a den in their fur, and they didn't risk allowing the change to take place during daylight and humans possibly seeing them.

She didn't smell any humans when they reached the trailer, but she did smell leopards and all the other stench Darla mentioned.

"You were right about the stench," Karma muttered under her breath when the three of them walked over an already beaten down path toward the trailer door.

Maurie heard someone move inside when she climbed the two wooden steps to the small porch built up against the front door. The door shook when she rapped against it, her knuckles burning with cold.

“What?” A young male pushed the door open.

Maurie stepped backward but managed her footing and walked into the male before he could figure out what she was about. “Why hello, darling,” she said, pressing her palm into the man’s small chest. He was barely half the size of Tore and with a lot less certainty about him.

“What? Who are you?” His scent was a mixture of distrust and curiosity. Obviously not many females pushed their way into his den. And she could see why. “What do you want?”

“Why, dear, I think that would be obvious,” she purred, continuing to walk toward him while she ran her hand down his chest and then gripped his cock, which got so hard she bet he probably would come in his pants before he figured out it would be the last time he ever came.

“Who are you?” Another male jumped off the couch, puffing what little chest he had out and strutted around his littermate. Both males were small, wiry and muscular with dark blond hair and red highlights. They were damn close to being about the most unattractive leopard males Maurie ever laid eyes on. Taking them out would be easy to do, especially knowing what they’d done to Darla.

“We figured we needed to introduce ourselves properly to you,” Maurie said, barely able to purr when she squeezed the jerk’s cock with her hand.

Karma entered right behind her, which blocked their view of Darla, who entered last.

“We like proper introductions.” The second male pushed in close, trying to put his arm around Maurie.

Their body odor, mixed with the stale smell of beer and pot, turned her stomach. She turned slightly, unwilling to completely turn her back on them, although she didn’t doubt she’d still be able to take them both down, and glanced past Karma at Darla.

“Are these the two?” she asked.

Darla nodded once, her expression tight as she sucked in her lower lip. Maurie hated that her youngest littermate didn’t run with more confidence. Now was as good as any to show her how easy it was to kill, especially when the cause was justified.

“Are we the two what?” the male in front of her asked, his voice tight from her caressing his cock.

She looked into his glazed eyes and smiled. “The two who are going to die,” she hissed and allowed the change to take over enough to allow her claws to grow.

Electric charges sparked up her spine painfully as she raised her hand and then swiped her claws across his neck. The immediate metallic smell of blood drowned out all other nauseating aromas.

The male howled, lunging out at her and grabbing Maurie's hair. He was stronger than she anticipated and pulled hard enough that she doubled over.

"You fucking bitch!" the other male snarled, jumping on her.

Karma shoved into the three of them, forcing Maurie to topple over. The gurgling cries of the male with his throat slit rumbled in her ear as flesh and bone pressed against her everywhere.

"Darla has the right to the second kill," Maurie yelled, pushing and shoving until she fought to her feet.

"What?" Darla stood there, her hands at her side, her eyes wide, round circles of fear while her mouth remained parted from the one word she uttered.

One male slumped to the floor, dead, while the other struggled to his feet, blood covering him, although most of it probably came from his littermate.

"Fucking bitch wants some more," the male sneered, and leapt between Karma and Maurie, howling as he allowed the change to take over.

Darla screamed instead of attacking and the male fell into her, sending both of them flying backward. Maurie wanted the kill to be quick and done with. The sooner they were in and out of here, the louder their message would be.

"Kill him." Maurie jumped at the same time Karma did, pulling the male off Darla.

Karma did the honors, burying her claws deep in the side of the male's neck and then hurling him into the living room. He fell on top of his littermate, his gurgling cries lasting only a minute before he was quiet, and dead.

"Come on." Maurie grabbed Darla, pulling her to her feet by her shirt.

Darla twisted free. "I'm fine," she growled, her long, thin blonde hair tousled around her face. "It isn't the first time I've been attacked."

"It's the first time the attack was directed personally at you." Maurie squeezed her littermate's arms, giving her a shake until Darla stared at her. "There's a difference when a male is attacking because he wants sex with you, and when he's attacking because we were part of Vision Controllers."

Her eyes were more gold than green and she nodded once, studying Maurie for a moment until her words sunk in.

Darla sagged into her. Hot tears burned Maurie's shoulder as Darla started sobbing. "I tried, Maurie. I tried," she repeated. "I would have killed them myself if I could have managed it."

"Let's go." She would focus on her youngest littermate's feelings later.

For now, they needed to get the hell out of here. Although she wasn't worried about Tore or Race showing up, if any more of this litter arrived, they would be out for blood. Leopards often took the law into their own hands, even if that meant killing to right a wrong. They didn't go to the police. There weren't any jails for leopards. If more of this litter came here before the three of them got the hell out of there, they would also attack first and ask questions later.

Karma pushed the door open. Cold air and snow blew around them, although its chill felt good.

"We should change," Maurie suggested, looking around them as she stepped out onto the deck.

"Why?" Karma frowned, pushing hair out of her face as she glanced first at her and then Darla. "If we leave the car there, it might be a while before you two have transportation again."

"We'll run to the car." Maurie remembered her vision as she stared at the snow-covered yard surrounding the trailer.

She could be wrong. The vision happened so fast. But searching the yard, an unsettling feeling prickled down her back. She didn't like the trepidation that settled in heavily, creating a lump in her gut.

"Change," she ordered, pushing Darla out of her arms. Maurie pulled her sweater over her head. "Change now!" she ordered.

"What's wrong?" Darla noticeably shook when she started fighting with her shirt.

"What the fuck?" Karma pointed to the side of the yard. "That's not Race," she hissed, stripping out of her own clothes quickly while the change swept over her body.

Black rosettes spread over her flesh while her back arched and her face shifted, altering from human form to that of leopard. Maurie's senses became stronger as electrical shocks zapped her spine. Instead of answering Karma, she growled, her mouth already taking new form.

Darla fell on the deck, crying out with her human mouth when she fought her jeans until peeling them off her legs. As she kicked off her shoes, her body twisted, the change attacking her ruthlessly.

Maurie fell forward, hitting the cold, snow-packed deck with her palms but ignoring the sting as her flesh thickened and her fingers contorted and claws grew. She shook her head, anxious for her hair to get out of her face, but already fur covered her body and she searched their surroundings. Her vision, sense of smell and sound were grossly acute when she focused on several males bounding over the snow—and coming directly toward them.

"The rest of their litter," she howled, but her words didn't come out. Run! Now! she growled, although Karma already leapt off the deck.

Maurie nipped at Darla, encouraging her to run as well, and then scooped their clothes into her mouth. They would either be out a pair of boots or come for them later, but for now their lives were more important.

Darla leapt off the deck, racing after Karma, when Maurie growled at the approaching males. Her littermates were making a good race out of it, already bounding across the snow. Maurie would make sure they were safe as she'd always done. Appreciated or not, despised and yelled at—it didn't matter. This was her litter.

Ever since her parents' untimely death, she'd accepted the burden of raising them and making sure no one ever harmed either of them. As she did now.

Maurie leapt off the deck when something caught her eye. In the opposite direction of the three males racing after them, two more leopards approached. One of them was noticeably larger than the other. Even with distance between them, his intense, golden eyes created a heat inside her that almost made her stumble over the clothes that hung out of her mouth.

There were too many of them, preparing an ambush. Maurie slowed, dropping the clothes, and focused on the three males. They sent snow flying as they bounded through drifts, their snarls easier to hear as they grew closer. She would take them on, hopefully eliminating at least two of them before they could reach Karma and Darla.

As she glanced over her shoulder, her heart damn near exploded. There wasn't time to react as her vision played out before her eyes. This time though she smelled Tore while staring at his magnificent body as he leapt over her. Her vision showed her his target but she spun around, ducking to the ground. Every muscle tensed and she pushed from the ground, digging her claws into the ground as the three males bounded toward her.

She attacked fiercely, leaping on one of the males, but was knocked off him and tumbled to the side as another male barged into the leopard from behind her. Disoriented for only a moment, she shook her head and leapt to her feet.

Two of the three males were bounding after Karma and Darla. Tore pounced on both of them, knocking them into each other. His roaring reprimand was warning enough. Before she could get to her feet, Race convinced the leopard she'd tried to attack he'd be smarter to back off.

There were times when she didn't need to be the victor. They came here to restore honor to their litter, and they'd done that. Maurie backtracked, grabbed their clothes, which were now filthy and wet, rolled them in a pile with her nose and then clutched them in her mouth as she hauled ass to catch up with her littermates.

She ignored Tore's penetrating stare when he jerked his attention her way, but raced past him, catching up with her littermates. She didn't want to hear anything he might have to say.

Chapter Five

Tore didn't like the idea of Race talking to his mate's litter about the Rivers litter. He couldn't believe the three of them pranced into that trailer and killed the two males who attacked Darla. Race told him that was nothing compared to what he'd seen their litter do. Maurie and her littermates were unlike any other litter of females he'd ever seen, and he was intrigued but also pissed.

It smelled damn obvious Race held out on him when mentioning his mate's litter's past. When Tore questioned him on it, Race changed the subject, telling him he needed to get his mate from her litter's den. Tore would have headed with him if it weren't for the fucking phone call.

"Dover," Tore said, balancing his cell between his shoulder and ear as he headed back out of his home after grabbing a quick shower. "What's the word, man?"

"If you're talking about your little bitch, sounds as though she's doing her damndest to howl enough noise to ruffle everyone's feathers."

"Oh?" Tore was surprised that word of Maurie killing the two Rivers males already reached the owls. "Tell me what you heard. Since I was there, I can vouch for her honor."

"You were there?" Dover seldom smelled or sounded of any emotions, but his question made his surprise clear even over the phone. "Then why is there an issue? Can't you say whether she's guilty or innocent?"

"She's not guilty of fucking shit," Tore barked, yanking his cold door handle and pulling the door open while his efforts caused fresh snow to slide down the windshield. "She was restoring honor to her litter."

"What litter?" Dover's calm tone resumed. "You've lost me, leopard. How does fucking a mated werewolf restore honor?"

"What?" Tore slid into the driver's seat and stared at the snow as it melted down the glass. "Wait a minute. You're talking about Jin Rose."

"Who were you talking about?"

Tore realized when Dover said "your little bitch" the only female who came to mind was Maurie. "Never mind. What's the word on Jin? I got a phone call earlier from Stephen Gage, a coyote here in Kenora. Do you know him?"

"I know of him. He's their pack leader, has a prominent voice here in town."

Tore would be surprised if Dover didn't know something about everyone on both sides of the border. The owl got around and kept his beak clean. Often times his low profile made him one hell of a good male to know.

"I'm headed over that way. He asked me to stop by."

"Want me to come with as witness to your conversation?"

"Couldn't hurt." Tore would never tell Dover having him along was more of an asset than being witness to what was said.

Stephen Gage lived on a narrow side street where each house had long, wide yards that offered a bit of privacy from their neighbors. The snow quit falling but a north wind put Tore's defroster to the test as he took the corner slowly. Dover usually rode a motorcycle, but this kind of weather tried even the most diehard of bikers. Tore pulled into the driveway just as Dover walked down the street, coming from the other direction.

Tore parked and headed toward the door with Dover following silently behind. Another redeeming quality about the owl, he didn't waste time on unnecessary chivalries. Dover stood quietly, waiting as Tore knocked and then listened with a slight tilt of his head to the movement on the other side of the door.

"Mann," Stephen Gage said, meeting Tore's gaze with piercing golden brown eyes. Coyotes were often misread as conniving, untrustworthy and easily coerced into decisions if profit were to be made. Gage never appeared to be anything other than an honest, hardworking male who'd put the care of his rather large litter before his personal needs or desires. "Around this way," he instructed, stepping outside instead of inviting the two of them into his home.

Any other time Tore might view that as an insult. He stepped to the side, allowing the male to lead the way from the front door and around the side of the house.

Stephen glanced sideways at Tore and shifted his attention to Dover, who walked on the other side of Tore. "Forgive my lack of hospitality," he growled, his tone serious. "My younger littermate already had her claws out when I told her another leopard was stopping by." Stephen shook his head, ignoring brown wisps of hair that blew over his forehead. "For some reason when she spotted the owl, she calmed down a bit. I'd have to rip your throat out if I didn't believe you seriously weren't interested in one of our females."

"You never know," Dover said, sounding incredibly calm as he challenged the coyote.

Stephen stopped in the yard, his soft brown eyes squinting as he decided on the meaning behind Dover's suggestion that he might go after a coyote female. When Dover continued staring at him, his face relaxed and his stance the same, Stephen finally shook his head, meeting Tore's cautious gaze.

"Fucking owls," he muttered under his breath.

"Tell me about it." Tore understood Stephen's hesitation in putting Dover in line for his comment. If another coyote, or leopard, or even a werewolf dared suggest they would seek out a male's females while on that male's land, they would be asking for a fight. Very few ever crossed Dover. Granted, the owl seldom did anything to piss anyone off. He watched, observed and, if approached properly, shared his insight on a matter. Tore knew though, Dover could hold his own and then some in a fight.

"But what is this about another leopard?" Tore asked as they trudged across hard-packed, crunchy snow. Stephen appeared to be leading them toward an outbuilding that didn't appear to be used as a garage since there were no tire tracks in the snow leading to it. "You said your littermate was upset that another leopard was stopping by."

Stephen snorted. "You'll see. And then I'm sure you'll understand why this one isn't allowed in the house."

"You're keeping a leopard out here?" Tore growled, sniffing the air when they reached the large wooden building. He glared at the padlock that Stephen grabbed, which secured a chain, keeping the tall sliding doors securely shut. "What the fuck is this, Gage?"

"This is going to be your problem here in about two minutes." Stephen didn't elaborate but unlocked the padlock and let the chain fall free to the ground. "Considering we caught her stealing, you'll note that we put a roof over her head and shared our kill with her. Which is more than some would do. I'm not vouching for her mood though."

Tore already felt a sinking feeling when Stephen pulled back the large door, which squealed on rusty hinges. He stared into the dark, dry building and breathed in a mixture of emotions, all of which rather surprised him.

Stephen stepped inside and reached for the wall, hitting a switch, which flooded the room with light. Then leading the way across the hard-packed dirt floor, he reached another door. This time he rapped on it.

"You up for company?" Stephen called out.

"Like I'm busy." The female voice was very familiar.

"Crap," Tore growled, stepping inside when Stephen unlocked the door. He didn't enter far enough for anyone to follow him though, but instead stopped in his tracks, shocked at the view before him.

Tore never had a relationship of any kind with Jin Rose. He didn't count the night he and Race both fucked her. That was another time, another life, and all enjoyed an escape from an otherwise trying time. He'd never seen her though as he saw her now. Jin didn't wear any makeup. She wasn't in her usual leather garb. Lying on a narrow cot with one long, slender leg crossed over the other and her hands behind her head, she shifted her attention lazily toward him.

"Good to see you, Tore," she said, sounding rather bored.

"I bet."

"I've been detained," she offered.

"She stole fish out of my sire's lake."

Jin moved to a sitting position slowly, her expression amused. It was fucking amazing how different she looked without all the eye shadow, eye liner and dark lipstick that usually covered her face. As long as he'd known Jin, she wore leather pants

and jacket that covered her natural scent. It was an intentional ploy on her part but made many suspicious of her. For the most part, he'd label Jin Rose a mystery.

She stood slowly, stuffing her hands deep into loose-fitting faded jeans. "I didn't know it was their lake," she whispered, leaning into Tore and looking up at him with green eyes so pale they were almost blue. He blinked, remembering how incredibly bright green her eyes were the last time he saw her and wondered if it were true that she wore colored contact lenses. If she did, why?

Tore searched the soft features of her freshly washed face, her dyed black hair that hung straight past her ears and curved just slightly into her jaw bone. "Do your senses fade when you wash off your mask?" he whispered, although was certain Dover and Stephen easily heard him.

Jin covered her cheeks with her palms, her smile sincerely appearing timid. The female was a master of disguises even when she didn't wear one. It would be damn hard proving her to be the seductress or cold-hearted, ruthless hunter that so many howled she was.

"They offered me a shower," she said quietly, and looked past him when the other two males stepped into the small room. Jin walked back to her cot and sat on it, pressing her hands between her legs and looking up at the three males wide-eyed. "What are you going to do with me?"

Tore was beyond impressed. Six months ago, left alone in a room with three males, Jin would have asked who was first.

"I've heard the howling as much as you have," Stephan said, focusing on Tore. "This female is wanted by the pack north of here. There is a price on her head."

Tore smelled the spiciness filling the air and didn't need to look around to know where it came from. Knowing if he gave Jin an audience she might very well attack the coyote, he ignored her and gave Stephen his attention.

"What are your plans?" He doubted keeping her here had much to do with fish from a lake. "If you wish to try her for stealing fish, I'll see to it. As well, I'll take her with me now."

Dover straightened, the only indication he offered that he supported Tore's decision. Coyotes wouldn't make a profit off leopards with werewolves.

"I'll speak with you outside," Stephen suggested, pushing open the door that had closed behind them.

"I can't hear the outcome of my fate?" Jin sounded humble, almost scared. She didn't smell that way though. If anything, in her natural state, the deadly female hunter with a reputation worse than most male rogues appeared even more dangerous. She damn near came across appearing innocent.

"Do you have a problem with me taking her?" Tore asked, crossing his arms and focusing on the male coyote.

Stephen's brown hair was damp, and tousled from the weather, giving him a carefree look. But his golden brown eyes narrowed shrewdly while studying Tore's face. Although several inches shorter, coyotes were ruthless killers, known usually to attack in packs. That Stephen escorted Tore out here alone, and not with another male littermate accompanying him, spoke volumes. Stephen didn't anticipate this being a violent meeting.

"I plan to notify the werewolf pack leader of this female." Stephen glanced past Tore, giving Jin the once-over. "She looks and smells very different from when we first found her. I think she's done it on purpose and that it proves her guilt."

Tore didn't have to discuss Jin's guilt with Stephen. It was a leopard matter and unfortunately a werewolf matter.

"If you wish to contact the werewolf pack leader, that would be very neighborly of you." Tore looked pointedly at Jin, whose piercing green eyes shifted and focused on the wall past him, as if she didn't want to make eye contact. It wouldn't surprise him if Jin wore contacts to disguise her eye color too. Every bit of her was fake to the point where he wasn't sure if the way she acted now depicted the real Jin Rose. Fortunately, he didn't care that much to find out.

He nodded toward the door and she stood, proof she paid closer attention than she would have him believe. "She will come with us and if honor needs to be restored, regardless of which species, I will see that it is done."

Stephen didn't have a paw to stand on arguing Tore's decision. He stepped out of the room, holding the door while Tore escorted Jin from her prison. Dover walked ahead of them, his long silver hair blowing off his broad shoulders. Jin was in front of Tore, her head lowered. Tore looked forward to getting her alone just to learn what she was about.

They stopped at his Jeep and Tore walked around to the passenger side, pulling the door open and watching Jin until she took the hint and slid into the seat. He closed the door then moved to the front of the vehicle, patting his keys in his pocket and knowing Jin couldn't make a fast getaway. She was in full-fledged docile female mode, which on her was grossly unappealing, so probably wouldn't try escaping.

For a moment he imagined Maurie would be just as confusing if she were to suddenly present herself as helpless and confused. He shoved thoughts of the wildcat out of his mind, although comparing Maurie to Jin brought him pause. The two females might be more alike than he cared to admit.

"Watch your tail with that female," Stephen said quietly as he stopped in front of Tore's Jeep.

Dover snorted but didn't say anything.

Tore nodded once, deciding not to enlighten Stephen on how well he knew Jin. "I appreciate your contacting me and holding her. We'll handle this matter according to our traditions."

"If I understand, they are similar to our ways." Stephen looked past Tore at his Jeep and Jin. "I will inform my litter there will be no profit made from this female."

Tore respected the coyote's honesty more so than if he'd made a show of holding a leopard simply because it was the honorable thing to do. Their species didn't care that much about each other.

"I wish you good hunting with that one," Tore said, relaxing and allowing a small smirk to appear.

Stephen relaxed as well, shaking his head and then scrubbing his straight brown hair with his thick hand. "It will be my mother who will bite the hardest," he confessed. "The werewolves offered a good amount of cash to anyone who would turn that female over to them."

"More than likely blood money not condoned by their pack leader."

Stephen shrugged. "Money is money as long as our blood isn't on it."

Tore didn't dispute the statement. Times were hard and not like they'd been for litters and dens before them. Living off the land wasn't as easy to do when utilities or rent needed to be paid.

"Very true," he mumbled, but then turned his attention to Dover. "We'll head back to my home."

Dover nodded, but this time instead of walking away, he climbed into the backseat of Tore's Jeep. Tore never knew how the owl knew when he was wanted. But Dover possessed a knack of knowing when his services were desired and offered them. Tore didn't mind a witness to any conversation he might have with Jin while heading back to his place. At which time, he needed to decide what to do with Jin.

An early evening chill was making the snow turn to ice. Sliding into a snow drift would be enough to crunch a car. Tore maneuvered around several accidents through town and then out into the country where the cabin he rented from Bart Rivers looked dark and cold when they arrived.

His cell phone rang before the three of them climbed out of his vehicle.

"Mann, what the fuck are you going to do about this?" Bart bellowed into his ear loud enough both Dover and Jin glanced his way.

"Is there a problem?" Tore wouldn't be intimidated by the leopard even if he held a prominent position in the area.

"Those god-damn bitches killed my two littermates," he hissed.

Tore unlocked his cabin, which he kept locked so the wind wouldn't blow open the door, and held it so Jin and Dover could enter.

"I haven't had opportunity to question the females," Tore offered, unwilling to let his blood pressure rise or start a fight with Rivers unless he had to. "From what I hear, they were restoring honor to their litter. Your littermates attacked the youngest female in the Sheridan litter."

"I hear those three females ran here from the States because of dishonor they brought on themselves. They're trouble, Tore, all three of them. I was so damn close to buying the Sheridan land. Human laws would have allowed it since it sat so long."

Tore quickly saw this wasn't about the death of his two youngest littermates. Bart Rivers wasn't a bad leopard and for the most part honest. Maurie and her littermates showing up ruined an opportunity for Bart, and so he would howl his grievances loud enough to start trouble if needed.

"Did you know those three females ran for their lives to this part of the country? They're bringing their trouble with them. You're a hunter, Tore. It's your job to learn what trouble they're in and then use it to get them out of here."

Tore pictured one hot, wildcat leap through the air at him the first time he laid eyes on him. Maurie gashed open the side of his face when she first arrived here. She might be trouble, and she definitely ran here. Tore doubted it was because of dishonor to her litter. Maurie struck him as the kind of female who would rip a male's throat out if he suggested anything she did was wrong.

"I'll look into it and call you back." Tore didn't see any reason to elaborate on Race's presence in the situation, especially with Jin sitting on his couch watching him and listening. He wished the leopard good hunting and hung up, shoving his phone into his pocket and then walking to the fireplace to get a fire going. "All right, Jin, spill it. Tell me right now why I shouldn't turn you over to that werewolf pack."

"Because it's not the right thing to do," Jin said, her soft, smooth tone barely sounding like the Jin he'd known for a while now.

"Why is that?" He balanced a couple logs in his fireplace and then stuffed brush around them. "Are you denying the charges of fucking a mated male?"

"Where is this mated male?" Jin asked. "They are demanding you turn me over to this female's den so that she, and whoever else in her den is inclined, can attack and possibly kill me, but what about the male? Will her den attack him too? Did anyone even ask if he bothered to tell me he was mated?"

Tore reached for the box of matches and struck one against the side, igniting it and then tossing it at the brush. He watched the flames start to dance and grow, hearing Jin's argument and knowing many females complained about the age-old traditions and laws most species abided by.

"Changing the way of leopards would be a slow, painful process. You know as well as I do, we can't improve the ways of other species with one fight. If there is a wrong, we attack and kill to make it right. That is how it is. And you know that." Tore left the fire to burn and stood slowly, stretching, and caught Jin admiring him as he did. The feisty female he knew was inside this docile creature, cleverly hiding.

"So you're going to contact the werewolf pack leader and allow them to come get me?" She didn't sound scared or worried, but more curious to know his intention.

"I don't see any options other than that one," he told her truthfully.

"Do owls have such asinine laws?" Jin asked Dover.

"Our laws are different." Dover stood by the door, his arms crossed. Whether he approved or disapproved of their ways, or his, he gave no indication.

Tore walked past him to the adjoining room that was more like a large closet, which was his kitchen. He thought about grabbing a beer. Jin was up to something. He sensed it. Leaning against his open refrigerator door, he stared at the bottles of brew, deciding if loosening her up a bit would be to his advantage or not.

He felt the vision come on before it began. For a moment he considered pushing the vision away, an ability he possessed that most leopards with visions didn't. Before arriving at Pard's den in Arizona last year and sniffing around a bit to learn what he could, Tore never knew how unique he was. He understood he was different for having visions, but no other leopard he knew of could control when or how long their visions lasted. The only thing he hadn't mastered was what time and place in the future the vision would take place.

Gripping his refrigerator door, he allowed his eyes to relax and the images in front of him to change. He blinked then blinked again, quickly rubbing his eyes as water continually dripped into them. When he lowered his head, he saw her. Maurie's hair was wet and clung to her bare shoulders. Her long, narrow nose accented her high cheekbones, giving her a regal look. But those olive green eyes, so confident and determined, damn near undid him as she continued staring up at him.

Tore noticed she knelt before him completely naked, her body soaked as water continued spraying over her. They stood in a shower—his shower. Although he waited to grow harder than steel at the glorious image worshipping him, he was so damn sated, he only grew half as hard as usual.

"Selfish brute," she snarled, although a smile played at her lips. "Don't think I'm doing that again before you offer me something in return."

If he could grab hold of his vision and strangle it for beginning after she gave him a blow job, he would do it.

"What is that something you want in return?" he growled, taking her underneath her arms and lifting her so she stood in front of him.

"You'll start by swearing I'll never catch you with another female again."

"What?" He was so shocked it took a moment to register the contents of his refrigerator. The vision ended without his consent.

The back of his neck prickled, the tiny hairs standing on end. Dover stood behind him, the quiet owl annoying only when Tore felt he had the upper hand over him.

"There's an interesting thing about the female in there." His slow drawl would make anyone think he didn't care one way or the other but simply chose to pass time with idle talk.

Tore pulled several beers out of the refrigerator and closed the door with his arm. "You think she won't take off if you leave her in there alone?" he asked, handing the owl a beer.

"I know she's not going anywhere." Dover took the bottle and unscrewed the lid. He didn't move out of the large doorway so Tore could pass but blocked it while tilting the bottle and downing almost half its contents. "There's something different about her."

"I've noticed." Tore was curious what Dover saw differently in Jin. "She say anything to you?"

"She asked if I thought you would turn her over to the werewolf pack." Dover studied him with his large, unblinking eyes. "The Jin Rose I knew wouldn't wait for another leopard to determine the outcome of her future."

"You're right." He held both bottles in his hands and started toward the door. Dover moved to the side. "I think it's time to learn what the female is about."

Dover swallowed another good portion of his beer. "I'm going to head out, fly around a bit and see what there is to know."

"Good hunting." Tore was still distracted by his vision and had half a mind to ask Dover to make sure Maurie was safe. He didn't want Jin hearing him mention Maurie's name though. Not to mention, something told him Maurie could ensure her own safety. It would probably be wiser to ask the owl to keep an eye on her so she wouldn't get into more trouble, but that was asking a lot of a friend.

Dover headed to his door and let a whirlwind of cold air in when he opened it. "I'll check on her," he said then closed the door behind him.

"Check on who?" Jin perked up and looked at him curiously. "Am I going to be attacked for being here too?"

"Never know," he mumbled. And he'd never know how Dover read his thoughts so well. He wouldn't get an answer, even if he asked. And he wouldn't understand the meaning of his vision. Standing here dwelling on either would give Jin the advantage. It was best to focus on her, and he did so as he approached and handed her one of the beers. "I think you better tell me exactly what happened to get you to the point where you're sitting in my den on my couch."

"I can do that," she purred, twisting off the cap and then puckering her lips around the bottle. She stared at him with eyes so pale they were unnerving. Her thick, long lashes fluttered several times over them but she never broke contact as she drank. Finally, lowering the bottle, she licked her lips slowly and then smiled. "You're looking good, Tore."

"I knew you were in there somewhere." He lounged in his wooden rocking chair facing his couch and crossed one leg over the other, acutely aware of her suddenly very hungry look. Interesting that she dropped her humble front once they were alone. "Tell me what happened," he ordered, looking away first.

"No one will smell the truth if I smell exactly like what they're accusing me of being." She stared at him pointedly, the seductress gone as quickly as she arrived. Jin was all business. "I showed up here after leaving Josh Bard's sanctuary. I'm pretty sure you knew when I arrived."

Tore nodded. "With a mark already on your head."

Jin shrugged. "Someone needed to do it. I view it as warped irony that I was the one to tend to the ugly matter."

"Meaning Leo Pard?"

"I couldn't let him destroy our species."

Tore wasn't convinced Jin killed Leo, but it was her story and he'd let her run with it for now. "Go on," he prompted.

"First thing I did when arriving was sniff out the territory. There's a lot going on up here as there is all over the country down south. We're a torn species right now."

Nothing he didn't already know. He sipped at his beer, willing her to continue.

"There's a bar north of here that apparently is predominantly werewolves." Jin took a long drink of her beer and raised her gaze to his when she rested the bottle on her knee. "Tore, he never told me he was mated. I was more surprised than he was when his mate showed up. The way I saw it, the battle was theirs, not mine. So I left."

There was something disturbingly familiar about her eyes. He studied her, not smelling a lie, but then her story wasn't too hard to believe. A male sniffing out some strange tail wouldn't necessarily enlighten a willing female as to the state of his den.

"That doesn't change the laws of the land, Jin."

Her spicy scent didn't faze him, although he noticed her bright green eyes didn't change color with her emotions, proof in his eyes that she hid the true color of her eyes. He wondered why. She downed the rest of her beer and put the bottle down on the coffee table with a loud thud.

"I'm not going to die because some werewolf's bitch can't keep track of her mate," she hissed, her pale complexion flushed and her eyes glowing a bright green, a very unnatural eye color for a leopard. She shoved her short black hair behind her ear and he saw a hint of light blonde roots. Jin wouldn't be recognizable if she returned to her original appearance. He was sure of it. Incredibly clever on her part. "If you possess an ounce of honor in you, Tore, let me run. I'll disappear and promise not to return."

"What kind of hunter runs from their problems?" he challenged.

Jin jumped to her feet, moving with an agility that didn't surprise or bother him. He didn't budge when she shoved her fists into her narrow waist and glared down at him. "I'm preventing problems!" she snarled, her teeth extending slightly as she panted with fury. "You think I don't know the trouble I drag around with me wherever I go?"

"Why is that, Jin?"

She shook her head, her straight, short hair falling over one eye. "I can't tell you that. Just know that I'm aware of it. There is a way to end it, and that is what I'm doing. Let me go. If you ever see me again, you'll know you did the honorable thing."

He didn't understand what she meant, but the sound of a car pulling up outside prevented him from demanding she explain herself. Tore stood as Jin backed away

from the door. The incredible spicy smell of outrage filled the cabin, but it wasn't coming from either of them. Whoever approached his door was livid.

Tore reached his door, breathing in the pungent odor, and caught whiff of another aroma, one he recognized all too well. Turning, he pointed a finger at Jin, who looked at him, surprised.

"You harm her and I'll kill you," he hissed, and then opened the door.

Chapter Six

Maurie almost slipped on the ice outside the cabin but barely noticed. Nothing pissed her off more than a player. She wouldn't allow any thoughts of backing down enter her mind as she reached for the door. Tore came on to her hard, his intentions smelling very clear. Clear enough that Race even commented that she stay put so as not to piss Tore off, as if she answered to him.

Maurie was even stupid enough to play into the game. Tore would pay for that. But not before she taught the fucking bitch in his den a quick, hard lesson. Tore wouldn't play with any other female while he fucked with her head. If she needed to show this entire damn town in one day not to mess with her, or her litter, so be it.

The second she overheard the owl telling Race there was a female with Tore, she'd let her anger take over. There was only one outlet for her emotions and that was taking out the bitch who was in his den. She lifted her fist to pound on the door when Tore pulled it open.

He filled his doorway, larger than life, and staring down at her with the same hunger she'd seen in his eyes when he'd come to her home. "Wildcat, behave yourself," he growled.

"I'm not the one misbehaving," she hissed, and hit him hard in the jaw with her fist. The intense sting from her direct impact made her eyes water and her hand feel as if it swelled ten times its normal size. Attacking in her flesh was a bitch, but there wasn't much choice.

Tore looked at her, stunned, and she took advantage of the moment, shoving him out of the way and prancing inside. "You've got less than a minute to get the fuck out of here," Maurie hissed at the female standing in the middle of his living room.

"No problem." The female took flight so fast, Maurie would have forced her to be in Tore's cabin longer than she wanted if she'd attacked.

Tore extended his arm, preventing the female from leaving. "Not so fast," he growled.

"Excuse me?" Maurie demanded, focusing on where he gripped the female's arm. "You don't like her much, do you?" she added, snarling as she moved closer to the female. "Because if you don't let her go, she's going to die."

"I'm flattered, my wildcat," Tore rumbled, his dark eyes turning on her and smoldering as he searched her face.

"Don't be," she growled, frustrated that her fist still burned and there was barely a bruise on his face from where she hit him.

The little female wouldn't get the honor of Maurie cutting Tore down to size. Maurie turned on her, offering a small smile, and was surprised when the bitch dared smile back.

Years of working for Vision Controllers, dealing with many different leopards and killing more times than she cared to remember, made it easier not to react to the female's odd behavior. When she expected to smell fear, apprehension or even lust, none of those emotions stunk up the air. Worse yet, Maurie was sure she picked up on the smell of relief. If it weren't for the female's odd pale eyes, she might have dwelt longer on why this female seemed happy to see Maurie.

"Don't think I care so much for an endangered species that I wouldn't kill a white leopard," Maurie whispered, knowing she'd guessed right when the female paled.

Tore didn't appear to know the female's genealogy because he gripped her arm hard enough she squealed and bared her teeth while digging her nails into his hand to release her.

"Is that why you hide the true color of your eyes?" he whispered so quietly Maurie almost didn't hear him. "I'm starting to think some incredibly terrifying thoughts, Jin. Tell me, who is your sire?"

"Let me go, Tore," Jin whispered, looking and smelling terrifying. "My sire is dead." She stared at him, as if she'd forgotten Maurie was there. "I told you already—it had to be done."

When he started to roar, it started with such a low pitch Maurie's ears tickled. As it grew into a piercing howl, the spicy outrage filled the small cabin until her eyes watered. No male scared her. Not ever. Regardless of size or reputation, she'd taken them all down. Something about the way he grabbed Jin though, lifting her in the air and then throwing her out of his cabin, made Maurie's heart stop.

Tore was beyond angry. Blind rage filled him. Maurie hurried after him when he stalked out of the cabin, looking as though he'd lift Jin off the ground before she could scurry to her feet.

"You think I had any say over who the fuck my sire was?" she howled.

"You're no longer a hunter," Tore growled.

"Fine!" Jin jumped to her feet, slapping her jeans and then shoving her straight black hair, which was obviously dyed, behind her ear. "You're not going to announce why though. I don't deserve that much dishonor and you know it. I've redeemed myself to my species, not that I'll ever get credit for it." She backed up as she spoke, putting distance between her and the two of them. "If I were you, I'd focus on your female there and not worry about me. I can take care of myself. When you make time to think about it, you'll see I've never done anything but honor the title of hunter."

She turned then, running with all of her might away from them.

"Tore," Maurie said when his body tightened as if he contemplated running after her. She didn't want to watch him race after another female, no matter how confusing her parting words were. "Who was that?"

"Jin Rose." Muscles bulged under his shirt and his straight, dark blond hair almost reached his collar, hiding his neck while he continued staring in the direction Jin ran. "I've just learned a lot about two females," he said, his tone moody.

Even without the sun and the dense clouds overhead making it darker than it normally would be at this hour, darker strands in his hair were almost a burnt orange, reminding her of his coloring in his fur. She watched his backside warily, not sure she wanted to comment on his observation. She didn't smell remorse on him, just anger. Which meant when she heard the owl say there was a female with Tore, she jumped to the wrong conclusion.

As if he would smear that in her face. If she kept the upper paw, made sure no emotions filled the air to give her away, she would learn more and prevent him from turning into a pompous ass thinking she would challenge some bitch for him.

Because she wouldn't. It was simply that she wouldn't be played with and then have leopards, and God forbid other species too, howling how the same male strutting around her den was wagging his tail for other females too. That was not going to happen.

"What did you learn about Jin Rose?" she asked, keeping her tone flat and her emotions under lock and key. It wasn't that she wanted him talking about the bitch, but if there was something to learn about another hunter, it would be wise to sniff it out. And it would keep the subject off her coming here.

"I need to make a phone call," he announced, turning and grabbing her by the back of the neck. His determined gait and strong hold on her made it impossible to do anything but keep up as he moved back inside and closed his door then locked it.

He kept his hold on her when he flipped open his phone and moved to the couch. Then sitting, he pulled her down on top of him, securing her there with one arm that was stronger than steel. He probably guessed she would try moving, and she would have, except he held her tight enough she could barely breathe.

Worse yet, all that muscle latched around her was more than distracting. Heat swelled between her legs and she couldn't extinguish it, even when she imagined what Tore and Jin might have done while alone here together. Nothing she thought of seemed believable after watching what just transpired here.

"Dover," Tore said, his voice deepening when he spoke to the owl on the phone. "Jin just headed out south of here, I'm guessing in her fur. Don't track her down but put out some feelers for me. I want to know where she heads."

With her head close to his, Maurie heard the male owl on the other end of the line.

"Your female chase her off?" he asked, his soothing owl-like voice not judgmental.

Maurie stiffened anyway. Tore rubbed her shoulder with his thumb, the small caress enough to send chills rushing down her body.

"I'm sure any scenario you conjure up would be fairly accurate." Tore didn't look at her or quit stroking her shoulder with small, slow movements so full of suggestions sparks ignited up her spine. His brooding stare offered no indication he was aware of

how he affected her. He appeared all business. "Don't announce she's run. I just want to keep an eye on where she heads."

"Easy enough. I've got a few hours to kill before meeting with a few others who are considering migrating to this neck of the woods for the winter."

"Don't let me keep you from checking out the new females." Something shifted in his expression and he slid his hand down Maurie's arm, igniting new sensations inside her. "Give out a good howling if you get lucky, my friend."

"Unlike leopards, I don't howl and bare my teeth to let the world know my business," Dover said, his tone never changing. "But on that note, the Rivers litter is making quite a fuss in town."

"Not as loudly as they would have a few hours ago." It almost sounded as if he announced that proudly. "Good hunting to you, my friend."

"Good hunting."

Tore closed his phone and tossed it to the coffee table. Maurie leaned forward as well and tried jumping off him. But he grabbed her with enough strength to push the air out of her lungs.

"You would fight for me, my wildcat?" he growled.

"I wasn't fighting for you," she snapped, putting some muscle in it and finally jumping free of his grasp. "I was fighting for me."

She did a quick dance to avoid falling over his coffee table but then leapt backward when Tore pounced off the couch. The table wasn't in his way. In fact, he didn't appear to notice it while his dark eyes and intense expression narrowed in on her.

Maurie's heart pounded so hard sparks shot up her spine, making it harder to move when the change begged to take over so she could better defend herself.

"Fighting for you?" he growled, his voice hoarse and raspy as he turned into a giant, deadly predator, slowly stalking her. "If not me, then pray tell, my wildcat, what in this cabin do you deem as yours that you would fight for?"

When she swallowed, her mouth was drier than sandpaper. Tore wouldn't manipulate or coerce her actions with words and by bullying her. She was intelligent and deadly, and knew how to fight back.

"First of all, Tore Mann, I am not your wildcat. I fought for my honor, for my self-esteem." She straightened, ready to pounce if needed, and hit her chest with her fist. Then pointing at him, she edged along the wall, working her way around him toward the door. "No male comes sniffing around me and then lures other females into his home. If you want to play, I'm sure there are many females around here who would jump on the opportunity."

"There are," he said quietly, not hesitating. "They've made it very clear."

He was too arrogant, too damn large and too bullheaded. Maurie made her move, diving for the door and gripping the handle before her fingers were torn from it when he wrapped his arm around her waist and threw her backward.

She cried out when she hit the opposite wall but then pushed off it with all her force and leapt at him. "Don't you ever force me to do, or not do, what I want," she screamed, latching on to his chest with her claws. Maybe he was too much of everything that would be bad for her, but that didn't mean she wouldn't take a moment to give him a lesson in respect.

He robbed her of the opportunity to experience intense satisfaction by burying her claws in his thick hide. Tore howled, ripping her from his body, and this time tossed her across the room onto the couch. She bounced off it, leaping to all fours while her teeth grew in her mouth, poking her lips. The metallic taste of blood sent sparks shooting up her spine and she growled, feeling wave after wave of power surge to life inside her. The change screamed for release, making her blood boil as she shook with the effort it took to maintain control and not lose what upper hand she had.

Tore landed on top of her, crushing her into his couch before she could leap. His large body pressed against hers, bulging hard muscles touching her everywhere. He gripped her neck, using his thumb to push her head back so she was forced to stare into his wild-looking eyes.

"You showed up here with your claws bared because you didn't like the thought of another female being with me," he whispered, his raspy voice scraping her senses, making her blood boil even more. "I don't care if your pride won't let you admit that, but I do mind you attacking and thinking you can prance back out of here."

"I can do what I want," she growled, and fought furiously underneath him to be released.

"Well then, so can I," he murmured, draping one leg over hers and grabbing her arms then forcing them over her head so that he had her pinned.

She glared into his smoldering gaze, barely able to breathe from him touching her everywhere, and his raw, untamed scent doing a cruel number to her system. God, what she wouldn't do to fuck him right now. Submitting wasn't an option though. It would never be an option.

"Are you saying you would mount me?" She hated how breathy her voice sounded.

"I can," he told her, raising one eyebrow while the corner of his mouth twitched as if the idea appealed to him.

God help her, but imagining him forcing his way inside her damn near made her come.

"Try and I swear I'll kick your ass." She struggled underneath him until his cock swelled against her leg and twitched, enough to show her what would come of her fighting him.

"Your offer grows more enticing by the minute, my wildcat," he growled.

"I am not your—" She couldn't finish her sentence.

Tore impaled her mouth, his kiss rough, demanding and hotter than fire. Her wrists were pressed together over her head, and he barely moved one finger, stroking the soft

part of her wrist. He moved his thick, muscular leg between hers until he pressed against the seam of her jeans. The material brushed against her clit and she cried into his mouth. He growled in return and she knew at that moment whether she fought him or not, he would fuck the shit out of her.

Now to decide how she wanted it. She tasted his heat, his hunger, which matched her own. As his hand moved up her side, pushing under her shirt and then cupping her breast, lights flashed before her eyes. They were bright, too bright, and she blinked, flinching against their intensity.

That's when she realized Tore wasn't kissing her. In fact, she yelled, "Tore, watch out!" before it dawned on her she was having a vision. She jumped to the side of the road at the same time he did and watched a large truck fly past them. It was driving way too fast for the road it was on. They'd been discovered.

Maurie looked around her frantically, feeling the heat from the sun create droplets of sweat between her breasts. Where the fuck were they?

"Maurie." Tore whispered her name in her face, but for a moment he seemed very far away. "Wildcat, come back to me."

This time when she blinked he was on top of her and her hands were free. The curious expression on his face told her one thing, he'd witnessed her having a vision, and he understood what it was he just saw.

"Tell me," he grumbled.

No way would she admit to him she saw visions. Regardless of how much he turned her on, Maurie wouldn't forget he was a hunter. He held the power in his paws to make decisions for the best interest of their species. She might enjoy fucking him, and given what he'd shown her so far, she didn't doubt for a moment she would. That didn't mean she confide her best-kept secret in him.

"Don't tell me you don't know what to do," she whispered, and realized her throat burned. If she screamed out loud in her vision, she was screwed.

"I know exactly what I'm going to do," he informed her, the confidence in his tone giving her chills. "And you know what I'm asking." He brushed his calloused thumb over her lips.

Maurie opened her mouth and caught his thumb between her teeth. Gold flecks flickered in his dark, forest green eyes. She saw the burnt-orange highlights in his blond hair were suddenly more noticeable. Remembering she could control this situation, regardless of how much larger and stronger he was than she, reestablished her confidence and she flicked the tip of his thumb with her tongue.

"I won't make love to you without your trust," he growled.

Maurie wondered if she misread the extreme emotions she saw going through him. There wasn't a doubt he was as turned on as she was. But possibly the change simmered inside him due to determination, frustration that he couldn't control her. If Tore thought he could roar and she'd offer her belly, he could enjoy a long life of jacking off in his hand.

"Trust is earned, male," she purred. "Not demanded. Don't ever think you can bully me into submission."

"You're one cocky wildcat." Tore moved with incredible agility when he pulled her off the couch, moving backward and not tripping over the coffee table.

Maurie put that damn coffee table to use and pushed away from him, keeping it between them as a shield. "Maybe you don't know me as well as you think." Her body screamed for relief, an ache she knew he could appease. "No leopard humiliates me or takes advantage," she snarled.

"I'm not just any leopard, wildcat." He slowly stalked her, forcing her to back up between his couch and coffee table. "I smell your intelligence so I believe you know that. But I also smell your lust."

"Don't flatter yourself." She moved from between his furniture and felt the heat from the fireplace on the back of her legs through her jeans.

"Maurie," he growled, actually saying her name. God, she loved how he purred when he spoke in a low, deep voice. "Are you really the type of female who would torture and tease a male simply for the pleasure of doing it?"

If he only knew. Maurie lifted her head, sticking her chin out while staring at him defiantly. Some things, no one would know—ever. Her littermates wouldn't tell and the rest of the world could never know.

"Sounds like you don't know me," she purred.

Tore stepped around the coffee table and walked up to her. Leaping around him wasn't an option. Unless she raced over his couch toward the door, she was trapped. He gripped her chin, tilting her head back and staring at her while searching his face.

"I want to fuck you," he growled.

Maurie grabbed his thick wrist and pulled his hand off her face. He didn't stop her when she walked around him, but breathing in his lust, his determination and rich male scent that made him so dynamic and aggressive damn near made her knees weak.

"You think I don't know that?" she mocked.

He grabbed her from behind, spinning her around and then pushing until her backside hit the wall.

Once again his hands were on her. "You want to fuck me," he growled.

She glared at him, refusing to give him the submission she knew he craved. "There isn't a male in this territory who would turn me down," she snapped.

His lips pressed into a thin line and he narrowed his gaze on her while a growl erupted deep inside him. In spite of knowing she wouldn't surrender the situation to him, his reaction to her words surprised her. He really looked pissed.

Pushing his large body against hers, he captured her mouth with a punishing kiss. More aggression, heat from his incredible desire for her and something else, something predatory and possessive, spilled inside her when he impaled her mouth with his tongue.

He moved quickly, pressing his hand underneath her sweater and finding her breast. She hissed when he squeezed, her mind buried in a fog of lust that made it hard to keep up with his actions. It took a moment to realize he'd also unzipped her jeans.

"What," she said, panting like a cat in heat, when she turned her head and felt his hand sliding down the inside of her pants.

"Come here." He grabbed her by her hips, pushing her jeans down her thighs.

Maurie growled, jumping to the side. "Don't tell me what to do."

"I think you might like it more than you're willing to admit." He pounced on her, this time lifting her before once again pressing her against the wall.

He held her, the two of them staring eye to eye while he pushed her jeans farther down her legs. Pinning her to the wall with his body, his heavy breathing, his heart thumping against her breasts while he held her captive with his body, made it take longer for his words to register in her mind.

"Oh do you?" she asked, purring intentionally and relaxing so he was forced to press against her harder so she wouldn't slide down the wall.

"You think I don't know how you are?" He buried his face at the base of her neck. His chin was rough with a day's worth of whiskers and his hot breath tortured her flesh.

But when he nipped at her collar bone, his teeth scraping her skin, something ignited inside her, pushing her too close to the edge. Maurie stiffened, refusing to let him get her this easily. With her body enflamed with need, on the verge of coming, she wouldn't stand a chance against his aggressive advances if she didn't get a grip.

"I know you don't." There wasn't any point in arguing though if he believed he understood what made her the way she was. Relying on her skills, on her ability to take a man, lure him into her seductive lair and then attack, should be second nature. "But if you insist on finding out," she purred, and then attacked.

Chapter Seven

Tore grabbed her arm when Maurie tried striking out. Her nails scraped over his face and she straightened her fingers, her expression showing she tried for blood.

"Are you trying to give me an education?"

"Do you think you can be educated?" she hissed, her slender muscles in her arm flexing when she used all she had against him.

Not that she could match him, no matter the circumstances. The thought she'd try anyway somehow impressed him more than he thought it would.

"I already am educated," he hissed, pulling her from the wall but holding on to her arm when she would have tumbled across the room. Keeping a firm hold on her, he decided moving farther from his front door might add a bit of security to the situation.

Not that he thought Maurie would run. He knew she wanted him inside her as desperately as he needed to be there. His cock swelled painfully just thinking about her moist heat wrapped around him.

"Educated in what? How to be a brute?" she howled, digging her heels in when he pulled her into his bedroom.

"That part came naturally." When she wouldn't budge in his doorway, Tore lifted her, with her jeans halfway down her legs, and tossed her on his bed. "I'm educated in hot, sultry females who believe they can use their alluring scent to distract a male and then take advantage." He grabbed one boot, yanking it off her, and then pulled off the next, dropping them to the floor with a thud.

"Why you fucking rogue," she growled, scurrying to all fours while her teeth extended and pointed against her lower lip. Her long hair fell over her shoulder, several strands partially covering one eye. There wasn't a hotter sight in all of Canada. "You've got me all figured out, don't you? The almighty hunter. Can't pull anything off on you."

He smelled her outrage, although it didn't quite cover the erotic aroma from her lust. "You'd do well not to forget that," he drawled, pulling his shirt over his head.

It didn't surprise him when she leapt before he'd managed to slip his shirt off his arms. Although this time Maurie made direct contact and made time to slip out of her jeans. As she clawed his face, she brought her knee up, coming dangerously close to proving when she fought, it was to win.

Tore roared, grabbing her by the back of her neck and forcing her to the ground. "Enough, wildcat," he ordered then lifted her by her waist and pinned her against him.

Maurie kicked with her back pressed against his chest. "Wild means having no control. I have more control than you'll ever be able to smell."

“Oh really?” He grabbed her lace underwear and eased it down her legs. Then lying down, he pulled her on top of him, wrapping his arms around her while she pressed her palms against his chest. “Is that why you’re fighting so hard not to fuck me right now? Is that a show of your control?”

Her green eyes flared, glowing against her creamy complexion. She studied him for a moment and licked her lower lip, her teeth slowly receding to their human shape. He swore he saw her mind churning while possible responses were on the tip of her tongue.

Maurie actually surprised him when she brought her face to his, her lashes fluttering over her olive green eyes, hooding her gaze from him. “Actually, yes. It is,” she whispered, brushing her lips over his. “And I’m concerned you don’t possess the same qualities.”

“How so?” He watched a wave of confidence bring color to her cheeks and make her eyes glow while her scent ripened.

The corner of her mouth twitched. “You just told me you wouldn’t make love to a female without trusting her. You don’t trust me.”

“I trust you.”

“Liar,” she hissed, and adjusted herself over him, pushing to a sitting position and straddling his hips. Then pulling her sweater over her head, she tossed it to the floor and shook her hair over her shoulders. Firm, perky breasts bounced before him and her brown nipples hardened, making his mouth water. She looked down at him triumphantly. “Give me your hands, male.”

Tore raised his hands, reaching for her breasts. Maurie grabbed his wrists and pushed. But he resisted her, holding her over him. Long blonde strands flowed over her shoulders.

“Where is this trust? I don’t smell a drop of it,” she challenged.

“What do you want, Maurie?”

“I want you to put your hands over your head.”

Tore relaxed his arms, allowing her to press his wrists together and hold them with her slender fingers on the pillow above his head. Something swelled inside him at the sight of her satisfied expression. Winning, knowing she held the upper paw, controlling and manipulating meant more to Maurie than it did to most females. He saw that giving her a small amount of control turned her on more so than if he’d forced her submission.

She brought her face to his once again, this time running the tip of her tongue over the length of the scratch she’d left burning on his face when she attacked him. Her partial growl, partial purr erupted from her throat and vibrated in her chest as she continued licking and kissing the side of his face until she reached his mouth. When he made a move to lower his arms, she tightened her grip on his wrists, digging her nails into the veins bulging in his arms.

"Stay put," she ordered, moving her lips over his.

"And what if I were to pounce, my little wildcat?"

"Then you lose," she growled, her voice raspy in her effort to sound vicious. "And I'm not your little wildcat." Defying her own words, Maurie bit his lip, her tooth puncturing her skin and the metallic taste of her blood drifted into her mouth as well as his. She purred as the taste in their mouths became the same. "I don't belong to anyone. Nor will I ever."

She licked her lips, and he knew she tasted him on her. Blinking and staring into his eyes a moment longer than she should have to make him believe she meant what she said, Tore saw the doubt and insecurity Maurie was a pro at hiding. It was there for only a moment before disappearing and her confident, cocky expression returned.

"I doubt either of us will lose tonight, wildcat," he growled, and twisted his hands, keeping them above his head but grabbing her wrists before she could pull from him. Then holding her hands over his head with his, he held them there, tugging so she fell forward on him. "Enjoy your control and kiss me."

Her face was so close to his it blurred in his vision but his other senses were in full working order. Tore smelled her lust, how fucking wet she was, and he smelled her amusement. As tantalizing as all those scents were, what got him harder than steel was the clean, overwhelming aroma that drifted to his nostrils when her moist lips pressed against his. It hit him at that moment it was an emotion he hadn't smelled on Maurie since meeting her. She smelled happy.

Tugging harder on her hands, he dragged her over his chest. Her breasts smashed against him, her nipples so hard they tortured the hell out of him when she moved over him.

"Does it help you hold on to your roguish nature to feel in charge, Tore?" she whispered.

"Yup." He knew she'd argue with any claim he made otherwise. Her dominant nature hid the fear she lived with in her world. "Fuck me, wildcat."

She purred into his mouth and Tore knew whatever it was putting the fear she did such a damn good job of hiding inside her, he would live to see it conquered. No female appealed to him like she did. And he'd been with his share. But his feisty wildcat possessed a fire inside her few female leopards possessed. Sure an unmated female was wild, out of control usually. And he'd heard his share of stories and witnessed a few firsthand of the hell a male went through when he found the female he'd mate with. Taming them was a bitch, often painful, and definitely a task he'd vowed more than once he'd never endure.

Realizing that made it painfully clear his need for Maurie was altering his ability to think like a sane leopard. Maurie would be impossible to tame, even for a leopard as determined and strong as he was. He would accept possibly creating a relationship with her of sorts. But once he was inside her, fucking her until she screamed, he was sure he'd come to his senses and disregard pushing the relationship beyond anything casual.

All he needed was to enjoy her, and once he did, he was positive he'd smell the truth of how unappealing and exhausting taming this wildcat would be.

"Do you possess more skills than your average male?"

"More than likely," he rumbled, pushing his thoughts to the back of his mind and grabbing her lower lip between his teeth then pressing just enough to make her squeal. "But you can learn that for yourself," he told her.

"I'm curious to see how you're going to fuck me with your clothes on."

"You'll learn never to underestimate me." Tore turned, pushing Maurie until she slid to the side and then rolling, keeping their hands over their heads, he pushed her to her back. She looked up, shocked for only a moment before narrowing her gaze on his. "Granted I'm good, but I'm better undressed."

She pursed her lips and left her hands over her head when he released them and moved off her. Slipping out of his remaining clothes and tossing them on the floor, Tore returned to his bed, overwhelmed momentarily by how incredible she looked stretched out naked with her long, thick hair shrouding her shoulders and breasts.

"God damn, Maurie," he muttered, brushing her hair away to see all of her. "You're beautiful."

"True."

"And as arrogant as a male."

"I doubt that," she murmured, lowering her arms and brushing her fingers over her belly while watching him move over her. "Your arrogance smells up the room enough for both of us."

That debate would be futile. Tore lowered his mouth to her nipple and sucked it into his mouth. Her hands flew to his shoulder and she dug in with her nails, purring loudly while arching her body against his.

"Wildcat, you're perfect," he growled, moving to her other breast.

"Just now noticing that?" she asked, her voice breathy.

"Among other things." He straddled her legs, gripping her waist, and began tasting her flesh as he moved closer to the source of her sex. Her scent made him insane with need and he held her firmly when she tried moving underneath her. "One of them being you need to learn patience."

"Don't try teaching me anything," she growled, shifting her hips underneath him and causing her scent to grow stronger between them. "There might be a thing or two you can learn as well."

"I plan on learning something right now." He moved to his knees, gripping her legs, and then spread her open.

She stared up at him with golden green eyes loaded with emotion. "What's that?" she breathed, her long thick hair fanned around her face and shoulders, giving her the look of a goddess.

"How you taste."

"Crap," she hissed, arching her back off his bed when he pressed his mouth to her shaved pussy.

"God damn, wildcat," he growled, and dipped his tongue into a pool of thick cream. "You're so fucking wet."

"Oh God," she howled, grabbing his bedspread with her fists and twisting it as she held on. She shook her head from side to side while her muscles flexed in her trim, hot little body.

Tore learned more than how she tasted as he took his time enjoying her. Maurie was defiant, commanding and control-oriented. But for whatever reasons, she hadn't had sex in a while. Just tasting her pushed her so close to the edge she trembled as he dragged his tongue along the length of her opening.

"Don't fight it, my sweet cat," he purred, dipping inside her again while his balls tightened painfully. "Let go and enjoy yourself."

"Don't fucking tell me what to do," she hissed, clenching her teeth together while squeezing her eyes closed.

His wildcat would fight him even during sex. The weight of his cock while his balls itched and swelled made it damn hard to relax and follow the instructions he gave her. But Tore wanted to watch Maurie slip over the edge. He wanted to see her explode and her orgasm rip through her.

"Maurie," he whispered, his voice rough with his own craving to bury himself in this scalding-hot pulsing pussy he feasted on.

"What?" she growled.

"Open your eyes."

"Go to hell." She gripped his blankets, pulling them on either side of her while her body stiffened and she tried wiggling away from him.

Tore chuckled, moving deeper inside her and then licking her soaked pussy walls. Tiny muscles clamped down against him, urging him deeper. He lapped at the juices that trailed down her toward her tight asshole.

"Crap!" she screamed, damn near leaping off the bed.

Tore put some muscle into it and held her in place then tortured the tight, wet hole that puckered furiously under his teasing tongue.

"Tore!"

"Enjoy it, my wildcat."

"But..."

"It's okay."

Tore pressed his tongue into her ass, feeling her tighten around him and fight his entrance. She flipped off the bed again, like a fish struggling for water. But the view was so fucking hot as he glanced up her body, he almost came just watching her.

Maurie chewed her lower lip while her lashes fluttered over her glazed eyes. She tossed her head from side to side and her long hair flowed over her shoulders, parting around her full, round breasts. Her nipples were puckered little beacons. And her breath came so hard, she panted while her hard tummy and slender body tensed until he knew she was to the point of no holding back.

"Fuck you," she hissed, and tremors erupted through her body.

Tore held on to her thighs, returning his attention to her hot pussy, and drank her come as it flowed from her, thick and rich and better tasting than anything he'd enjoyed as long as he could remember.

"As you wish," he growled, licking his lips and leaving her delightful pussy.

He pushed himself to his hands and knees, staring down at the incredible sight underneath him. His dick was so damn hard, throbbing and demanding attention he could barely focus.

Maurie blinked, staring up at him as she let go of his bedspread. She brushed her hair from her face, searching his while licking her lips and swallowing.

"You're not bad," she whispered, her voice rough.

"You haven't seen anything yet, my wildcat," he growled, kissing her while lifting her legs.

She didn't fight him, in fact if anything eagerly adjusted herself underneath him and wrapped her legs around his waist. Maurie lifted her ass off the bed, torturing him beyond his ability to fight her when she pressed her soaked pussy against the tip of his cock.

"Then show me," she encouraged.

Not that he needed any. Tore buried himself inside her soaked heat. The intensity of it wrapped around his shaft, sucking him in deeper while her muscles contracted around him, suffocating the life out of him. He shuddered, his spine popping with sparks when the change came to the surface. He dragged in a staggered breath, fighting for control while she tortured him with a pussy so sweet, so hot and wet, he would die trying to maintain stamina long enough to enjoy her.

His muscles ached throughout his body, but Tore wasn't a cub. This was far from his first time fucking a woman. As hot as Maurie was, and as perfect a fit his cock was when he glided deep into her pussy, he maintained control. Straightening, he ran his hands down the backside of her legs and slowly pulled out until he felt her come clinging to his shaft.

"I want to watch you come again, wildcat," he told her, loving her flushed expression when she stared up at him.

"Fuck me," she ordered, placing her hands on her legs and stretching them farther apart, allowing him to descend deeper.

"Bossy little bitch," he grumbled.

His heart swelled when she smiled at him. God, she was fucking gorgeous as hell.

"In charge," she whispered, and then pressed her lips together while tightening her pussy around his cock. "Let's see if you can handle it."

"I have no doubts I can handle you." He thrust deep inside her, using enough force to slide her up the bed.

Maurie howled, reaching for him while her eyes grew wide. But then she smiled, her cocky expression returning while she soaked his cock and her come dripped down him to his balls.

"Again," she ordered.

"My wildcat likes it hard and rough." He didn't wait for her answer but plowed deep inside her, receding only to bury himself again deep into her heat.

Maurie grabbed his shoulders, her nails pinching his flesh while she held on, groaning and crying out while her hair clung to her cheek and strands fell over her face. She was hot as fucking hell, the most incredible sight.

Tore watched her while fucking her with more aggression than he usually released on a female and loved how her cheeks flushed and her sultry green eyes were laced with flecks of gold. She panted hard, trying to stare up at him.

Her lips parted and her teeth were pointed just enough to show how hard emotions and desire rushed through her. But what impressed Tore, what shocked him as well as concerned him, was the incredible change in her scent as well as in how she looked at him.

Already he guessed she didn't fuck that often. That did something to his male ego. He didn't deny that. Any male prided himself in knowing he captured a female who didn't offer what she had to many males. But Tore detected something else, something not only foreign to Maurie's usual scent, but something he didn't smell on many females ever.

Maurie smelled scared, uncertain and almost in awe. The unique, crisp scent was like leaving a dense forest and suddenly breathing in the clean smell of an untouched lake. She stared at him, unblinking, and her mouth formed a perfect circle. Panting hard, digging into his shoulders and holding on as if her life depended on it, he'd rendered her silent and amazed.

He wasn't sure if she was shocked at how well he fucked her, or if there was something else. Tore would explore this, but after he enjoyed the hell out of her hot, tight pussy.

Increasing the pace, he created a friction between them that burned him alive. She clamped down around his cock as if aching to hold him deep inside her every time he thrust deeper and deeper.

Maurie cried out, puncturing his flesh with her claws, and squeezed her eyes closed as another orgasm ripped through her. Come dripped from her, making his already painfully tightened balls itch until he couldn't bear the pressure built inside him.

“My turn,” he growled, thrusting one more time deep inside her and then spilling everything he had in her soaked pussy.

She let her fingers fall down his chest, leaving his shoulders burning where she’d scratched him. A moist sheen of sweat covered her body while she panted, trying to catch her breath, and stared up at him. Her crisp scent, the uncertainty he’d detected while fucking her, disappeared and was replaced with the rich, intoxicating aroma they now shared and would share as long as they continued fucking each other.

His mark was on her, and hers was on him. Traditionally with leopards, as was common with most species, when a male and female fucked, they mated. Those traditions were, for the most part, forgotten and overlooked. Consensual sex occurred all the time among his kind. He didn’t worry for a moment Maurie thought of this act as anything other than a good fuck. Nonetheless, he’d never breathed in a more incredible aroma.

“My wildcat needs a shower,” he growled, feeling an incredible sense of possessiveness when he reclined next to her and dragged his finger down her middle.

Maurie stared at the ceiling, pushing her hair from her face. “It would be inappropriate to leave here smelling like you.”

He searched her face, not smelling regret, and then touched her lips with his finger. She shifted her attention to him but dropped her gaze immediately to his chest. Once again he smelled something unique to Maurie. Her uncertainty had returned.

It hit him at that moment that she probably never fucked a male like this. She wasn’t a virgin and he itched to know more about her. But for whatever reasons, lying here next to him, basking in the aftermath of hot sex, was unfamiliar territory for her. Maybe she took her males only in her fur. He knew females like that. Leopards ran with very ancient traditions and laws. Some litters viewed their females as collateral, ensuring their line would remain strong and their females would breed with the right males. Tore wasn’t so old-fashioned that he didn’t understand females needed to fuck as much as males did. If he guessed right, Maurie wasn’t the first female who got around her litter’s demands by remaining a virgin in her flesh while appeasing her urges only in her fur.

Granted that made her not a virgin. But it also explained the unique scent he still smelled lingering around the stronger aroma from their lovemaking.

“I’ll take that shower.” Maurie rolled away from him and sat on the edge of his bed.

Tore sat also, focusing on the slender curve of her back, how her long hair, which was now slightly tousled, curled in loose waves just above her ass. He moved across the bed, pushing hair from her bare shoulder when he sat next to her. Placing his bare feet on the cold floor, the vision he had earlier popped into his mind. Maurie searched his face and he gave her his attention, petting her while studying her olive green eyes.

“One of the few drawbacks of this cabin is the hot water heater is small. We’re going to have to shower together.” He stood, taking her hand, stepping over their

clothes and leading her to the bathroom right off his bedroom. "It's going to be cozy, but I don't think it will be that bad. I want to clean you."

"You want to clean me?" she asked from behind him. "If you didn't want your scent on me, then why didn't you pull out?"

Tore adjusted the water and pulled the lever to make the shower spray. Pulling back the shower curtain, he stepped under the water and took Maurie's hand, holding it while she stepped into the water with him. Immediately her long blonde hair clung to her body as the spray started soaking her.

"Cleaning you won't take my mark off you, my wildcat." He pressed his finger over her lips when she started to speak.

"Then why are we showering?" she asked, moving her lips against his finger while searching his face.

"I told you. I want to clean you." He wasn't sure how they would get to where they were now to her on her knees giving him a blow job. The down side of visions—he didn't always know how far in the future they took place. He grabbed soap and lathered it in his hands. "Do you have a problem with that?"

"With you cleaning me?" Maurie stood with her hands by her side, watching him while he ran his soap over her body. Suds created streams over her breasts and down her belly. She continued watching him while he focused on his task. "You're trying to wash your scent off me," she accused.

Tore stopped, putting the soap back in its dish built into the shower wall. "No," he insisted, grabbing her arms and pulling her against him. Then yanking her wet hair, he forced her head back. "I'm going to wash you, bring you my kill because, Maurie, you're my wildcat."

Chapter Eight

"Do you say that to every female after you fuck them?" Maurie smelled the strong predatory possessiveness reeking off Tore. It was almost as strong as the smell of their lovemaking, which wouldn't wash off with soap and water.

If life were only different. Tore was unlike any male she'd ever known. Not that she'd taken time to let any sniff around for long. Even though she and her littermates moved here to restore her litter's burnt home after being fired by Vision Controllers, Maurie had every intention of restoring her status with them. Allowing a hunter into her life would complicate matters.

"I've never said it to any female before." Tore ran his hands over her body, taking his time cupping her breasts while staring at her with a smoldering gaze. "Does that scare you, wildcat?"

"No," she snapped, not hesitating. "Nothing about you scares me."

"I smell your uncertainty," he whispered, his voice rough when he looked down, his broad shoulders filling her view as he meticulously cleaned her. "Share your thoughts with me."

Maurie turned her back to him and let the water spray over her soapy body. Tore lifted her hair and held it in one hand while running his other hand over her, helping her rinse.

"You don't fuck males like you just did with me," he guessed, his hot breath torturing her neck as he pressed his body against her backside.

"It's really none of your business how I fuck other males."

Tore flipped her around so quickly she lost her footing and slapped her hand against his steel chest to balance herself. His cock was as hard as the rest of him and pressed against her abdomen when he held her in his arms.

"I'm making it my business," he growled. "I don't bring females to my den."

"You didn't bring me here," she pointed out.

"You're right. You stormed in here because you didn't like the smell of another female in my den." His triumphant glint in his eyes pissed her off.

Maurie wouldn't allow him the upper paw. No way would he start getting cozy around her and boss her around and control her life. It wasn't going to happen. Not only could she not live like that, but with Tore prowling around her den, Vision Controllers would smell him immediately. She saw what happened when her littermate let a hunter sniff around. It cost them their jobs.

She ignored his comment, knowing no matter how hard she tried explaining to him she chased that female out of here to make a point to him, he would believe what he

wanted. Males were ridiculously stubborn when it came to their egos. Maurie told him already she wouldn't be played with. He didn't listen. His comment just now proved that.

"I won't say fucking you was a mistake," she began slowly, knowing in the confined space of his shower, with the warm water trapping their scents in the steam, a lie would be smelled quickly. "But I didn't fuck you to start a relationship."

"You didn't have to," he growled. "Something had already started between us."

She wasn't going to get through his thick skull. And damn him for looking so fucking sexy with water beading off his muscular body. She absently traced a small scar on the side of his chest while contemplating her best move.

There was only one way to get him off her tail. Ignoring the pain swelling around her heart, Maurie looked up at him, batting her lashes. It wasn't hard to make the smell of her desire fill the air around them.

She ran her hand down his chest and wrapped her fingers around his hard cock. He was so thick, so long. Stroking him slowly while holding his gaze, the pressure building inside her proved the dangerous territory she was moving into.

"I doubt you want a female like me," she purred, and slowly bent her knees until she knelt before him, continuing to hold his attention while water sprayed over her body. His cock danced in front of her face, the rich aroma of him filling her nostrils and lungs. He was a drug, highly addictive and dangerous.

This wasn't the first time Maurie flirted with danger. She lapped at the swollen round tip of his cock and watched him suck in a sharp breath. "You need to control, to dominate and own what you feel is yours," she said, and then wrapped her lips around his cock.

He was so thick she opened her mouth as far as she could, her lips tingling when she stretched around him. But her trick worked. Instead of arguing her facts, Tore growled and pulled her hair, holding her head in place while trying to thrust deeper inside her.

Maurie let him slip out of her mouth, keeping her attention on his face.

His expression was tight when he hissed and focused on her. "Are you planning on torturing me? You insult my nature and then tease me on your knees. What is your game, my wildcat?"

"I don't play games." She ran her tongue down the length of his cock, moving slowly and then pressed her lips on his swollen tip. "But I won't be played either. You don't want me."

"What makes you think you know my mind?" he growled.

"Already you announce I am yours when I'm not." She sucked him into her mouth, teasing him with her tongue. Her actions were possibly more dangerous than she could handle. With any other male, if she toyed with him sexually, her mind was always on her plot. Tore was different though. Something about him appealed to her more than he

should. He was a brute, demanding and dominating—traits she would never be able to handle in a male.

Not to mention there was no room for a male in her life.

Once again she let him slip out of her mouth. But this time Tore was ready for her and gripped the side of her head, pinching her hair at the roots, causing a stinging pain that added to the swelling need already boiling out of control inside her.

“Would you be happier if I’d fucked you and then chased you out of my den?” he grumbled through clenched teeth. “You’re playing with fire, wildcat.”

“I’m accustomed to the fire,” she whispered, and opened her mouth to allow him entrance once again.

He tasted so fucking good. All that steel with velvet-like skin wrapped around it moved over her lips, pressing against her tongue and daring to go deeper. Maurie endured the pain of Tore gripping her hair when she pulled her head back and again released him from her mouth.

“Selfish brute. Don’t think I’m doing that again before you offer me something in return.”

“What is that something you want in return?” he growled.

“You’ll start by swearing I’ll never catch you with another female again.”

If she hadn’t focused on him the same moment she finished speaking she wouldn’t have seen the smile play at his lips. The pain that attacked her heart at the moment was worse than any she’d known since the death of her parents. Tore was a player, a rogue who would dominate and control females—the more the merrier. He was a hunter, given power he could use to help manipulate those around him to smell things his way.

Maurie pushed back on her hands, struggling to stand and get out of the shower in the small amount of space allotted to her.

“What is this?” Tore growled, grabbing her around her waist when she would have tumbled out of the bathtub. “Without allowing me to answer you’ve already judged me?”

“You don’t need to answer. Forget I even mentioned it.” Fighting him and getting tangled in the shower curtain, Maurie fell out of the tub.

Water splattered on the floor before Tore bent down and shut it off. “You’re not going anywhere, Maurie.”

“You can’t handle the simplest of requests in starting a relationship.” Maurie grabbed the only towel she saw and wrapped it around herself while wondering why in the hell she was even having this conversation with him. The sooner she got out of his den, cleared her head of his scent, the sooner she’d regain her rational thought. “Which is fine,” she added, padding barefoot into his bedroom and grabbing her clothes. “I don’t want a relationship of any kind.”

“Yes, you do, or you wouldn’t be here,” he said from behind her. “Someone told you Jin Rose was here, and without waiting to find out why she might be here, you flew

into a rage and raced over with teeth and claws bared. My little wildcat, don't tell me you showed up just so you could have first dibs at fucking me."

"I am not your little wildcat!" she shouted, spinning around and damn near sliding in the puddle she'd created standing on his bare floor.

She shouldn't have turned around. Already her heart pounded too hard in her chest and in spite of dripping with water, her palms felt clammy and it was hard as hell getting into her clothes. But focusing on Tore standing naked and wet in his doorway, looking dangerous and deadly as hell, turned her on more than any male should be allowed to do.

"You're becoming more and more my little wildcat with every minute," he growled, his rumbling baritone sending shivers over her flesh.

He strolled toward her, his lazy gait adding to his sex appeal. His cock was still hard as steel, although he didn't seem to notice, or it didn't bother him to stalk her without clothes on and his dick hard as stone and pointed at her like a beacon.

Maurie couldn't take her gaze off his. When he was close enough to touch her, he stopped and stared at her, neither of them speaking, but the emotions smelling up the room spoke volumes.

She damn near jumped out of her skin when someone knocked firmly on Tore's cabin door. He looked over his shoulder, growling fiercely and baring his teeth at whoever dared intrude on their argument. When he returned his attention to her, his hard, predatory look made it hard to catch her breath.

"Get dressed and stay quiet," he snarled, his look fierce enough to let her know defying his instruction in his den could lead to very unpleasant circumstances.

Maurie hated being told what to do. She clutched her clothes to her chest, straightening and stared at him, fighting to stuff her emotions that ran amok up until a moment ago back where they belonged—out of the way.

She stood there like an idiot while he put on his pants and then turned without saying another word, closing the bedroom door. Maurie dropped her clothes on his bed, breathing in the thick aroma of their lovemaking, and began frantically scrubbing her body with the towel.

"Tore, I've learned more about the Sheridan litter," a male bellowed the moment Tore opened the door. The male's spicy anger was strong enough it seeped through the closed door, tarnishing the rich aroma from their fucking. "They were shunned, chased out with their tails between their legs. The howling down that way is they killed quite a few males. What they did to my littermates is a pattern that must stop now. That litter is rabid and I want a forum created now to have all three of them killed."

"Where did you hear this howling?" Tore's low baritone was unbelievably calm after the atrocities just spit at him. "One of the Sheridan litter is mated to a hunter. You need to be very careful about your accusations, Bart."

Maurie struggled with her jeans, almost falling face forward at the bald-faced lies being spit out in the other room.

"I just came from talking to Race Ogden. He confirmed there were multiple deaths around Wheeler's Point while those females were there."

Maurie almost shred her sweater trying to pull it over her head. Her spine popped furiously and it hurt to straighten after slipping into her shoes. The motherfucker would die before he spit out another lie about her litter. Damn Tore to hell and back again if he expected her to remain silent and shut up in his bedroom while he listened to Bart Rivers hiss out so much bullshit it stunk up the entire cabin. If he wouldn't defend her and her litter, Maurie damn well would.

Storming over to the bedroom door after she was dressed, Maurie grabbed the door handle and then pinched her palm when she turned it and it wouldn't open. He locked her in his bedroom?

"Who is in your bedroom?" Bart demanded.

"Now that's none of your business." Tore still sounded sickeningly calm.

"Maybe it is, and maybe it isn't." Bart was turning into a larger jerk the longer he remained in the cabin. "You're honored as a hunter in this territory. Any leopard will sniff you out to solve a dispute. But you bring disgrace on that title by running with the wrong kind of female, then I swear to you, Mann, you won't have any reason to remain in this part of the country."

"I don't do threats." Tore finally showed some fucking backbone when his honor was questioned.

Maurie gripped the door handle, putting muscle into it and turning it until she heard metal snap when the lock broke. She yanked the door open, storming out into the living room, and glared at the littermate to the males who almost raped Darla.

"The only honor in question right now is yours, you son of a bitch. How dare you suggest me or my littermates are guilty of anything. It was your littermates who—"

"That's enough!" Tore roared, grabbing Maurie's hand and yanking her off her feet when she got too close to Bart. "You are going to learn when to howl and when to remain quiet," he hissed.

"So this is how it is?" Bart sneered, curling his lip as he gave Maurie the once-over. "Before you came along I ran this territory and I can do it just fine after you're gone. You've sniffed after the wrong piece of tail this time, Tore. You'll see that I'm right." He pointed at Maurie. "Her entire litter is murderers. I'll prove it and when I do, you better be very careful which way you run if you want to hold on to that title of hunter."

Bart Rivers stalked out of the cabin, slamming the door behind him.

"God damn it," Tore growled, storming out of the living room and into his bedroom.

"How dare you stand there and listen to him disgrace my litter and not say a fucking word until he howls something distasteful about you," Maurie growled, hurrying after him.

"Not right now," he said, holding his hand up to silence her as he picked up his phone.

"Fucking fine." Maurie stormed out of the room to the front door. She'd made it clear she didn't want any type of relationship with Tore. Staying here and arguing with him was pointless. She needed to make sure Darla was okay. Then she needed to rip Karma's mate a new asshole if he suggested anything to dishonor their litter. "Go lick your own wounds, you pompous jerk," she yelled, opening the front door.

The cold evening air barely had a chance to wrap around her before Tore grabbed her from behind, lifting her off the ground and practically throwing her on the couch before slamming the front door closed.

"Do you always rush to attack before sniffing out the situation?" he roared, his teeth pressing against his lower lip as he glared down at her.

Maurie wasn't intimidated. She leapt off the couch, jumping over the coffee table and landing in front of him. "I don't stay hidden where it's safe when a situation needs sniffed out," she hissed, stabbing his chest with her finger.

"You can stand here and behave for one minute or I can tie you to the bed. Your choice." He took his attention from her and pushed buttons on his phone.

Maurie noticed long, thin scratches on his shoulders as well as a couple small puncture wounds from where she'd held on when he fucked her. In spite of how pissed she was, staring at where she'd marked him created a swelling inside her that really should piss her off even more.

Tore didn't move but stood less than a foot in front of her while placing his call. "Race," he said in a deep baritone. "Yeah, man. What's the howling all about?"

Maurie heard Karma's mate's voice through the phone and her ears tickled when she tried hearing what was said. She heard something outside at the same time Tore turned, blocking her view of the front door when he continued talking and reached for the door handle.

"I need to know, Race. Bart Rivers made some harsh accusations against your mate's litter. Were there any charges against the Sheridan litter in Wheeler's Point before you ran with them here?" Tore asked and opened the door.

Cold air wrapped around Maurie in spite of Tore blocking her view of the door. Even when she tried stepping around him he shifted his weight and continued to prevent her from seeing who was outside. The thick smell of worry reached her though and she breathed it in, recognizing it at the same time the leopard at the door spoke.

"Where is my littermate?" Darla demanded.

"Move!" Maurie slapped Tore's arm.

He stepped aside and Maurie hurried to Darla. Her youngest littermate took in Maurie's wet hair and sniffed the air furiously as her expression turned from frantic to wary understanding.

"You are all right?" Darla whispered.

"Yes. Both of them are here," Tore said, grabbing both her and Darla's attention.

Maurie pulled her littermate into her arms and then closed the door, ignoring Tore and giving Darla a quick once-over. "I'm fine. What's going on?"

"The Rivers litter is on a rampage," Darla said, still whispering.

Maurie rolled her eyes and hoped to calm Darla down. "They're leopards we can handle," she assured her, and grabbed her shoulders. "Are you hurt?"

"No. I was supposed to go to Karma but was worried about you."

"We'll head back and go home."

"What about the Rivers litter?" Darla glanced at Tore, who still was on the phone. She returned her attention to Maurie, her green eyes laced with gold. "How many of them do we have to kill?" she whispered.

"All of them if needed," Maurie informed her, refusing to hide her conversation from Tore. She didn't say anything that would bring her dishonor. "Let's go."

"What about...?" Darla looked at Tore but didn't finish her question.

"I don't answer to any leopard," Maurie informed her, and prayed her youngest littermate would see how strong a female needed to be to handle a male.

They made it outside and almost to the car when Tore stomped through the snow behind them. He gripped Maurie's shoulder, holding her in place, and came around to face her. "You're going to your den," he said, not making it a question.

"Of course we are." She straightened, staring into his deadly looking, brooding gaze. "If there is trouble I'll defend what is mine."

"Maurie, I need to know now so I can protect you. Have you and your litter murdered?"

"Leopards don't murder, they survive," she hissed at him, knowing damn good and well there were no laws that could be held over her for any of her actions before coming here. "And we don't need your protection."

Tore pulled her to him, capturing her mouth with a hot, needy kiss. He was aggressive, demanding, and when he let her up for air, she was almost panting.

"I'll follow you home," he told her, letting her go before she could gather her wits.

Chapter Nine

"A couple buddies of mine tracked Jin Rose heading west in her fur," Dover offered.

Tore nodded, stopping outside where Race and Dover stood in the cold, dark night and watched Maurie disappear with her littermates inside their home. They really needed to get busy and build up more of the house, but with weather turning worse and worse, doing construction was a bitch to pull off right now.

"I'll have you know the Gage litter is on to her scent," Dover continued, his calm, peaceful tone, anything but soothing at the moment. "She's nothing more than a gold mine to many right now."

"Which she's brought on herself," Race argued, growling.

"I'm not so sure I agree." Dover didn't always get involved in leopard politics and so grabbed both of their attention when he suggested he had an opinion on Jin's situation, which involved more than leopards. "I doubt seriously any parliament will be formed on the female's behalf, but if it were, they would need to inquire into the motives behind the male who had sex with her."

Race laughed, slapping the owl on the back. "If I didn't know you better, Dover, I'd swear I smelled a soft spot in you toward Jin," he said, but then bristled and sniffed the air when footsteps sounded through the trees.

Tore had contemplated heading inside with the females. An overwhelming urge to protect Maurie wouldn't leave him alone. It confused him. Usually he wasn't a glutton for punishment. And Maurie would dish it out to him in droves. She didn't have a problem announcing to him in front of anyone she didn't need to be protected. As he turned, ready to attack anyone who dared approach her den, and saw the leopards walking toward them on the dark, unshoveled, snow-packed road, it was obvious she needed a hell of a lot of protection.

Headlights beamed behind the handful of males approaching. They'd left their car near the road and walked on foot the remaining distance, which, if they didn't have snow chains on their tires, was probably a smart move. Maurie's litter's home was very undeveloped having been abandoned for so many years.

"Good hunting," Clay Rivers announced, nodding to Tore and Race and giving Dover a quick glance before hiding any notion he might have about an owl being present. "We would like to speak with you, Tore."

Saul Rivers stood silently on one side of Clay and Bart fumed on the other, looking as if he ached to attack anyone who would just give him good cause. Tore faced the litter, usually not having a beef with any of them. Whatever they had to say he would

hear, although nothing they said would justify putting the Sheridan litter through any reprimand for their actions.

"Say what you will," Tore told him seriously.

"That litter in there killed two of my littermates," Clay began, nodding toward the partially rebuilt structure looming in the darkness. The smell of wood burning crept through the frigid night air, the only indication the females were in there since no lights shone through the two windows. "All we have is those females howling as to why my littermates were killed in their own den."

"Are you doubting the accusation that their youngest littermate was attacked by your littermates?" Race asked.

Clay shot Race a furtive look. "I haven't personally heard any howling from her," he said, smelling of the truth.

"I personally witnessed her showing up here with the crap scared out of her in her fur and without her clothes," Tore barked. "There doesn't need to be any further discussion of this matter. Go burn your dead."

Bart bristled and growled low and fearsome. Tore ignored him, turning his attention to the home that appeared dark enough to make him believe they'd all gone to sleep. Except he knew Maurie well enough by now to know she wouldn't fall asleep with excitement happening outside her door. He half expected her to barge outside any moment, hissing and scratching as she attempted to run the show.

"You'll honor us by witnessing the burning of our dead," Saul spoke up.

"This matter isn't closed," Bart broke in.

Tore shot his attention back to the three of them, immediately aware of Saul and Clay giving Bart side glances. Bart led their litter, although Tore never personally witnessed the chain of command in action. It was obvious by looking at the three of them that they were birthed from the same litter, but Bart always made the show of being firstborn. At the moment though, it appeared a strong dispute was ready to play out.

"The matter is closed," Tore stressed. "And I will attend your burning." By doing so, he would be stating the dead died with honor. Only a dishonorable death had no witnesses at the burning.

"We're honored," Clay and Saul mumbled at the same time, and looked pointedly at Bart, who remained stubbornly quiet. Clay cleared his voice, giving indication there was more to be said.

Bart rubbed his hands together and walked away from his littermates, moving closer to Tore and Race. "I understand although you are both hunters, your judgment concerning this litter will be biased." He held his hand up as if prepared for either or both of them to dispute the matter. Tore remained quiet as did Race, and Bart lowered his hand, rubbing them together again. "I will howl for a hunter who isn't biased to sniff out the truth in this matter."

"What matter is it you are concerned about?" Race asked.

Bart pinned him with a condemning look, his eyes narrowing to slits as he pressed his lips into a thin line. "I did some sniffing around, contacted a few leopards I know south of here. There were quite a few murders around Wheeler's Point while this litter stayed there." He nodded his head toward the house. "No one ever came forth to claim their murders."

"If your friends howled clearly to you, then you would know the females inside had nothing to do with those deaths. Each one of them was accounted for during those killings. As well, all three females lived quietly, never disturbing anyone, and no one around them ever howled a complaint about them." Race walked in front of Tore and stared Bart in the face. "There are two hunters around Wheeler's Point. Contact either one of them to hear the truth."

"I already have. The bar owner, Thad Pierce, who, as you state, is one of two hunters living in that territory, acknowledges being present the day there was a gathering to determine if the leopards killed, all on the same night, died with or without honor."

"I was present that day too. That was a run gone bad," Race told Bart, waving his hand to dismiss the topic, and then walked past Bart to stand next to Dover. "There isn't a single complaint against any of those females. I swear to you as a hunter, I wouldn't take a mate who would discredit my good name."

"I've already stated this matter is closed. Unless the three of you have another issue to discuss with us, I wish you all good hunting." Tore was through standing in the cold in his flesh. He was ready to find out what those three were about inside.

"In the middle of the night we will burn our dead," Saul said solemnly. "Already they are prepared for the ceremony at their den."

Tore nodded. He hated the idea of interrupting the night to attend a ceremony for two assholes. But to keep peace in the territory he would attend and listen to his wildcat bitch about him attending as soon as it was over.

Tore followed Race into the females' den a few minutes later after the Rivers den left. Dover took off as well, announcing calmly there were new females in the area he wouldn't mind checking out.

A fire burned strong in the small hearth, immediately warming him the moment they closed the door behind them. Tore didn't realize how cold he'd become standing outside until his flesh burned from the heat flowing from the fire. He noticed how clean and well scrubbed the small living area looked with the few pieces of furniture giving it a rather homey look. He also saw why it looked so dark from the outside. Other than the fire, there weren't any lights on in the living room. Light flowed under and around a partially closed door and he followed Race when he walked through the living room and pushed the door open.

"Are you ready?" Race asked, extending his hand to Karma.

The three females sat together, cross-legged, on a single bed pushed up against the far wall. All of them directed their attention to the males, their green eyes glowing from the one lamp that ran off a generator he and Race hooked up for them shortly after they arrived.

A variety of emotions filled the air with their scents. Maurie sat on the middle of the bed with her littermates on either side, facing her. Their long blonde hair, slender figures and regal facial features proved they were related. Otherwise, they were three very different females, all gorgeous, all intelligent, and with the leery, slightly angry emotions that dominated with their strong aromas, all were a mystery.

"I'm not sure about leaving these two," Karma told her mate, hesitating when she pulled her gaze from Race and glanced at Maurie and Darla.

"They'll be fine," Tore said.

"We'll be fine," Maurie announced at the same time. She looked at him with a hooded gaze, her thick lashes fluttering over her olive green eyes.

He noticed the cell phone in her hand, which she slowly fingered as she pulled her gaze from him first and focused on it as well.

"Did you get a phone call?" he asked.

Maurie shot her gaze back to him and gave him her most defiant look. Which answered his question. The female was hell-bent and determined to run her own life, and although he didn't know details, he saw running had brought her and her littermates to a burnt-down home they were now trying to reclaim.

"Who called?" he asked when she didn't answer his first question.

Maurie slid off the bed and her littermates followed suit, Karma walking into her mate's arms and Darla hovering behind Maurie, although glancing at him several times with large, golden-green eyes filled with curiosity and something else. He couldn't place it.

"Darla and I are very capable of protecting ourselves," Maurie announced, not looking at him but gesturing with her hand that all of them leave the small bedroom. "We wish all of you good hunting."

Race wrapped his arm around his mate and walked into the living room. Tore held the bedroom door, unwilling to argue with Maurie as to who exited first. She pursed her lips when he wouldn't walk out before her and held on to her look, and smell, of disdain when she entered the living room. Obviously, even though her scent was rich with the smell of him, she would make it clear to all those close to her she wouldn't answer to him.

Tore had half a mind to bend her over his knee in front of all of them and offer them a show of his own, making it damn clear he wasn't going to take her crap. Race looked at him when he reached the front door and if there was an ounce of amusement in his friend's gaze, he held it back carefully and kept his expression serious.

"There were some issues in Wheeler's Point the Rivers litter will try to use to smear their honor," he offered.

"Karma," Maurie growled fiercely, "silence your mate or I will."

"No," Race growled, glaring at her. Obviously he'd had a run-in or two with Maurie in the past because his teeth grew quickly and the look he gave her was damn near hostile. "They were just here."

When all three females looked surprised, Tore wondered what conversation held their attention in here to the point they were too distracted to smell all the males outside.

"We were in here..." Karma began.

"Enough." Maurie leapt across the room and grabbed Karma's arm. "Take your mate home now," she hissed.

Race shifted his weight, pulling Karma to his side and freeing her from Maurie's grasp. Then insulting her when he turned his back on her, he faced his mate and spoke quietly.

"What were the three of you doing in here?"

Maurie roared, leaping at Race's back, and grabbed his shoulder. Race started to turn but Tore was faster. Grabbing Maurie's arm, he knocked her off balance when he yanked her backward. She recovered quickly, raising her hand to strike, but he grabbed that arm too and shoved her against the wall.

Ignoring Darla's squeal behind him, Tore focused on Maurie's dark green eyes and breathed in her rich scent, heavily laced with the smell of him.

"You're going to allow this conversation to happen now," he hissed. "Or you're going to risk me learning information on my own and possibly the facts might not be howled properly."

"We've never killed a male without just cause," Darla yelled behind his back. "Don't hurt her."

Maurie almost sagged against him, her focus dropping to his chest. "He's not hurting me, Darla. Rely on your senses and believe what you smell."

"You like him?"

If Tore weren't focusing on Maurie's face, he would have missed the view of a lifetime. He doubted many would ever witness Maurie blushing the beautiful shade she did at that moment. Tore was sure someone snickered behind them, possibly Karma, but he ignored it and let go of her hands, brushing his thumb over her lips.

"Care to elaborate on your littermate's comment?"

"No," she snapped.

"I meant her comment about not killing without just cause."

Maurie looked up at him, her olive green eyes swarming with more emotion than he'd ever seen. "Move," she whispered.

Tore stepped to the side but ran his hand down her smooth, long hair when she tugged on her shirt. Then without looking at any of them, she moved to the fire, grabbing the poker and stabbing the burning logs until the flames roared in retaliation.

"You're wise to hear the truth here," Race offered. "No one other than the four of us knows exactly what happened the night all those males died."

"So there were a lot of unexplained deaths?" Tore asked.

Race nodded, studying Tore for a long moment as if deciding something before continuing. "I killed them."

Some emotions were harder to depict by their scent than others. But the sweet and sour smell of shock and surprise, of disbelief and amazement, was almost as pungent as Chinese food. As thick as the smell was, there was no doubting this was news to all the Sheridan females, possibly even his mate.

Maurie spun around, poker in hand, and sent several live embers flying. Karma recovered quickly, stamping the glowing ember out with her foot, and watched Maurie warily.

Maurie's jaw dropped and she stared at Race.

"You knew this?" she asked Karma, her expression softening as she quickly put her emotions in check. Once again, Maurie maintained her regal composure, straightening and squaring her shoulders while her long hair fell down her back to her ass.

"It's the first I've heard him say it out loud," Karma said quietly, and didn't smell as if she lied.

It was as if everyone in the room waited for Maurie's next reaction, even Race. Here was a litter who blindly followed their oldest littermate, which explained a lot to Tore. Maurie was hard, almost cold to the world around her. Being a female and raising, protecting and providing for a litter on her own, for God knew how long, created the wild, obstinate creature who stood facing her littermates with a poker in her hand.

Maurie blinked, placing her emotions even deeper to rest while the hard, unreadable expression she must have mastered years ago returned. She nodded once. "All of this is ancient history. There are other matters to tend to now."

"I'm sure you'll fill me in on this incredible night you and your littermates refer to," Tore grumbled, hating nothing more than feeling left out but understanding there was history between all of them that he didn't share. "The matter at hand, as you say, is about whatever action you may or may not have done while in Wheeler's Point. No one in this room is resurrecting them, but nonetheless, you're going to have to defend yourself."

"Like hell I am." Maurie white-knuckled the hot poker, squaring off to face him. "No one in this litter is guilty of any dishonorable act. Therefore, we have nothing to defend ourselves for. That is final, Tore. You take my word as head of this litter to whomever is howling otherwise and you tell them they will need to defend themselves if they continue hissing vindictive lies about us."

"Maurie," he began.

"No." She sliced her hand through the air and then calmly placed the poker on its stand by the fireplace. "I have spoken and that is how it is. We've already shown this territory what will happen if anyone attempts to disgrace any of us." Maurie took a step toward him, her eyes deep and passionate as she continued speaking. "You go howl to those assholes they better watch their tails. No one fucks with a Sheridan female and lives to brag about it. No one," she hissed.

"I agree," he said, meaning it. He stared at her and she didn't blink when she watched him. For a moment he swore something softened in her olive green eyes. Something she'd lodged into place years ago possibly dissipated and offered him insight deeper into the feisty, high-strung, aggressive female before him. "I swear no one will fuck with you or your littermates. On my honor as a hunter and a leopard proud to run free and not be caged, you will have the same rights. But providing that security will be easier if I understand everything. Then, when someone howls, I will be the first to smack them out of the way for you," he told her, keeping his voice soft when the fierce protector inside him wanted to hiss at her to obey and allow him room to protect her.

"We appreciate it." As quickly as her gaze softened, once again it became impermeable. Maurie crossed her arms over her chest and took a step away from him, shifting her attention past him to her younger littermate. "It's late and my littermate and I need to sleep. Good hunting and thank you for honoring us with your protection," she said so formally her words reeked with the false sincerity to them.

Tore could throw her up against the wall again, or better yet over his shoulder, and march out of this home to his. He'd been dismissed with the graciousness a well-bred female would offer. Maurie wore so many faces it was hard to keep up with her sometimes. From insanely out of control to wild and energetic, to somber and carrying an air of class and integrity that few probably could smell the truth of her.

"Are you sure you two want to sleep here?" Karma asked, focusing more on Darla than Maurie.

"Yes," Maurie answered, and walked around Tore to Darla. Standing in front of her thinner, quieter littermate, she continued wearing her noble, relaxed expression. "You must believe the Rivers litter's accusations stem from their craving for our land and den. If we hadn't shown up, they could have bought this home and all the land our sire and mother sweat and bled to create a home for us on. We'll never run from it again, no matter who attacks."

There was such finality in her tone neither of her littermates said a word. Karma nodded slowly and reached for Race, who already had his hand on the door. A whirlwind of snow and ice-cold air wrapped around the room the second he escorted his mate outside, but Race stood there with the door open, obviously feeling obliged to play protector to his mate's unmated littermates. He waited without pretense for Tore to leave the den as well.

No matter how many of his traditions he'd endured all his life, there was no arguing the fact he couldn't remain here with Maurie. They weren't mated. Darla was barely grown. And no other male would be here to offer escort. He believed Race would stand there, allowing the temperature in the home to drop to as cold as it was outside until Tore left the den.

Stepping outside, he fought the urge to growl when Race closed the door to the den, and to Maurie's scent. He followed both of them to where their cars were parked.

"Did the three of you get a phone call that upset you while you were in there?" he asked Karma.

She glanced furtively at her mate. "It's really not my place..." she began.

"If there's information that will help us protect you," Race prompted, his tone gentle when he brushed Karma's hair behind her shoulder.

"That wouldn't be fair," she said, looking up at her mate, her eyes wide in the bitterly cold darkness surrounding them. "I honored my littermates by not telling you until they were present. Maurie would want the same thing."

Understanding spread over Race's face.

Tore fisted his hands against his waist. "What are you two talking about?" he demanded to know, hating nothing more than being left out of something that smelled urgent, if not dangerous.

Karma stared up at her mate, pressing her palm against Race's chest. Her expression was imploring, but it was clear she would wait for Race to answer Tore.

Race sighed, rubbing his head and leaving his thick golden hair in a sloppy disarray of curls. "Man, you're going to have to wait for her to tell you." He spoke slowly, as if hating that he needed to explain this to Tore. "I know it's a bitch, I had to go through it too," he offered. "I'll tell you this much, keep an eye on them."

Tore stared at Race, a leopard he'd known as long as he'd been a hunter. Although older than Race, Tore learned quickly after gaining the honorary title, that the male staring back at him was wise beyond his years. He hid it well behind an easy smile and carefree scent he held on to even now as a mated male. At the moment nothing sounded better than wiping that relaxed expression off Race's face and changing the male's relaxed smell real damn fast.

"I'd already planned on it." Tore couldn't keep his tone from being tight. He managed his temper pretty damn well most of the time. Something about knowing there were issues with Maurie he didn't know about made it harder to contain his emotions. Especially when every time he inhaled he was reminded of how good it felt being buried inside her. Her scent on him was stronger than ever. "Good hunting."

Race searched his face for only a moment before nodding. "Good hunting," he mumbled, and then turned to guide his mate to his truck.

Tore wouldn't leave his car parked outside Maurie's den all night. He believed she'd never done anything to dishonor her litter, but something didn't smell right in the

air, and after hearing Race and Karma pretty much admit there was trouble they wouldn't share with him, Tore knew he wasn't going home tonight.

He did drive and park his Jeep at his cabin though, leaving it out front as he always did but not going inside. He growled when he remembered telling Saul Rivers he would be present for the burning of their dead. Those two little pricks didn't deserve an honorable death. He'd given his word though.

"Crap," he hissed, his breath forming a cloud in front of his face as he stared at the huge black sky spread out overhead. He wouldn't be able to watch over Maurie all night, and the Rivers litter would know that.

It seemed to get colder as he began removing his clothes. Tore stripped off his shirt and then undid his jeans. Then stepping out of his boots, he pushed his jeans down his legs, feeling the frigid night air attack his flesh without mercy.

The change unleashed inside him, forcing electrical shocks to shoot up his spine while blood started racing through his human veins faster than they could handle. The burning distracted him from the winter wind wrapping around him. His skin thickened and his muscle tone altered and changed. Tore made quick work of binding his clothes together and stuffing them in a bag in his car then dropped it to the ground when his hands could no longer hold on to it.

When he dropped to all fours, he breathed in the night air, his senses growing sharper and his vision improving. The blackness of night no longer hindered his view and he scanned his surroundings, making sure no enemies lay in wait. All he breathed in was Maurie's ripe scent, which was so strong he swore she stood right next to him.

But she didn't. Maurie was home with her littermate, more than likely cuddled under warm blankets and drifting off to sleep. He would ensure she got a good night's sleep.

Grabbing his bag of clothes in his mouth, Tore broke into a sprint, tearing at the frozen ground with his thick, long claws as he raced across the countryside and back to Maurie's den.

Chapter Ten

Maurie opened her eyes, gulping in the chilly air. Her bedspread was tucked under her chin and she was cocooned in it, warm and cozy, although incredibly restless. Too antsy for having just woken up. She stared at the ceiling, her restlessness growing. She'd just woken from a dream, or was it a vision? As she grew more alert, hearing the wind outside rubbing branches against the roof, she lost the visions in her head that woke her with a start.

"Crap," she hissed, sitting and suddenly very cold. She tucked her blanket around her and stared at her bedroom. Race and Tore did their best to follow her instructions and recreate it exactly as her room had been as a cub. It wasn't the same. Not even close.

The room might be the same size, and she might have found furniture similar to what she'd had as a cub, but it was too cold, too unsettling. She stared at her surroundings and didn't feel the warmth and security she'd known and took for granted growing up.

When a bad dream woke her with a start, she used to be able to run to her parents' room and crawl under their blankets, knowing it was the safest place in the world. Her parents' room wasn't even there now. There hadn't been reason to rebuild it. It was her room, Darla's room and the living room and kitchen area. Add one small bathroom and this was her new den. What had she been thinking bringing her litter back here? What sense of false security had she hoped to gain being here?

Tossing the blankets off her bare legs, she embraced the frigid hardwood floors under her feet and walked into the living room where the fire had burned down to glowing embers, which offered no heat. Maurie walked over to the table where her cell phone was and pushed the button to make it glow and show her the time.

"Fucking four in the morning," she groaned.

Maurie glanced at Darla's bedroom, her door opened and the dark room quiet. Her littermate's slow, relaxed breathing was enough to know she slept peacefully. Unlike Maurie, who was now wide awake.

Walking back to her bedroom, she pulled her bathrobe off the edge of her bed and slipped her arms in then wrapped it around her, hugging her waist and returning to the living room. It wasn't smart to get a fire going this late at night. Beyond it being a waste of wood and dangerous getting a full-fledged fire going when she could fall back asleep, smoke coming out the chimney might attract more rogues. And she wasn't in the mood for company.

Sighing heavily, she then breathed in Tore's rich scent, which still clung to her skin. What was it about that male? She didn't want a mate. And she sure as hell didn't want

some rogue who was bull-headed and dominating and so fucking bossy and demanding.

"Quit thinking about him." She turned her attention from the glowing ashes and paced the length of the living room, pausing in front of the window and feeling the temperature drop drastically while staring at the frosty panes. "You've got worse matters to deal with."

If only Tore were her worse problem. Remembering the phone call earlier last night, and then the discussion following it, sobered her and made her more awake. A good hard run would help her sleep.

When Laird Bradford, one of the oldest male leopards Maurie had ever known, called to see how they were doing, Maurie couldn't control her excitement. She knew VC—Vision Controllers—the organization her sire and mother helped create, would come back to them with her tail between their legs. Maurie and her littermates were the best team VC ever had. She couldn't begin to count how many leopards they'd helped relocate, escape the claws of Leo Pard and start new lives.

"How dare he say he just called to make sure we were okay," she snarled, moving from the cold window back to the fireplace, which wasn't offering enough heat. Maurie grabbed the poker. "That isn't why he called."

Of course Karma argued Laird might very well care about the three of them since he'd known their sire. Karma smelled too damn gullible sometimes. The old leopard could sniff around and learn how they were doing. He didn't need to call them on a cell phone. Maurie knew why he called. It was obvious. He wanted to see them struggling, barely able to hunt a good meal so he could prance in and save the day. Then if they begged, he might consider reinstating their status with VC so they could help other leopards with visions again.

"A status we wouldn't have lost if Karma hadn't mated with a hunter." For some reason blaming Karma for their downfall, their reason for running here to the burnt home they'd grown up in left a foul taste in her mouth this time. Usually she found solace knowing their lives were fucked up right now because Karma howled for the wrong male. "It wasn't my fault," she mumbled bitterly, stabbing glowing embers with the poker and watching them shower the ashes with sparks.

"But I can put things back to how they should be." Except for an overgrown, dangerous rogue male who smelled and tasted a bit too good for his own hide. "Quit thinking about him."

She shoved the poker onto the wrought iron stand that held all the fireplace utensils and wrapped her robe tight around her waist. "Focus on the best way to convince Laird VC will benefit with me and Darla running for them again."

Maurie walked to the front door as a north wind shook the trees and stirred up the smells outside, some of them drifting through the door. Breathing in the mixture of fire and the aromas from outside, she swore she smelled Tore's scent above all the rest.

“Because he’s fucking embedded in your pores,” she snapped at herself, reaching for the door handle without giving it much thought and opening the door. She slid her feet into her boots and headed into the frozen night.

Maybe freezing to death for a moment would clear her head and keep her thoughts focused. All that mattered was running for VC. There were too many males and females out there still fighting for control of their lives and barely managing to stay out of the claws of Leo Pard. He was an insane leopard, convinced all of their kind with visions should be herded together and forced to breed with each other to create some super race. A race of bitterly unhappy leopards—that’s what he’d create.

Maurie would see Leo Pard dead herself if she was ever given the opportunity. Even though she didn’t have internet access at their home right now, when they were in Wheeler’s Point, Darla spent most of her time on Panthera Incognita, a website run by leopards and predominantly gossip, but occasionally beneficial news was found there. They’d kept up on the happenings of Pard and the wasted excuse for flesh followers he had prancing around the country doing his dirty work. PI was where they learned hunters helped Pard round up the first group of leopards and hauled them to his home in Arizona where they were caged and forced to breed with each other.

When Karma fell for Race, he argued to all of them hunters didn’t help Pard but sniffed around the place and then rescued those caged. “And you didn’t smell a lie,” she reminded herself, shivering against the bitter cold.

“Lord, it’s beautiful,” she breathed, hugging herself and staring at the inky black sky cluttered with huge stars. “I need to run.”

Which meant she would have to wake Darla. No way could she take off to clear her head and leave her youngest littermate unprotected. Contemplating the thought of waking her, she continued staring at the sky when a sound in the trees next to her made her heart swell to her throat.

Maurie growled, her entire body stiffening as she stared at the trees and saw a large wing flutter and a few feathers fall free. She focused on one large feather fluttering to the ground and breathed in the strong smell of owls.

“Who is there?” she growled, gripping her bathrobe but ready to shed out of it if she needed to put some muscle on. Fear didn’t consume her as much as trepidation and curiosity. Owls didn’t usually attack leopards, mainly because they would lose if they didn’t fly away fast enough, but also because they weren’t aggressive like leopards. “Don’t get this close to my den and not show yourself unless you’re a coward.”

Maurie searched the darkness, knowing at least two owls were behind the trees but unable to focus on them with her human eyes. It was too damn dark.

A growl erupted from her throat when two females appeared in the trees and walked toward her. They were tall, slender with silvery blonde hair and large, unblinking eyes, strong characteristics of owls.

“Are you a Sheridan female?” the one on the left asked. She was thinner than the other female, possibly younger. It was so hard to determine age with owls.

"Who the hell are you?" Maurie demanded.

"We're bringing a message to the Sheridan litter but need proof of who you are."

"I don't need to prove shit," Maurie hissed. "You're on my land, not the other way around."

The female speaking nodded, watching her with those unnerving large eyes, but not saying anything else for a moment. "We can't deliver the message without confirmation of who you are," she said, her calm voice and soft tone too relaxed for a potentially dangerous scene.

"Who sent you?" Maurie asked, glancing from one owl to the other. She'd dealt with this species on more than one occasion while running for VC. Although owls never came across as predatory, they were a race to respect. Maurie didn't offer respect to anyone who didn't earn it though. A lesson she'd learned as a cub and held on to with all of her dealings with strangers.

"Once we know who you are, we can offer more information," the other female told her.

"Get off my land." Maurie turned from them, waving her hand in the air dismissively. That was when she breathed in a hint of something else in the air.

Something a hell of a lot more dangerous than two female owls. She mentally cursed her human eyes for not allowing her to see better in the dark. But her senses didn't lie. Even if they weren't as strong in her current form, she knew the aroma she breathed in wasn't the lingering scent of Tore on her body. It was too fresh, too predatory and too angry to be coming from her.

Tore was out there watching her somewhere in the darkness, hidden by the trees and the night. By the rich smell she'd guess he was in his fur, but either way, he stood out of sight, not cowardly but possessively. That pissed her off.

As if she needed some fucking guard dog.

Maurie spun around as quickly as she'd dismissed the owls, not surprised to see neither of them had moved. They'd picked up on the scent too. Their attention snapped to her the second she faced them, but Maurie knew they'd been scanning the darkness just as she had, wondering if danger closed in on them.

Let them wonder.

"I'm Maurie Sheridan, eldest of my litter. Tell me who you are before you offer your message," she instructed, keeping her tone calm, quiet, soothing, although if Tore were in his animal form, there was no way he wouldn't hear their conversation. He didn't need to be about her business. "Answer only what I ask," she told them.

They stared at her, not saying anything for a long minute, and watched her with those large, unnerving eyes. Maurie felt tingles rush over her flesh and it wasn't from the cold. Her fingers were numb, her bare legs under her robe burning. The very early morning breeze made her eyes water.

The female owls studying her, taking their time calculating their response, didn't do a thing for her like the heated glare that burrowed into her back. Remembering how aggressive he'd been in his flesh, how he'd fucked her and left her more satisfied yet craving him again immediately, only created suggestive images of how it would be to be taken by him in her fur. She almost staggered from the intensity of it while fighting to keep her attention on the owls.

"I'm not sure why who we are matters," the female who spoke first said. "But if it satisfies you, and since you honored our request, we will give you that information."

"I'm Gelda," the other female told her.

"And I am Ryann," the first female said.

Maurie knew owls considered their last names an extreme formality, only offered under the most honorable of circumstances. Another strange quirk about their species, but one that never bothered her before, until now. She saw their point, offering their names did little to help her.

"Where did you come from?" she asked, knowing it wasn't the same as asking their last names but close. "And I don't mean originally," she added, knowing how owls would answer a question at face value. "I meant before you flew here."

Ryann nodded once, accepting the specifics of the question. "We flew here from the United States, more specifically from the state of Minnesota."

"Who sent you with this message for me?"

"Another of your kind," Gelda offered.

"Who told us you would be difficult and reluctant to receive your message," Ryann offered, finishing Gelda's sentence.

The two of them were very familiar with each other, almost as if they were a lesbian couple. Maurie didn't know a lot about sexual orientation of owls and didn't really care. But she noticed at that moment both females smelled the same. They were either related or spent almost all of their time together.

"Are you suggesting the leopard with this message knows me?" She wasn't insulting herself, but if someone knew her, they would know she wouldn't greet strangers and honor them as if they were special simply because they graced her with their presence.

"Yes. He knows you and your littermates very well," Gelda said.

"Are you ready for your message?" Ryann asked.

Maurie didn't want Tore hearing anything he shouldn't. "I'm not sure," she told them, ignoring how her legs shook from the cold. "Tell me what this message is about first."

"VC," Gelda told her, not hesitating.

Maurie's heart stopped and she probably dropped her jaw when she gawked at the two owls. She regained her composure and stepped toward them. Both females

stiffened and their scent grew so strong it was almost nauseating. They were preparing to attack.

"I won't attack," Maurie whispered, taking another step until she was a few feet from both females. They were taller than she was, their long, silvery blonde hair giving them the look of being a hell of a lot older than they probably were. She fought to keep her own scent neutral, unwilling to let them, or Tore, understand why she approached the owls. "Whisper your message. Do it quickly and then leave," she said, speaking slowly and searching both their faces for understanding. She didn't want to have to explain there was an overly possessive male lingering somewhere behind her who didn't need to know her business.

"You're to meet Laird with VC tomorrow at noon in Wheeler's Point at the bar," Gelda whispered, and then turned.

Ryann turned at the same time and the two females walked into the trees, following her instruction and offering no more explanation. Their message was delivered.

A chilling breeze wrapped around Maurie as she stood watching the darkness where the two females disappeared. With each breath she took, she filled her lungs with Tore's scent. Strong, powerful, aggressive and dominating—everything she swore her entire life would turn her off in a mate. And since most leopard males possessed at least some of those traits, Maurie assumed she would never mate.

Maurie wrapped her robe around her when she shifted her attention from the trees where the owls disappeared to the darkness behind her. What the hell was he doing here?

She didn't need to search for him. Tore stepped into the clearing, his large paws crunching over packed snow from where cars had parked earlier. He dropped a full bag next to the front of her car and then straightened, lifting his head and stared at her with golden eyes filled with a challenge.

If she changed, he would fuck her. He might fuck her even if she didn't. That knowledge made her head spin. A craving exploded inside her, impossible to ignore. Suddenly her breasts felt heavier, ached for his touch and his mouth wrapped around her nipple. The swelling between her legs throbbed, the need to feel him inside her overwhelming all her rational thought.

Maurie gulped in a cold breath of air, forcing her focus from his eyes to his massive chest and broad shoulders. Tore was one hell of a large leopard, bigger than any male she'd ever seen. Muscles rippled under his orange fur. And rosettes, so black and perfectly symmetrical, added to his beauty. Tore was beyond gorgeous. Her mouth watered taking in his muscular body and all the gulps of air dragged into her lungs didn't appease the fire now burning deep inside her.

"Go home," she ordered him, even her voice was raw with need.

If she hadn't spent years training herself to be strong, the merciless one in her litter, she might have caved in at that moment. Turning toward her door, putting one foot in front of the other, took every ounce of strength she possessed.

Tore moved with lightning speed, placing his large body between her and her home before she realized he moved. “I said leave,” she hissed, and made the mistake of staring into his golden eyes and drowning there.

He stalked her, moving closer, the predator that he was taking his time while he decided what his next move would be. She saw his thought process, knew he calculated his options and weighed them equally before choosing his course. She knew this because she did the same thing. As she saw it now, there were two choices—make a bolt for the door, and probably one hell of a scene when he stopped her, or strip out of her clothes and change.

And if she left her human form...

God! She smelled her lust as strongly as she smelled him. Tore was already in his fur, his senses stronger than hers were in human form. No way would he let her pass. He would wait until she froze to death and changed and then he’d fuck her.

“Damn you,” she hissed.

She swore he laughed at her. He opened his mouth, showing off shiny, deadly looking long white fangs. A rumble ripped from his throat, shaking the ground under her feet. It sent vibrations shooting through her, intensifying the craving she knew wouldn’t go away unless she fucked him.

Damn him to hell and back.

“Get out of my way and let me go inside. It’s freezing out here.” She gave it one last shot and knew by how her voice cracked, not to mention how strong her craving for him smelled, she didn’t sound too convincing.

Tore stepped closer until his black, moist, velvety nose was inches from her face. The heat from his body had to be strong enough to melt the snow around him. It was doing one hell of a good job of melting the exterior force field she’d kept in place for damn near twenty-eight years now.

Maurie stepped over the snow, walking around him while he watched without moving. Not that he couldn’t leap again and prevent her from doing anything he didn’t want. And that pissed her off. He’d eliminated her choices. No male controlled her. Even if he was the hottest, sexiest, most intriguing male she’d ever sniffed out. That made it worse. It made her feel weak.

“Don’t try to stop me,” she instructed, pointing her finger at him as she continued a wide trek around him to her door. “I’m going inside and you’re going home. That’s how it is.”

When he didn’t move but simply watched her, the wave of disappointment attacking her as she reached for the doorknob and knew she would now be safe from him hit her so hard she did slip. But she grabbed her door, pushed it open and used it to brace herself when she practically fell inside.

Closing the door behind her didn’t lessen his scent or her overwhelming need for him. “Son of a bitch,” she cursed under her breath, leaning against her front door while her heart pounded in her chest.

She glanced nervously around her dark living room, sniffing the air. Darla still slept. The fire barely glowed in the fireplace. All was as it should be in her home. Peaceful and comforting. Except the tingles that poked her flesh, the thumping of her heart and the sparks shooting up her spine made her feel anything but peaceful.

She was on edge, suddenly grouchy and irritated, and pacing the length of her living room didn't help. Tore was out there. She'd bet her life on it. More than likely standing right where she left him. His way of letting her know he wouldn't force her to do anything she didn't want but he wouldn't submit to her any more than she'd submit to him.

Hell of a couple they would make.

Which was why getting involved with him would be the stupidest move she ever made. Hell, Laird just made contact. After being fired because Karma mated with a hunter, the controversy around those two exposing them and who they were to more hunters, Maurie had paced anxiously waiting for the moment when VC would come crawling back to her. And she knew they would. She was the best they had. Hell, her sire and mother helped form VC, knowing a group of the best leopards with visions were the only ones who could help the others from escaping the insane wrath of Leo Pard.

Under no circumstances whatsoever could she do anything to jeopardize returning to VC. It was her life—what she was meant to do.

"Which means no Tore Mann," she told herself, still whispering and pacing and shooting furtive glances at her front door.

She'd stopped pacing and simply scowled at her front door when she realized her actions. Unsure how long she'd stood there, what she did know was arguing with herself the rest of the night would leave her irritated and exhausted. Once again she presented herself with two choices—go to bed or find Tore and fuck him.

What if all she did was fuck him? It wasn't as if there needed to be a relationship. Even though her heart argued it might not be her best judgment call, Maurie slipped out of her boots, which had left a nice puddle in the middle of the living room floor, and placed them by the fireplace to dry. Then walking barefoot to her front door, she shed her bathrobe, draped it over the back of the couch, and released the sparks attacking her spine.

The change attacked her system with such a vengeance blood roared in her head, disorienting her momentarily. Maurie grabbed her nightgown, all but ripping it off her head, and barely managed to put her hand on the doorknob and open the door before it hit her with full force.

Maurie fought the urge to roar from the sweet pain brutalizing her nervous system. She didn't remember reaching behind her to close the door and keep her home from freezing, but a remnant of sanity obviously existed in her feverish brain somewhere. The wooden door bumped her rear and she fell to all fours, her hands barely changed to paws when the frozen, packed snow just outside her home seared her skin.

The frigid night helped clear her head. Her senses grew more acute. Fur sprouted from her flesh, which had thickened into a protective hide that made the winter temperatures more tolerable. Maurie stepped over the snow, no longer concerned with slipping, and filled her lungs with the night air. Every bit of it smelled like Tore, but she didn't see him.

She would not search him out. Unfortunately, she couldn't break into a run either and leave Darla here alone. Turning in the direction the female owls had disappeared, Maurie decided she would make good of being in her fur and sniff out where they'd been. At least she could make a good show of having returned outside in her fur for reasons other than to see Tore.

Maurie walked around the trees, picking up a faint smell of the females. It was hard to detect with his scent wrapped around her so tight she swore he was right next to her. More than once she looked around her, checked over her shoulder, finding herself very much alone.

Although she knew she wasn't.

She returned her attention to the trees in front of her and stubbed her nose against hard, solid muscle. Maurie hissed, jumping back instinctively, but Tore was on her before she could react further.

Every breath filled her lungs with his rich, intoxicating scent. His coat was smooth like raw silk and covered bulging muscles. Tore grabbed her nape, his sharp teeth pinching her flesh as he held her still and mounted her.

There wasn't foreplay in their fur, unless she wanted to beat the crap out of him. Although the thought crossed her mind, attacking this close to her home would wake Darla and create a scene she couldn't have happen.

She growled, turning her head and raising a paw to strike when he pinched the back of her neck between his teeth. He was holding her in place, keeping her where he wanted her. And he was moving over her.

Tore was damn near twice her size. He climbed on top of her, but she couldn't stand underneath him. His weight forced her to the ground yet he still held her neck.

Leave marks, you son of a bitch, and I swear I'll kick your ass clear back to the United States, she growled, keeping her tone low and threatening.

He rumbled a response that vibrated clean through her, making her heart race with its fierce sound. Tore wouldn't take her crap, which made it even more necessary to dish it out to him. At the same time, she believed he understood she wouldn't take shit off him either.

Maurie lowered her head, enduring the pain of his teeth scraping over the back of her neck until he let go. She'd be damned if he would pin her so she couldn't move. Moving until he couldn't hold on to her any longer with his mouth put her body on the ground. She looked over her shoulder, curling her lip and letting him know with a low growl she didn't go for being controlled like that.

Staring into those golden eyes was as big a mistake in her fur as it had been in her flesh though. Tore pierced her soul while moving her hind legs and pressing his cock against her swollen pussy. She drowned in his gaze, feeling his heat while her heart pounded and sent blood rushing through her at a dangerous pace.

This was trouble, possibly even the biggest mistake she would ever make. And she couldn't wait for him to enter her. As he pressed his hard, thick cock against her entrance, a wave of panic exploded inside her. She wasn't sure if she yelped from the reality she saw in his eyes or because at that moment she realized keeping Tore out of her personal life, ensuring this relationship remain casual, might be impossible to do.

Tore continued staring into her eyes and thrust his cock inside her. He lowered his face to hers, growling as if warning her, and then impaled her with the biggest, thickest cock she'd ever felt in her life.

Maurie howled, or tried to. Apparently Tore anticipated her reaction to him entering her and pressed his head against hers, muffling the sound. He nipped the side of her face, his sharp teeth offering sweet pain while his cock glided into her soaked pussy, bringing pleasure like she'd never known before.

When she whimpered, practically praising him for the sensations he sent rushing over her, Maurie would have blushed if she could in her fur. Tore rumbled softly in his throat, a mixture between a growl and purr. The rich aroma of male satisfaction, of pleasure knowing he pleased her and would offer her more, smelled so damn good. And she hated the scent at the same time.

Tore was a pompous brute, and too damn good. He receded and thrust again, taking her so close to the edge she could feel it. She reached out with her paws, extending her claws, for that invisible barrier only he could take her to. And she wanted it. Wanted it so fucking bad.

He stood over her, his cock buried deep inside her while he built a pace and created friction inside her. She would ignite into flame any moment now, every time he impaled her, stroked her soaked insides. Maurie felt herself get closer and closer. Pressure built, volcanic heat erupted, and her world tilted as she dug at the ground. Nothing she could do would bring her closer to her orgasm.

Tore made her feel so damn good. She was purring, fucking purring, while he built up speed and fucked her hard, aggressively and with confident domination that she should hate. He was controlling her, manipulating the situation, owning the moment.

But no leopard would ever own her. He wouldn't tell her what to do or decide when she would have her orgasm. Fighting him and taking over the act was impossible to do though. Worse yet, Maurie didn't want him to stop. She didn't want to fight to take over their lovemaking. He was doing things to her body she didn't know she could experience.

Her pussy constricted, the pressure consuming her body. He'd brought her to the place where she wanted to be and now she didn't want to leave. Hovering on the edge

of her orgasm, feeling it ready to spill over her, Maurie focused on how his thick cock felt as Tore stroked the many muscles inside her.

She didn't want to dwell on the repercussions of their act. She didn't want to think about his aggressive nature and how he might treat her after taking her in her fur. Maurie left her home of her own accord. She'd wanted this and she got it. It was her idea. When she changed into her fur and came back outside, there wasn't an ounce of doubt she'd end up right here, underneath him, gaining the satisfaction she'd craved.

And she was getting what she wanted. No way would she feel guilty, hold a grudge or regret her actions. Later she would figure out how to manage Tore. But for now, so damn close to exploding, all that mattered was that he take the pressure away and release her orgasm.

Reaching with her mouth, she found his leg and bit him, clamping down on muscle and fur, and held on even when his growl turned fierce, and urged him to take her over the barrier that held her in a state of heated passion.

Tore slammed deep inside her, using what had to be a good amount of his strength. Maurie slid against the frozen rough ground and let go of his leg as wave after wave of satisfaction spilled throughout her. She hissed, doing her best not to scream, and wasn't sure she pulled it off as she came so fucking hard she damn near passed out.

Her world shifted, his hot come spraying inside her pussy. Tore came right along with her, the rumbling in his throat turning to a menacing growl as he pushed both of them into a space new to her. My God, it was fucking perfect.

Arrays of color exploded before her eyes and she fought to breathe. His cock twitched inside her, hot and swollen and soaked. And when he relaxed over her, his large body pressing her against the ground, the mixture of scalding heat radiating from him and the frozen ground underneath her, added to the rippling sensations that continued spilling over her.

She sucked in a breath and filled her lungs with an aroma so sweet it was like nectar from the gods. As far back as her grandparents' time, fucking a male like this would make her his mate. Traditions changed slowly with their kind and always would. The thick cloud of lust continued fogging her brain, but even so, Maurie knew the wonderful odor wrapped around both of them was the smell of their scent combined, a sign any male or female leopard would pick up on and acknowledge that both of them were taken.

Maybe today, in her world now, leopards often experienced and enjoyed casual sex. And that was what this was. Tore eased his weight off her, shifting so his large body reclined behind her while his cock continued twitching inside her. Whatever it took, from this point forward, Maurie would have to make it damn clear they were nothing more than two single leopards who could enjoy hot sex with each other and nothing more.

She would be firm about it. She would have to be. No matter what, fucking Tore like this couldn't mess up her chances of reuniting with VC. As she continued taking

slow, deep cleansing breaths, Maurie also insisted to herself fucking Tore meant nothing.

She felt his cock, still swollen inside her. The hard, cold ground underneath her didn't help soothe the heat still rushing through her. His large body behind her kept her warm. But when he lifted his head and looked down at her then slowly ran his tongue down the side of her face to her shoulders and began meticulously cleaning her, Maurie felt the first wave of panic attack. And when it did, it pierced her heart.

Convincing Tore they were nothing more than fuck buddies might be easier to do than convincing herself. He took his time cleaning her, adoring her body with his tongue while purring softly. She was in trouble—big trouble. Tore made her feel as good cleaning her as he did fucking her.

Maurie started worrying walking away from Tore might be the hardest thing she ever did.

Chapter Eleven

Tore squinted against the glare of the morning sun against the snow as he parked in front of Race's home. He picked up on the faint smell of antifreeze, a warning he would need to service his SUV soon. Another time he would have put the task at the top of his list. Tore always kept his vehicle in top running shape. Being stranded was about as bad as being caged. He didn't like the taste or smell of either and wouldn't tolerate either happening. Unfortunately, in the past week or so, the usually quiet town of Kenora was pulsing with drama and issues. And it was his job to clean it up.

"I'm ready." Race came strolling out of his new cabin, a small home he'd built almost completely on his own for him and his mate.

Tore didn't blame the male a bit for not wanting to live with all of Karma's littermates. He smelled Race's dislike for Maurie, and Darla was so young and pretty she was dangerous. No male could be around her without experiencing an overwhelming urge to either protect her or fuck her. All three Sheridan females were sensual, sexy-as-hell creatures, yet all of them so incredibly different.

Tore looked past Race when Karma and Darla appeared in the doorway.

"How long will you be gone?" Karma asked, speaking to her mate's back.

Race reached the passenger side of the Jeep and looked over the hood at his mate. She and Darla didn't move out of the doorway and Tore wanted to know where Maurie was. She wasn't here. He also wanted to know why Darla was here. That meant Maurie was alone at her den. His insides tightened, making his muscles hurt while the urge to demand explanations about her whereabouts grew overwhelming.

"I can't imagine we'll be there too long. I'll call you once we leave the werewolf pack. Maybe we can all meet in Kenora for a steak."

Darla rewarded him for his suggestion with a big, excited grin. "Works for me. I'm already starving."

"Then eat," Race grumbled.

"I'll feed her. Don't worry," Karma said, elbowing her littermate in the side. She shifted her attention to Tore. "Maybe I can get Maurie to join us in town when you two males take us out to eat."

"Depends on when they get back," Darla said, frowning at Karma. "She's going to be gone well into the afternoon."

"Where did she go?" Tore demanded, practically growling.

Karma shot Darla a warning look and her younger littermate looked at the ground, her long, silky blonde hair falling over her shoulder and partially blocking her face. For a moment the silence hung heavy before Race cleared his throat. Karma focused on him,

her green eyes wide with a silent warning. They weren't going to tell him where Maurie went.

Tore opened his car door, sliding behind the steering wheel and slamming his door closed hard enough the females jumped. He didn't care. As if he would be able to discuss Jin Rose with a bunch of fucking werewolves without knowing where Maurie was and if she was safe. If she'd gone to see another male, then the motherfucker would have to die.

"Where the fuck is she?" Tore demanded to know when Race slid into the passenger seat.

"Man, Tore," Race grumbled, smelling frustrated.

Tore slammed the car into gear and spun the tires over the ice, practically doing a one eighty before leaving the driveway and hitting the not much better rural road.

"What the fuck is it about this god-damn litter?" he hissed, accelerating too quickly and causing his Jeep to fishtail. He decelerated enough to maintain control of the car and glared at Race. "If she's with another male I'll fucking kill him."

"No offense, but what the hell do you see in that female?" Race asking ridiculous questions wasn't going to change the subject.

"If you don't tell me where she is, we're going to comb this territory until I find her," he said instead of wasting time answering Race's question.

"She's not with another male, not like you think. Okay?"

"Would you be satisfied if Karma disappeared and I refused to tell you where she was?"

Race growled instead of answering.

"Okay then. Tell me where the fuck she is."

Race didn't look at Tore when he spoke but focused on the road ahead of them, his large body relaxed yet his jaw set, determined, and his tone relaxed, too goddamn fucking calm. "There is something unique about this litter, something personal, and only Maurie can tell you. It would dishonor her to do otherwise."

Tore gripped the steering wheel, his eyes burning when he didn't blink but glared at the road ahead of them. He was in no fucking mood to go talk to the pack leader who'd called and requested a meeting. His blood burned in his veins, understanding creating a bile taste in his mouth. Maurie and her littermates had a secret, one he hadn't picked up on. And obviously one Maurie didn't offer to tell him.

Her scent was so ripe on him there wasn't any way any sane leopard wouldn't know he'd fucked her in her fur. And god damn if she didn't love it. Maurie pranced out of her home last night, her tail in the air, releasing her scent and inviting him to come to her. She'd shifted from her skin to fur with one thought on her mind. Maurie wanted him and he gave her what she wanted.

Obviously she had no intention of honoring the repercussions accompanying having sex with a male in her fur. Not that it was the first time he'd fucked a female like

that. But words were exchanged first. They knew it had been casual. There weren't any words shared with him and Maurie announcing the lovemaking they shared last night as being casual. She knew as well as he did there was something growing between them.

And now the sexy little obstinate female pranced off to god knows where without howling to him first. He held on to the steering wheel with enough force to rip the column clear out of the dash. Glancing at Race when he turned onto the two-lane highway that would take them into werewolf country, the male held on to stubborn silence, his arms crossed over his chest while staring out the front window.

Race looked at Tore and relaxed his expression, blowing out an exasperated sigh and filling the inside of the car with tense emotions. "If you want to chase down that female, you've got your work cut out for you. More so than with any other female. Honestly, I'd say you're crazy to try."

Tore knew Race wouldn't ask if Maurie was worth it sexually. Tore would never ask his friend what his mate was like in bed. But he couldn't argue with anything Race just said.

"You're right, man," he growled, forcing himself to relax his grip on the steering wheel. "I would never dishonor her though."

"Never said you would."

"She thinks she can run how she wants and the whole fucking world will bow down and allow her to do it."

"That's a female for you."

Tore wasn't sure he agreed. There were many females out there willing to belly up for him and do whatever he wanted. The little barmaid at The Running Mate was a good example of that. God, he hadn't given her a thought since he'd gotten a whiff of Maurie. And a week or so ago he seriously contemplated fucking her.

"Maurie's worse," he said.

"Won't argue with that one," Race grunted.

Tore shot him a menacing look, ready to tear his head off. "She's aggressive for a reason," he added, the urge to defend her too strong to ignore.

Race held his hands up in mock surrender. "If you want her, go for it. You have my blessing."

Race held the position of head of the Sheridan litter since there weren't any males. By mating with Karma, technically he could approve or disprove any male sniffing around Maurie or Darla. Tore doubted Race took the role too seriously, but Race would look out for them, out of love and honor to his mate.

"You honor me," Tore mumbled, knowing the age-old words howled at a time like this but not feeling the meaning behind them as he should. If anything, part of him sided with Race. Hunting Maurie down would be more work than he ever thought he would exert toward a female. "I'm not saying that—" He cut himself off.

"I know." Race nodded as if he understood the unfinished sentence. "I swore I would never mate, didn't see the reason in it. Maybe down the road, once I slowed down as a hunter, a few cubs might be nice. Karma crept up on my ass. I'm telling you. Maurie might not obey you or behave as you want, but I'd watch your tail if I were you."

"Why is that?" Tore didn't like the rather amused expression and how Race's scent changed drastically when he looked at Tore with a smirk on his face. "What?" he growled.

"You smell pretty fucking mated to me. And the way I know Maurie, she'll be running wild whenever she feels like it and having you howling to her for permission to run on all fours."

"Like fucking hell," Tore roared.

Race chuckled and then broke out into a gut-clenching laugh when Tore's spicy scent filled the inside of the Jeep.

The large white house sat on an incline with sprawling land stretching out for miles around it. It was an odd place for such a huge house, out in the middle of nowhere. Tore remembered being told once it was a human boarding house with other buildings around it. Today it was all that was left standing of a community long since gone.

And now it was werewolf property. A good-sized pack lived in the large house as well as the much newer-looking cabins built in a row behind it.

Tore pulled into the shoveled drive behind a blue and white truck and cut the engine. Several females stood at the side of the house yelling for their cubs, who raced frantically toward them. Tore stepped out into the crisp winter air and breathed in the panicky smell the cubs and females left behind as they scurried around the back of the house and disappeared.

Leopards were on their property and the females wouldn't have their cubs in danger from such a vicious species. Like werewolves were any better, he thought with a grunt and turned his attention to the large front porch.

He and Race climbed the porch stairs when the front door opened and Rick Bolton filled the doorway.

"Welcome to our den, come in," Rick said formally, his deep baritone bouncing off the high ceiling in the entryway.

Tore got the impression he did more than welcome them to his den with his greeting. It smelled more as if he were announcing to everyone in the house leopards were present. Not that anyone here wouldn't smell them. The place was thick with the smell of werewolves.

"You honor us," Tore said, entering the very clean entryway and staring past it at a large living room stuffed with several couches and at least as many reclining chairs.

A large-screen TV stood in the corner with a fairly elaborate stereo system housed next to it on a sturdy-looking entertainment center. He also noticed most of the latest and most popular game machines. Following the werewolf into the large living area, he spotted a formal dining room with a long, expensive-looking dining table with matching chairs on either side. Bolton's pack was doing all right for themselves.

"Elsa," Rick said, extending his hand to a female lunewulf who appeared from another door in the dining room and approached the males quietly. The particular breed of werewolves were known for their speed and light-colored features compared to the Malta Werewolves who lived in the Rockies in the States. "These are two leopards from Kenora, Tore Mann and Race Ogden. Males, allow me to introduce my mate Elsa Bolton."

Bolton's mate was petite with very light blonde hair that fell to her waist. She had bright blue eyes, which stood out more probably from the blue sweater she wore. Elsa moved to stand next to her mate and smiled at both of them, nodding her greeting and then wrapping her arm around her mate's waist.

"Where is the Hayden den?" Rick asked, looking down at his mate.

"I called them as soon as these two pulled up. They said they'd be here in a minute." Elsa glanced from Tore to Race. "Would either of you like coffee or a beer?"

Tore could be tempted with beer. Already his nerves were on edge, close to the burning attacking his veins. It wouldn't take much for the slightest bit of idiocy to set him off. Knowing Maurie had taken off somewhere, satisfied her litter was trained well enough not to rat her out, had him wound tight. Add alcohol to his current state and he'd kill some unlikely bastard just to blow off steam.

"Coffee is good."

"It's still early. Coffee works for me too," Race said.

Tore didn't smile at the lunewulf female but sensed she wasn't intimidated by him. Interesting how all of a sudden he noticed things about her gender he'd never smelled out before. Elsa Bolton looked as if she would attack without hesitating to protect what was hers. He honored her by looking away when she left them instead of watching her firm ass sway in the figure-hugging blue jeans she wore.

Instead he focused on Rick Bolton, the tall werewolf already watching both of them carefully. "Tell me about this den—this Hayden den," Tore said, keeping matters on business. The sooner they were out of there the better.

"I take it you didn't bring Jin Rose."

Since Tore told him on the phone she wouldn't be with him he simply stared at Bolton.

"She was sniffed out in Kenora. Some of the coyotes held her in their den," Bolton said, his scent remaining neutral in spite of his words suggesting Tore intentionally didn't honor Bolton's request to bring her to him.

"You're right." Tore wouldn't judge the werewolf. Since he'd lived here, Bolton never gave him indication of running low to the ground. All the howlings suggested he was honorable and straightforward. Tore would credit him as such unless he smelled otherwise. And he didn't have any intention of lying to the male. "I picked her up at the Gage coyote den."

Race turned first when Elsa appeared in the dining room with a tray of coffee mugs. Her mate moved to help her, lifting the cups and handing one to Race and Tore.

There was a sound at the back of the house, a door opening while someone knocked on it.

"That would be the Haydens." Elsa put the tray on the dining room table and hurried out of the room, returning a minute later with a young couple, both lunewulfs.

Their fair complexions and slightly smaller build than Rick Bolton, who was an American werewolf, otherwise known among his own kind as a mutt, commonly led many to believe they were a less aggressive breed of their kind. Lunewulfs were known not only for their incredible speed, some bragging they were the fastest species on earth, but also for their cunning and eccentricity. Tore heard so many claims to good and bad traits about every species he'd learned at a young age to judge someone only after sniffing them out.

He studied the small-boned female as she shifted her attention to each of them quickly before focusing on her hands. Her mate stood in front of her, his chest puffed out and tousled blond hair almost reaching his shoulders. He didn't look at any of them and nodded once when Elsa offered them coffee.

Once everyone had their coffee and the rich brew, which was really good, filled the room with its strong aroma, Rick Bolton returned to the living room then faced the group standing around him.

"I don't see any reason to turn this into a party." He focused on Tore, ignoring the Haydens, who both smelled really uncomfortable. "You didn't bring the female."

"No."

"Why not?" Rachelle Hayden asked, her outburst smelling revoltingly spicy.

"Jin shared something with me in her defense." Tore sipped at his coffee, feeling the weight of the room staring at him and noted Race watched the Haydens warily. Race came to stand in as his second and probably didn't plan on saying a word, but he was a good hunter who would sniff out trouble as quickly as Tore. When he shifted his attention to Rick and his mate, both of them also watched the young mated couple but met his gaze, waiting for him to continue. "Her claim is you never told her you were mated."

Lee Hayden stared back at him with pale, icy blue eyes. There was a lot of rogue in the young male and enough cockiness he apparently didn't see why Jin's accusation bore any weight.

"Is this true?" Rick asked Lee.

"What?" Lee blinked and shifted his weight then slowly shook his head. "I don't remember."

"What does it matter? You were supposed to bring her here. I have a right to attack," Rachelle complained.

"I would suggest you attack your mate then," Tore growled.

"What the fuck?" Lee hissed, puffing out his muscular chest and fisting his hands on either side of him as he took a step toward Tore.

It would take nothing to throw the young, arrogant pup into the next room. Just thinking about it shot surges of adrenaline pumping hard through Tore's body. He didn't move though, holding the lunewulf's gaze, acutely aware of Rick taking a step toward both of them.

"I don't want to attack him," Rachelle argued, fisting her hands into her hips and pursing her lips as she glared at Tore. If she weren't reeking of so much rage, possibly she would be an attractive bitch. Tore didn't go for young whiny females though, especially ones willing to take the easier fight.

"I'm sure you don't. That would be too much of a challenge for you and releasing your pain and humiliation on someone other than the source will help you believe your problem is going away."

"That's enough, leopard," Lee hissed, and then glared at Rick. "Would you allow him to speak to us in such a way in our own pack?" he snarled, pointing a finger at Tore. "I have her word once the female is brought to her she'll drop this matter and now you tell me she isn't here? Where the hell is she?"

"Does she have your word you won't cheat on her again?" Tore asked, and watched the male's eyes flash with silver streaks as his body tightened. "There's no honor in attacking a female for her actions when she was lied to."

"If you're accusing someone in my pack of lying, you better have proof," Rick growled, his low baritone a warning.

Tore didn't look at him but held on to Lee's outraged glare. "Did you tell Jin Rose you were mated before you fucked her?"

"I told you already I don't remember."

The smell of anger prevailed over all other emotions and Tore wasn't sure if he smelled a lie on the male or not. He glanced past him at his mate, who scowled at the floor and appeared to not be paying attention to their conversation.

"That's a very important piece of information and one I find odd that you wouldn't remember discussing with her. I can only imagine how the conversation might have played out if you told her you had a female waiting at home for you."

Rachelle looked at the side of her mate's head, her pained expression revealing how uncomfortable it was for her to imagine her mate sniffing after another female. She didn't look violent but instead more defeated. It made her look even more unappealing. He pictured Maurie in the same circumstance and then realized he couldn't. Maurie

wouldn't allow a situation like this to escalate to this point. If a male cheated on her, she'd kill him, no questions asked. Remembering how she flew through his cabin door, ready to tear into Jin's flesh for being with him, made it harder to remain focused on making his point. He hated shoving her image out of his head but needed to in order to resolve this matter with the werewolves and get the hell out of here.

Tore turned to Rick. "I'm going to call this matter closed," he stated, but didn't hurry to explain when the werewolf raised one eyebrow and looked ready to announce this was his territory and only he would decide if the matter was resolved or not. Tore continued speaking to him and ignored the others in the room. "Your male sniffed out one of our single females without revealing his mated status. If he'd told her he was mated, I believe he would have remembered the conversation, and Jin claims he didn't."

"So where does that leave us?" Lee demanded. "She's going to whine and throw a fit until she can attack."

Tore gave him a shrewd look. "Then I suggest you take your beating like a grown male, and once she's done attacking you, remember you're a mated male and act like one."

He downed the rest of his coffee and then placed his cup on the tray still sitting on the dining room table. Race followed suit and followed Tore to the door. Rick opened the door for them and for a moment looked amused.

"Your argument smelled honorable," he told Tore when he followed him onto the front porch. "And I'd have to agree with you, mating is challenging enough without throwing in the stench of infidelity."

"Good hunting." Tore didn't comment on Bolton's comment. He left the werewolf's den with an uncomfortable weight settling on his shoulders. He knew without any doubt he would now sniff Maurie out until he found her. But then what? Why was he chasing her so hard? Mating for life suddenly had a rather bile taste to it.

Chapter Twelve

Maurie never had cared much for the smell of humans. The stale stench of emotions they usually carried with them was nauseating. They were half of a whole, a lesser species with the inability to change and allow their feelings to release in their most natural, raw form.

It didn't surprise her much when Laird called her before she reached the bar in Wheeler's Point. He told her to meet him at a small restaurant she'd never been to before, one that was completely human. She sat across from the older leopard in the booth and knew they were the only ones in the establishment who weren't human. Laird often pulled tricks like this though, announcing a rendezvous location and then changing it at the last minute so if anyone brought along spies to sniff the situation out, the individual he was meeting with wouldn't have time to relocate their spies.

"The rumors are growing stronger about Leo Pard," Laird told her, watching her with those incredibly pale green eyes of his. "If it's true the leopard is dead, this old male here might finally be able to retire."

Maurie stabbed at her meat, watching the juices flow onto her plate. "I can't imagine a time where Vision Controllers isn't needed."

"My dear, VC will always be needed."

"Do you really think he's dead?" She hated being out of the loop, not being able to smell trouble before it landed in her lap.

"I'm not sure, but it sure is being howled about damn near everywhere." He studied her for a moment, although he didn't smell of any emotion. She'd always hated that about him. "Returning to your sire and mother's home has been good for you," he added, his tone softening and suddenly sounding the concerned relation instead of her old boss. "Is there a mating in your future?"

"No," she said, but the tilt of his eyebrow let her know she answered too quickly to sound completely believable. "He's too much of a nuisance," she added. But when his expression didn't change she added for good measure, "My life is with VC."

Laird nodded, glancing at the remnants of the steak he'd ordered. The baked potato next to it remained untouched. "Good. I've got a trial run for you. Prove yourself to me once again and I'll reinstate your status with VC."

Maurie fought the urge to leap in the air and howl. Returning to VC would fix everything, put her life back in order. Laird never should have fired her and her littermates, and it was about time he came to her to mend the rift created when Karma mated with Race.

"Good. What do you want me to do?" She tried not to sound too excited.

"I want you to go to Arizona, to Leo Pard's den, and confirm if he's alive or dead."

The drive back to Kenora seemed to take minutes. Maurie was so lost in thought over her new assignment with VC. For years, pretty much as long as she and Karma had been adults, they'd tackled mission after mission, always scratching and howling at each other over details.

"Won't be the same without you, little bitch," Maurie mused, grinning to herself when she slowed and entered Kenora.

Humans did a decent job of clearing streets and the sun shone brilliantly against a blue sky, making small mountains of snow in parking lots glisten and create a glare she squinted against. She needed to pick up Darla then head to their home quickly and make plans. Watching the roads, taking it slow with many slick spots causing cars to fishtail and slide, Maurie mulled over the best way to take on this assignment.

It sucked she couldn't get past the planning part of leaving their home. She and Darla needed to leave without the hunters in their lives knowing anything about it. Which meant Karma couldn't be told—and what the hell was she going to do about Tore?

"You knew getting close to him would be a big mistake," she argued with herself as the tension grew in her gut and caused the inside of her car to stink.

Suddenly her hands were clammy and she released and gripped the steering wheel, for some reason her stomach clenched with nerves the closer she got to Karma and Race's home.

"Crap. I bet he's there." If any of them said she'd left town and would pick Darla up when she returned, and he wanted to play the almighty male and bully her for leaving without telling him, he'd be there waiting for her. "Crap. Crap."

She hated feeling like this. Her life was her own. Her decisions her own. "I can do whatever the fuck I want."

Nothing she said to herself, no method of approach she conjured up in her mind, appeased the nervous anticipation crawling over her skin the closer she got to her littermate's home. Tore would storm toward her, howling and growling and making a god-damn scene. She had too much to deal with right now to tolerate his male chauvinistic behavior. Like she answered to him!

Possible ways of sneaking in, grabbing Darla and bolting before he trapped her came to mind. Maurie also considered going home, packing for both of them and then getting her littermate. Even Karma would be pissed if left in the dark.

"There is no easy way to do this!" she wailed, hitting the steering wheel with her palm. The sting didn't soothe her mood.

If she didn't calm down, her smell would be so nauseating when she arrived, they would all be suspicious.

"There isn't any reason to be this upset," she reminded herself, but slow, cleansing breaths didn't stop her heart from racing. "God damn him," she growled, hating to admit to herself why she was getting so upset.

Tore would be pissed as hell she didn't tell him she was leaving town. This morning it made perfect sense not to let him know. He didn't own her. Now, knowing she'd face his wrath in minutes, she didn't understand the compelling urge inside her to have a good explanation to soothe his temper before it exploded.

"Yes, you know why," she said, frustrated acceptance saturating her insides. "You like the brute."

She liked him a lot. He was arrogant, pushy, bull-headed and dominating. Every trait she knew without doubt would clash with her nature. Allowing a relationship to grow between them would make her life hell.

"And now of all times." Just when things were starting to smell better.

They were barely settled back in the home they'd grown up in. She would need to let Karma know she and Darla would be gone for a while so they would keep an eye on the place, especially with the Rivers litter sniffing around the land and itching to find reason why they could rightfully buy it up and take it from Maurie and her littermates. The more she focused on all loose ends she'd need to take care of before leaving, the clearer it became taking off with few knowing about it would be a tricky business.

"You've handled tricky business repeatedly as long as you can remember," she pointed out to herself.

Maurie turned off the highway and slowed drastically on the snow-packed road before realizing she'd driven home instead of to Karma's. Maybe she needed time to regroup before sniffing out her littermates and talking to them. She parked in front of their home and stared at the new wood stacked alongside the building, waiting to create another room to their house.

A layer of snow a few inches thick was on top of the stack of planks. She stared at it, shutting off the car, and remembered Tore showing up with the wood. He'd hauled that wood as if it weighed nothing, his muscles bulging against his shirt and stretching under his jeans. She'd seen him a handful of times since they'd moved here, but on that day Maurie knew, watching and sparring with him, he was by far the sexiest leopard she'd ever seen.

And now—crap—his scent was embedded in her flesh, becoming part of her own natural aroma. There wasn't any getting him out of her system when every breath she took reminded her of him. Not that he wasn't in her thoughts twenty-four-seven these days anyway. Even with his less-than-appealing dominating nature, he turned her on more than any male who ever came sniffing around.

As she stared out the windshield, the gray white world surrounding her disappeared. She felt the heat burning her back at the same time she realized what she saw wasn't really in front of her. Yet she smelled her sweat, felt perspiration beading between her breasts and knew whose hands were on her without looking up.

"We're in this together, my wildcat." Tore's rough whisper raked over her senses as she breathed in his rich, intoxicating all-male scent.

"I know," she heard herself whisper.

Danger loomed around them. She felt it creating sparks up her spine.

"And when this is over, we're still together." Tore gripped her chin, tilting her head until she stared into his eyes. There was a thick scratch running down his face. She ran her fingertips down it and he closed his eyes, allowing her to touch him. It was a fresh wound. "Don't worry about me," he growled. "It's nothing compared to other injuries I've endured and this one was worth getting to know you're safe. Swear to me now you'll never run without me again."

So much emotion glowed in his eyes when he stared down at her, Maurie's heart constricted. Her mouth was incredibly dry when she tried answering him.

"I promise." Her voice cracked.

Maurie cleared her voice and blinked, shivering when she looked around at her car and the cold wintry world outside. She reached for the door handle and almost fell out when it opened quickly. Large, rough hands yanked her out of the car and Tore shook her like a rag doll.

"Where the hell have you been?" he snarled, his spicy anger making her eyes water.

Maurie fell back against her car, struggling to maintain her footing on the icy ground and free herself of his grip at the same time.

"Don't you ever handle me like that again," she howled, smacking his chest and wondering how far in the future her vision took place. Obviously it was warm, but at this rate, they would never speak that affectionately to each other. Her visions didn't lie though, which confused her. Her mind must have wanted her to see somehow she'd end up with this leopard.

Wasn't that just swell. She hit his arm, as aggravated with herself as she was with him. "Get out of my way," she snarled.

Tore stalked behind her when she headed to her home. "You're going to tell me where you were today."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yup. Neither one of us is leaving this house until you do," he informed her, following her inside and closing her door behind him, enveloping the two of them in darkness.

"Well now, that's a problem seeing I need to pick up Darla." She walked over to her fireplace and opened the wood box then pulled out two good-sized logs.

Tore was next to her when she straightened and took the wood from her, his dark glare creating warmth inside her. As if she would need a fire with him standing so close and pissed as well, very dangerous territory for the two of them. Thinking about fighting with him, smacking him around a bit more, created moisture between her legs he would smell in moments if she didn't get her act together.

"Darla is fine," he said, turning and squatting so she was forced to move when he dropped them in the fireplace and reached for another log. "Where were you?"

Maurie stared at his thick, straight blond hair and studied the darker strands that were almost the same color as his fur. If he wanted to start the fire for her, that was fine. She marched away from him into the small kitchen and opened her refrigerator, searching its contents and not finding anything in it appealing. Tore's angry scent made it hard to focus on anything else.

She heard him strike a match and then the fire crackle to life. His heavy footsteps sounded behind her. She knew he stopped right behind her and her flesh tingled from his nearness, although he didn't touch her.

"Don't tell me where you went today and I'll walk out that door. We don't have to talk ever again."

Her heart constricted into her throat. Tore wasn't playing fair. Yell and scream and she would attack. Fighting with him was easy even if it was dangerous since it turned her on so damn much. But offering her an ultimatum, worse yet, an out, was something she didn't expect from him.

Damn him. An out would make taking off to Arizona so much easier.

"Wheeler's Point," she said, her voice cracking just as it did in her vision.

Tore grabbed her and turned her around. He shoved her against the refrigerator, forcing the door closed with a bang. It shook behind her when her back pressed against it and his mouth covered hers.

His kiss was hungry, aggressive and almost brutal as he pressed his tongue between her lips and forced her to open for him. Then impaling her, he let her taste his hunger, his need to possess and claim that surpassed even the intensity of their lovemaking early this morning.

She was gasping for breath when he broke off the kiss and let her slide down his body. That's when she noticed he'd lifted her off her feet. Maurie was so taken by his kiss she didn't even notice how he'd trapped her between his body and the refrigerator. She couldn't move until he did.

Tore didn't move. "You're not going to toy with me, my wildcat."

"I'm not toying with you."

"When you bounded out that front door this morning," he began, his eyes wild with anger that still simmered too close to the edge. "You raced into the night looking for me with one thing on your mind. I smelled how ravenous your desire was. You got what you wanted and then you think you can toss it to the side."

"How dare you!" The last thing she'd tolerate was being insulted. But she couldn't raise her hand to strike him fast enough before he grabbed her wrist in a steel grip. "Don't pretend you smell the truth of how I am, leopard," she hissed.

"If you don't tell me, all I can go by are your actions," he sneered, his face close enough to hers that his eyes glowed like wild orbs. His breath was hot against her face

and reminded her of how he tasted moments before, like fresh meat and beer. "And a female who would take a male in his flesh and then his fur but then run from him without a word is a female without honor."

Maurie howled, turning wild as her anger unleashed inside her. All her life she'd fought to maintain honor for herself and her littermates. When her parents died and they were three single females on their own, she took on male after male, ensuring she and Karma and Darla would grow up and not be abused or ruined before they became adults and could find good mates.

The refrigerator shook behind her, making a terrible screeching sound over the floor when it moved from their weight. Maurie didn't care about it or anything else right now other than beating some sense into this willful, out-of-line male. He had no right accusing her of not having honor when he chased her as hard as he did.

Maurie had succeeded. It had been one hell of a bumpy ride more times than not. Things smelled worse than putrid from time to time, but she'd pulled off raising her littermates into honorable and smart females. Her parents didn't do that. She did. She took them from uncertain teenagers and guided them while running together into the beautiful creatures both of them were today. She got the credit for that. And she'd kept them all alive, giving up good times others her age enjoyed and focusing only on ensuring the three of them did more than just survive.

Maurie released years of pent-up anger on him, refusing to allow him to growl lies at her and think he could get away with it. "Obviously no one ever taught you any manners," she howled, freeing herself from the trap of his body and the refrigerator.

This wasn't vicious foreplay anymore. Her rage boiled over and his size or aggression didn't matter. Maurie flung herself at him, screaming to where her throat burned as she attacked with claws and teeth. Digging in where she could, needing to feel muscle under her fingertips, to connect with flesh, to make him see she wasn't a female he could dish crap out to and get away with it.

"Wildcat," he growled, his tone feeding her fury, "your anger wouldn't smell so terrible if you didn't smell the truth in my words."

"Like hell," she spat, her teeth extending and puncturing her lower lip when she hissed at him. "No one accuses me of running without honor." She managed to connect, her nails tearing through his shirt before he yanked her off him.

Tore threw her toward the living room and she landed on all fours, pushing herself to her feet while he stalked her. "You left this morning knowing you'd piss me off by not telling me where you were going."

She wouldn't lie. Not after being accused of no honor. Glaring at him, she told herself that wasn't the point. He needed a tough lesson in how to talk to females, how to treat them, how to treat her.

Maurie tugged her shirt down, straightening it, and feeling a sense of power fill her when his gaze dropped to her breasts. Not that she didn't know his interest was there, but knowing she held that power over him filled her with even more determination to

teach him a much-needed lesson. He would respect her and fucking trust her to be able to make decisions on her own without running and howling to him to think for her.

That would never happen, not with him or with anyone.

"I left this morning on business—my business," she stressed, glaring at him. "If you can't handle my being in charge of me, then I'm too much fucking female for you and you better go sniff after some brainless twit you can handle."

"My little wildcat, you're missing the point," he growled softly, moving in on her without making a sound. Interesting how his footsteps could echo in her house when he wanted them to, yet a leopard his size could be as silent as a soft breeze when he willed it. He stared at her with dark green eyes laced with gold, giving her the impression they were on fire. His soul burned with the intensity of his emotions. "I spent the day handling my business with Race, who knew where you were and what you were doing yet was honor bound to his mate not to tell me. I lived with knowledge your litter wouldn't share your whereabouts, although they all knew how they smelled of their frustration in the matter because even though I wear your scent like my own, you won't honor me with the consideration of sharing what you're about."

Maurie felt a twang of warped satisfaction knowing Darla and Karma held on to their secret. "If you threatened either of them..."

He cleared the distance between them and grabbed her neck. Squeezing just enough to let her know he could cut off her air supply if he willed it, he held her, his knuckles pressing under her chin so she couldn't turn her head.

"Is that the kind of leopard you think I am?"

"No," she admitted, the heat from his hand sinking into her flesh and searing her brain.

"You left this morning knowing you'd piss me off by not telling me."

She didn't know what to say to that without sending him into a rage. Grabbing his hand, she tried digging her fingers between his and her skin to no avail. He continued holding her while staring down at her.

"You don't trust me enough to share what you and your littermates are about yet you would fuck me in your skin and your fur."

"Don't get fucking righteous with me," she hissed, but then paused when his grip tightened slightly. "It's not about trust," she whispered.

Tore let go of her neck. Her flesh tingled where his hand had been.

"Maurie, if you want a casual fuck buddy, I'm not it." He turned from her and squatted in front of her fire, tending to it while roped muscle flexed under his shirt. "I can't think of you the same way I think of other females around here."

Her breath caught in her throat and suddenly the room was too warm, the walls too close while everything around her seemed to tilt slightly. He didn't mean she meant more to him than anyone else. She touched her neck, feeling the heat on her flesh and

smelling him stronger as she pressed her fingers over her mouth and tried clearing her head.

He was moving in, taking over, and if she let him, he'd own her heart and soul and she'd be stuck. Her heart constricted, ready to yell at her brain she could do a lot worse. His thick, straight hair fell in disarray to his collar. Broad shoulders stretched against his shirt. And so many muscles bulged underneath it as she stared at his back.

"I don't want a fuck buddy." Her voice cracked with all the emotions she desperately needed to regain control of. Tore was sweeping her off her fucking feet to where even attacking him, seriously attacking him, didn't send him running. He wanted her, and damn her insane thinking for wanting him to. She swallowed the painful lump in her throat and forced the words out of her mouth. She couldn't make the same mistake Karma made, not when Laird just gave her an assignment. "I can't have a relationship with you at all."

Maurie jumped when he pounded the wall next to the fireplace with his fist. Instinctively, she stepped backward, preparing for whatever reaction he would dish out when he stood slowly. She swore he grew before her eyes as he slowly turned around.

"Why are you lying?" he demanded, his harsh tone slicing the air between them.

She blinked, feeling the swelling in her throat as her eyes started burning. "I can't. And I'm not." She wanted to run, to rip her clothes off her body and tear out of there and race as far away as possible.

He continued staring at her, his gaze fierce as he pinned her with a look, making it impossible to move no matter how desperately she ached to do so. "Then tell me why you can't. You're not already mated. I know that much. I don't smell another male on you, and so you know, if I ever do, he'll die."

She didn't have to tell him the same applied to him. He'd already watched her attack and chase off the female in his house. Maurie hated the raw, painful feelings tearing her apart inside. All of this was her fault. Tore was a hunter, the worst possible male she could spend time with. He would destroy her life, and she would resent him forever for that. As much as she hated it, felt the truth rip her apart inside, it had to be this way. Not just for her or Darla, who also had a right to continue with VC without Maurie destroying her chance to do so, but for every leopard out there still living in fear of being caged because they had visions.

Visions. Crap. How in the hell would they get to the point where they were right now to where they were in the vision she'd had in the car before he showed up? And what did that mean? There wasn't any way she would leave VC and all it meant to her litter and to so many others out of a selfish act of love.

No. Not love. Lust maybe, but not love. She didn't love Tore. She couldn't. Not now. Not ever. Already the pain inside her hurt too much.

"I'm not mated and there isn't another male. I do possess honor. More than I can tell you. And it's that honor that prevents me from allowing this to continue. I'm sorry,

Tore.” She ran past him, too proud to let him see her cry, and rushed into her bedroom, slamming the door behind her.

Maurie didn’t think she fell asleep. There wasn’t any way she could relax enough to do so. But she jumped when someone rapped on her bedroom door and barely managed to crawl to a sitting position on her bed when the door opened and her littermates entered cautiously, the smell of their concern and worry filling the room and then trapping in there when they closed the door behind them.

Her stomach twisted into a cruel knot when it hit her there was a reason they closed the door. Race and Tore were in the living room. She could smell them.

“Are you okay?” Darla asked, moving in next to her on the bed and wrapping her arms around Maurie.

She pulled her into a warm hug while Karma stood in front of her, crossing her arms over her chest and staring down at her, confusion lining her face.

“What happened?” she asked, keeping her voice low and almost whispering.

Darla straightened, brushing Maurie’s hair over her shoulder while searching her face. “Tore looks pretty beat up, but you look okay.”

“He told me I didn’t have honor,” she explained, knowing she wasn’t clarifying anything for either of them.

“Race said he went nuts earlier today, demanding to know where you went.” Karma wrinkled her nose as if she found all this rather amusing. “He said he remembered the hell I put him through because I wouldn’t tell him about VC without you two being present.” She dropped her voice to a barely audible whisper as she spoke but then crossed her arms over her chest. “So are you going to tell him?”

Maurie was still the backbone of her litter. Staring at Karma and seeing how her younger littermate saw only an opportunity for a relationship to blossom but not the larger picture allowed Maurie to see she would always have to be the strongest of the three. Sometimes that position got really fucking old.

“No, Karma. I’m not.” It was a bit easier to clamp down on her heart with Tore not in the room staring at her with his dark, brooding expression. The tender emotions still ate her alive, but somehow she’d managed a numb state, and that helped. At least her sadness over the bitter reality of how things were wouldn’t create a stench in the room. “I have something I need both of you to know though.”

She stood, turning her back to her bedroom door and then gesturing for Karma to sit on her bed next to Darla. Then facing her littermates, she whispered her news to them, telling them about Laird and his proposition.

“Arizona?” Darla whispered, her green eyes wide and laced with streaks of gold. “But what if he’s not dead?”

“Then we’re going to kill him.” Maurie saw the fear and excitement create a flush on Darla’s face and knew her littermate was in.

"Now how are you going to do this without Tore knowing?" Karma leaned back against Maurie's pillows, her long blonde hair fanning over her shoulders, and studied Maurie skeptically. "I'm guessing I'm not going because you wouldn't let Race run with us." She sounded offended.

Maurie wished the two of them would do a better job of keeping their reactions to this conversation under wrap so they wouldn't make the room smell. It would only take the slightest excuse for Tore to come barging in here.

"I'm not going to let VC slip through my claws twice," she hissed, watching both of them as she emphasized the importance of this. "Not to mention we're making an incredible impact on leopards everywhere with this mission. This is it, the big one. Confirm Pard is dead and we change how leopards live forever," she added, unable to hide her own excitement.

Chapter Thirteen

Tore scratched his scalp as he walked to his door. It was too fucking early for visitors, which was the only damn reason he got out of bed. No decent leopard banged on a door before noon unless there was trouble.

He opened the door and stared down at Karma. Immediately he picked up on her worry, but when he glanced past her at Race, who leaned against his truck, looking more than perturbed, his gut tightened.

“What’s wrong with Maurie?” he demanded, his voice still heavy with sleep.

“May I talk to you?” Karma spoke softly, her pretty features reminding him so much of Maurie, except she lacked the fire that always burned in Maurie’s eyes.

“Give me a minute.” Inviting her inside wasn’t proper since she was mated, but with Race there, he could speak freely with her. “I need to get dressed,” he added.

Karma nodded once and left him, walking over to her mate. Tore closed the door and had clothes on in a minute. Shoving his feet into his boots, he ached for coffee when he winced against the morning sun as he walked outside.

“What’s wrong?” he demanded, searching both of their faces and not liking what he saw. “Where’s Maurie?”

Karma held two cups of coffee purchased from one of the gas stations in town and handed one of them to him. He was more grateful than he could say as he accepted the warm cup and allowed the heat to soak into his palm while bringing the opening on the lid to his lips. The first swallow burned all the way down but helped kick-start him awake. He continued watching them and breathing in their scents. Years of being a hunter helped him read leopards and the two of them were definitely upset about something.

“Karma has decided to share something with you,” Race informed him, holding his own cup and leaning against the front of his truck.

Tore sensed how uncomfortable both of them were in spite of how different each of them smelled. Race and Karma, for different reasons, wanted, and didn’t want, to share something with him. He waited out the silence, damn if he would make it easier for them. His body tensed with anticipation and he didn’t try hiding it.

“Maurie is gone,” Karma said.

“What?” he roared, not expecting that.

Karma jumped but recovered quickly as Race moved to touch her. She shoved him off and stared at Tore with eyes so similar to Maurie’s yet so different at the same time.

“There was a job the three of us had,” she said, licking her lips and then staring at her fingernails.

"Yes?" he asked, pushing her. He wanted to shake her until she quickly spilled what he needed to know. "Where did she go?"

"We were fired from that job when I mated with Race," she continued, not answering him.

She wasn't making sense. Why would all three of them be fired from anything just because one of them took a mate?

"What was this job?"

"It was our lifework and our sire's and mother's work before us. It's all Maurie has, and Darla too. Maurie had to think of her litter before thinking of herself." Her last words sounded too stiff to be believable.

Tore shifted his attention to Race. He didn't look as if he would be much more help, his gaze blank and his expression tight enough to show he fought to keep his opinion and feelings about whatever the fuck Karma was talking about buried deep inside him.

Tore growled. "Where did she go?"

"Arizona."

"What?" he roared again. "Why the fuck would she go to Arizona?"

He'd been there once. So had Race. And as he stared at the male, understanding hit him like a fucking brick wall.

"You're fucking kidding me," he hissed.

Race straightened. "She left before dawn. At the last minute she decided to go it alone, which wasn't the plan she shared with us last night. But she left Darla here."

Tore never thought for a moment Race cared that much for his mate's older littermate. He saw now though, Race didn't wish her harm. Running alone, across the fucking country, to the one place no leopard should go right now, was a suicide mission.

Tore turned sharply and stalked into his cabin. There wasn't time to close the place down but at least he hadn't started a fire yet today. Grabbing his cloth drawstring bag, he kicked off his boots and sat down on the couch, pulling off his socks and stuffing them into the bag. Maurie had almost a six-hour lead on him, but he'd tracked leopards with better advantages and found them.

"Tore," Race said, pushing open the cabin door and letting himself inside then closing it behind him. "She can't go there alone."

"You're right." Tore stood, peeling his shirt from his body and rolling it up then shoving it in the bag. He'd be smart to pack a change of clothes as well, but he couldn't carry too much in the bag. It would be wrapped around his neck through his journey. "You mind telling me what possessed her to take off like this?"

"It's not because of you."

Tore already knew that. He didn't bother responding to the comment but headed for his bedroom and took all the money he had on him and put it in a wallet then shoved that in the bag too.

“When I met Karma, they were running for an organization. The leopards they ran with don’t think very highly of hunters.”

Tore stopped, searching Race’s face. “What organization doesn’t think highly of hunters?”

Race sighed, his strained look enough to show he hesitated in telling Tore more. “Vision Controllers. They are an underground railroad who help leopards gain freedom from Pard’s claws and give leopards with visions new lives.”

Tore didn’t completely understand but he’d learn more as he needed the information. Right now pertinent facts were imperative if he was going to track down his wild little cat.

“Why did she go to Arizona?”

“Karma told me yesterday when Maurie went to Wheeler’s Point to meet with her old boss he said she could have her job back if she proved Pard was dead.”

“Fuck!”

Race nodded. Then turning, he reached for the door handle. “Good hunting.”

“Tell your mate her littermate will be safe. I give my life on that fact.”

He didn’t watch Race leave his cabin but knew the message would be taken well. That was why Karma came here, obviously giving him information Maurie didn’t want her to share with him. He would protect Maurie—after he wrung her sexy neck.

* * * * *

Two days. He’d spent longer in his fur before, but nonetheless, there wasn’t any doubt in his mind he smelled worse than any other creature roaming the field that night.

His muscles were tight. Tore’s fur itched. He had a deep gash in the pad under his right front paw and his eyes burned. Lack of sleep wasn’t his biggest concern. The group of leopards stalking the side of the lake ahead of him, pouncing on each other and making enough fucking noise to be heard across the state of Colorado, smelled of more trouble than he felt like dealing with.

If it were up to him, he’d sweep around them, leaving them to their playtime, and never be seen. Apparently Maurie had other thoughts. He’d caught up with her earlier that day but kept his distance, deciding to pace her until she stopped to rest. For whatever reason, his wildcat was getting too damn close to the young males who were making a show of trying to prove who was the strongest. The lot of them were trouble with all caps. Apparently Maurie suffered from worse sleep deprivation than he did because she wasn’t sniffing out the obvious. Wag her hot little tail too close to that group and she’d be dished out more than even she could chew.

Tore stood at the edge of the ravine separating him from Maurie. In the night, with shadows so dark it was difficult for even him to keep track of her, she continued moving closer to the group of rogues by the water.

What the fuck are you up to, wildcat? he growled under his breath.

There was too much distance between them to stop her. If he leapt over the ravine, raced at full speed and overtook her, both of them would be discovered. Maurie would make enough noise attacking him those idiots by the water would pounce on the opportunity to make her scream louder.

Tore counted heads. Six of them. That's when he saw what he'd missed at first.

Not six—eight. Two more leopards were in the water.

Leopards were usually incredible swimmers. Unlike the beasts who couldn't shift into human form, swimming was a pastime he'd enjoyed more than once on a hot summer day. Fishing too. When Tore first sniffed the rogues, he'd guessed that was what they were doing. Grabbing a bite to eat, probably munchies after a night of hard partying. He'd guess none of them were sober.

Now he realized the truth and his gut clenched at the reality unraveling before him. They were fishing, but not for fish. The two leopards in the water were females, trapped and unwilling bait to a rowdy group of horny male delinquents.

And Maurie thought she could rescue those females.

Crap! Stupid little wildcat! Don't you dare try to play against those odds.

He knew his warning wasn't heard as well as he knew Maurie wouldn't listen if she had heard it. In spite of words he'd hissed at her before, Maurie smelled of more honor than most. She was hard, cold when needed, and ran a straight line no matter what obstacles blocked her. He didn't know a lot about Vision Controllers, but he knew they were a group of leopards hell bent and determined to ensure leopards remained free. They were a lot like hunters, which made it hard to believe when Race told him they didn't respect the work he and his sire before him did.

Later he'd learn the reason behind all of that. Right now he needed to save his sweet little wildcat's ass. So he could spank it later.

Backing up a few meters, Tore ripped the earth underneath him with his claw when he took off in a full, hard run. He cleared the ravine and landed hard on the other side, once again gaining speed as he ran close to the ground. It was uneven earth, boulders in the ground and smaller rocks, which made this part of eastern Colorado good ranching land but not good for much else. He kept his pace, feeling his paws bleed with fresh wounds when he landed on more than one unnoticeable sharp rock half buried in the ground. Tore barely noticed the pain, his attention fixed on Maurie, who raced ahead of him with damn near as much speed.

When he closed a good amount of distance between them, Tore slowed, aware of the fact she hadn't picked up on his scent. That proved her preoccupation with whatever scheme she'd conjured in her pretty head was about to take place. It also showed him no matter how much training or skills she believed she possessed, she wasn't as alert and attentive as she, or whoever hired her to take on this insane mission, believed she was.

Tore's heart lodged in his throat but still managed to pump blood through him at a speed dangerous enough to make his ears ring. He gulped in air, tasting her scent along with the hungry, if not angry, smells of the rogues prancing along the edge of the water. Their snarling and yelping indicated they were fighting over who had first dibs on the females trapped in the water.

Every inch of him stiffened when Maurie made a sound so beautiful and enticing. Tore's cock turned to stone, his balls tightening painfully as he stilled, disbelief making him sick.

Maurie called out to the males, luring them toward her while she damn near purred as she meowed melodically. He wouldn't have believed her capable of such an innocent and provocative sound if he hadn't heard it himself. She didn't sound a bit like the dangerous hellion he knew her to be.

Three of the drunk males started toward her without hesitating. The others quickly followed, already nipping at each other's hind quarter to get out of the way and allow them first go at her.

Tore would see to it none of them touched her. But it would be a hell of a fucking fight and one that didn't have to happen. Why was Maurie doing this? She could have come up with a different plan to lure them away from the females. Hell, kicking loose a few rocks downstream and creating a panic probably would have allowed the females time to escape.

Two males sidled next to her and Maurie purred too loud. It almost sounded fake.

Tore already stood still, waiting for the best moment to attack, so he clearly saw what happened next. Both males were close enough to brush their fur against hers, the smell of their lust putrid in the night air when she attacked. She moved fast enough he didn't see it. But there wasn't any doubt what she did.

Within less than a minute two males bled out, their throats ripped open as they crashed to the ground and resumed their human form. Maurie leapt at the remaining four, a wild beast blood hungry and moving faster than he guessed her capable. A third crashed hard enough to shake the ground, roaring in the night until his screams gurgled and faded. He too met a quick death, jerking a few times before lying still, bloodied and naked.

Tore watched the females splash out of the water and guessed they would race to help her with the remaining three. Not all leopards possessed the same amount of loyalty or gratuity Tore often wished they did. He shouldn't have been surprised when they ran as if their lives depended on it, disappearing in the darkness within moments and leaving Maurie to fend for herself against the remaining three.

Pissed off they'd been bested by a female and lost their play toys for the evening, not to mention several of their friends, three males circled her warily, no longer wishing to play. Tore made his presence known, moving in quickly on the rogues.

They shifted their attention from Maurie to him and the smell in the air changed in the next breath. He had a fight on his hands. They were young, stupid, but still fully

grown. And he'd run hard and long for the past two days. But Tore wouldn't let them hurt Maurie. If they smelled her on him and guessed why, that was fine with him.

Tore leapt through the air, ignoring Maurie's startled howl, and attacked the first male brutally. The act of surprise remained in his favor only a few moments before he found himself in an almost evenly matched fight.

It took more than a few minutes, and the remaining two males got in a few good blows. He laid one of them out, tripping over him when he finally bled out and tumbled over his own paws when he fell and started changing. Leopards returned to their human form in death, always. Ancient myths, passed down from generation to generation and most often told by mothers to their cubs as bedtime stories, stated the gods blessed his species, giving them the gift to protect who they were even in death. Once their souls left them, their bodies changed back to being human, never half changed regardless of when death occurred, to protect them from being discovered for who and what they were.

Regardless of the scientific explanation, the fact remained the same. And the leopard he just killed died as a heavy male leopard but then after crashing against Tore and knocking him off his feet, reverted to a naked human teenage boy. The only advantage Tore could focus on then was in this form he weighed a hell of a lot less.

Tore pushed the boy off him and scrambled to his feet. The only male still alive turned tail and bolted away from him. Obviously he decided being a coward would save his life that night. And it did. Tore started after him, felt his own wounds pierce his body with pain and then realized he stood alone in the dark with death surrounding him.

Where the fuck was Maurie?

God damn it! Tore roared with outrage gutting him alive. His rage outweighed his pain as he raced across the field, leaving the blood bath behind him and gulping in air, desperate to reclaim her scent. His heart pounded too hard in his chest. With every beat it pumped blood to the wounds in his body. He'd lost Maurie. Worse yet, he was injured and the pain was besting him.

Tore knew when he finally slowed a good hour or so later, his anger allowed him to run a lot farther than he would have been able to do otherwise. The smell of humans grew stronger as the sun appeared on the horizon. He was hurt, Maurie was gone and a he was on the edge of a town. Not good.

He didn't like the options before him. One thing he knew, if he didn't clean up, he would leave a trail for anyone to follow. He'd been a hunter long enough to know there were more enemies surrounding him at all times than friends. As much as it burned his heart, his soul to pieces, Maurie had left him. He would have to stop chasing her and take care of himself or he wouldn't be able to track her again.

His anger turned to bitter disappointment when he stopped by the edge of a sparkling pond, allowed the change to take over, and then damn near put himself into shock when he washed the blood from his body in the fucking cold-as-hell water.

He was in shock, staggering and frozen as he walked out of the water dripping wet and enduring more pain than he'd known in quite a while. That was why he saw Maurie, standing before him, because he wanted to see her. When he crashed into her and she braced herself to hold his weight before he passed out, Tore told himself it was his delusions from the wounds all over his body that willed his mind to believe her soft fur cradled him and prevented him from landing on hard rocky ground.

Tore didn't try opening his eyes. Consciousness alone created a pounding in his brain that hurt bad enough he swore someone was taking a sledge hammer to his head. And the smell of dried blood, of sweat dried and clinging to his body made him itchy and sticky.

He lay there listening, breathing, enduring the throbbing pulses that forced blood through his veins. For now that was enough. He didn't exert the energy to kick himself in the ass for not handling the situation better. Two days of hard running drained his energy. Those fucking young rogues were already wired and itching for a fight. Tore let the blackness smother him once again. He wouldn't berate himself for his actions now. There would be time later. Just a bit more rest and then he'd take off once again. Next time when he caught up with Maurie there would be no more pacing her. Next time he'd capture her sexy ass and then spank it thoroughly.

He was sure unconsciousness held on to him for only minutes. As he came to this time, he squinted against a thread of light streaming through the opening between heavy curtains. When he pushed himself to his elbows, his stomach roared to his throat.

"Easy now," Maurie purred, her small, warm hands pressing against his bare chest.

"Where am I?" He shifted his attention to her lazily, immediately noticing the oversized button-down shirt she wore and nothing else. "Come here," he growled, not waiting for an answer to his first question.

Maurie pressed her lips together and crossed her slender arms over her chest, pushing her breasts together and offering him a view of cleavage that forced the buttons of the shirt to stretch in their buttonholes.

"You're in a motel room that I paid for to keep your stupid, fucking ass from bleeding out," she growled.

Tore ignored the smell of her anger and didn't bother taking his attention from the swell of her breasts. She wasn't panting, but a few slow, deep breaths due to aggravation simply made the view more enticing.

"I said come here," he told her.

"What the hell are you doing here?" she snapped, not budging. "And who told you how to find me?"

Tore really didn't like giving the same command more than once, let alone three times. He shoved the blankets off him, realizing at that moment he was completely naked. She obviously undressed him and they were very alone in the motel room. Tore sat up, ignoring the lightheadedness he was sure came from not eating while he slept

and mended. He was stiff, woozy, but otherwise okay. And his little wildcat wasn't listening to him.

"You're going to get spanked for ignoring me now, as well as for running once again without telling me where you were going," he informed her, finally lifting his gaze to her olive green eyes in time to see the flash of gold streak across her irises.

"You are not going to spank me," she informed him, her high-and-mighty tone not matching the flush appearing in her cheeks. She chewed her lower lip, studying him and taking a step backward when he sat at the edge of the bed. "Don't move too quickly, Tore. You've been out for almost a day and some of those cuts were rather deep."

He remembered freezing his balls off in the fresh water after killing those rogues. The frustration and pain he didn't know how to handle over Maurie disappearing on him when he finished her fight returned to him as well. Obviously she'd come back.

Tore stood, experienced the room tilt to the side, grabbed Maurie's arm and dragged her to him as he sank back down on the edge of the bed. Maurie slapped his shoulder, balancing herself, but couldn't get free. He was weak with hunger and loss of blood but otherwise fine and she wasn't escaping him again.

"My little wildcat tended to my wounds and nursed me to health," he growled, yanking again until she fell on top of him.

Maurie proved how well of a job she did taking care of him when she struggled in his arms but couldn't free herself. "It was the honorable thing to do," she muttered.

"Yes, it was," he agreed, and then grabbing her chin, he brought her face to his and kissed her.

That did the trick and proved she was quite possibly as stubborn as he was. Even though she played off being crass, trying to sound annoyed and putout that he was with her, Maurie stilled when his mouth claimed hers and in the next moment relaxed.

Her fingers stretched over his bare shoulder, caressing him and adding to the fire, which quickly burned to a raging need inside him. His cock turned to steel, pressing against her bare thigh as she opened to him, tilting her head even more so he could deepen the kiss.

Where he was sure he probably tasted foul as hell, Maurie had a minty taste and smelled fresh, probably from a recent shower. She'd stayed with him, nursed him, watched over him while he slept and mended. They were the actions of a female protecting and caring for her male. Never in his life had he ever dreamed acknowledging someone helping him would feel so fucking good.

"If your strength is back, you should shower," she said, her lips caressing his as she spoke.

He wouldn't argue he needed one desperately. "Clean me," he growled.

"It's a small shower."

“Perfect.” He stood again, this time a bit more coherent, but kept his arm draped over Maurie’s shoulder as he walked to the bathroom. “Don’t think I’m letting you out of my sight.”

Maurie stiffened. “You imply I’m not trustworthy, I’ll walk out that door right now,” she growled.

Tore flipped the bathroom light on and confirmed Maurie’s comment about the shower, it was no more than a stall with no bathtub. Maurie hadn’t wasted her money on amenities but simply found shelter where it was safe to nurse him back to health. He didn’t have a problem with that. But he did have a problem with her tossing ultimatums his direction.

When he gripped Maurie’s shoulders and pushed her against the wall, he saw all she wore was the button-down collared shirt. Furthermore, it was his shirt.

“I never once told you I would let you know if I went anywhere,” Maurie pointed out, sticking her chin out and glaring up at him with so much defiance in her expression it turned him harder than steel just staring at her.

“The only way I’m showering alone then is if you give me your word you’ll be in this room when I get out.” He would offer her the trust she claimed to have and see where it got them.

Chapter Fourteen

Maurie hated taking Tore's shirt off. She'd worn it ever since bringing him to this motel room. It had been in his bag, along with another change of clothing. Maurie didn't need him to tell her he planned on going with her to Arizona.

It was a damn good thing he'd been out cold as long as he was. She'd had time to cool off. If she'd wanted Tore coming with her, she would have asked him. Worse yet, it wouldn't take long for howlings to reach Laird and him to learn she was with a hunter, so much for regaining status with Vision Controllers.

Maurie folded Tore's shirt and neatly placed it, along with his other clothes, back into his bag then secured the tie on it. After dressing and doing the same with her own bag, she set both by the door and plopped down on the end of the bed, listening to the shower in the bathroom.

Being stuck in this room when there was work to do made her nuts. But taking care of Tore while he slept, nursing his wounds, using a warm washcloth to bathe him while he slept, created a warmth, a need, a fever inside her that only grew the longer they were alone together.

Maurie stared at her reflection in the mirror on the wall, listening to the shower and knowing it pounded over all Tore's roped muscle. Her pussy swelled, cream coating her skin so that she shifted on the edge of the bed, trying to find comfort and keep the room from reeking of her lust when he came back out. It was all she could do not to caress him more than necessary, take advantage while he was asleep. What sucked, and it was something she learned within an hour of leaving home, was that she was in a bad way. This wasn't a case of serious lust. Maurie knew how to battle that one. She worried she was falling in love with the oversized leopard.

From the moment she saw him leap out of nowhere and attack, taking her fight from her, the misery that engulfed her the moment she left disappeared. Watching him fight, kill two of the three males, and knowing he did it to protect her, filled her with something she still pondered over. There just wasn't another name to give to it.

Maurie accepted she'd never been in love. Well, maybe her sire and mother, but that wasn't the kind of love she meant, and there were times when she seriously hated both of them, especially after they died. Not that she would ever admit that to anyone. She hated herself at times for admitting it. Her parents died, leaving her as the eldest to finish raising her littermates. When other females her age were finding males and mating, Maurie was taking care of Darla and Karma and getting the three of them more and more involved with VC. Was it finally her turn for happiness?

Glancing at the bathroom door when the shower quit running, Maurie pondered what to tell Tore when he came out of the bathroom. She wasn't given enough time to

think about it. The door opened, steam billowing out, and Tore walked through it, completely naked.

"I put clothes in there for you," she said, finding it impossible not to drool over the massive hard-on he had.

"I saw them," he said, his voice low, gravelly, while he stared at her and approached slowly.

It was hard to swallow. "Check out is in an hour and I'm not paying for another day."

"Then we'll make the best of that hour." He stopped in front of her, his cock at eye level.

Maurie breathed in the rich, clean smell of him, the intoxicating aroma of his arousal and was suddenly drooling. When she dared look up, past rippling muscle in his chest to his brooding expression, she knew there was no telling him no.

Tore leaned over her, pushing her backward when he pressed his fists into the bed on either side of her, and captured her mouth with his. His kiss was so hot it seared her lips and she whimpered. He growled and raked her lower lip with his teeth before sucking gently and then impaling her mouth. She tasted his hunger, his need, the wonderful aroma unique to him, and felt her insides swell until she was sure she'd explode just from kissing him.

"I think I liked you better in my shirt," he growled into her mouth.

Then pressing harder with his body, he pushed her until she collapsed on the bed. "I washed my clothes." She wouldn't tell him how they were covered with his blood after leaving him alone long enough to get this room and then dragging him here in the middle of the night.

"Good. Take them off." The hunger in his voice was enough to let her know that if she didn't oblige, they'd be ripped from her body.

Nonetheless, her spine popped with charges of energy from his gruff tone and growling at her as if he could tell her what to do. "Why?" she purred, arching her back and rubbing her breasts through her sweater against hard-packed muscle. He felt so damn good. "Afraid you don't have the energy to take them off and fuck me?"

She loved how his dark eyes glowed with streaks of gold when she challenged him. "Do you really want to mess with fire, my little wildcat?" he rumbled.

"If you can't handle it," she began, and made a show of trying to scoot out from underneath him.

Tore lifted himself off her, leaning back on his haunches. A rush of disappointment attacked her faster than she could stop it when she worried he wouldn't fight to keep her where he wanted her.

She shouldn't have worried.

"I'm learning you really do love a good fight," he snarled, grabbing her wrist and pulling her hand over her head.

When she turned to him, Tore grabbed her other arm, forcing it over her head as well and then holding both her hands, smashing her wrists together with one large hand. He yanked her sweater above her breasts.

"I would always apply tooth and claw to any honorable fight," she informed him, doing her best to twist out of his hold and ending up on her knees, bent over with her hands still pinned together as if she were bowing to him.

Tore pulled her sweater over her head, blinding her momentarily, and left it there when he leaned across her and grazed her ass a quick, hard smack. "If I spanked you for each of your crimes in the past few days, wildcat, you'd have one hell of a red ass. It might teach you how to approach these honorable fights as you call them."

"Excuse me? Teach me? And what crimes?" she hissed, putting some muscle into it when it became apparent he didn't plan on moving her sweater from its current position. He wouldn't leave her blindfolded with her own damn clothing.

Tore flipped her over, dragging her sweater from her body and tossing it over his shoulder. Maurie shook her head fiercely to get her hair out of her eyes and tried brushing strands from her face, but once again he grabbed her hands.

"There are always new things to sniff out and learn, wildcat," he said, his baritone smooth but with an underlying growl to it, hinting he was a bit more serious than he would let on. "One of them being when you take off without telling me, I get rather upset."

He was grabbing her jeans, pulling the zipper down while focusing on her and speaking. His gaze burned into her flesh, making it obvious wherever he looked. When his knuckles scraped over her belly, her skin tingled, the sexual energy simmering inside her while watching him sleep, bathing and caring for him too damn close to reaching its boiling point. Hell, all he was doing was touching her and berating her while doing it, and she was too close to being a puddle of sexual need before him.

She stared at him a moment, not fighting when he lifted her ass off the bed and dragged her jeans past her hips and down her thighs. Cream coated her pussy and her sexual aroma floated in the air between them when he pulled her jeans to her ankles. She needed her head clear battling this male though. His cock jerked, catching her attention and making it hard as hell to concentrate.

She closed her eyes and kicked off her shoes, refusing to allow him to trap her in her own jeans tangled around her ankles. "How do you think it makes me feel when you come chasing after me and then I have to drag your ass off to nurse you back to health?"

"I think it made you so fucking hot you couldn't wait for me to wake up," he growled, crawling over her.

Maurie glanced at the long scar traveling down his chest. The other day it was a nasty wound, one she'd taken great care to clean and bandage so the scar wouldn't be too bad. It didn't surprise her how quickly he healed. Leopards had incredibly high metabolism levels and never took too long to mend. There was another gash on the side

of his arm and one on his leg. She doubted they gave him too much grief at the moment. And if they did, she had a feeling he wouldn't tell her.

She raised her gaze to his dark, brooding eyes and breathed in how aroused he was. God, she loved his rich, sexy aroma. He nipped her lower lip and then moved lower, scraping his teeth over a nipple.

Maurie jumped, grabbing his shoulders but trying not to dig in on the side she knew was still healing. "And I think you're one conceited, arrogant male," she hissed, and twisted her hips to the side, preventing him from lying on top of her and trapping her legs. She'd be damned if she would spread her legs and welcome him inside her, no matter how desperately she wanted him there, after what he said to her. "You accuse me of crimes, of running on a whim and not notifying you. There isn't a collar around my neck, leopard. You'd do well to remember that."

Tore jumped off the bed, moving with incredible agility for someone who damn near bled out on her. He didn't say anything when he pulled a pillow from the bed. She watched him strip the pillow case off it and then twist the cotton material so it looked like a long, white rope.

"Is that what it will take?" he asked, his soft, low baritone sending chills rushing down her body.

Maurie moved to a sitting position, the sudden urge to run hitting her hard enough to steal her breath. Tore excited the hell out of her. At the same time, wariness crept over her in spite of trying to maintain her defiant expression and stare him down.

"What are you doing?" She pressed her palms into the bed, ready to jump if needed. The look on his face was a mixture of determined confidence and enough orneriness to bring her heart to a hard thumping in her chest.

"Contemplating," he said while he continued twisting the pillow case.

Maurie moved to slide off the other side of the bed. "Fine. You contemplate. Now that you're back to your old annoying self, my work here apparently is done."

Tore jumped onto the bed, grabbing her by the waist. One arm wrapped around her with enough strength she flew backward, swearing she'd have blanket burns down her back from the amount of strength he used capturing her. His aggression made her blood boil, created an overwhelming urge inside her to attack. Damn him for getting her so hot she fell right into his game.

The more she struggled, the stronger he became. Tore grabbed her wrists, dragging her to the head of the bed, and used the pillow case to tie her wrists to the wooden headboard.

"Fucking let me go," she howled, straining against her binds until her wrists burned.

"Be quiet, my little wildcat," he growled into her face, which was inches from hers. He glanced at her hands over her head and appeared very pleased with his work. "Humans might not understand why you're howling so loudly. You don't want to explain to human cops how you're simply enjoying how your male treats you, do you?"

Her male?

She panted, pissed as hell and so fucking turned-on by him she couldn't catch her breath. "Untie me now, Tore," she demanded.

"I don't think so. Not yet," he said, and ran his finger down the middle of her body and then over her soaked pussy. "There are a few things we need to straighten out first."

"Like what? And let me go," she hissed, twisting and fighting against her restraints. The burning in her wrists only made her struggle even more.

Tore dragged his finger over the entrance of her pussy, his eyes glazed with lust, which added to his dangerous aura. When he tried sliding inside her, Maurie brought her legs up, thrashing out. She'd give him new wounds before submitting to him, even if he out-strengthened her.

He moved before she could kick him in the face and wrapped powerful fingers around each ankle. "There are more pillow cases, wildcat. Don't think for a moment I wouldn't tie your cute little ass up until you are completely at my mercy."

Maurie stilled, her heart pounding too hard while she tried thinking of a way out of his trap. But damn him, the way he restrained her made her damn near come while fighting him. She hated and loved him at the same time. Worse yet, her stomach twisted in knots with fear that he saw through her and knew exactly how his treatment affected her.

Tore moved between her legs, letting go of her ankles and resting them on his shoulders. His cock brushed against her swollen, soaked entrance and she hissed out a breath, knowing he tortured himself as much as he did her, and scrambling for a way to use that to her advantage.

"That's my good wildcat," he purred, brushing his rough fingertips down the length of her thighs until he gripped her hips and squeezed, bringing her closer to the tip of his cock. His expression strained, but only for a minute, long enough though to prove his actions would do him in if he weren't careful. "I smell how desperately you want me and you know I want you. We'll get these small matters cleared up in no time."

"Believe what you want, leopard," she said, purring back at him while her lashes weighed heavily over her eyes. Control. Maintain control and she'd gain the upper hand. She was learning how desperately Tore needed to feel he ran in the lead. If she could let him believe he held that position, possibly it would distract him enough to allow her to regain leadership. She swayed her hips, rolling them over his hands, which almost cupped her ass, and brushed closer against his cock. "If we're going to clear up matters, let's start with why you followed me."

"We'll start further back with why you left without telling me," he informed her, pressing against her entrance. She opened for him eagerly, feeling his swollen head stretch her pussy and her smooth folds wrap around him, desperately trying to suck him in deeper. Tore pulled back, no longer touching her with his cock. "I want your

word right now. You won't leave me again without telling me where you're going. And then your reason for leaving without me better be really good."

"Tie every inch of me to this bed, you'll never control me like that." She blinked away the fog of lust enveloping her and stared at him, her vision clear. Disappointment bit at her but she held on, ignoring the popping sensation rippling up her spine as emotions threatened to swarm to the surface. "If that's what you're about, you aren't the leopard I thought you were," she added under her breath, appealing to his honor and praying her disappointment smelled stronger than her lust.

Tore bent over her, forcing her feet closer to her head and causing the back of her thighs to burn as he succeeded in almost folding her in half. Dark burnt-orange highlights streaked through his hair as it fell around his face and hid his expression from her. Their scents intertwined, almost smelling the same, and made it harder for her to detect his reaction to her words.

"You'll learn to understand," he whispered, his grumble vibrating over her flesh when his lips touched her bellybutton. "I'm asking for you to honor me, and I'll give you the same in return." He lapped at her flesh, dipping the tip of his tongue into her navel and hitting a nerve that caused her to flinch. "You aren't in a cage because you share yourself with me. You howl to me as I would to you because you care. Your happiness smells like mine and your anger smells like mine. The next step, wildcat, is accepting and acting on that."

His words swarmed around in her head as he continued teasing her bellybutton. When he dipped into the shallow entrance, he poked at a nerve, which sent shocks straight to her clit.

"Who says I want to take the next step?" In spite of fighting to make him see her independence, her determination not to be collared, she dragged her fingers through his thick, smooth hair, held his head. She wouldn't let him tame her, but thoughts of holding him where he was, preventing him from doing anything other than her bidding, soared through her like an intense wildfire, igniting passion inside her she couldn't restrain any longer. "And maybe, just maybe, leopard, the next step I say we take isn't the step you would take."

Tore lifted his head, seeing right through her. Damn him. His gaze burned straight to her soul. Even with her fingers tangled in his hair, she couldn't hold him in place.

He shifted, moving lower, leaving her bellybutton and then stealing his focus from her to the smooth flesh between her legs.

"You're not running wild any longer, wildcat," he whispered, his tone ragged while his breath scorched her tender, swollen flesh. "If you don't want that collar, then accept that simple fact. Honor me, and I will honor you. But if you don't offer that honor, then get ready for the shackles. Because, my little cat, I will tie you down until you learn to behave."

Her response to his domination was on the tip of her tongue but came out a howl when he pressed his lips over her clit and then sucked the incredibly swollen and enflamed flesh into his mouth.

Fireworks ignited inside her, exploded and took all rational thought along with it. She bucked against him, unable to hold back the passion, the lust this male created inside her. Maurie didn't have a grip yet on what it was about Tore Mann that left her in such a state of molten bubbling need. His presence, his intoxicating scent, the way he touched her, and damn him, even his bold, aggressive manner when he informed her of how life would be, turned her on in ways no other male ever came close to doing.

She'd died after leaving Kenora and her littermates. But not because of the town she'd been raised in as a cub. And not because of her two littermates, her flesh and blood she'd sacrificed so much for in order to give them the life they deserved when the one she deserved had been burned and destroyed along with her parents. She'd died, split in two and felt the pain from it, when she'd left this male.

Her life's work was VC. There wasn't any existing without it. They were her reason for breathing, everything she'd worked for since her sire and mother burned to death. Helping others know freedom when hers was gone, knowing male and female leopards would run free, hunt as they wished and choose mates they would love for life kept her alive from one day to the next.

But now something else had charged into her life, something quickly starting to mean as much to her as VC. She'd realized that when she'd ran from him. But telling him that, even allowing him to smell the truth, would change him and give him an edge to feed his already too-big ego. If she allowed that, then he would become something she wouldn't be able to tolerate.

For his own good, and for hers, she wouldn't allow him to manipulate her. "Tying me down won't satisfy you," she groaned, squeezing her eyes closed when his tongue dipped inside her.

"You're going to come and when you do you'll scream my name. That will most definitely satisfy me."

He avoided the point of her statement, which at the moment didn't bother her. His tongue stroked over her tender flesh. When he dipped inside her, the overstimulated muscles aching for his touch eagerly clamped around him, willing him to go deeper.

"And that is why you followed me? For this?" She lifted her head, staring at his head between her legs. Tore raised his gaze and stared at her with dark, hungry eyes. His lashes fluttered and several strands brushed over his eyebrow, adding to his animalistic look. Instead of answering her, he lapped at her clit, destroying her reserve and forcing a howl out of her when he pushed her over the edge.

When he growled, the reverberation crawling up from his chest added to his afflictions. Maurie grabbed the pillow case, holding on to it like a life line as she felt her world slip away. Her control was gone, her ability to maintain power and manipulate all around her dissipating as she came so hard she couldn't breathe.

"Come for me, wildcat. Don't hold back."

"Fuck you," she howled, and something in the back of her fogged brain felt a warped sense of satisfaction when she didn't cry out his name.

Wave after wave of desire spilled over her and her body convulsed, the cotton bound around her wrists chafing her skin. No one ever would have made her believe being tied up, a fucking leash put on her, would make her so damn hot. Maurie continued coming, crying as the need to reach the peak came closer and closer.

Tore growled again, feasting on her juices like a starving man. His large body pressed against her legs and the growth on his chin, the shadow adding to his sex appeal, raked over her flesh.

"God damn you, Tore!" she cried out, feeling the final explosion when it hit like a fucking tidal wave, washing her away from everything that mattered.

"My adorable little wildcat," he purred, his voice rough with emotions and his eyes glowing when he slowly rose over her. "So damn perfect. Every bit of you is so hot, craving my cock. Aren't you, baby?"

"As much as you crave being in me," she said, swallowing when her mouth was dry from screaming. "Untie me. Let me enjoy this as much as you will."

"I think you're already enjoying it." He nipped at her nipple, making her jump. "Maybe you'll learn something about yourself today."

"What's that?" She cringed at how her body reacted to him. No matter her need to prevent him from seeing how submitting to him turned her on, every inch of her was on fire, so sensitive to his touch she couldn't control the urges screaming inside for more from him.

"You'll learn to trust me."

She blinked, staring into his dark, brooding expression. "Why would you think I don't trust you?"

He adjusted himself between her legs, the swollen crown of his cock pressing against her pussy. Maurie swallowed her breath, her body tingling and flushed as a carnal craving tore her apart, so strong she could barely focus from its intensity.

"It's going to become second nature for you to share everything with me." He kept his cock at her entrance, torturing her, letting her feel what she was in for, but not giving it to her. "You won't ever consider walking out a door again without telling me where you're going."

God. He had her to the edge again. A sheen of sweat covered her body and at the same time chills rushed over her. There wasn't any way she could fight him like this. But he'd laid out the terms and left her with little choice. Obviously the only way to get him to untie her was to play his game.

"And you?" She fluttered her lashes and slowly raised her gaze to his eyes. The savage, feral burning, which laced his dark eyes with gold streaks of fire, stole her

breath. She swallowed, refusing to look away first, and took him on. "Will you submit to me if I do this little task you request?"

Tore's laughter sounded more dangerous than he looked. "I'm not on any deadline, wildcat. Are you?" He lowered his body, brushing his chest over her nipples and scraping her sensitive, puckered flesh with his coarse chest hair. "Because we're not going anywhere until you understand how it must be."

"Why must it be that way?" she whispered, fighting to focus on his eyes when they were inches from her face. Breathing in his rich scent tortured her senses as much as his body did. "If you want a docile, submissive bitch, go find one."

"I want you," he roared, a flash of anger making the air spicy when he captured her mouth, demanding she open for him and then impaling her with his tongue.

Maurie lifted her legs, wrapping them around his hips, and brought herself up to him. His thick cock was harder than steel and slipped inside her, filling and stretching her as she held on with her legs and eased his journey deeper.

Tore roared into her mouth, choking her with his tongue as he forced her to open farther for him. Maurie held her ass off the bed, straining against the confines strapped around her wrists, and latched her legs around him, rising higher to take him deeper.

Tore tried straightening and she felt the burn in her thighs when she refused to let him go. She stared into his eyes, knew the raging fire in them matched her own.

"I come with a price too high for what you're asking," she told him, wondering for the first time exactly how much he'd learned before coming after her. "Fuck me, Tore. Fuck me and talk later."

Chapter Fifteen

Tore stared into Maurie's olive green eyes. They were so beautiful, so sensual, but as he focused on her he saw pain. He saw fear and uncertainty. And he vowed to take those emotions away from her.

"I'm going to fuck you," he assured her, moving in spite of her efforts to keep him where she wanted him. Even restrained, Maurie refused to submit. But she was wrong about one thing. She was the female for him. He'd learned years ago to trust his instincts and understand what he smelled around him. "And once again, my wildcat, you're going to scream my name."

"No." Her trite little smile damn near undid him. "This time, male, you'll howl my name when you come."

He knelt between her thighs, enjoying the view of her wrists bound over her head, her full breasts swollen and round with her nipples so hard and puckered into beacons, his mouth watered staring at them. Her breathing was slow, deep and labored, and her breasts rose and fell every time she inhaled. The glow of her flesh, moist with her desire and flushed with her need, matched the erotic aroma she released in the air around them. Exotic, enticing and so damn intoxicating with every breath, he needed her more than he did the moment before. If he weren't careful, he'd break down, humiliate himself and beg her never to leave his side again.

The female was beyond amazing. Bound underneath him, she still managed to control every inch of him and give the orders. Beyond any doubt, Tore knew he stared into the eyes of his mate.

"Wildcat," he purred, grabbing her legs and stretching her open. Her pussy glistened with come and lured him into her before he could even control his actions. He felt her pussy stretch around him, pull him in deeper to her heat, and sank inside her, feeling her take his heart along with his cock. "You are my wildcat." He stressed every word and then sank deep.

Hard. Quick. He impaled her, burning alive and yet taking everything she demanded he take while fucking her. He was losing himself in her, feeling the wall that so successfully protected his heart, his ego, his resolve to live life without pain or emotion blocking his path, dissipate with every thrust.

"My wildcat," he hissed, cupping her breasts, lowering himself over her and breathing her deep into his lungs. "Every inch of you—mine."

"Tore," she whispered, her panting so crisp, so raspy and rough, her arms flexed against her restraints and her legs clamped hard on his sides. "Fuck me," she added in the next moment.

He knew she held back from expressing her thoughts. Maurie spent her lifetime running, leading others to safety, watching some make it while others were captured, humiliated and killed. He knew that life, knew it so damn well he smelled it on her everywhere. Odd how he hadn't sniffed that out of her before Race told him of her involvement with VC. But now, knowing the truth, seeing his Maurie for who she was, he knew which way she ran because he ran the same way.

There wasn't a personal life. It was impossible when he never knew when someone would howl for him, when terror would attack one of his own kind and he would be the only one who could save them. Tore knew the pain of loss, the sweet taste of victory, and how one too often outweighed the other.

Knowing Maurie knew that same life made it easier to chase her down, sniff her out and find her. Luckily he found her in time. Maurie might be strong, better than most females, deadly and capable of fighting and killing without giving it a thought. But he doubted she would have made it through all six of those males if he hadn't shown up. That she'd been willing to take them on so two females she didn't even know wouldn't be forced into something they didn't want showed more about her character and made Tore love her even more.

"You're so fucking wet," he growled, losing himself in her.

Maurie purred, arching her ass off the bed and allowing him to glide deeper with his next thrust.

"And so tight. Fucking wildcat, look at you." He dragged his attention from her full breasts to her mouth, which was puckered in a perfect circle while her eyes glazed over, her lashes hovering over her green orbs so they were barely visible.

But then he saw her hands, twisted together, the cotton pillowcase stretched taut over her flesh. Her claws were extended and scraping against the fabric, slowly shredding it.

"Not so fast," he growled, and pulled out of her, the cool air wrapping around his soaked cock, stealing his breath and causing his balls to tighten painfully. "Claws in now."

Maurie's gaze lifted from her eyes and she glared at him, her body deflating when she blew out an exasperated breath. Instead of obeying though, she slashed at the material again with her sharpened claw, parting her lips enough for him to see her sharpened teeth press against her lower lip.

She was playing him. Damn her to hell and back. The little seductress used sex so many times while running she didn't know when to turn it off.

Tore flipped her over and she landed flat on the bed with a grunt, her hair falling over her face when she struggled to look over her shoulder at him. "Untie me!" she hissed.

"Looks like you need to learn more than just submitting today," he growled, and let his hand fall on her ass.

Maurie squealed, lifting her head off the bed, her hair flying wildly over her shoulders and down her back. "You're the one who needs to be taught a few manners," she howled.

He slapped the other side of her ass, not hard enough to hurt her, but the sound of flesh striking flesh made his cock swell and his balls itch to come. "We'll focus on one thing at a time, wildcat." He came down over her, moving her hair from her face and then kissing her cheek. "You don't trust me."

"You haven't given me the chance to show you if I do or I don't."

Her cheeks were flushed, the rosy color accenting the shade of her eyes when she turned to stare at him. "You're making the rules here without telling me the game."

"This isn't a game," he growled.

She raised her ass off the bed, and the soft mounds pressed against his cock. He jerked, his world tilting. Maurie could torture him no matter how he bound her. Just looking at her made him want back inside her.

"Yes. It's a game. You're trying to control me, to break me so I'll submit and be the good little female you think you can make me."

"I'm not trying to control you but gain your trust. And until you see that, you'll stay as you are now, bound and stretched out underneath me where I can enjoy every inch of you. And my sweet little wildcat, I could enjoy you for a very long time."

"Tore," she whispered, sounding exasperated.

He ran his hands down her back, enjoying the way it curved into her hips, which were round and perfectly swollen and glowing from his spanking.

"Do you really think I would want to break your spirit?" He moved his knees between her legs, forcing her to stretch, spread them apart and offered him a view any male would kill to see. "Wildcat, it is what makes you glow, the basis for what makes you the wild female I'm falling in love with."

She stilled, not even taking a breath, when the words slipped out of his mouth. Maurie was so much female, so aggressive and powerful, stretched out before him with her hands bound. She was so fucking sexy. There weren't many things in this world he'd chased down hard enough to make his own. But she was one of them. He lowered his gaze, noting she digested the news of his feelings but didn't react. He'd give her time and turned his attention to the glistening flesh between her legs.

Reaching just in front of his cock, he dragged his finger from her swollen, soaked pussy to the smaller, tighter hole between her soft mounds of flesh.

"Crap! Damn it!" Maurie jumped, unaware he'd touch her there and then hissed. "Fuck me, Tore. Just fuck me, please. We'll discuss everything else later."

"Are you begging me?" he asked, watching as he spread her cream over the tight, puckered hole and feeling his blood drain down his body as his cock danced eagerly, aching to take the place of his finger.

"Damn you, Tore. You want it too. Why are you torturing both of us?"

"I've told you already." And he was torturing himself, making himself so insane with need for her his growing feelings for her slipped out. That wasn't his nature and he didn't see any reason to stroke her ego and let her know he'd never voiced those words to any other female. He slipped his finger into her tight hole and watched her jump, cry out, and her hair fly around her shoulders when she tried jerking off the bed. "So fucking tight. Has any male ever taken you here before?"

"That's not your business."

"We're still there. Your lack of trust."

"Tore," she cried out, almost whining, her need flushing through her when he held his finger in place and reached down with the rest of his hand, stroking her thick cream over her pussy. "I trust you, damn it. Are you happy now?"

"You trust me," he repeated.

"Yes. I trust you."

"You would tell me if you went somewhere?"

"Sure. Anything. Fuck me now, damn you!"

He doubted she would speak without meaning it. Maurie would hold out if she wanted something and not just say what he wanted to hear. But he would test her.

"Will you explain VC to me?"

Again she stilled. He moved his finger slightly, pulling out of her ass, but not all the way. Maurie's muscles clamped around him, her breath jagged as she yanked against her restraints. He saw where she'd torn the pillow case and noticed if she pulled a bit harder she'd probably free herself.

"Yes. I'll explain VC to you."

Tore slid his finger deeper into her ass.

She cried out, bucking against his hand. "Please, Tore, now," she howled.

Tore pulled out of her and ran his hands down her smooth legs. Then lifting her to her knees, he positioned her against his cock and slid deep into her heat.

"Yes. Finally. God, I need all of you now."

"I know you do." He gripped her hips, needing her just as badly.

Taking her hard, watching his cock slide deep inside her and feeling her muscles constrict around him, he knew there wasn't any way he could hold out that long. She was too hot, on fire, and milking him with so many tiny muscles he would do well to satisfy her before coming.

Holding on to her, he impaled her, focusing on her release, wanting her completely sated. Her breathing escalated, her cries tearing from her body when he continued fucking her, watching her hair fan over her shoulders and back.

"Tore!" she howled, screaming his name loud enough he was sure anyone in the motel right now would hear her.

Not that he cared about humans. All that mattered was pleasing his hot wildcat. She was burning him alive and pumping him with her tight, slick muscles. Her entire body stiffened when she came and she yanked hard enough to tear the pillow case. Maurie didn't move her hands from over her head though as her orgasm shattered through her.

He drowned in the boiling cream that soaked his cock, drenched his balls and filled the air with the most incredibly sweet and erotic scent he'd ever breathed into his lungs. Impaling her one last time, he collapsed over her, reaching under her hair and cupping her cheek with his hand as he pressed his lips just below her ear.

"I love you, my wildcat," he growled, and released everything he had deep inside her hot, tight pussy.

Maurie purred, her body relaxing underneath his, moist perspiration covering both of them. For the first time, Tore felt the strain of his injuries when he slipped his arm under her and then rolled to his back, pulling her over alongside him. When she lowered her arms, he took her wrists and carefully removed the destroyed pillow case.

She sat slowly, rubbing her wrists and then combing her hair with her fingers. "It's my turn to shower now," she informed him, sliding off the bed. "Then we need to get out of here."

"How far are we from Fountain Hills, Arizona?" He realized he didn't know where they were, his preoccupation since waking up being Maurie.

Tore focused on her adorable ass when she faltered, her scent growing stronger even with her back to him. There wasn't any hiding the thick aroma from their lovemaking, but it wasn't hard to pick up on her frustration, maybe even anger, when she slowly turned, tapping her finger to her lips and finally looking at him.

"Fountain Hills?" she asked him.

"That's where Leo Pard's mansion is in Arizona. That's where you're heading, right? You're going there to confirm if he's dead or alive." A suicide mission at best, another reason he'd hauled ass to catch up with her. Once this was all said and done he would howl for more than a few minutes at whoever told her to do this.

"That's right," she said slowly, her expression guarded.

He wanted to yell at her, remind her yet again about trusting him. Because obviously, in spite of his efforts while making love to her, even confessing his feelings about her, Maurie didn't trust. What if his wildcat didn't know how to trust? Did he have it in him to show another leopard what trust was?

Maurie moved again toward the bathroom, brushing her hair over her shoulder but pausing outside the bathroom door and looking at him with wide, olive green eyes that for a moment looked like they glowed with moisture.

"If we leave soon, we should be there tonight," she told him, and disappeared, the door closing behind her.

There were a few things at least Tore knew that Maurie hadn't sniffed out. The obvious and most important being she was walking into a trap. He could smell it from here. Tore stood, raking his hair with his fingers, and contemplated his best move. Either walk Maurie through how to properly handle her assignment, or simply stay on her tail and make sure no one attacked.

"You need to show her trust," he said to his reflection, which meant talking to her. And with his stiff cock covered with her come and still hard and ready for more of her, approaching her as he was now would make it difficult for her to believe he just wanted to talk. Especially when he would love to climb into that shower with her, clean every inch of her, and then turn her against the shower wall and impale that hot pussy of hers again.

"Trust, man. Make her smell of trust." He found his clothes in his bag, all neatly folded and arranged for him. After pulling on jeans and zipping them up over his still-hard cock, he endured the pain of moving around in them, and laid out a t-shirt, socks and shoes then headed to the bathroom. "Wildcat," he growled at the door, announcing his presence before turning the door handle.

Steam greeted him when he stepped into the bathroom, the mirrors already fogged over as water pelted against the shower wall and Maurie's body on the other side of the cream-colored curtain.

"I won't be long," she told him.

"We need to talk."

"Tore, we don't—" She broke off her sentence as the humid air swimming around him filled with a salty smell alerting him of her emotions. "I mean, well, don't worry about it, okay? In the heat of passion..." Again she faltered.

Tore stiffened, the saltiness in the air thickening until he fought the urge to rip the curtain from between them and yank her out of the shower. She thought he came in here to retract words whispered to her during their lovemaking.

"Wildcat," he growled, fighting not to get upset with her for jumping to the wrong conclusion. He wanted to yell at her to drop that fucking shield she kept so firmly in place around her heart. "I didn't howl a damn thing to you I regret," he hissed, barely succeeding in adding to the stench of negative emotions trapped in the steam swirling around him.

She stilled in the shower. He sensed it, could tell by how the water fell evenly, hitting surfaces that weren't moving. When she didn't answer, he wanted to yank that curtain out of the way, remove all obstacles between him and Maurie. He wanted to pull her into his arms, hold her until she released the barrier between them. He wanted to shake her until she accepted the truth. Because he smelled the truth, saw it in her eyes, in how she touched him. Hell, he saw it in how she sparred with him every chance she got. His wildcat loved him too and she would admit it if he had to tie her to the bed and keep her there until she did.

The water stopped and Maurie peeked around the curtain, her long hair plastered to her shoulder and clinging to one breast. "Would you hand me the towel?"

He grabbed it from the rack, held it out to her still folded, and leaned against the counter, crossing his arms and watching her run the towel over her body. For now the knowledge of their emotions would take a back burner. They wouldn't stay there for long. There were matters at hand, a situation to sniff out, and he would address that right now so they would know how to run together.

"I've been to Leo Pard's mansion before," he told her.

Maurie stopped drying herself and looked up at him, beads of water clinging to her lashes as she stared at him a long moment. Her emotions were under wrap, guarded carefully as her expression remained blank.

"Really," she finally said.

"All of the hunters ended up there." It was an ugly time, a time of discovery and trying to figure out everything he smelled. Some right decisions were made and others he would do differently if given the chance. "When the list was posted to the Panthera Incognita website and we hunted those on the list, we were ordered to take them to Pard's mansion in Fountain Hills."

"And you did this." Her tone was crisp. She was so fucking young to have mastered concealing every emotion inside her. But damn if he didn't smell a single reaction to what he'd just told her. All he had was the cool response and hard look she gave him when she walked out of the bathroom to know what he just told her pissed her off.

He was going to piss her off some more. Maurie needed to get mad—furious in fact. It was the only way she'd understand and see clearly what they needed to do when approaching Pard. If the bastard was still alive.

"There were twenty leopards on that first list." He wasn't sure why he didn't tell her he was number two on the list. "It was a list of leopards known to have visions."

"I know what the list was," she snapped, her back to him when she bent over and used the towel to wrap her hair.

Tore's mind went blank for a moment at the view she offered, bending over naked in front of him, her body clean and flushed from the hot shower. Knowing she intentionally displayed her pussy and that tempting tight ass of hers helped pull his head out of the quick fog she intentionally placed over him. Maurie had skills. Very good skills. He was seeing now how she'd used these skills over the years, possibly all her adult life, to lure in males and then trap and kill them.

Last night she would have met her match if he hadn't been there. That sobered him even more. He turned before she straightened, meaning to show her she wouldn't place him under her trance, manipulate him and then put into play whatever scheme he was sure she was conjuring at the moment.

Tore walked past her to the front door, peeked out the peep hole and then moved the curtains just a bit to stare out at an almost empty parking lot. "The leopards on that

list were broken into groups and each of us hunters gathered the males and females we were assigned to get."

"And you did this without ever smelling trouble? Or do you hunt blindly? Are you interested only in the fee paid you for the service requested?" The bite in her tone would have hurt if he hadn't been asked the questions enough times now to be immune to them.

Maurie stepped into shorts and slid them up her legs, adjusting them over her hips and then zipping and snapping them. She didn't put on underwear, another bit of knowledge he was sure offered to him to distract him from their conversation. Then without putting on a shirt she walked to the mirror and let down her hair, towel drying it before pulling a brush from her bag.

"Why are you telling me this, Tore?" she asked, staring at him through the mirror. "I know what happened. Those twenty were just the beginning. Some of them escaped, some didn't. Leo Pard continued gathering males and females with visions, stealing them if necessary from their litters to forward his despicable plot to create some new race of leopards he believed he would control."

Tore moved to stand next to her, watching her pull her brush through long strands of damp hair. "I'm telling you this because if you really knew what happened I wouldn't smell your outrage toward me right now," he said softly, meeting her piercing gaze when it shot his direction in the mirror. "And I'm telling you this so you'll understand I ran after you not just because I want you by my side, but because the assignment you accepted is a suicide mission and I'm not going to allow you to walk into a trap."

"Allow me?" Her spicy anger quickly filled the air as she turned, gripping her brush as she held her hand up between them, and glared at him. "You've made some pretty hasty assumptions, leopard."

Tore stared at her, seeing the uncertainty she tried so hard to hide behind her calloused expression. Her blonde hair was darker wet and draped over her bare shoulders and curtained her breasts. She stood tall, unashamed of her nudity before him. But she didn't stand like a lover. She didn't touch him or look like she ached to be touched. Tore had to search deep into her olive green eyes to see the female who was scared, unsure and trying so desperately hard to make him see her as invincible.

"Wildcat," he drawled. "I haven't assumed anything. If I believed you couldn't handle this assignment, I would have hauled your ass right back to Kenora. We're going to Fountain Hills. I'll take you to the mansion. And you'll return with the information your leopards with VC want. The only surprise will be your returning, because I promise you, my little cat, they don't believe you're coming back."

"I've never let VC down. Never."

"Yes, you have." He needed her to understand completely before they left this motel room. "You fell in love with a hunter."

Maurie stared at him, her lips parting and then snapping shut again. She blinked once, twice, and then her expression paled. "You're wrong," she whispered.

He knew she believed him. "Pard's mansion is very well protected. Before you can see the mansion, they have already sniffed out your presence. If you don't know exactly where you're going, you're a dead female."

Maurie turned, but not before he saw in her expression, barely picked up in her scent, the unpleasant smell of betrayal. She didn't know any of this, had run blind in her eagerness to regain her position with VC. She pulled a bra out of her bag and put it on with her back to him.

"When we leave here, we'll head to Fountain Hills. But then we'll get a room in town, play human and keep a low profile. I'll be able to tell by the amount of leopards prowling the area if Pard is still active or dead."

She kept her back to him when she pulled a short-sleeve sweater over her head. Then sitting on the edge of the bed, she slid her narrow, small feet into sandals. Not once did she look at him, but the slightly spicy edge to her scent, mixed with the more pungent smell of growing betrayal, tainted the sweet enticing aroma that clung to both of them. Tore vowed to himself to remove those tarnished smells, to show Maurie whom she could trust and who was worthy of running by her side for the rest of her life.

"I think it would be a good idea for you to call your leopard. Let VC know you're doing well and should have their answer for them by tomorrow night."

Maurie's expression was pure curiosity when she looked up at him. "That isn't normal procedure. Why would I do that?"

"We're still working on trust, my wildcat," he purred, his voice rough with emotions he barely managed to contain. As much as he wanted her relying on him, knowing without a doubt he would never steer her wrong, he also needed her to see the truth in order to get her there. "I want you to hear the surprise in the voice that answers when you let them know you're doing well and all is going as planned."

"Trust is a two-way street, male," she said, batting her lashes at him and showing him what a professional tease she was. "You howl like you know so much about VC, yet you didn't know I was a part of them before I left Kenora. So how do you know so much now?"

"Race and Karma shared some information with me." He knew he'd see betrayal flare with a despicable smell, although she covered it quickly and maintained her relaxed expression.

Damn it if she didn't pull off looking vulnerable and enticing. Although the hunger he knew he put inside her didn't exist at the moment. She showed him an act, what years of running for VC, stealing males and females out of the greedy claws of those who would turn them over to Pard, had made her. Tore would personally rip the throat out of the leopard who prided themselves in creating a machine, of turning a young, beautiful female leopard into a cold trap they could use at will to do their bidding.

"In defense of your littermate, she was very vague." He sensed she needed to hear that. "Vision Controllers is an incredibly honorable organization. Their purpose matches that of hunters."

"How can you say that?" She cut him off, standing and pressing her fists into her narrow waist while searching his face. Was it regret? Or maybe a hint of eagerness to hear something she could hold on to and believe they were on the same team. She obviously didn't believe it at the moment. "Hunters took leopards to Pard. You helped him in suppressing our kind, Tore. If the hunters hadn't stepped in to his aid, ran for him and sniffed out everyone on that list, Leo Pard wouldn't have been able to pull off his insane plan."

"If hunters hadn't stepped in and aided him, Pard would have found others to do it. He believed he would gain more rank, be sniffed out as honorable with us on his side."

He tilted his head, breathing slowly and waiting patiently for her to finally smell the truth. He would stand here and discuss this with her until she did. Once Maurie understood, he knew then he'd have her heart. Because with that understanding would come the removal of the impenetrable wall she had around her heart.

"I saw an opportunity to learn what his insanity smelled like. Sometimes you need to play with your enemy in order to best him. I know you agree with that one, my wildcat," he added knowingly.

Maurie's eyes widened for only a moment before she narrowed her gaze on him.

"I saw you last night. Saw how you lured those males in, led them to believe you were a hotter piece of tail than the two they'd trapped in the water," he growled. "And then you attacked with the skills and brutality you've fine-tuned from years of working for VC."

"You smelled something wrong with me helping those two females?" she challenged.

"No. Not at all. Your act was very honorable." He dared move closer, waited for her to jump back, but when she didn't, reached and stroked her damp hair. "My wildcat, my actions were just as honorable. Every leopard I rounded up for Pard returned to their litters. You have my word that is the truth, but I can prove it to you if you need that proof and can't smell the truth in my words. But by going along with Pard a year ago, he made a serious and dangerous enemy. I know his mansion, know every room of it. And I understand the security he used. Not even Leo Pard has the money or influence to completely revamp his entire setup. And I know every bit of it."

She didn't push his hand away but didn't move into it either. Instead, he watched her digest the information he just offered her. His heart swelled when her scent slowly started once again to match his. Brushing his finger underneath her chin, he tilted her head until she met his gaze.

"Make that phone call, wildcat. Let your friend with VC know you're doing well and will have his information for him by tomorrow." He lowered his mouth to hers,

needing to taste her just for a second. "He will ask you about me. I promise. Say what you wish, my little cat. But know this. He will only hope when you die, you take out a hunter with you. I guarantee it. Make that call and tell him you're alone, doing well, and are already familiar with Leo Pard's litter so won't have any problems confirming he's dead."

Chapter Sixteen

Maurie didn't mind humans that much, but spending the entire day with them was about to make her sick to her stomach. All the stifled emotions they carried around with them smelled stale. She almost danced climbing off the commercial passenger bus and breathing in fresh, dry air. As hard as it was to pack shorts with frigid winter weather surrounding her, she was glad she wore them now.

"Do we really have to get a room?" she asked, almost whispering as they walked across the parking lot and away from the small crowd of humans struggling to get their luggage or greet other humans waiting for them.

"Yes." Tore walked with purpose across the parking lot, not touching her or glancing from side to side. He held his head high, staring ahead of them as if he knew exactly where he was going and nothing mattered but getting there.

Maurie should still be pissed. He didn't have the right to chase her down and take over her assignment just because he liked how his cock felt inside her. She searched the side street when they approached, noting the humans who drove past them or walked alongside the street. Somewhere deep inside she understood he howled after that for more reasons than just sex. But damn—love?

And what if everything Tore told her was true? She'd called Laird, spoke directly with him, and didn't need to smell him to know he was surprised to hear from her. Although with Laird, speaking to him face-to-face didn't help, the leopard didn't have a scent. Odd but true. She'd heard it though, and had closed her eyes to ward off the pain.

When Laird suggested she hurry then, before nightfall, and learn the truth, her heart had constricted against the pain. He was sending her to her death. But why? Could it be Laird had grown delusional in his old age and couldn't smell the extent of danger he asked her to run toward? Or was Tore right? Was it Laird's hatred of hunters, the reason he'd fired them when Karma mated with Race, and now his reason for seeking Maurie out and then sending her here?

"This place looks decent." She needed to make a decision, pull some control back into her corner, or she'd start reeking of submission. Something that wouldn't happen. Maurie cut in front of Tore and headed toward the entrance of a small restaurant, leaving Tore to follow or not. She didn't look back. Nor did she say anything else until they were seated in a semi-private booth with high backs. "Where is his place from here?" she asked, after sniffing out the restaurant and determining they were surrounded by humans.

Tore looked at her for the first time since getting off the bus. "How would you find it on your own?"

She accepted his challenge after all. Moments before she'd searched for a way to put this assignment back in her own paws. She leaned back, focusing on the moisture streaming down the glass of iced water the waitress had left each of them with.

"The first thing I'd do is determine if this town is in fact all human," she said under her breath, lifting her gaze to his.

Dark eyes never left her face, his strong features relaxed, yet still he managed to look like a dangerous predator, ready to attack on moment's notice. "I would do the same," he answered solemnly.

"Possibly we're on a side dominated by humans." It was common for leopards and even more common for werewolves and coyotes to preside on one side of town, keeping to themselves and perusing only stores and businesses run by their own kind. "The town doesn't appear that big."

"Twenty-five thousand," the waitress informed her, appearing at their booth with a toothy grin. "If you're just passing through, we have one of the largest fountains in the country just across the way." She pointed with the pen she'd posed at her pad.

Maurie glanced down at the table, spotting the laminated menu she hadn't bothered to look at yet.

"Two hamburgers, rare," Tore told her. "French fries and two Cokes."

"Make mine iced tea with sugar," Maurie said. She met Tore's gaze after the waitress left them. "So we eat and then we do some sightseeing," she decided, damn if he'd order for her and also lay out the itinerary for the rest of their day.

By the time night fell, along with the temperatures, Maurie had walked off her burger. She strolled alongside Tore over a cracked sidewalk, slowing the same time he did when a scent they hadn't picked up on all day hit them. She knew he smelled the other leopards. His hand moved protectively to her back, those long, powerful fingers spreading protectively over the middle of her back while he sniffed the air.

"They're ahead of us," she whispered, catching the direction of several leopards when the breeze cooled her face.

"Let's go in here." Tore guided her with his hand pressing through her shirt, warming her with his possessive touch.

He pulled open a heavy wooden door and they were greeted with the smell of beer and sweat as they walked into a dimly lit pool hall. Even the wooden floors seemed saturated with the aroma of the bar and her sandals stuck to it while she stuck close to him but studied the humans they passed.

"There are more at the back of the room." His deep baritone caressed her flesh and a wave of desire made her pussy swell. Tore pulled a stool from under a small round table. "Sit here and order a couple beers when the barmaid comes by."

"Where are you going?"

Instead of answering, he pressed his lips to hers, nipping her lower lip and dipping inside to offer her a taste of carnal, mounting heat. His kiss was demanding, marking

her for everyone in the establishment to see, and also showing her the hunger raging in him matched the craving growing inside her.

"Stay here," he repeated, moving his lips over hers. "I'm just going to get a feel for the place but you'll never be out of my sight."

"I can take care of myself," she promised him.

"I know you can, wildcat. But you don't have to anymore."

She would have told him she wanted to but he turned, walking away from her before she could say anything. Someone plugged coins into a juke box and an old standard started wailing in the room, causing everyone to talk louder and the noise to run together. It didn't distract Maurie as she watched Tore leave her and couldn't help drooling over how his blue jeans hugged his muscular legs and showed off his firm, perfectly shaped ass. She also noticed she wasn't the only female watching him and a growl escaped her lips before she could stop herself.

My male, she hissed, although the noise surrounding her prevented anyone from hearing. A flush crept over her cheeks. She would make a fool of herself and a hypocrite as well if she leapt at the human females who didn't have a fucking clue what they drooled over. He would rip you in two, she grumbled under her breath. Stupid bitches.

"If you're not drinking you can't sit there," a stocky female yelled over the music at Maurie.

Maurie glared at her, a wave of irritation causing sparks of electricity to pop in her spine. "Two draws," she informed the waitress, holding up two fingers with her claws extended just enough the female looked at them for a moment before lifting her attention slowly to Maurie's face.

Soft green eyes grew wary as the female leopard sniffed the air, aware of an intruder in her bar, a newcomer who wasn't known and therefore not trusted. "Who's the other beer for?" she demanded to know, a question very out of line and one that wouldn't have been asked probably if she hadn't heard Maurie growling when she walked up to the table.

"My mate." The words slipped out. Maurie didn't blink but dared the female silently to press the conversation further. "And he's thirsty," she added, willing her to leave and not return until she had the draws in her hand.

Apparently satisfied, the waitress left without saying anything else and Maurie searched the crowd for Tore. He wasn't hard to find, standing taller and more muscular than most males. She watched him standing in the shadows behind the pool tables, looking as if he might join one of the games.

Maurie couldn't imagine Tore overhearing her tell the waitress he was her mate. She carried his scent on her, as he did hers, and no one would question her for saying it. As she watched him, his attention shifted, snagging her gaze and holding it from across the room as humans and leopards moved between them.

She could have told the waitress anything for her reason for wanting two beers, including informing her it wasn't any of her god-damn business who she bought them

for. His dark eyes smoldered as he continued staring at her and then slowly moved across the room and back to her side. Watching his intentional lazy stroll, the way roped muscle flexed under his jeans, and how his t-shirt stretched over his hard-packed chest, Maurie remembered him telling her he was falling in love with her while they fucked earlier.

Tore definitely did something to her insides no other male had ever come close to doing. There wasn't a better-looking leopard anywhere on the planet. And even his overconfident nature, his dominating aggressive nature, seemed to be turning her on more than annoying her lately. Not to mention, running without him, believing when she left Kenora she wouldn't see him again for quite a while, had ripped a part of her in two. When she'd first realized he'd found her, and then took her fight for her, Maurie hadn't known a happier moment. Even taking time to nurse him back to health didn't bother her. But was that love?

The waitress appeared at the table when Tore did and placed two tall glasses of beer on it. She yelled over the music, telling Maurie how much they cost, although her attention shifted to Tore, and the look on her face showed she liked what she saw.

Tore pulled a few bills out of his back pocket and gave them to the waitress but then pulled out the stool next to Maurie, sitting so his back faced the waitress. Either he didn't notice her checking him out, along with every other female in the bar, or he didn't care if they did. He sat close enough his leg brushed against hers and drank slowly from his glass of beer, his expression contemplative.

"Drink and let's get out of here," he said, not trying to yell.

Maurie didn't want to risk them being overheard by asking what he might have sniffed out. Curiosity bested her though, and she gulped the beer then almost gagged on the tepid, almost flat taste to it.

"I'm ready," she said, putting it down half finished.

Tore didn't question her, put his not-quite-empty glass on the table, and this time wrapped his arm around her and kept her close when they left the bar.

Several leopard males passed them, growling at each other and making a fair bit of noise with their insults and jokes. They barely noticed Tore and Maurie when they passed each other.

"Interesting," he grumbled as they walked to the end of the block.

"What's interesting?"

They reached the end of the block and Tore quit holding her. He faced her, his contemplative expression filled with confident strength she realized was starting to appeal to her. She wouldn't be told what to do. But Maurie wouldn't tolerate a weak male either. Knowing he was her equal, capable of as much as she was not only appealed to her, staring into those dark eyes created moisture between her legs while need swelled and spread throughout her.

Tore brushed her hair away from her face with his rough fingertips. "I didn't hear any mention of Leo Pard," he said softly.

Maurie searched his face, deciding what that bit of knowledge might mean. "The leopards we passed didn't act nervous or concerned they didn't know us."

"I think it's time we checked out his mansion."

She watched the flare of energy spark in his eyes while he straightened before her. Thinking about running into potentially very dangerous territory, sniffing out the enemy and taking him down or reporting his death turned her on almost as much as standing this close to his virile body did.

Feeling the excitement rush through her with the same intensity she saw it ignite inside him, Maurie nodded once. "You may lead the way, leopard," she growled.

Tore grinned, grabbing the side of her neck and pulling her to him for a rough, needy kiss. Sparks of adrenaline shot up her spine as she arched into him.

"You're going to stay close," he whispered against her mouth. "And if I say to do something, I want your word you'll do it."

Maurie saw he wasn't trying to boss her around but protect her. She nodded once, opening her eyes and staring into those dark green glowing orbs. "And if I smell danger, you're going to acknowledge that I know how to sniff out trouble."

"I already know that, my wildcat." He wrapped his arms around her, smashing her against his chest. "We're going to be quick, make our determinations and get the hell out of there. I'm not going to lose you on this assignment."

Her heart swelled, the sensation she was more than needed, but wanted, sent a rush of warmth over her. There wasn't any stopping the sweet, clean smell that tripped her. It was a harsh realization but, once she accepted it, felt better than anything she'd ever felt before. Later she'd put words to it, but now she simply wanted to finish her job, report in and then focus on the decisions she needed to make.

They'd walked along a two-lane highway without a single car passing them for almost half an hour. The black velvet sky looked different than it did in Kenora but still incredibly gorgeous. The smells of the night called to her, fresh and enticing, but none of them as appealing as Tore's scent, which so closely matched her own.

"Let's cut off here. I think we'd do better in our fur from this point." Tore was all business, his body tightly sprung as energy sizzled from him.

"Where is the mansion?" Maurie squinted in the darkness, searching for a structure of any kind. All she saw was flat ground and an endless black sky that spread to the horizon where the shadowed silhouettes of the mountains added to the serene setting. "I don't smell trouble anywhere," she added, whispering as if interrupting the peaceful night would somehow ruin it.

"Me either." Tore led the way away from the highway, stopping when they reached a gully and then jumping several feet and turning for her.

Maurie jumped as well, ignoring his outstretched hand, and landed easily on the uneven ground, bending her legs slightly before straightening and pushing her hair behind her shoulder. Taking advantage of the natural hiding place that blocked their

view of anyone who might drive along the highway, she pulled off her sweater. The chilly night air immediately clung to her skin, invigorating her. Everything smelled so clean, so fresh, and thoughts of an adventure had her spine popping with eager anticipation.

Nothing smelled or looked as good as Tore did though when he ripped off his t-shirt, causing muscles to flex in his arms. He stared at the quiet darkness around them, his straight hair lifted by the breeze. Dark burnt-orange highlights streaked through his blond strands, adding to his bad-boy look.

He loved her. Those words branded her soul more than she ever believed they would. Maurie wouldn't dwell on when she'd last heard any leopard say those words to her. It didn't matter. Even with her too stubborn littermate Karma, who believed to the depths of her soul Maurie was nothing more than a thorn in her side. Again, it didn't matter if Karma loved her, if Darla loved her, or if any male who'd dared lust after her while growing up ever howled the words to her.

Tore loved her. Crap. He loved her.

Her fingers shook as she unsnapped her shorts, unzipped them and then pushed them to her hips and allowed them to slide down her legs. She hadn't bothered with underwear, especially when Tore had watched her dress. Little bits of knowledge like that gave her the edge, kept her in charge by controlling him with information, which would distract him if she pressed it.

Suddenly it seemed manipulation tactics didn't satisfy her as much as they once did. She started rolling her clothes but then glanced into Tore's eyes when he put his hands over hers and then took her clothes from her.

"Five miles or so north of here Leo Pard's land begins," he said calmly, his baritone dark and dangerous-sounding. He shifted his focus from the direction he was talking about and began folding their clothes in his hands. "Last time I was here there were electronic detecting devices capable of spotting any moving creature no matter how big or small it was."

He had both of their bags that held their clothes in his pocket. Pulling them out, he stuffed one inside the other and then began shoving all their clothes in the bag until it bulged so he exerted some effort to pull the drawstring and close it.

"Pard had a room off his dining room where his security team monitored the ground surrounding the mansion," he continued.

"Is it true how he made his money?" she asked, wanting to ask so much more, pick his brain and learn everything he knew about her nemesis. Mainly though, Maurie ached walking in his footsteps, retracing Tore's past and learning how he came to know so much about Pard. She wanted to know why he possessed this information but didn't go to the effort to take Pard out. And she prayed the answer was one she could live with. "Is it true he accessed bank accounts from leopards he held captive, robbing them financially as well as stealing their pride and freedom?"

"He's as much of a monster as you believe him to be," Tore told her, standing before her naked with his cock harder than steel, throbbing between them and fueling the energy already striking like electrical shocks igniting the air and making the small hair on her arms stand on end. "If he's not a ghost rotting in hell right now, he will be by the end of the night."

"Tore," she whispered, sucking in the cold night air and willing it to soothe the feverish need inside her. "If he is still alive, I want to kill him."

She saw him hesitate, saw roped muscle twitch under his tanned flesh and smelled how much he wanted to rip the asshole's throat out.

"If you knew all of this about Pard, why didn't you kill him sooner?" She had to ask, had to know why when she clearly saw his blood lust right now.

"I've dreamed of dismembering him, my wildcat," he growled, and stroked the side of her face with his fingers, his scent so rich, so damn strong it would make her drunk the more she breathed him into her lungs. He gazed into her eyes and his lashes hooded his dark green orbs. "There were many leopards who needed my help, and I'm a hunter before I'm a murderer, no matter how justified the kill would be."

She understood. He couldn't have offered her a better answer. Allowing herself to drown in how good he smelled, how his touch made her flesh sizzle or how his gorgeous body, naked and inches from hers, was making her fucking drool would pull her away from the reason they were here. Now was the time to commit murder, or confirm someone else had.

As she watched Tore's eyes begin to flicker with gold, electricity sparked up her spine. The jolts sent charges of fire burning through her legs, her arms until the heat made her want to howl.

Tore let his fingers slide from her face and the muscles in his chest and arms bulged under flesh that darkened and thickened. He pulled on the drawstring of the bag holding their clothes and then made quick work of tying it around his neck. The dark burnt-orange streaks in his hair were the same color as his coat. As his flesh turned to a thick hide, black rosettes appeared over his body. Tore was a gorgeous man and just as incredibly sexy as a leopard. Even when his face altered, contorted from human to leopard, she was losing herself in the glow in his eyes. A glow she knew didn't come from the gold flecks that took over his dark green pupils but radiated from a source deeper inside him—that same source that was beginning to claim her heart.

Her senses grew sharper, more in tune with her world around her. Every blade of grass and branches in trees that moved with the night breeze grabbed her attention. Small rodents, suddenly shocked when the smell of two humans changed to that of incredibly dangerous leopards, scampered for safety. Their tiny paws pattered over the ground. An owl hooted, its distant warning something she wouldn't have heard with her human ears. But she heard it now, as did Tore.

Maurie fell to all fours, standing tall and almost coming to Tore's shoulder when he landed on all four paws next to her. The danger she didn't smell a moment before now

damn near suffocated her. Tore nipped her shoulder, her only warning before he collapsed on top of her, forcing her to the ground and landing on top of her.

His low growl rumbled through her but she couldn't answer from his weight crushing her. It was a warning. All wasn't as it appeared a minute before. Maurie couldn't assess the danger though with the brute damn near suffocating her. She could smell the predatory protector guarding what was his and understood in their fur how much simpler things were than in their skin. Maurie was his, claimed again and again every time they made love. Whatever closed in on them, Tore would rip to shreds and ask questions later in order to protect her.

Maurie hissed, curling her lip and turning her head as far as she could until she found flesh and then bit him. They needed to determine what seethed around them and not lie in this fucking gully with him on top of her playing macho he-male. She suspected Tore believed he hurt her and that was why she bit him because he moved, his actions fluid and limber, not making a sound as he slowly straightened to his paws but did a bit too good of a job standing over her and making it hard to move. Regardless of his thoughts, she slinked to the side on her gut until she could stand. As if he had a right to get pissed at her for straightening. Upright on all fours, she sure as hell didn't stand out as much as he did. He was almost twice her size.

Tore circled around her but Maurie took advantage of him not smothering her and sniffed the air then searched as far as she could see over the dark terrain on either side of the highway. Once again she heard the warning of an owl, far away and barely detectable but nonetheless definitely an alarming cry for whoever's attention they sought out to pay heed.

That's when she saw it, against the horizon. The dark cloud, inky black against the almost black sky. It rose, spreading, while barely visible, hugging the horizon, flames danced and stretched. Something was burning. It was far away, but whatever it was, it was pretty good-sized.

Chapter Seventeen

Fucking hell! This was worse than any nightmare.

Tore raced over the land, acutely aware of Maurie hauling ass next to him. There were owls nearby—a lot of them. Hopefully someone saw something and he'd get the facts later. Right now he knew they ran into a serious clusterfuck.

Humans would be pouring over the scene before the fire was out. Tore didn't know if anyone was in Pard's mansion or not. Nor did he have any idea who would have set the fire. Not that there weren't thousands and thousands of suspects. But if they didn't get there quickly, he doubted he'd get his answers.

The air grew hotter and hotter. It was dark as could be and still the air became thicker with smoke. The smells were putrid and his gut churned as the acidic and metallic aromas tortured him along with anxiety and determination to figure out a way to bring sanity to an absolutely insane situation.

Damn him! He shouldn't have pushed Maurie into understanding so much of him prior to bringing her here. They should have sniffed the place out in the daylight, learned immediately who was here. But he'd been an idiot, thinking it mattered that Maurie accepted how they would run together. There would have been time for that later. He didn't have time now to sniff the truth out of a ridiculous inferno.

Maurie slowed alongside him at the top of the hill, her tail swatting around her cute ass while she shifted her attention from him to the burning skeleton of what once was an incredible mansion. As they stood there, the smoke rolling toward them in billowy waves, it became harder to see, to smell anything other than a melting pot of aromas, or to pick out sounds besides the crackling and crashing of the huge structure.

He turned quickly, a growl tearing from his throat before he could stop it. Maurie bit him again, pushing into him as her ears perked up and her golden eyes glowed, reflecting the fire. There wasn't any way she smelled the other leopards, but she'd seen them. Tore followed her gaze to the side of the mansion and spotted the figures, gray shadows bounding through the smoke.

It wouldn't have mattered if he roared at Maurie, the odds of anyone hearing them were slim. Obviously sight was their only reliable sense, which is why he didn't haul ass around the fire. He kept low to the ground, as did Maurie. There were three leopards, running as if their life depended on it, which quite possibly it did.

Tore's heart thumped against his ribs and his breathing grew labored. They were getting closer to the fire and the leopards hauling ass were racing closer to them. The chances of knowing who they were was slim, but he might get lucky. He slowed then came to a quick halt. Maurie ran into his back end.

She hissed and growled but left it at that when the ground shook. What once was an incredible mansion was now destroyed, along with any evidence confirming the monster Leo Pard and all his atrocities. Not that leopards needed evidence to kill him. Although if the evidence confirming his death once existed, it burned along with his home.

It was almost impossible to see. Sirens wailed behind them and he turned to see flashing red and white lights blurring through the gray haze. Their piercing sound stabbed through his head worse than an ice pick. Fucking nightmare would get worse tonight before it got better. Two fire trucks and a couple sheriffs' cars were already off the highway and managing the narrow road leading to Pard's mansion, or what was left of it.

Over a year ago, when he was last here, humans weren't really clear on what Pard was all about. But then, hell, most of his kind weren't either. Today Tore didn't know how much they'd taken the effort to learn. The mansion blazed in its glory, making it a hard sight to miss. Even if every human in Fountain Hills and surrounding towns like Scottsdale and a few of the others plotted to rid the area of leopards, they couldn't ignore the magnitude of the fire lighting up their night sky. Tore thought the trucks took their time driving the narrow road to Pard's, but maybe it was his imagination.

Maurie roared, her body tensing while she bared her long, sharp white teeth. Tore flung around, eager to release adrenaline pumping ruthlessly inside him and protect his female from whatever she growled at. The leopards running from the mansion hadn't seen Tore and Laurie and now skidded to a stop, their claws raking the ground and sending dirt flying into the thick, smoky air.

Tore stared into pale eyes so clear he should have been able to see their soul. Except there was no soul, just fiery outrage. He blinked, stunned, convinced he just saw Pard, except she was a female. She damn near ran into them in the smoke, lunged to the side and disappeared with the others who followed her.

* * * * *

Tore hated waiting three days to check out the Pard mansion. He smelled Laurie's frustration every time she talked to Laird Bradford on the phone. There wasn't any way she'd get her confirmation of Pard being dead. With humans combing over the remains of the mansion, when they finally were able to get close enough to the ruins, all original scents were too tampered with to draw any conclusions.

"There's a werewolf in city hall." Laurie closed her phone as she walked across the still-charred ground. Her expression and scent contrasted against the destroyed setting. "Their pack is sympathetic to our situation and he's willing to fax copies of the police and emergency service reports to me so we can see what they found during their initial sweep of the place."

Tore watched her face glow with enthusiasm and understood how trying it had been for her cooped up in that fucking motel room while fighting to sniff out the truth

of what happened here. From what they'd heard on the local news, there were no clues as to why the mansion burned to the ground. Human reporters announced no one died, which Tore believed. If they'd found any remains, they would have announced it but then grown very quiet if an autopsy were done. Humans would have to search carefully for the differences in a corpse. The other species around here were a bit more compassionate. Tore hated thinking he'd have to beat the crap out of any of them if they sniffed a bit too close to Maurie while offering that compassion.

Maurie's grin turned mischievous, as if she smelled jealousy on him, which she damn well did not, and considered giving him shit about it.

"We need to be careful in here," he informed her when she reached his side and the two of them stepped gingerly over what once was a very large front porch. He had a few connections too, although they were on the road crew, assigned to watch the property and keep looters out. Tore and Maurie were forced to wait for all official parties to be done with the property before they'd been allowed to walk through the remains. "Honestly, I can't smell anything that will help us in here."

Maurie didn't have a signal in the remains and held back at the car they'd rented while in Fountain Hills. Tore already gave the place a quick walk-through. There wasn't shit anywhere that would help them confirm or deny Pard's death.

"This was a large living room." Tore pointed to where doorways and halls once were as he remembered his time staying in this house over a year ago. There was nothing left to the place—nothing. "Right there a wide staircase led to a long hallway. I don't remember but I'd say there were at least ten bedrooms up there."

"Seems the place was designed from the beginning to be more of a boarding house than someone's home." Maurie stared at where stairs once led to the second floor.

"Leo Pard had his plan well thought out before he even began sniffing out leopards with visions." Tore watched the sun shine against Maurie's long blonde hair while her expression remained pensive. The tight sweater she wore hugged her slender figure and showed off her full, round breasts. It was sleeveless and he could almost see the bite mark he'd left on her shoulder while fucking her the night before. Already he ached to be inside her again. If he could help it, a minute wouldn't go by for the rest of her life where she wouldn't carry his scent wrapped around her like a shroud. "There are so many answers we still don't have, one I hope to learn someday is how he learned the leopards who were on that list had visions."

"You saw the list?" Her eyes glowed as they always did when she enjoyed the topic of conversation.

"I still have a copy."

Her eyes grew wide and she grinned. "I'd love to see it."

"Maybe sometime."

"That trust thing," she grunted, and turned from him, walking through a doorway still intact, and then disappeared around a corner leading to a back hallway.

He would give it to her, she never missed a beat. Maurie sniffed the truth better than she would admit to most. Tore saw her easily now. Her different aromas streamed around her based on her mood. She didn't carry a scent he didn't love breathing deep into his system.

"You'll have to remind me. I have it on a flash drive back at my cabin."

Maurie stood toward the end of the hall, staring at the remains of a room. The foundation was intact and the remains of a large throw carpet covered the floor, once large windows offered views of the side and back gardens surrounding the mansion. Tore remembered sitting at a long dining room table, which was no longer in the private dining room, with several other hunters and Leo Pard. It had been one of the most difficult meals he'd ever stomached, and hadn't been able to enjoy perfectly cooked steaks for the insane psycho babble of Pard while he preached to the female who later mated with Josh Bard.

Unwilling to reminisce over a period of his life that was done and now burnt, he blinked, forcing the unpleasant memory to go away, and stared at Maurie. She continued looking through the doorway, or where the doorway once was. Her eyes were large, not blinking, and he picked up on the slightest spicy aroma drifting around her.

"My little wildcat," he said, keeping his tone calm as he suspected she didn't see what he saw in front of her.

Her gaze was locked on something that wasn't there. As he watched, her breathing grew sharper while she flattened her lips into a thin line. He knew that look. Whatever she saw had her mad as hell.

"Wildcat," he whispered, touching her shoulder. Her skin was cold in spite of the warm winter sun glaring down on them.

Maurie snapped her head his direction, breathing hard but catching her breath and recovering quickly from what she just saw. "That's fine," she said, her tone tight while the spiciness around her began to fade.

Tore seriously doubted she knew what it was she just said was fine. He moved in behind her and wrapped his arms around her waist. "Really? I'm surprised but pleased. Good thing it's fine with you, wildcat." He scraped her neck with her teeth and cupped her breasts, finding her eager, hard nipples and pinching them with his fingers and thumbs.

Maurie's breath caught in her throat and she hissed. "What are you talking about?"

"You don't know? Where was your mind a moment ago, little cat?"

She held her breath while considering her answer, which helped him smell the truth even more. "You won't tell me," he grumbled, hating how she would fuck him until he couldn't see straight, run with him in her fur and her skin but not confide in him.

Maurie pushed away from him, shoving angrily when he tried holding her. "Now you want to know my thoughts every minute of the day too?"

Tore turned, storming out of the room, refusing to enter into a fight that was only instigated to cover a truth she didn't trust him enough to share with him. Wood cracked behind him. He moved around a partial wall still standing and noticed his blonde wildcat running in her flesh away from the mansion.

"Damn it," he growled, hurrying out of the dilapidated burnt structure and chasing after her.

She couldn't outrun him in her human form any better than she could as a leopard. At the first group of trees she slowed, jumping over a rock and then winding around more of them until she pulled a half circle and stared at him warily. Tore was sucked in by those gorgeous olive green eyes, how she panted and her breasts pressed against her sleeveless sweater, and how her hair flew wildly around her, soft and smooth-looking and so fucking sexy.

"Would you run from me rather than confide the truth in me?" he growled, moving in on her slowly. "I'm sick of it, wildcat. You're mine. End of story. You're not going to howl for anyone else, or sniff out anyone else. You're with me."

"It sure as hell isn't the end of the story if I have to ask permission to fucking run from the house to the trees," she snapped, waving her hand to indicate the distance they'd run. "You may want me, but you will never fucking own me. Is that clear?"

"I might want you, but will never have you if I don't have your trust. Why did you run here and stop? What did you see back there?"

"What would I have seen but the same thing you saw," she argued, narrowing her gaze on him and searching his face.

Tore glared back, the silence between them growing. She hesitated but he watched her lip her lips, considering sharing what she saw. And she challenged him. He didn't miss her implication when she asked what else would she have seen than what he saw.

Tore sighed, seeing clearly how it had to be. Trust required going out on a narrow limb, one so capable of snapping if it wasn't trotted on properly.

"Fine." He sliced his hand through the air. "From this point on, our trust for each other will never falter. We will confide in each other completely."

"Why would we do that?"

"Because that is how mated leopards act. They honor and trust each other, damn it."

"Mated?" she asked, her voice faltering as if uttering the one word was more than she could handle.

"Mated." He walked toward her and Maurie jumped backward.

Tore leapt over the rocks between them. There were smaller ones lodged between larger rocks and his foot slid from one to the other. A mini-avalanche started, taking him down while sharp-edged rocks slid around him.

"Tore!" Maurie screamed, charging toward him and grabbing him before he fell farther. "Crap. I didn't see it correctly," she complained, wrapping her arms under his and holding him.

"What did you just say?" Tore picked himself up, feeling the stickiness on his cheek and knew he'd cut himself falling.

He'd been an idiot, a klutz, obviously not paying attention to something as simple as a group of rocks and had wiped out on his ass. Maurie looked pale, but the way she shook as she held him before he stabilized himself didn't make sense.

Instead of answering, she pointed.

Tore stepped away from the rocks, holding her in his arms and looking in the direction she pointed.

"Fucking hell," he growled, staring at the large hole under the rocks that he damn near slid into. "It was a god-damn trap."

"I'm sorry. I didn't know it was here." She searched the area but didn't try leaving his embrace.

"What the hell are you talking about? How would you know what was here? We haven't been back here before." But then he understood why she was so pale, why she hesitated. "Tell me exactly what you saw," he said slowly, believing now the vision she witnessed inside showed her what just happened. "Talking about visions right after they happen is best so you have it fresh in your head."

"Why do you think?"

"Enough," he growled.

Tore grabbed her arms, holding her in place in front of him and waited until she lifted her focus to his. Maurie searched his face, studying the cut he felt pulsing from his cheekbone to his jaw.

"If trust is earned, then I'm about to earn it," he said, fighting to soften his voice and then made himself loosen his grip on her arms. "I told you I have the list of the first twenty names of leopards Pard wanted who had visions."

"Yeah," she said, her long thick lashes hooding her gaze.

"I'm number two on that list."

She stared at him, not blinking, and then backed out of his reach, hugging herself while turning her back to him. "So you're a hunter who has visions."

"Yes." He watched her profile, remained quiet while she sobered, staring at the ground and letting his admission sink in. "Wildcat, tell me what you saw."

She sucked in a long, deep breath and faced him, squaring off while brushing her hair behind her shoulder. "I saw them bury his remains after the fire."

"Bury his remains? Who?"

Maurie nodded to the rocks behind Tore. "You're right. I had a vision. When I saw the trees out here they were clumped together like in my—" She cut off without finishing. "I've never talked to anyone about this before other than my littermates."

"And you're scared it will bring you harm talking about it to me now?"

"Of course not. I'm just not accustomed to it."

His little wildcat wouldn't admit being afraid of anything, yet another quality he loved about her. He moved closer and petted the side of her hair, its soft, silky texture reminding him how it felt stroking his bare chest when she rode him during sex.

"What happened in your vision?"

She swallowed and he understood it took a moment to learn how to share visions with someone else. Maybe someday he'd tell her she would be his first. No one knew he saw the future, which was why he would also learn, even if the knowledge came from burnt ashes, how his name came to be on that fucking list.

"I saw the female who was in your cabin." She dropped her gaze to somewhere on his chest. "She piled rocks on top of each other and was talking to herself. At first I thought she was talking to me but then realized it was one of those visions I wasn't a part of but simply an observer."

"What did she say?" Tore slipped his arm around her waist, holding her against him and stared at the pile of rocks. There was a pit dug out underneath them he hadn't seen when he first leapt over them.

"She said, 'You're lucky to get this much and it serves you right to burn in flames like this.'" Maurie sucked in a breath, staring at the rocks. "I don't know when she was here, but these are the rocks. I know they are."

"I believe you."

"I remember she also said, 'Is it poetic justice that I'm burying the ashes of a sire who never claimed me?'"

Maurie frowned at the rocks. Tore pulled her closer, tucking her head under his chin while surveying their surroundings. Jin Rose performed the death ceremony without an audience, giving whoever she buried a dishonorable death. Maybe there was more poetic justice here than the female admitted.

"You know this really sucks. My chance to show VC I'm who they need doing their runs and Leo Pard's home burns to the ground. What am I supposed to do now?" she complained.

"We're in this together, my wildcat."

"I know."

"And when this is over, we're still together." He gripped her chin, making her look at him.

Maurie touched the cut on his cheek, her expression pinched with concern as she ran her finger along the edge of his wound.

"Don't worry about me." He told her before she could display the motherly instincts he saw rising in her. "It's nothing compared to other injuries I've endured and this one was worth getting to know you're safe. Swear to me you'll never run without me again."

"I promise. But..."

"No," he whispered, touching his finger to her lips. "We'll take care of VC."

"How are we going to do that?" she asked, sounding disbelieving as her scent turned richer, calling out to him and hardening every inch of him with an urgent need to satisfy her stronger than any he'd felt before.

"You were given that vision for a reason, my wildcat." He dragged his fingers through her hair, tangling them and forcing her head back. "You tell your VC male that Leo Pard is dead."

Maurie glanced past him at the pile of rocks. "I really wanted to kill him," she said, her voice soft and deep with a longing hunger he could hear and smell. "Every time we helped a litter start a new life and saw the haunted look in their eyes, I vowed to destroy him one day."

"I know the feeling." Tore pulled her into his arms, staring at the rocks and then once again glancing around them. He didn't know when Maurie's vision took place but he didn't smell anyone else around them.

Interesting though, Jin Rose was always an odd leopard, mysterious in more ways than any female he'd known, and elusive. The way she hid her scent, wore disguises. If she were in fact Leo Pard's daughter, it made sense. But something else was true as well. He remembered how pale Pard's eyes were. Jin's eyes were just as washed out. If she and Pard were in fact white leopards, he wasn't sure if wishing her luck would help. The rare breed, shunned by most because of their unstable nature, would explain a lot but also bring up more questions. Questions he wouldn't worry about today.

"We've got a long journey home. Better get started," he told Maurie, and guided her back to their rental car.

* * * * *

A new blizzard released its wrath on Kenora three days later. Tore wasn't thrilled about Maurie returning to her litter, but he hadn't officially requested mating with her. Worse yet, Race was the head of her litter as the only male. Tradition stated Tore ask Race for Maurie. Talk about swallowing his pride and enduring Race smirking at him when he approached him about having Maurie.

He paced his cabin, hearing the wind wale outside. When someone pounded on the door, he realized how badly he was lost in thought. "What are you doing here?" he demanded when Race stomped his feet and hurried inside out of the cold.

"Damn fucking females," Race grunted, moving so Tore could close the door.

Race moved to the fire, holding his hands out and then turned, allowing his backside to warm while studying Tore.

"I'll have you know I'm here under protest." He blew into his hands. "And that I couldn't run here in my fur. Fucking traditions can go to hell if you ask me."

Tore watched him warily, immediately suspicious as to why he was here. He could guess it might have something to do with a spitfire, dominating wildcat though.

Race straightened, his expression turning sober. "Okay. I'm here. Go ahead."

Tore turned to the kitchen but then immediately spun around and paced back to Race. The male fucking stood there, serious as a heart attack, and didn't make a sound or change his expression. He wasn't going to make this easy for Tore.

"God damn it," Tore hissed.

Race didn't blink an eye.

"Well hell," Tore growled, raking his hair with his fingers and pacing toward the kitchen. When he faced Race again, his friend of so many years continued standing, his back to the fire, and stared straight ahead without saying a word. Tore cleared his throat, deciding to put both of them out of their misery quickly. "I want Maurie to be my mate."

"Done." Race exhaled noticeably, and the smirk that so often graced his expression returned. "You can have her," he added.

Tore straightened, deciding the first thing he'd do is show her litter she wasn't the bad female they all believed her to be.

Race obviously didn't want to hear the lecture. He headed toward the door, but before turning the handle, looked over at Tore. "I'll send her in now. Oh, and congratulations, man."

"She was waiting outside?" Tore roared, suddenly too aware of the mean winds rattling his window panes.

"All of them are in the car." Race gripped the door handle. "Those females cornered me and ordered me over here. They decided they would wait in the car until you asked for her. I'll send Maurie in now. But be ready, I think the three of them are already planning a mating party."

Tore groaned and then scowled when Race laughed. "Welcome to the Sheridan litter, my friend."

The door opened and a bitter wind blew in snow on Tore's floor as Race stepped backward and Maurie pushed her way around him.

"Is everything taken care of?" she demanded, her hair covered with snow and her cheeks rosy red but her expression determined.

"Did as you said. It's done." Already Race was heading out the door.

"Good." She closed the door behind Race and faced Tore. "I have to do everything, don't I? Is that going to be a habit with us?"

"You forced Race over here because you thought I wouldn't ask to mate with you?" Tore growled.

Maurie didn't budge but put her hands on her waist and gave him an assessing look. "You weren't doing it and it needed done," she said simply.

It would take years to train this female, he realized with a groan. "If something needs done, I'll do it," he told her, knowing right then she would never know how he paced his cabin, procrastinating and fighting for courage to approach Race.

"You're right. You will." She walked into him, wrapping her arms around his neck and leaning against him. "I'll see to it."

Tore lifted her off the ground, feeling her crush against him as her long blonde hair tortured his flesh. "You're not going to tell me what to do for the rest of my life."

"You think?" She leaned her head against his arm, her olive green eyes glowing as a slow, satisfied smile crossed her face.

"I know you aren't and if you try, you're going to spend a lot of time tied to our bed." He tossed her on his bed, and came down on her before she could squirm out of the way.

Her happiness made his bedroom smell clean and fresh, better than it ever smelled before. He hated admitting how sparring with her turned him on, but at least he was satisfied in knowing it got her just as hot.

"Keep it up with those threats and you might wake up one morning and find yourself tied to the bed." She grinned wickedly and then bit his chin when he tried lowering his face to hers for a kiss.

"Wildcat, you're going to start this mating off in serious trouble," he growled, fighting not to grin back at her.

"And what will you do to me if I'm in trouble?" She raked her claws over his shoulders, fueling his fire while her face glowed with anticipation.

He loved the smell of her arousal as much as he loved it when she smelled happy. Lifting himself off her enough to grab her sweater, he shoved it over her breasts. Maurie moved quickly, grabbing his shirt at the collar and ripping it, yanking the tear until his entire chest was exposed. She purred delightfully as she dragged her fingers down his front.

"Why you little..." he growled, moving to his knees and surveying his destroyed shirt.

Maurie made quick work of yanking her sweater off and throwing it to the ground. Her bra went next. Then matching his pose, kneeling before him, she undid her jeans.

"Take your clothes off, leopard, before I use them to tie you to the bed."

He couldn't stop from laughing, realizing she tore his shirt to distract him so she could get out of her clothes before he tried tying her to his bed with them. He would remember, for future reference, the element of surprise was a very effective tool with his wildcat.

Tore stood, removing his clothing, and then crawled onto the bed again, staring at her flushed expression when they were both naked.

"Wildcat, you honor me being my mate," he told her seriously. They would lock horns, fight more than most, and he didn't doubt for a moment he would love every minute of it.

Her grin faded, her lips puckering into an adorable pout. "You're the one honoring me. I honestly worried there wasn't a mate out there for me. Not many males can handle how controlling I am."

Tore grabbed her legs, spreading them, and then sunk deep into her heat, unable to wait another moment without having her wrapped around his cock.

"I can handle you, wildcat," he whispered, and nipped her lower lip.

Maurie howled, arching into him and sucking him deeper into her heat. "Tore!" she screamed. "God! I love you!"

His heart swelled and the pain spreading through his body never felt better. He was so hard, so tight and desperate to have all she could give him and anxious to let her take everything he had, he could barely breathe.

Riding her hard, fast and with an energy so hot it tore him apart, he spilled everything deep inside her, coming with a roar as she pumped his come from him. Then still hard as a rock, he was finally able to think straight and moved slower, loving how her muscles constricted around his shaft as he made love to her again.

"I love you, wildcat."

"You better," she told him, grinning and then grabbing his head. She pulled him to her, growling as she kissed him.

About the Author

All my life, I've wondered at how people fall into the routines of life. The paths we travel seemed to be well-trodden by society. We go to school, fall in love, find a line of work (and hope and pray it is one we like), have children and do our best to mold them into good people who will travel the same path. This is the path so commonly referred to as the "real world".

The characters in my books are destined to stray down a different path other than the one society suggests. Each story leads the reader into a world altered slightly from the one they know. For me, this is what good fiction is about, an opportunity to escape from the daily grind and wander down someone else's path.

Lorie O'Clare lives in Kansas with her three sons.

Lorie welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at www.ellorascave.com.

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