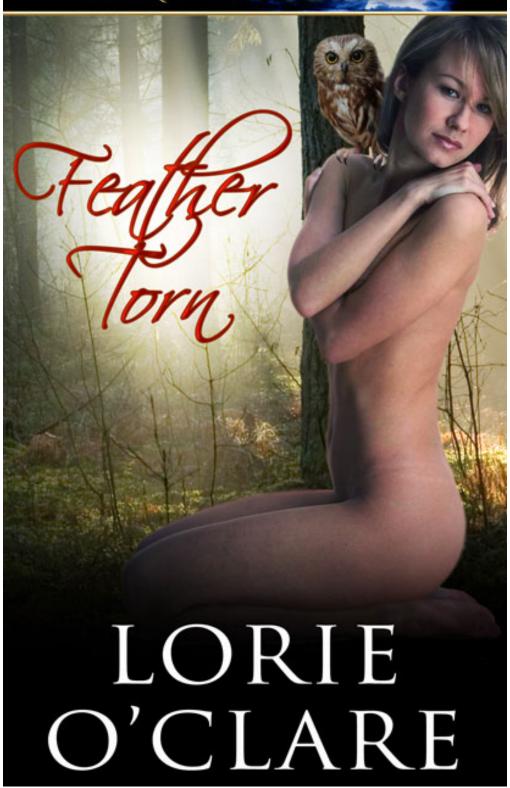
Ellora's Cave TWILIGHT



Feather Torn

Lorie O'Clare

Raptors Revealed, Book Four

Rock Halk has kept his secret long enough. Owls won't humiliate themselves by showing emotions, but some feelings are too hard to keep buried. Especially when it's need—hard, hot and carnal—burning in his veins whether he walks as a man or flies as an owl. His desire for Darla Sheridan has grown so strong he doesn't care who knows or who might smell her beautiful, enticing scent on him after he makes passionate love to her.

There is one problem. Darla doesn't view it as so much of a problem, more like a catastrophe. She's fallen in love with Rock. Her feelings have grown too strong to keep inside. But her family won't allow it. No matter how much they think of Rock—and they do think highly of him. Rock comes from the most prominent family of owls in Banff. He walks and flies with honor. Darla's family is good friends with him. But Darla is a leopard and Rock is an owl. Leopards and owls don't mate.

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Feather Torn

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Chapter One

Rock Halk flew underneath the branches, picking up speed and flying dangerously close to the ground. What he'd seen made no sense. They'd run too close for comfort. Rock had told himself multiple times hiding wasn't honorable. There was a difference between hiding and seeking out privacy. Nonetheless, he forced himself forward, determined to make sense of what he'd seen and what had brought them to this remote corner of the mountain. His feathers were flat against his body, the smell of danger, of discovering something illogical, increased the tension spurring him on.

Nothing pissed Rock off more than someone interrupting his plans. Rock flew the way he wanted to fly. He was honorable, honest, and he wasn't doing a damn thing wrong. What he saw was wrong though, very wrong, and couldn't be ignored.

He wouldn't tolerate anyone, regardless of species, violating a simple code they all lived by.

He'd be damned if he explained to anyone why he was on this side of the mountain though. It wasn't a crime to fly where he wanted. The fact remained he was here. He saw the leopards push the black leopard, or possibly a jaguar, off the cliff. Rock had flown to the jagged rocks below after the leopards ran off but knew the jaguar was dead before getting close. The creature had returned to his human shape.

Rock wasn't sure how much longer he could fly like this. Not zigzagging between trees, this pattern was simple enough a fledgling could do it. He wasn't sure he wanted to continue flying so privately, sharing his personal life with no one, and seeking out remote locations in the mountains so he could spend time with his female. But that was where he'd been, and he'd left Darla when he flew after the leopards. Rock would know who just committed murder. Killing anyone was outlawed unless done with consent of the entire parliament. Rock didn't know if specific laws or traditions applied to leopards. They were a much more violent species than owls. Forcing a living creature off the side of a cliff so they fell to their death smelled suspicious as hell to him.

The grove of tall, narrow evergreens ended and Rock rose into the air, leaning at an angle as he picked up the current, which lifted him higher into the air. More than once Darla had told him she envied his ability to fly. She would leap from rocks, stretching her limber, sexy body, and glide through the air to the next rock. That was as close as she came to leaving the ground. Rock would lift her into the air if he could, but fate had played a delightful joke on both of them, or so Darla mentioned more than once. He was an owl. Darla was a leopard. That would never change.

Rock trailed the leopards as they ran across the mountain even as his thoughts drifted back to Darla. Lately, she was on his mind more than anything else. When Rock and Darla first started spending time together, the last thing he expected was to find her so fascinating. At first they had spent most of their time in their flesh, discussing politics between their two species. Darla followed most of the same beliefs Rock and his nest did. She had all the respect in the world for every race and species on earth. The only way to truly judge another creature was to get to know them. There were good and bad in every species.

Politics weren't the only common interest he and Darla shared. But as many things in common they had, there were also distinct differences between them as well. Leopards showed their emotions, growling and hissing just to get someone's attention. Such a display would be total humiliation for an owl.

He glanced down, having flown high enough most creatures on the ground would have a hard time seeing him. His vision was incredibly powerful in his feathers. It wasn't hard keeping an eye on the leopards as they tore across the rocky meadow stretching around part of the side of the mountain. They were running at high speed, anxious as hell to get wherever they were going.

When the meadow ended, they jumped dangerously over the rocks, still moving incredibly fast, even for leopards. They were headed back toward the part of the mountain where most of the leopard litters had their dens. Rock was curious which den they would go to. He didn't know the names of each litter on the mountain. But he would return to Darla, describe the location, and she would probably know. If there were rogue leopards on the mountain, taking life into their own paws, it was a matter for leopards and owls to be aware of.

For a moment, as the leopards continued bounding over jagged rocks and cliffs, racing at a dangerous pace, Rock thought they might be headed to the next mountain. Cariboo lunewulf lived on that mountain. For the most part, all species lived in peace, respecting each other's territory. There were times, however, when one of the species needed to be reminded of where they could run and hunt, and where they couldn't. It would be very interesting if the leopards headed to one of the werewolf packs after having killed a jaguar.

At the last minute the leopards swerved, remaining on their mountain and slowing only when they came in smelling distance of other litters. Rock remained above the trees, watching the leopards stay together as they ran around trees and large boulders. They finally slowed and stopped at a rough-looking den buried on the side of the mountain. A stream of smoke curled and twisted as it rose out of a chimney. The cabin wasn't large and little effort had been put into it other than to ensure it protected them from the elements. The wood cabin wasn't painted as many dens were, creating individuality for their litter. No flowers grew around the den. It almost appeared to be part of the rough terrain surrounding it. Rock landed on a branch not too far above the leopards and watched the males take on their human forms.

"This will not be discussed from this point forward." A large male covered in sweat stared at the others who were all in different stages of the change as he unrolled jeans and pulled them on. "Return to your litters and continue with your day. And good hunting to all of you."

All five of them were dressing now. Rock didn't know a lot about jaguars and found it interesting five leopards decided to run one jaguar off a cliff. Not to mention, where did one rogue jaguar come from? He didn't smell anger on any of them. If anything the air smelled clean, fresh, as if all of them viewed the act they'd just committed as incredibly satisfying.

"Do you think this will take care of it?" The male who asked was possibly the youngest. He spoke softly, sniffing the air as he did.

Rock didn't have any problem hearing all of them. They could whisper and he'd still hear. Owls had better hearing than anyone in their feathers. If he paid attention he could hear what the female leopard inside the cabin said to her cubs. Rock's attention was on all the males though, putting their human appearance to memory and watching their actions as well as hearing their words.

"It better," the first male growled.

"It will," a third male offered. All of them had blond hair with streaks of red. Most leopards looked similar as humans, but it wasn't something Rock would voice out loud. He imagined leopards might say the same of owls. "When he doesn't return to his colony, they'll know leopards aren't a species to mess with. And they claim jaguars are deadly."

The group of them chuckled, now smelling proud of themselves.

"We know he won't be returning to his litter with whatever information he was trying to gather," the first male said. He also sniffed the air and glanced around them at the trees. "Head to your litters. I don't want to hide the stench of a lie if I have to explain to anyone what all of you were doing."

"We've done a good and honorable thing." It was another male who hadn't spoken yet.

All of them growled, although it sounded more like a soft rumble as they fought not to become a distraction. None of them ever bothered looking up but all continually glanced around them as one by one they parted ways and headed off in different directions toward their litters.

Rock took to flight after all the leopards were out of hearing range. He flew over the trees, watching two of the males until they parted ways and each soon arrived at their dens. He made a mental note of where these litters were located, using the first litter as a reference point. Then, gliding as he gained altitude, he turned around and headed back to Darla.

Rock soared along the side of the mountain, staying out of visual sight of any leopards by flying higher than necessary. In spite of most of them being relatively new to having owls as neighbors, most owls had discovered leopards seldom looked toward the sky. Rock wasn't going to risk it though. Something was going on and it would be easier to figure out what if those involved weren't aware they were being watched.

He returned to Darla, circling carefully as he searched the ground until he was certain no one was near his female. Emotions and feelings were harder to express in his feathers than they were in his skin. It wasn't until he landed near the rock where he'd left his clothes and the change began surging through him, that irritation also started twisting in his gut, turning quickly to anger.

Feathers shrunk and receded as the thickness of his skin smoothed, and softer, smooth flesh began tingling in the cold air. Where a moment ago the weather had been the least of his concerns, a hard shiver rushed over him as his legs took shape and he began growing. Suddenly, getting his clothes on was all that mattered. Sharp rocks hurt under his bare feet and he stepped to the side, not quite changed and hopping to avoid cutting his feet. He found a thick patch of moist, freezing grass and regained his balance as he reached his full height of just under six feet.

It was an amazing sensation, changing from owl to human, and human to owl. Rock had always found the experience uplifting, almost cleansing, even as far back as when he was a fledgling. His senses would dull as his less-powerful human half took form and his brain began trying to process and rationalize all he'd just witnessed. In his feathers, he gathered the facts and sorted them. They would be like a puzzle that simply needed assembled. But now as a human, he wanted explanations and understanding of each puzzle piece. There were advantages to living in both forms and he was proud of who he was, a complete creature and part of two honorable lifestyles, one in his feathers and one in his flesh.

Rock finished dressing as he searched the small clearing surrounded by steep boulders that created walls around him. Darla was nearby. Her scent was strong even though he didn't see her. Her clothes were no longer on the rock next to his.

"Darla?" he called out, glancing around as he sniffed the air and started toward the rocks.

Instead of answering, she popped up from behind a rock and grinned broadly at him. If an owl witnessed another owl with such an open display of happiness, it would be humiliating as hell. Showing emotions at all was beneath any respectable owl. Rock wasn't sure if Darla's strong leopard ways appealed to him or not. It had taken getting accustomed to when they first started meeting in Banff, the nearest town and run predominantly by Rock's parliament.

He leapt up the first two rocks then hoisted his body onto the third, swinging his legs around and joining Darla on the small, flat cliff, which wasn't noticeable from the ground.

"So, did you see what happened? That wasn't a black leopard, was it?" Darla had incredibly beautiful eyes. They were a bright green, as were most leopards in their human form, but Darla had gold flecks splattered through the green. Her eyes were compelling, provocative and full of curiosity as she searched his face. "They were running so fast you would have thought the mountain was on fire."

"I wasn't sure if he was a jaguar or not, at first," Rock began, sitting on the flat rock next to Darla and staring at the magnificent Canadian Rockies stretching out all around them. "But I'm pretty sure he was. The leopard males chased the jaguar up the

mountain. They were herding him. I noticed that. When the jaguar tried racing in a different direction, the leopards split up, keeping him heading up the mountain to a cliff. The jaguar didn't know it was there and that particular cliff drops off over half the length of the mountain. From that height, the jaguar raced off the cliff and fell to his death. I flew down to make sure and he was in his human form."

"Holy crap!" Her surprise and shock filled the air around them.

Rock had grown accustomed to her not giving a thought to her emotions cluttering up the air. "I followed the males back to their litters."

She grabbed long strands of her pale blonde hair and shoved them over her shoulder as she stared at him. The breeze wrapping around the strands continued blowing them in her face, and also blew her emotions until they were a mixture of aromas added to Darla's compelling and enticing scent.

"Where were their litters?" Her eyes grew larger as she puckered her lips and stared at Rock.

He glanced at her, searching her face for only a moment before returning his attention to the mountain range in front of him. "There were five males. All of them smelled mated. The oldest was probably close to forty years and the youngest was barely over twenty."

"Cliff Snipes just mated. He's twenty-one," she suggested.

Speculating wouldn't get them anywhere, but it was something Darla seemed fond of doing. When they'd first started spending time together, Rock hadn't been convinced he'd be able to fly around her too much. He was sure her blatant display of every emotion she experienced would grow too annoying after just a short time. The more they were together though, instead of finding her nature exasperating, he'd grown rather fond of it. Rock had learned, after months of flying while she ran underneath him, they both possessed the same emotions and feelings. Both of them simply reacted different, such as now.

"The males instructed each other to never discuss this again," he continued, watching her eyes as they searched his face while he spoke.

"To not discuss what again?" she whispered, although she could smell as easily as he could that there was no one around them.

Her straight pale hair framed her face. Darla would be considered beautiful by any male's standards, regardless of whether they ran or flew. Her stunning, incredibly distracting sex appeal caused fights all the time. Rock and his nest were on good terms with the mated couple Darla stayed with. Her litter had moved her out to the mountains when they decided there were no acceptable males in their territory for her to mate with. Without having ever flown to Kenora, where Darla had lived before coming here, Rock believed it to be true. There wasn't a male on this planet worthy of her.

"They believed the jaguar was here sniffing out the mountain and planned to return to his colony, letting them know what he found here."

"Interesting." There was a slight curve at the corner of her mouth.

Rock knew she mimicked him, having pointed out to him numerous times how the word *interesting* was just about the only word almost every owl uttered while following a conversation.

"It is," he agreed, nodding once. She might tease him about his ways, but he wouldn't do that to her. Leopards were incredibly emotional, which was their one downfall to an otherwise strong and powerful species. "Several of them assured the others, especially the youngest of the five, how what they'd done would take care of the matter, although there are still many unanswered questions."

"You're right." She tapped his chest with her finger, her excitement smelling as strong as her happiness. "Why do the jaguars want to know about our mountain?"

"And what were they planning to do here?"

"Maybe I should give the new Snipes litter a call, congratulate them on their recent mating," Darla mused. "It wouldn't be odd for me to do that. While I'm there, I could sniff out the truth. Cliff is too young and still too wild to hold out the truth on me."

When she straightened, her perky, round breasts pressed against her thin sweater. Her nipples poked through the material and Rock allowed his gaze to drop, admiring the view, before returning his attention to her face.

"It wouldn't be logical to put yourself in danger over this." Rock didn't know anything about the Snipes litter but imagined all five males would fight to protect their litters after committing murder. "I think I'll discuss this with my nest and we'll probably fly to your litter to discuss this with Kane Masters."

Darla lived with the Masters litter. Her grin grew and her eyes glowed as she stared at Rock. "You better let me know when you will be at our den," she ordered. "I want to be there and make sure I look good."

"Darla, you always look good."

She laughed and ran her fingers down the side of his face. "This is what I love about you, Rock. You say what you think. I never have to sniff the truth out of you. You willingly share it."

Her usage of the word "love" wasn't implying she wished to mate with him, but simply how fond she was of him. Nonetheless, everything in him hardened again as blood flowed to his cock. Lately, keeping his hands off Darla was proving harder and harder to do. No matter how much he repeated to himself that pushing their relationship to the next level was extremely illogical, his body didn't agree with him. Maybe they couldn't fuck in his feathers or her fur, but they sure as hell could as humans.

Chapter Two

Darla Sheridan ran her fingers through Rock's thick, wavy hair. It was growing more and more annoying how he would so easily make comments implying he thought of her as more than a friend. The aroma of any creature didn't lie. Granted, owls were one of the hardest creatures to sniff out. A few of them smelled stale, their emotions were so stuffed. Rock didn't though. His smell was always fresh and clean. There were times when she really believed he simply didn't feel anything.

She might just have to teach him how to feel. If that meant baring tooth and claw and attacking until he came to his senses, Darla wasn't opposed to doing it. Just once she'd love to see Rock display some raw, carnal emotion.

"What are you going to tell your nest?" she asked, watching as his silver blond hair sifted over her fingers.

"Everything I told you." His voice was deep. Rock was soft-spoken. His large gray eyes watched her, penetrating through her soul. "It would help to learn who these leopards are."

"I honestly don't know by your description," she said, shaking her head. When a strand of hair drifted over her shoulder, his gaze shot to it. "Possibly one might be Snipes, but I'm not sure. Maybe we could head that way and you could show me which litters."

It made her crazy not knowing what he was thinking. Did he wish she could fly over the litters with him? Did he ache to be able to race across the mountains on all fours? Something told her it wasn't the latter. Rock gave no indication of what thoughts crossed his mind at her suggestion. But he was very proud of who he was. Rock believed being in his feathers was almost sacred, and had told her on more than one occasion it was a cleansing experience, the time when he would feel completely logical and rational.

The world was an incredible place of contradictions and opposites that often were attracted to each other. Darla had immediately laughed at her comment and told Rock being in her fur was perfect because it allowed her complete freedom with the rawest of all emotions. Human hesitation and trepidation faded when she was on all fours. Both of them admitted changing gave them more freedom. But to each of them, freedom was a very different thing.

That fact often terrified her. Were she and Rock completely incompatible? And if so, what the hell was wrong with her?

"We don't have time to do that today."

"Why don't we have time now?" She didn't want him returning to his nest yet. When they were alone, Rock was more open with her, although he definitely had a long way to go. If she saw him around her litter, or his nest, he practically acted as if he barely knew her. "Do you have plans?"

Rock stood and stretched then reached for Darla's hand to pull her up. She was perfectly capable of standing on her own, and even jumping to the ground below, but Rock's chivalrous nature also appealed to her. He was so unlike any male she'd ever known, which intrigued and annoyed the hell out of her at the same time.

"Little cat," he said softly, brushing her hair away from her face with his knuckles. "It will be dark within the hour and I won't dishonor you by keeping you away from your litter this long."

Darla rolled her eyes in spite of the warm sensation knowing he cared so much about her honor. "I'm a grown female owl," she growled, intentionally stepping into him until she had to tilt her head back to see his face. "I can do whatever I want," she whispered.

She expected Rock to step back. He usually did if she tried getting close to him. There were times when she ached to stroke her body against his, to arch into him and purr until the heat between them grew intoxicating. She wanted to smell his lust, experience his raw, carnal desire.

Rock didn't budge but instead looked down at her with those large, almost-round eyes. Many thought owls were the only species who didn't quite look human when they were in human form. Rock's eyes were larger than any human's would ever be, and their roundness and impenetrable gray color gave his kind away easily. Darla was pretty sure she'd never seen a jaguar in human form, but she'd heard they held on to their catlike-shaped eyes even when they were human.

"Is there something you want?" he asked.

Darla blinked. His question sounded as if he didn't have a clue what that might be. But he'd asked the question and if she lied he would probably smell it before she did. Rock didn't miss a thing, which told her he wanted her to voice her desire to be with him.

"You know what I want, Rock," she whispered, not daring to blink as she searched his face for any sign of a reaction.

Which was a fool's mission. Rock was an owl through and through. Darla had run with owls for quite a while now. She'd moved to the mountain outside of Banff almost three years ago when Dover Down, an owl male who had been a good friend to Kane Masters, agreed to bring Darla to live with Kane and Jin when leopards she couldn't stand the smell of started sniffing around a bit too close, believing they had the right to mate with her. Her sisters Karma and Maurie both mated with hunters back in Kenora. Karma's mate Race, and Maurie's mate Tore both thought highly of Kane and believed Darla would be happy and safe living on the mountain. What would her sisters think now if they knew she spent all her time with an owl?

"Interesting."

"God damn it!" She slapped her hands against her thighs and turned from him. The small cliff allowed her no room to create distance, so she spun around again, slapping her hair out of the way as she glared at him. "There are times when I really, really hate that word."

"Why would you hate a word?"

"Because it's your way of voicing that you have a reaction to something without showing the emotions."

Rock didn't say anything, more than likely because he agreed with her and saw no problem with it. That just pissed her off more.

"You know what I meant and completely twisted the conversation," she pointed out, stabbing his chest with her finger. Again she turned, her instinct to pace off her anger kicking in full time. There wasn't enough space on the cliff for her to move more than a few feet from him before she had to turn and face him again. Her frustration mounted and she hoped he breathed in the pungent smell of it. At least that way he'd have emotions inside him, even if they were hers. "Tell me you don't want me," she dared. "State right now in the most logical way you can think to do it whether you want me or not."

"What?" He didn't look puzzled or even surprised by her demand. Rock stared at her, his intense gray eyes continuing to drill into her soul.

"You know exactly what I mean," she accused, her growl deepening as her anger grew. She fisted her hands at her hips. If she didn't she'd start pounding his chest in an effort to knock some sort of emotional reaction out of him. "If you don't want me, it would be logical to let me know, right? No honorable male anywhere, regardless of his species, would lead a female on if he weren't sexually interested in her at all. Since you are avoiding the topic, I'm making it crystal clear for you. And I know you'll speak the truth," she added, lowering her voice to a menacing whisper.

"Let's get off this cliff." He spoke as if she hadn't just challenged him.

"What?" Now she was confused.

Rock grabbed her hand and turned.

"Wait. No! We're going to have this out right here and now," she hissed, twisting and trying to get out of his grasp.

Rock didn't let her go but instead held her hand firmly as he walked to the edge of the ledge then jumped, keeping a hold of her. The cliff they were on was a good six feet or so higher than the small meadow below. Rock put some leg muscle into his jump, forcing them to leap forward far enough to miss the rocks they'd both climbed to get up there. He landed on his feet, still holding her hand and Darla landed easily next to him.

She hit the ground with a slight jar, but not in a way it would hurt. Nor did it knock her anger out of her. Rock still gripped her hand, but instead of the grassy area, which spread to the thick grove of trees and more of the mountain, Darla stared at the backside of a cabin. On top of the cliff, the sun had been behind Rock. Now she felt the sun on her back. Darla glanced around her, momentarily confused, then jumped and almost staggered backward when several young cubs came bounding toward her. One of them damn near knocked her down.

"I can send them inside," a female said, hurrying after the cubs with her arms spread. "I don't want them to bother you. Do you care that you'll never be able to have a litter?"

Suddenly the female was gone. There weren't cubs trying to knock her over. The sun once again hung low just over the trees ahead of them. Darla glanced around her, not seeing a cabin but instead the open area she and Rock often came to in order to spend time alone together.

Crap! She'd just had a vision. It sucked glimpsing into the future and not having a clue when in the future it was. Darla had experienced visions since she was a cub. No one knew about them. Well, no one other than her sisters and their mates. But that wasn't Darla's fault. Her sisters told their mates they were special. Darla hadn't been consulted on the matter. Sometimes her visions were strong, sometimes they lasted a lot longer than this one had, but always they left her confused, frustrated and wondering why she'd just glimpsed at that particular part of her future.

Rock released her and once again faced her, appearing just as relaxed as he had on the cliff. "Now you can pace and be angry without walking off the edge of the cliff."

"You're so fucking considerate," she murmured then did just as he suggested and began pacing. "We're friends, right, Rock?" she asked, trying for a different tactic. Now she paced off the vision as well as her anger. Rock didn't seem to notice, which for the time being was for the best. She could only imagine how his logic would wrap around something as unexplainable as her visions.

He didn't dodge that question. "Yes," he said easily.

"Very good friends, aren't we?" she continued, strolling to the edge of the grassy patch and the rock where they'd ditched their clothes earlier so he could fly above her while she ran.

"Yes," he said again, his tone not changing or faltering.

"Do you want to be more than friends?" she asked, facing him as she spoke and pinning him with her gaze.

"That wouldn't be a sensible move."

She didn't say anything. Her brain went blank as something as powerful as a dagger pierced her heart. She'd be damned if she'd cry or allow a fragment of sadness to seep from her pores. There was a difference between being logical and downright cruel. Darla wasn't born yesterday; she wasn't some air-brained twit. She knew what a male looked like when he wanted her, even if that male was an owl.

Not to mention, why would the female in her vision just now ask if Darla cared if she never had cubs? Darla didn't know if she was infertile or not. But she doubted it. No one in her litter was, nor was infertility a problem in previous generations of litters in her line. The only reason someone would ask about her not having cubs was if she ended up mated to Rock. The female was pleasant to Darla, as if they were friends, which also told Darla mating with Rock wouldn't shun them from their own kind.

"Why wouldn't it be sensible?" She'd listed the many reasons to herself for the past couple of months, ever since her feelings for Rock had started shifting. The vision she just had confirmed her thoughts, or emotions, were very sensible. Darla slowed her pace and moved in on Rock, knowing he wouldn't move even though there was more space around them to do so now.

"Is this a rhetorical question?"

If she weren't so frustrated and angry she might have actually laughed out loud. "Do you know how many times I want to tell you to cut the crap?" she asked, continuing with small steps as she once again moved into his space. There might be only one sure-fire way to learn how much he wanted or didn't want her.

"I'm sure," he muttered.

Darla thought she saw something akin to amusement when the corner of his mouth twitched. If she was crawling under his feathers, then that was just a damn shame. She would go nuts if she lay in her bed one more night, reliving every moment they spent together, which lately had become at least a couple hours every day. At this rate, her litter would grow suspicious. And although she told herself she wouldn't hedge around the truth with them, or anyone who confronted her, it would be a hell of a lot easier to back her decision to run with an owl if his scent was on her.

"And let me guess, my temper annoys you."

"You're actually very beautiful when your cheeks grow flushed and you start panting."

Darla stepped forward again and was now close enough to easily rest her hand on his chest. His hair was longer than the other males in his nest. There were strands of silver weaving through pale blond hair that grew past his ears and fell straight almost to his shoulders. Owls grew more silver in their hair as they matured. For them, the silver hair made them more honorable, wiser and they displayed it as proof of their full maturity. Rock was twenty-seven and had more silver than many male owls his age.

"So, you piss me off on purpose to make me prettier?" she asked then licked her lips as she brushed her palm over his beating heart.

"I didn't mean to make you angry." He really sounded as if he meant it. "Darla," he said, exhaling quietly then wrapping his long fingers around her wrist. He didn't pull her hand from his body but simply prevented her from moving. "I can smell your curiosity, your desire and urges to see what might exist between us. Perhaps it's normal since we spend so much time together."

"It already does exist between us," she interrupted, leaning into him and tilting her head back farther to stare into his face. "Owl or not, I know what you want. You want me as badly as I want you, Rock. Do something about it," she demanded, and reached for his face with her free hand.

"Don't allow your emotions to rule you, my sweet cat." His voice almost broke when she ran her fingertips along the side of his face and into his hair. "The torture and humiliation afterward would most definitely be stronger than all the pleasure offered in a moment of passion."

"Then we'll make it last longer than a moment," she muttered, going up on her tiptoes and arching into him as she'd imagined doing so many times. The moment her nipples pressed against his hard chest, she hissed in a breath.

"Darla, I won't allow you to be humiliated and possibly shunned." He grabbed her other hand when she tried pulling his hair.

"I won't allow my litter to disgrace me because I care about a male."

"Owls and leopards don't mix," he stressed, his voice tight.

Darla guessed he voiced this fact for his benefit as well as hers.

"Then we won't tell anyone," she argued, determined to win. There was no way she could return to her litter with the swelling inside her. Lustful need swept over her with enough power she might have staggered if Rock weren't holding both her wrists. She stretched against his hard, muscular body, bringing her mouth to his. "Kiss me and see what happens," she whispered.

"I know what will happen." His lips moved and he uttered the words as she pressed her mouth to his.

Small explosions ignited inside her. Darla suddenly fought his grasp when he returned her kiss. His mouth was hot, his lips moist and responsive. Darla put some strength into it and managed to free one hand. She immediately wrapped her arm around his neck, pressing herself against him and opening to him.

When his tongue met hers, the growl escaping her matched the ripe, intense aroma wrapping around him. And it wasn't just her lust she smelled. Already their scents were mingling, forming a bond, creating a new scent each of them would wear with honor and pride. It was the way of her kind, the way of his. When a male and female mated, their lovemaking united their smells, creating a new smell. They would smell the same. Anyone who came around them from here on would know they'd been with someone, bonded and united their souls. Through their scents the world would know neither of them was available to anyone else.

Darla dragged her fingers through his hair, tangling them in the thick silk. When she grabbed a hold and tugged, a fierce, hissing growl erupted from deep inside him. He grew next to her, every inch of him hardening and bulging. She felt his cock pressing against her abdomen, hard, ready and throbbing. Rock did want her. He wanted her desperately and possibly had endured the same torture she had for quite a while now. She hadn't doubted it, not too much. But learning beyond any doubt it was the truth created a joyful happiness that bubbled in her tummy and simmered into something even more powerful. It wrapped around her heart, growing stronger until it thickened the scent in the air, adding to it and making it even more powerful.

Rock's hands moved, and for a moment she braced herself, ready for him to push her away. Instead, he grabbed the sides of her head, tilting her and impaling her mouth with his tongue. She allowed him entrance, relaxing into him as her fingers began exploring the many bulges and rippling muscles all over his body.

Darla really had no knowledge of how owls fucked. Leopards were aggressive, often using a good fight as foreplay before having wild, sweaty and mind-blowing sex. She craved exciting, mind-blowing sex with Rock. Every time he pissed her off the pressure grew even more inside her. One more fight and she might explode. Although she was an assertive female, and twenty-seven years old, she was the youngest female in her litter and her older sisters had sheltered her. When they didn't like the males sniffing around her, they had sent her off to Banff. There was no blood relation between her and the Masters litter, but Kane and Jin also protected and sheltered her. Darla had met Kane and Jin before she'd moved here and had been excited to start a new life on her own, no longer in the shadows of her littermates.

Kane and Jin were just as bad as Maurie and Karma had been. Neither allowed any single male to come within sniffing distance of their cabin in the mountains. If an unmated male needed to speak with Kane concerning business, Kane always spoke to them outside the cabin, regardless of weather. Jin would always pace inside, appearing the female of the den, ready to attack to protect what was hers until the male left and Kane returned inside. Since she spent all her time with Rock lately, she didn't complain about them keeping all single male leopards at bay.

Darla'd had a lifetime of learning how to run around overprotective dens who cared deeply for her. She wouldn't hurt Kane and Jin any more than she would hurt Maurie and Karma. But her life was her own. No matter what anyone howled—or squawked—Darla wasn't doing anything wrong. Her vision proved that to her.

She wouldn't call herself naïve. Darla wasn't a virgin. But she didn't argue there were things she didn't know. It hadn't been too hard to do her homework when it came to Rock. His nest was the most prominent in Banff. They owned the apartment complex where many of the owls in their parliament lived. If there was a dispute or problem of any kind, one of the Halks took care of it. Rock was a leader among the owls and therefore it was easy to learn about him. He wasn't the kind of male who flew after any female if she shook her tail feathers at him. Which was a damn good thing. It wasn't hard for Darla to keep an eye on many of the single females, and she would attack if any of them started sniffing too close to Rock.

As quickly and aggressively as Rock had agreed to the kiss then deepened it until her world tilted to the side, he ended it. He moved so fast she didn't have time to brace herself and counterattack.

"No!" he hissed, suddenly pushing her to arm's length with enough force she stumbled backward.

Darla's world was still off-balance. Her insides were swollen with need, her pussy damp and throbbing. Her heart beat as strongly between her legs as it did in her chest. And she panted, her hair tousled and falling around her face.

"Like hell," she snarled, ready to leap at him.

Rock stepped forward, more than likely ready to be attacked. "We can't do this," he said, his voice breathy and rough.

"This is all both of us want." She grabbed his arms, the thought of wrestling him to the ground until he put out making her swell even more with need.

"They are feelings and emotions we must control." His hands were on her waist but he wasn't pushing her away. He wasn't drawing her nearer either.

"I'm sorry. Leopards don't make it a habit of stuffing their emotions. We know it's a lot healthier to release them or they will make us nuts."

"If we fuck each other we will part ways with our scents embedded on each of us."

It was the worst humiliation if a male or female informed they didn't want to carry the other's scent. Darla wouldn't let him know how easily his words could slice through her heart. There might be some sense in his annoying logic. She might be smart to put a shield around her heart. Right now she was so exposed he could rip out her jugular and she'd have no defense.

"You don't want to carry my scent." She wouldn't allow her words to smell pitiful or sad. Instead, she breathed in a calming breath and moistened her lips. The instant she ran her tongue over her lips, his scent was in her mouth, drifting down her esophagus and filling her with everything that was Rock. Regardless of what he thought, or every leopard and owl in the territory believed, she wouldn't run with her tail between her legs but hold her head high and let everyone breathe in her new smell.

"It's not about what I want, or you want, but how things are." He tightened his grip on her waist and gave her a slight shake. "Maybe someday species will interbreed. But right now it could be as bad as being chased off a cliff."

"No one would kill us," she argued immediately.

"They wouldn't approve. If I make love to you, your litter will forbid me to spend another minute with you. Darla, you would have to sneak just to see me, risk being caught, and ultimately, in the eyes of your litter, dishonor them if you tried to keep me in your life. We wouldn't be able to run and fly with each other as we do now. If anyone saw us they would be duty-bound to tell your den and my nest."

She hated him for presenting such a clear and accurate picture of how things would be. It wasn't fair. It sucked and the pain in her heart deepened.

"What if we make love then go swimming. It will diminish the scent. Rock, I want you now. I'm tired of living with the pain of not being with you."

Chapter Three

Darla would eventually see that he hadn't dishonored her by flying away, but instead honored her. She was such an emotional creature. Occasionally, he envied her for so easily tossing out whatever feeling entered her pretty head. But usually he didn't like it. Her emotions brought her pain and her pain sliced through him harder than she would ever know.

He would take responsibility for their relationship growing out of hand. Rock had smelled her lust and curiosity long before she started dropping hints. He should have stopped it long before now. The look on her face when he'd stripped out of his clothes and changed had damn near destroyed him. She was wounded, destroyed, the pain and surprise on her face branded in his brain.

Rock was doing the right and honorable thing. He would give her time, space, and hopefully they would continue to spend time together and both possess the strength to prevent anything from happening.

Seeing things logically and maintaining honor always made him feel better. Rock couldn't stop the pain from spreading inside him as he swore a sharp blade, ruthless and fierce, impaled his chest then dug in, twisting and causing so much pain inside he was barely able to fly.

The pain didn't make sense. Love wouldn't hurt like this or owls wouldn't allow the emotion. Rock understood with instant clarity the truth in the matter. The pain came from loving a leopard, from allowing himself to exist beyond the realm of logic and honor. This was the pain inflicted from dishonoring himself.

Fortunately no one was on the roof of the apartment complex his nest owned and he'd lived in all his life. He and his two older brothers were hatched on the fourth floor, in the large nest his brother Heath now lived in with his mate. Beel, his other brother, lived on the third floor and Rock's nest was on the second. The complex had belonged to his nest for a couple generations now and it was his father who helped build the solid foundation to allow their parliament to grow and establish themselves along the Canadian Rockies. Rock wouldn't be so modest not to say he and his brothers had a lot to do with strengthening their parliament and helping it to grow.

Rock had lost a couple of hours flying and fighting to sort his thoughts and stabilize his emotions. It was early evening and the different smells of meats cooking as nests on the different floors prepared their nightly kill made his stomach growl. Rock headed down the concrete stairs after dressing, his boots creating a repetitive echo in the stairwell. He had moments to clear his head of Darla before he ran into another owl. Rock didn't want to think how fucked up his scent was right now. There were

important issues to go over and he'd be smart to dwell on them and not a hot little leopard female he could never have.

But god damn he wanted her so bad he'd clip his feathers to have her. There was something seriously wrong with him.

The sooner he focused all his thoughts on why a jaguar would be chased off a cliff to his death the better off Rock would be. He pushed the door open to his floor and sauntered down his hallway, slowing when Gena Mason opened her door. She had moved into the nest his youngest sister had lived in prior to mating and moving out of Banff.

"Hi, Rock," Gena said, her light-colored, soft gray eyes as relaxed as the rest of her.

Rock swore the female had never frowned or stressed over anything in her life. Her skin was so soft-looking and smooth he doubted she'd ever creased her forehead or grinned until dimples appeared on either side of her mouth.

"Good hunting, Gena." He continued to his door, his keys already in his hand.

"I know you're probably terribly busy," she said behind him, moving to his side and watching as he unlocked his nest. "There's something wrong with the dishwasher. It is leaking and getting the floor wet when I use it. I've stopped washing dishes in it but wanted to mention it to your nest. When you have time would you look at it?"

There were nests who had lived in the complex over the years who were a hell of a lot more demanding and insistent their maintenance requests be honored before any of the Halks did anything else. Gena had flown with his younger sister when they were fledglings and had always seemed relaxed and happy.

He turned his head as he pushed open the door to his nest. "I need to contact my nest and discuss something with them. I'm not sure how long it will take, but when we're done, I'll come take a look." If he looked at her dishwasher now he'd break it further than it was now. He needed to clear his head.

Gena nodded and stepped toward her nest, wishing him good hunting. It was reassuring when she didn't react to his scent, which implied he didn't smell any different than he ever did. If he'd continued kissing Darla for another moment, he would have fucked her. She'd pushed him that close.

Damn her anyway. Rock stalked into his kitchen and pulled a bottle of beer out of the refrigerator then pulled out his phone. He twisted off the lid as he placed his call, tossed the lid in the trash and managed a quick gulp before Heath answered.

"Where have you been?" he asked, not sounding angry but definitely side-stepping the common courtesy of a greeting.

"Out." Rock didn't answer to Heath even if he was the oldest in their nest. "We might have a situation," he added before Heath could control the conversation.

"Come on up. I tried reaching you earlier to join us for our meal. We're grilling right now."

"Sounds good. I'll be up in a few."

* * * * *

Heath and Beel were sitting on Heath's couch when Rock entered his brother's nest, the nest he'd been hatched in and the three of them reared.

"It's about time you got here," Beel said without a trace of animosity in his voice. He held up his beer in a silent salute then gulped down a few swallows.

"It smells good in here." Rock had brought his beer up and sat facing his brothers in the large, overstuffed reclining chair. Their father had spent many hours in this chair, counseling other nests in their parliament. Their mother had rocked each of them in the chair. The thing was old and ugly and its upholstery had been repaired one too many times. Heath wouldn't get rid of it and Rock understood why. It was one hell of a comfortable chair and although owls didn't dwell on nostalgia, there was a lot of nest history in the piece of furniture. "Thanks for inviting me to eat with you."

"No problem. What's this situation you mentioned?" Heath asked, relaxing in the corner of his couch and crossing his shoes on the coffee table.

"I witnessed something rather odd and definitely in need of a good explanation today." Rock told them where he'd been flying earlier, although he didn't mention Darla nor whether he flew alone or not. He would never lie to his nest.

His brothers faced him, their faces almost identical, although the two were nothing alike. Heath and Beel had been hatched at the same time and Rock hatched a couple years later. By human standards Heath and Beel would be called twins. Owls seldom hatched two fledglings out of the same egg. Most females birthed two, sometimes three, and occasionally one owlet at a time. Heath and Beel were hatched minutes from each other, giving them strong similar appearances. Rock had entered the world by himself.

"I can fly us to the exact location and wouldn't be surprised if the body is still there."

"Body?" Heath and Beel said at the same time and both leaned forward.

He'd grabbed their attention. "A few hours ago five leopards chased a jaguar off a cliff on the other side of the mountain."

"A jaguar?" Heath asked.

"There are no jaguars anywhere around here." Beel leaned forward as well, glancing at each of his brothers.

"I don't remember ever hearing where there might be jaguars." Heath gave each of them his attention for a moment. "I know what you know. They are a fierce, unstable species and to the best of my knowledge are considered permanently rogue. I think there are only certain places they're allowed to live. I think Panthera Affairs regulates their litters but don't hold me to that," he finished, holding up his hand.

"Panthera Affairs regulates leopards," Beel said.

"They regulate all cats," Heath told him. "Just like Werewolf Affairs regulates all packs whether they're lunewulf, Cariboo or Malta werewolves."

"I didn't realize laws were that strict with jaguars." Rock brought the conversation back to his jaguar before Heath started giving them a government lecture. He wondered where the male jaguar had come from. If there were more of his kind in the area, it might put Darla in danger, especially if she got it in her stubborn, pretty head to run to the Snipes litter and talk to the young male.

"I'll find out." Heath straightened. "There was only one jaguar?"

"I just saw the one. That's what grabbed my attention, the black cat running with the leopards. I wasn't sure he was a jaguar until I got closer."

"He was running with or being chased?" Beel asked.

"He was most definitely in the lead." Rock remembered seeing the group of large cats tearing across the mountain with barely a thought to how one slip of the paw would end their lives. "My guess is he wasn't familiar with the land. The leopards would spread out, keeping him on the course they wanted him. The jaguar was running too fast to prevent going off the cliff. More than likely by the time he realized the ground disappeared he was already airborne."

Andrea, Beel's mate, appeared in the doorway leading to the kitchen. She held a beer in one hand and a plate covered with wings in the other.

"How about an appetizer?" Shelly, Heath's mate, announced from behind Andrea.

The two females joined them and Shelly passed out small plates. Rock watched both his brothers shift their attentions to their mates. They watched them possessively and with pleased, satisfied expressions on their faces. Rock understood what they felt toward the females and yearned for the ability to openly share his reaction to his female entering a room. If his nest sniffed out the truth, or learned where his thoughts were with Darla, they'd peck him alive until they thought he'd regained his senses. Maybe there was something seriously wrong with him for aching for a female leopard.

"What was this I heard about jaguars?" Andrea asked, perching on the edge of the couch next to Beel. "Those are some hateful creatures."

"You've met a jaguar?" Heath made room for Shelly to sit next to him and draped his arm around her, pulling her against him as he looked around her at Andrea.

"No, we haven't. But there were stories when our nest was north of here," she explained and nibbled the meat off the wing in her hand. "When some owls were down in the States they ran into a few of them. Jaguars don't run with honor."

"Why would you say that?" Rock asked.

She tossed the cleaned bone on the plate on the coffee table and Beel handed her another wing. "From the squawkings I heard, jaguars rent themselves to humans and will eliminate whoever the human wants killed."

"Interesting." Heath sucked juice off his fingers as he stared at the floor. "We will fly out to see the leopards tomorrow." He looked at Rock. "You're going to tell Masters what you saw."

"Could you identify the leopards?" Beel asked.

Rock shook his head. It was the truth. He had no idea who the leopards were. "All I know is they were male, all of them mated." Tomorrow he would describe them and Darla could suggest who she thought they might be. When she'd named the young male leopard, she'd been speculating based on his description. She would do the same thing tomorrow.

The dinner his brothers' mates made for all of them was delicious. Rock enjoyed everyone's company but continually fought his drifting thoughts. He didn't like having to exert so much concentration simply to spend time with his nest. Thoughts of Darla wouldn't leave him alone though. He replayed the words she'd howled at him earlier. It wasn't the first time Darla got pissed at him. Every breath the female took was passionate. She felt all emotions and lived them to the extreme. They were so far at the opposite ends of the spectrum when it came to expressing themselves. If Darla had been an owl she would have disgraced him, even if they'd been alone. Rock would have flown away from her without looking back.

Darla wasn't an owl though. She was a leopard, and as one, she acted exactly how she should. He didn't mind her yelling half as much as she minded his calm reserve. He couldn't change who he was any more than she could change her nature. Furthermore, he would never ask her to change. It was the way she was that turned him on to the point where he was starting to lose sleep at night.

"Rock!" Heath raised his voice, giving Rock a peculiar stare. "Where were you, owl?"

"I didn't hear you. What did you say?" He wouldn't show humiliation for not paying attention to the conversation. The four of them had started discussing fledglings and the way he was flying, fledglings weren't in his future.

"I'm very aware you didn't hear me." Heath leaned back in his chair and patted his stomach. "We were just saying a night in the sky might be just what we all need to burn off some of this good food."

"I'd be the odd male out." Rock slid his chair back and nodded to Shelly. "You honor me with your excellent cooking," he told her formally.

Shelly nodded, accepting the praise modestly, and also stood. "Is that what this is all about, Rock? Were you lost in your own thoughts because we were discussing mated issues?"

"Shelly." Heath would never reprimand his mate in front of another owl, not even his own nest. He spoke her name calmly, quietly, but his meaning was clear.

Rock's oldest brother believed this to be the case and didn't want Rock to dishonor himself by having to admit he didn't like not having a mate when his brothers did.

"It's okay." Rock held up his hand, glancing at Heath, but shifted his attention to Shelly. "Fledglings aren't in my future so I simply had nothing to contribute to the conversation. It doesn't bother me at all for the four of you to discuss this. I would be highly honored to become an uncle."

Both females looked down quickly and Rock guessed his brothers were both being pressured to make their nests grow.

"In the meantime," he continued, changing the subject and possibly saving Heath and Beel from having to hear about fledglings for the rest of the night. "The four of you go fly. I think I'll head to my nest and see what I can find online about jaguars."

"Let me know what you find." Heath walked Rock to the entry. He opened the door and stepped into the hallway with Rock. There wasn't anyone else out there and from the smell of things, the owls living around Heath's nest were either retired for the evening or out flying. "When you get to the point where you want to talk about what is preoccupying your thoughts, I'm a good listener," Heath said under his breath.

Rock stared into his brother's eyes, wondering if he were more obvious than he thought. "I'll remember that," he said truthfully. "Good hunting."

* * * * *

It was rather interesting reading about the jaguars. They were indeed mercenaries, their main resource coming from income made by killing for humans. Rock immediately noticed how vague information was on this topic, with citations being requested on almost every line.

As he read further, apparently the website was more confident on other information about this species. All jaguars in the U.S. lived in southwestern Colorado at Colony, the name of their territory for over forty years. Jaguars migrated up from the rain forest in Central America. That was the only other known location where they lived.

When he sat back and clasped his hands behind his back, Rock was acutely aware of how everything he read offered no explanation as to why the male jaguar would be in their territory. Apparently, the only time they left Colony was on assignment. Their contracts were assigned by humans and they were to kill.

"Were you up here to kill someone?" Rock mused then leaned forward when his cell rang. He stared at the small screen glowing in his dimly lit nest. Rock grabbed his phone and answered, and the room immediately grew warmer. Even seeing Darla's name on a cell phone screen got him hard.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, her hot, sultry voice creeping into his system like a highly addictive drug.

"And I apologize for upsetting you so much." It was impossible to stay mad at her, especially when his craving to fuck her was growing daily.

"I think sometimes I'm certifiably insane." Even her giggle appealed to him. "I get so pissed when I can't get you to open up to me," she admitted, sighing. "And at the same time your strong silence, the way you always look as if you already know the answers to any question, and how you never get mad, no matter what, are all reasons why I like you so much."

"Then we're both certifiably insane, little cat," he said, matching her low tone. "You don't upset me when you get mad. I understand your need to release your emotions are as engraved in you as not displaying them is engraved in me."

"We make one hell of a crazy couple." Again she laughed, although she sounded more relaxed than she had when he first answered the phone. "Rock, I really want to see you."

"I don't think that would be a good idea tonight."

"Why not? We could meet where we were earlier today. I seriously doubt there will be any more excitement there."

"My nest is flying tonight. I don't want to risk running into them."

"Then I'll come to you. There's nothing wrong with me being in your nest, is there?"

Rock glanced at his clock on the corner of the computer screen. "Darla, it is much too late for you to fly alone. You will not dishonor yourself."

"Rock Halk," she hissed, her quick temper raising its head again. "Don't you dare show me you're as backward and thick-headed toward females as some male leopards are. I'm very capable of taking care of myself and can damn well run by myself at any time day or night, and will not disgrace myself. Don't you even start suggesting I'm not capable of defending myself."

He decided he wouldn't point out it would depend on who her attacker was. "I know how capable you are of defending yourself. I also know it's not proper for an unmated female to be alone with an unmated male in his nest."

Someone knocked on his door and Rock sniffed the air, trying to figure out who it was.

"Is that someone at your door?" Darla asked, her voice quiet and calm again.

"Yup." He pushed himself away from the table, closing out the website where he'd been reading about jaguars before standing. "Hold on."

"I'm not going anywhere," she purred into his ear.

"Good," he said, speaking without giving thought as to how she might take it.

Rock took the phone from his ear and started to the door. After a second thought, he left the phone on the table by his computer and headed to his door. Rock picked up a female's strong scent before answering. He unlocked the door and opened it then stared into Gena Mason's face.

"Forgive me for interrupting," she began formally. "Are you busy?"

"No. Is something wrong?" He opened the door all the way and stepped back a bit to allow the female to step into his nest.

Gena entered but remained in the doorway, glancing past him briefly and taking in his nest. When she spoke, her soft gray eyes returned to his face. "I'm sorry to bring up my dishwasher again but water is coming out from underneath it. My nest floor is rather wet." She fidgeted with her hands in front of her and looked at the ground as she

shifted her weight. "Would you be willing to come take a look?" she asked, her voice growing softer.

Rock wondered if she wanted to make sure no one heard her asking him to enter her nest. "Of course. Give me a minute and I'll be over."

"Thank you." She backed up, meeting his gaze for only a moment, before turning to her nest.

Rock closed his door and returned to the phone. It set on his table, facing up. Darla might have been able to hear their conversation if there wasn't static on the line. Rock wouldn't live worrying about his actions upsetting her. It wasn't logical and he couldn't justify pondering what to say if she were to accuse him of fluttering his wings around another female. He would tell her the truth and she would accept it. That was how it would be.

"I'm sorry about that. I'm back," Rock began.

There was no response. Rock listened for another moment and heard complete silence, not the popping and cracking of an open line with someone whose litter was buried in the mountains. He pulled the phone from his ear and his stomach hardened in a knot. Darla had ended the call.

"If you come running to my nest..." he muttered under his breath. The thought of her racing to him, her emotions cranked up on full power, worried and excited him at the same time.

No owl liked dealing with mixed emotions. When alone and feelings grew too extreme, it was risky allowing the emotions to surface and create odors that might be detected. It would be too hard to explain and the smell of humiliation was one of the most despicable aromas.

Rock didn't make a conscious decision to let his emotions have a bit of free rein. He had no choice. His stomach clenched in pain as he imagined Darla racing to him. He wasn't convinced the jaguar being in their midst had been coincidental. But, along with his concern for her safety, knowing the possibility existed Darla might show up at his den made his blood sizzle in his veins. His dick grew hard and every inch of him tightened, his penned-up sexual desires growing too strong to continue ignoring.

If Darla entered his nest this evening, he wasn't sure he had the strength left not to fuck her.

Chapter Four

Darla paused in an alley on the edge of town. Banff was a growing community. In the almost three years since she'd moved to join the Masters litter on the mountain, Darla had witnessed many changes in the community. The alley ran down the middle of a block with little light. Storage units and a loading dock of sorts appeared completely abandoned. It was almost ten at night, which for her kind was rather early, but for humans it was late. Darla took advantage of the isolated area to change from her fur to her flesh and get dressed.

She moved silently into the darkest of the shadows, breathing in the frigid night air. Once protected in the black of night along an old brick building, she remained still, drinking in the night air. Darla despised the human pollution drowning out the otherwise pure mountain air. It was heavily laced with dew, which dampened her coat and would more than likely leave her wet once she stood on two feet.

Darla didn't pay a lot of attention to the industrial smells around her. Instead she searched the air for any other aromas. If there was anyone else nearby, she'd smell them. She listened too, tilting her head and staring into the dark shadows stretching from other buildings across from her and down the alley.

She couldn't remain in her fur too long in town. Not only was it dangerous but also stupid. Humans attacked out of fear, usually acting long before analyzing a situation to determine if there was danger. They used guns and other weapons, believing that compensated for their lack of fighting skills. Humans thought fighting came when they were physically capable of it. Very few humans understood a true fighter mastered the skill in their mind, not in their fists or claws. Even a cub understood that. Unfortunately, or possibly it was fortunate, humans couldn't wrap their brains around that simple fact.

There didn't appear to be anyone else in the area. It was time to allow the change to take over. Sparks danced up her spine and her skin tightened. Her heart started pounding too hard. For a moment she hesitated. Darla sensed something in the air.

Suppressing the change when it was ready to burn through her veins was not only painful but momentarily left her breathless. She sucked in a rich, alluring scent then another. Darla was no longer alone.

She staggered to the side until her backside pressed against the cold, damp brick wall next to her. As soon as she regained her composure, shoving the change deep inside her, she remained frozen, not moving and barely breathing as she began searching the dark alley once again. This time she spotted the shadows moving at the other end of the alley.

Damn! If she'd allowed the change to take over, she would have been naked, struggling with her clothes, as a handful of males sauntered into view at the end of the alley. Darla knew her fighting capabilities well but wouldn't deny that she would have been outnumbered. Oddly enough, her tummy tightened with the realization of how close she just came to proving Rock right. He'd never let her live it down if she were cornered in town by more males than she could handle.

Of course if she'd been hurt, Rock would personally see to each of their deaths. She didn't doubt his protective nature ran as strong as he made a show of it being. Darla would decide later how much of this moment she'd share with him. Right now all that mattered was staying out of view and keeping the males from picking up her scent.

As they approached, she realized they were all leopards. Two she didn't recognize and the third was vaguely familiar. A lot of new litters had settled on the mountainside in the past couple of years. The leopard grapevine was strong and solid. Good news traveled as fast as bad. Their territory was full of wild game, open spaces and rocky mountainsides to run, and providing for a litter here was a lot easier to do than in other parts of the country.

"So where are they?" The male on the far right of the trio spoke under his breath as he narrowed his gaze, squinting into the darkness.

Darla lowered to her haunches, pressing her underside against the broken pavement of alley that met the brick wall. It smelled of rotting trash around her, and as putrid as the aroma was, it probably also helped keep her hidden. As well, the males were in their skin, which limited their senses and gave her the advantage.

She heard footsteps coming from the other end of the alley before the three males did. *Crap, it's an ambush!* she thought to herself, breathing slowly to prevent anxiety from surfacing. If she didn't keep a clear head she would never make it out of here alive.

Darla looked over her shoulder as two males appeared from around the building on the left.

"You didn't change your mind," one of the two men said as both groups walked until they all stood facing each other.

"Did you think we would?" The tallest of the three leopards spoke.

A chilled breeze raced down the alley at that moment, lifting the male's blond curls and showing off darker red curls underneath. Darla prayed the breeze wouldn't carry her scent to the males. Her curiosity was piqued and she wanted to know what they were doing, meeting in a human alley at this hour of night. If this were a legitimate meet, they would have gathered at a litter or outside somewhere on the mountain, not in owl territory and on human land.

"I don't waste time thinking for leopards."

Darla's attention shot to the male who just spoke. He referred to the three males as leopards, which suggested he wasn't a leopard. The male stood as tall as the three leopards facing him. His hair wasn't blond though, as every leopard Darla knew was.

Instead, thick, straight, black hair fell past his ears almost to his shoulders. He looked in her direction, although not at her, and Darla was drawn to the most compelling green eyes she'd ever seen. It was more their shape than color though.

In her world, the only species who didn't quite look human in their human form were the owls. Their eyes were large and almost circular. It was a dead giveaway for their kind and made it harder to fit in with some groups of humans.

This male, however, had different-shaped eyes, like cat eyes.

Cat eyes, she thought. Like a jaguar!

"Let's not waste time with conversation that is pointless," one of the three male leopards snarled.

"There is nothing pointless about establishing a chain of command," the dark-haired male returned.

"Here is your chain of command." The male leopard in the middle stepped forward, moving within striking range of the two dark-haired males. "We're paying for a service. Your other male didn't perform. You're here to finish his work. We're paying you. You do your job."

"The wind smells as if Moren was killed and didn't accidentally run off the cliff because he didn't know it was there."

"I don't know. I wasn't there."

Darla didn't smell a lie. She studied the three leopards, trying to remember their names. They all looked familiar to her, but she'd been spending every free minute she had with Rock, not running with the other litters. The leopard behind the male talking nudged the male next to him. Darla didn't catch what was said but the whispering made her ears tickle.

"We weren't there either, but a cub could sniff the foul play in the air. We won't do the job if there is stench in the air. That's standard contract." The male with the oddshaped eyes crossed his arms, showing he didn't fear the male standing in front of him. It could be a compliment or an insult, depending on the situation.

Darla didn't think he was honoring the male leopard.

"The contract is already signed," the male facing him said, snarling. "You'll finish the job and I seriously doubt you're here for any other reason."

The silence grew between the males. Darla watched, barely daring to breathe, let alone form a thought that might change the smell of the air. She never thought she'd be grateful for the pungent odor of trash and human Dumpsters lining the dark alley. Darla also didn't know what she'd stumbled onto here. The leopards and jaguars, if they were in fact jaguars, were on human ground in a town run by owls. She would talk to Kane about it. And soon. He was the hunter for all leopards in this territory, the male who solved all problems and disputes. But she would tell Rock too. The owls needed to know if something was brewing in their territory.

"Here's the thing." The other male with funny eyes stepped forward, angling his body so he faced Darla. Although his attention was on the male leopard who now had his back to Darla, she had a perfect view of the male's features. "A jaguar fell off a cliff and died. Your leaders are going to investigate this. If they find more of us in the area, it will make our work here more difficult to finish."

"But not impossible, right?" one of the leopards standing back asked.

The leopard facing the jaguar held up his hand, silencing the male with him. "You will honor the contract. One week and you'll report back to me, letting me know the job is done. At that time you'll receive the rest of your payment."

"That is acceptable," the jaguar decided.

Darla swore all three male leopards exhaled their relief simultaneously. What job was it the jaguars were here to do? It made no sense for leopards to pay any species anything to work for them. Leopards ran on their own right. No one she knew would ever lean on someone else to do their work for them. The dishonor would weigh them down so terribly they'd never run again.

"How will we know when the job is done?" another leopard asked.

He sounded like the youngest of the three, and if she were sniffing all of them out correctly, he was the only one unmated. She wasn't sure about the two male jaguars. There was so much hostility dripping off both of them she couldn't smell anything else, other than the garbage in the Dumpsters.

When the male jaguar smiled, his white teeth flashed in the darkness against his olive-colored skin. His black hair was so smooth it seemed to shine, although there was very little light to reflect off it. Possibly he would be considered good-looking, but in a terrifying type of way. He looked mean.

"You want a leader killed and ask me how you will know when the job is done? Aren't leopards supposed to be intelligent?"

The insult even pissed Darla off. She tensed, waiting for the males to defend their kind. Bile rose in her throat when the males didn't move or even react to the crude comment.

"You have one week," the leopard facing him repeated.

"Enough time."

The jaguar male next to him nodded his consent.

"Now if you don't mind, we're going to find a lodging den for the evening, or should I say nest. Tomorrow we'll sniff the place out."

Darla remained where she was a long time after all the males disappeared, each group heading toward a different end of the alley. She'd stumbled on some terrifying news, news that might possibly save someone's life. From what she could tell, a leader was going to be hunted and killed by those jaguars. That meant either Heath Halk or Kane Masters was the jaguars' target.

And leopards were paying them to do this?

It didn't make sense.

* * * * *

It was a lot later than Darla expected to get to Rock's nest when she arrived a bit later. The chilled night air had sunk into her flesh and she hugged herself, rubbing her arms as she hurried up the flight of stairs to his floor in the complex. Darla had forgotten all about her anger when she'd raced out after hearing Rock talk to a female at his door. This was one of the main reasons why she hated living so far from Rock's nest. Although, if she had her say, Rock would move into the mountains instead of her moving here. All these nests on top of each other was claustrophobic as hell.

She opened the door at the end of the flight of stairs and stared down the hallway. Rock was backing out of a nest across the hall from him and speaking amiably to whoever stood just inside the doorway.

"Let me know if you want me to fix it again," he said, his voice soft and collected.

Darla's anger fanned to life as she marched down the hallway.

Rock looked her direction before she reached him, his large gray eyes narrowing on her as she approached.

"Now close and lock your nest," he ordered, backing farther from the nest and turning to his own before Darla reached him. "I told you not to run alone and you did anyway."

Darla had enough decency to not scream at him in the hallway. She marched into his nest when he opened his door and faced him as he closed and locked the door.

"What the hell were you doing?" she snapped, crossing her arms once again.

"I was fixing a dishwasher. Why are you here?" Rock didn't look pleased to see her at all.

"Fixing a dishwasher? For whom?"

Rock's expression relaxed. He stood before her, studying her as if he didn't have a thought in the world. That owl trait of his got damn annoying at times.

"Her name is Gena Mason. Would you like to meet her?"

He was mocking her. Darla smelled her jealousy, which only proved to mock her further. She walked away from him, refusing to rein in her emotions simply because Rock was a master at it. She was leopard, from a good litter, her rage, her pride, her freedom to express herself would never be suppressed.

"That isn't necessary," she told him, her voice clipped.

"Why are you here?" Rock's tone softened. There were emotions behind all those feathers.

She just needed to learn where to look for them. Looking over her shoulder before turning, she let her gaze travel slowly up his body. There wasn't a damn thing to fault about him. From his strong, steel chest, to rippling muscle visible past his short-sleeved

t-shirt, to the way his pale blond hair streaked with silver. She gazed into his round, gray eyes and damn near lost herself. There were definitely emotions pooling around inside him. Maybe he'd mastered preventing anyone from smelling them, but she could see them, feel them, and her body instantly reacted.

"Because you're here," she whispered, and reached out to brush her fingertips across his chest.

He shuddered. She loved pushing him to the edge. One of these days he would slip and she imagined he'd be one hell of an incredible lover. All those penned-up emotions needed to release somehow.

"On my way over here, I witnessed something." As much as she wanted to torture him, she knew her news couldn't wait.

Rock's expression didn't change. She dropped her focus to her fingers brushing over his chest. Through his t-shirt flexed muscle twitched against her touch. She ached to feel him naked against her, their clothes gone, possibly torn from their bodies. As powerful as Rock was, she couldn't picture him having rough sex. But her imagination had a field day with the idea.

"What did you witness?" he asked, breaking her momentary silence.

She shot her attention to his face. "There are jaguars in Banff."

Darla told Rock the conversation she'd overheard. "I ran into town and when I reached the edge of it, found the first alley to change," she explained.

Rock was pacing, tapping his finger to his lips as he stared down ahead of him. She wanted to make sure he had all the details. "I recognized one of the three leopards in the alley, but not the others. I spend more time with you than I do running with the litters."

Her comment didn't faze him or break his continual stroll back and forth across his living room.

"There's one thing obvious," she continued. "Either Kane or your brother Heath is their target. They plan on killing a leader within the week."

Rock stopped pacing, faced his door. Without turning around, he pulled out his phone and placed a call. "Heath," he said after a moment. "I need you to come to my nest right now. We have rather troubling news."

"You want your brother to see me here?" There was a mixture of excitement and dread building in her stomach.

When Rock turned around his gray eyes were an interesting dark shade. He moved in on her slowly, causing her heart to start racing in her chest.

"It is only logical he hear this story from the source," he said, his voice gruff as he stroked her jawbone with one finger.

His touch gave her chills, although she was anything but cold. "Is that the only reason you wish me to stay here?" she asked, her voice coming out as a whisper.

Rock didn't hesitate. "No."

Her heart leapt with excitement and her happiness filled the room. She swore he almost smiled. Rock breathed in deeply, watching her.

"If only life were different," he muttered.

As easily as her heart exploded with happiness, the implosion was just as painful. Rock would never dishonor himself or his nest. It wasn't in his nature. He simply wasn't capable of it. No matter how many times she told herself being with an owl was preposterous, something that simply couldn't be done, her heart and mind refused to listen. No other male drew a reaction out of her as Rock did.

She jumped when there was a solid knock on the door. Darla hugged herself, focusing on Rock's backside as he unlocked his front door and allowed his older brother into his nest. Immediately Heath focused on her then shifted his attention to Rock when he returned to Darla's side. She probably showed more worry and concern on her face than the two brothers did as they stared at each other—Heath trying to assess the situation and Rock appearing calm and composed as he stood inches away from her, the two of them facing Heath as if they were together. Had Rock decided to let his nest know he wanted a leopard?

"What is this news?" If Heath had the ability to speak harshly, the tone might be close to the one he used now.

"Darla has something to tell you." Rock took her arm and guided her to the couch. "Sit," he said, nodding to Heath. He brought Darla around the coffee table with him then sat and pulled her down next to him. "Tell him what you just told me."

Darla cleared her throat and stared at the male who led the owl parliament. He looked so much like Rock yet so different. Their physical appearance was almost identical, but the way they carried themselves, the way they moved, made them such incredibly different males. It was unnerving though, staring into eyes that could be Rock's but definitely were not.

"There are jaguars in Banff," she began.

"In Banff?" Heath wrinkled his brow, probably the closest to a frown she'd ever seen on him. He would feel emotions for his territory before he would over his brothers. "Have you told Kane about this?"

She shook her head. "Not yet. I saw them on my way over here."

He didn't ask why she was coming here, which was wise on his part. It would change the subject, which was an important matter. Not to mention, Heath wouldn't smell up the room by making a scene. Darla speculated only for a second on whether the two owls would discuss her later, when she wasn't around. Then she wondered if Rock would let her know if they did.

"How do you know they were jaguars?"

Darla moistened her lips, having no problem sharing every detail about the jaguars with Heath. This situation affected both their kind. "I stopped in an alley on the edge of town to change after running down the mountain. It was late for humans, but I wouldn't risk anyone seeing me in my fur so chose a secluded spot on the edge of town,

or it had smelled secluded when I first arrived. I was in the shadows when several leopards, who were in their skin, appeared at one end of the alley. Two males with round, catlike eyes appeared at the other. Their eyes weren't shaped like owls are in their flesh, and these males both had straight black hair. I never thought for a moment they were owls. During their conversation, it was mentioned they were jaguars."

"What was said?" Heath asked, facing her from the other side of the coffee table, his large gray eyes not blinking once as he continued staring at her. If she weren't so accustomed to owls and knew they didn't view this kind of behavior as rude, she might have been unnerved by his continual attention on her as she spoke.

Darla repeated the conversation for the second time, this time feeling her insides tense as Heath stared at her, appearing fiercer by the moment.

"Either Kane or myself is their target," Heath said, standing when she'd finished. He walked to the other side of the living room but didn't pace. Instead, he faced Rock hooking his thumbs in his jeans pockets. "Let's go. We'll escort Darla to her litter. While we're there, we'll have a chat with Kane."

* * * * *

It wasn't the first time Darla ran in her fur with Rock flying over her. However, it was the first time she didn't find the experience incredibly enjoyable. Darla was more than capable of taking care of herself, especially in her fur. But with Rock overhead, flying silently and pacing her as she ran, she would usually get this overwhelming sensation that she was cloaked with the ultimate protection. Tonight, as Heath flew silently alongside Rock, Darla couldn't kick the sensation she was being sent to her den for doing something wrong. And she hadn't done a damn thing wrong. If she hadn't run to Rock's nest, she never would have overheard the jaguar and leopard males making their plans in the alley. Now leopards and owls would both be ready if outsiders were to try attacking one of them.

They'd walked to the edge of Banff before changing. Heath and Rock both wanted to sniff out the alley where she'd overheard the males talking. A scent lingered along with the stench from the Dumpster, but Darla had to agree with both males, with the chilled night breeze doing its best to clear the air and so many other smells captured between two buildings, it was impossible to tell who might have met back there.

When they neared her litter, Darla ran to the back of the cabin, allowing the males to change from their feathers to human in the front while she changed in the back. Her bones stretched, fur receded, and her heart pumped in her chest faster than a human body could tolerate. The sweet pain engulfed her. This was who she was, a strong part of her existence that she embraced. Darla was a young female in her prime, ready to mate, and her heart and body ached for an owl. There was something seriously wrong with her. Worse yet, she wanted to explore her desires, not hide them. If it were possible for her and Rock to be together, she didn't want to miss what might be her only chance for true happiness.

Sweat clung to her naked flesh as she straightened and began shivering uncontrollably. Darla hurried and dressed but was still a lot colder in her flesh than she'd been in her fur. She let herself in through the backdoor then traipsed silently into the living room of her den.

"What is this?" Kane growled, rising from the couch where he'd been reclining with his mate Jin. "I thought you were asleep."

"I went for a run." As tall and intimidating as Kane could be, he didn't scare her. "We have company, Kane," she added, glancing at Jin who was straightening on the couch. "And there is news."

Kane turned his head, sniffing the air at the same time Darla heard noise out front. Without asking her who, Kane took a few long strides to the front door of their den and opened it wide. Darla saw Rock standing next to Heath just outside the door.

"We apologize for disturbing you this late at night but we have trouble."

Chapter Five

Rock finished dressing after leading his nest and Kane Masters to the cliff where the male jaguar had fallen to his death. It didn't surprise him when they didn't see or smell a body.

"Must have taken some work to get him up out of there." Rock stared down the steep incline.

"Where was he?" Heath moved in next to him.

Rock pointed to a flat rock a good twenty meters below. "On that first ledge down there."

"If he was running, you'd think he would have flown farther out." Kane stared down, but then squinted into the darkness as he stared ahead of him. "If they were running at high speed and the jaguar flew off the cliff because he didn't know it was here, he would have gone a good five or six meters through the air before dropping to his death."

"Point taken." Rock hadn't thought about that.

"You said you saw five leopards running from this direction." Masters pointed around the side of the mountain. "They were moving at an incredibly fast pace, as if they were racing."

"Or running from his crime," Heath commented.

Masters shook his head, this time squinting at the mountain. "I don't understand why any leopard would kill a jaguar and not tell me about it. I didn't even know jaguars were around here."

"They aren't." Rock walked away from the cliff, moving in between his brothers. "They have a colony in Colorado. I don't know much about them other than they live in a confined area moderated by the government."

"They're that unstable?" Beel asked, glancing toward the cliff.

"Unstable or deadly," Rock said. "They're from the rain forests in South America but moved north. I don't know why but I do know jaguars are mercenaries."

"Hired killers?" Heath asked, almost sounding disgusted.

It would be hard not to be repulsed at the thought. There was no honor in killing for sport or in payment. Any respectable creature killed only to eat, to protect what was theirs or out of mercy, but never blindly because someone else instructed them to do so.

"The question we need to sniff out is who hired them."

Heath looked at Masters. "And why," he added.

"We also need to know which one of you is the target." Rock brought both their attentions back to him. "Are you going public with this?"

"I've been thinking about that." Heath ran his hand over his hair. "If we do, we alert whoever brought the jaguars here."

"I want to talk to the one leopard Darla thought might be involved. I need to sniff out the others. If I can ask a few questions I'll know if they're lying to me." Masters started over to the open grassy area where they'd landed. "I'm heading back to my den. I'll give you a call later, Halk, when I have an update."

Rock flew back to the parliament with his brothers and returned to his nest. In spite of being convinced he wouldn't be able to sleep, Rock was out the moment his head hit his pillow. Morning came way too fast, although after showering, he already felt too antsy for coffee.

He stood in his kitchen, watching the coffee percolate, as his thoughts turned to Darla. It sucked knowing she might be cuddled under blankets on the side of the mountain while he woke up alone in his nest. Sooner or later it would become too apparent what they were doing. Rock anticipated both his nest and her litter of doing their best to put an end to it. The most he would endure were lectures from both his brothers. Darla would have it worse. Being a single female, Masters could find a mate for her, order her to remain on the mountain or force her to spend time with single male leopards. That thought made his blood boil and he'd marched out of his nest before knowing where exactly he planned on going.

He'd reached the top of the roof and squinted against the morning sun when his cell phone rang. Rock stared at the number for a moment before answering.

"Rock, this is Kane," the deep male voice informed him.

Rock had recognized the home phone to Darla's litter but the last voice he expected to hear was Kane Masters. Immediately red flags went alert in his brain.

"What's wrong?" he demanded.

"Is Darla with you?" There was a cold harshness in the tone that was very noticeable.

Rock ignored it. "I haven't seen her today." He almost said "yet today", but modified his sentence at the last minute.

"I know owls don't lie, but are you sure?"

"Positive." Rock put enough stress into the one word to prove to the leopard he spoke the truth. Masters was a good male but annoying sometimes.

"She isn't here. I thought she went with Jin into town, but when Jin returned after I got here, she thought Darla was with me."

Rock cursed under her breath.

"Halk, if you have any idea where she might be, I need to know right now."

"Understood." His brain raced, trying to figure out where his stubborn female might have run. "I'm not sure where she might be. I'll fly out that way right now and let you know if I spot her."

"You'll tell me immediately."

"Understood." Rock hung up the phone. "Interesting," he muttered. If he kept his brain out of denial, Rock would swear Masters was already on to the two of them. He would decide later how to react to this bit of information. Right now, he had one willful female leopard to find. And she better not have gotten her cute ass into trouble.

Rock flew over the mountain less than an hour later, spotting several groups of leopards enjoying an afternoon run. A few of them spotted him and leapt in the air, clawing at the sky as they roared. They were feeling ornery from a relaxing run. Rock humored them and squawked loudly in return, which set off even more roars. He didn't spot Darla. Although, she wouldn't run with a group of leopards. He already knew that about her. Apparently so did Masters or he wouldn't have called Rock.

In his feathers, his emotions turned a lot more basic. It was easier to see through a situation and Rock saw two cut-and-dried choices. He either took Darla, marked her with his scent, then faced her litter and his nest about it, or he let her go. Even in his feathers the latter seemed an impossible task to perform.

As he neared the place where he and Darla had relaxed the yesterday, Rock slowed, curving in a high circle above the trees as he narrowed his focus and took in every inch of ground between the trees. There were no leopards in the area. He'd flown beyond the usual territory where they ran and hunted. Which was why he and Darla used this spot to be alone and uninterrupted.

A thought hit him and he circled back in the direction he'd come. He wasn't positive where he was going but remembered seeing the males stop and change outside a remote cabin. He would fly there first. If Darla went after the male she suspected of being part of the group who were involved with the jaguars, he'd have her tail.

Rock remained at high altitude, focusing on the ground between thick groves of trees and jagged rocks until he neared the cabin. Then, circling around, giving it a wide berth, he dropped in altitude until he was below the tree line. Already he smelled leopards. The cabin appeared, thick snakelike smoke from its chimney giving away its location. Rock moved in closer, training his ears to focus in on any sounds coming from the small den.

He jumped from branch to branch, his clothes wrapped around his waist under his wings in ropelike fashion. When he was near enough to the cabin to see inside one of its dirty windows, he froze, hearing the voices inside.

"You've got a lot of nerve running here with such bold accusations. Masters know you're here?"

He heard Darla, her voice quiet, almost a whisper. It was too difficult to hear what she said, but with one question he knew it was time to get his female out of there. Rock

jumped to the ground, taking a scrutinizing look around him before letting the change ransack through his system.

His brain warred with possible scenarios taking place inside the cabin as his bones stretched and blood flowed through his veins like fire. Feathers receded and his flesh became exposed to the cold mountain air. He was freezing and shaking almost uncontrollably before he stood at his full height. His senses dulled and he no longer heard a thing inside the cabin. Wind whistled through tree branches and rustled what few leaves still clung to the branches after winter. The change also blocked out the noise of small rodents racing around on the ground he'd so easily heard in his feathers.

Rock struggled with his clothes, every inch of him shaking harder than the leaves were in the trees surrounding him. He needed to call Masters but decided to wait until he entered the cabin. If Darla had been wrong with her accusation, he would save her from the dishonor of her litter. Whether she chose to enlighten her litter or not would be up to her. Rock would make sure she was safe then hear what she had to say.

He couldn't think of a thing she would say to get her out of the fact she ran alone, something he'd demanded she never do, and came to this den without telling anyone she was doing it. It was best to rein in his thoughts before approaching the door. Leopards weren't owls. They wouldn't pick up on his emotions as easily as one of his own kind would. But he didn't cut them short for their perceptiveness. They were simply a different species, each having qualities and down falls.

Rock was still cold as hell after dressing but at least he wasn't shivering worse than a fledgling on a cold, wintery day. Again he checked his surroundings, was pretty sure he was alone outside, and approached the cabin door.

A male leopard answered after Rock knocked once, firmly. He immediately showed his surprise.

"Are you lost, owl?" he sneered, giving Rock a disgusted once-over.

"You're kidding me," another male said, and appeared next to the leopard who still sneered at Rock. "I'll be damned," the male grunted. "What the hell are you doing on our mountain?"

"I don't believe leopards hold exclusive title to this mountain," Rock said calmly. "And I'm here to take Darla to her litter."

He picked up on a scent and it confused him. It was easy enough to sniff out their anger, and he imagined there would be at least several reasons why the two males might be pissed. But the stench coming off them was spicier than just anger. If he didn't know better he'd swear he smelled pure, raw hatred.

Interesting, he thought. "You'll bring her to me now," he informed them, remaining calm.

One of the males backed up, looking over his shoulder.

"Rock?" Darla called from inside, her voice steady, but he knew her well enough to hear her fear.

He stepped inside the cabin, immediately feeling incredible warmth coming from a healthy fire in the fireplace. The male who answered the door didn't budge.

"I'll be damned to hell if you enter my litter's den," he growled under his breath. "Take the female if you want her. She's got some insane notions brewing in her cute little head. Don't know if beating her or fucking her would set her straight."

The other leopards in the room laughed as Darla practically pranced around them and sidled up to Rock. He grabbed her arm, almost throwing her behind him. Then without any indication he slammed his fist into the side of the leopard's head.

"Don't ever speak about her that way," he said, rage boiling inside him, although he managed to keep his voice calm.

The male leopard stumbled backward and almost fell over a wooden chair behind him. Two other males in the room didn't say a thing or move to help. Instead, they stared at Rock in disbelief.

"Why you..." The leopard started to lunge toward Rock.

Rock had a good three or four centimeters on the male leopard, but the male was definitely more muscular. Rock relied on speed and the act of surprise as he had with his first blow. He reached out, grabbing the male by the neck and kept his arm locked, preventing the male from returning the blow.

"Your dishonor reeks worse than your hatred, leopard," Rock said, forcing his words to remain soft and emotionless. It was growing harder to do. He wanted to kill the male for speaking of Darla so dishonorably. Just imagining what might have happened to her had he not shown up when he did made fury almost burn out of control inside him. "I understand your dishonor after what you've done, but your hatred is another subject. We don't have time to discuss it now since I must return this female to her litter. You can thank me now for saving your hide if Masters had found her here. Good hunting, leopards," he added, and shoved the male backward.

This time he did stumble into the chair and knocked it over. By the time he regained his balance, Rock had pulled the door shut and was marching around the cabin with Darla firmly in his grip.

"How did you know I was here?" she asked, glancing up at him as she hurried at his side to keep up with his pace. "I didn't tell anyone I was coming here."

Rock didn't answer her but trained his hearing on every sound behind them. Something told him the leopards wouldn't follow them. They needed time to think, to regroup. He saw how his parting words affected the male he'd grabbed by the neck. When he stated he knew why the leopard would feel dishonor, the male had stared at him wide-eyed, his confusion quickly turning to fear. Rock guessed they weren't in charge of the run against the dead jaguar, but they were definitely part of it.

"You really did show up at the right moment," Darla added when she apparently realized he wasn't planning to answer her question. "And the way you defended my honor. No one's ever tried fighting my fight for me, other than my littermates when I was still practically a cub."

He kept their pace at a fast clip, knowing it would take over a day to walk back to her litter. He might need that much time to calm down. His emotions had raged out of control. It might be to his credit only leopards witnessed it, but he wasn't sure. The last thing he wanted was Darla smelling his embarrassment when she thought him her hero.

Rock was aware of Darla almost running alongside him. She didn't complain and held on tight to his hand. They needed to be far from that den, and he had to be convinced they weren't being followed before he allowed them to change.

"You heard them both pretty much confess to being involved with killing that jaguar, right?" Darla was starting to smell worried.

He imagined his silence bugged the crap out of her. Darla cared deeply for Rock, it was incredibly obvious by her scent. But watching Rock damn near knock the male leopard to the floor showed her what she might have needed to see. Rock cared for her too, obviously too much.

"Are we seriously going to walk all the way to my litter?" she complained after another moment of silence passed.

"No."

"He does talk." She grinned up at him. "Rock, I'm sorry I didn't tell you what I was doing. I saw the opportunity to come here when both Kane and Jin headed out. Both of them are so worried about the jaguars."

"They're worried about you too." He looked down at her. She was still staring up at him. "Masters called, asking if you were with me."

Darla had the good sense to blow out a breath and look worried. "I should call him."

"Yes, you should." He glanced around them, slowing their pace a bit, and looked over his shoulder. No one appeared to be following them. It would be a hell of a lot easier to protect them if he changed into his feathers. "Let's head up this way. You'll probably have a better signal."

Darla didn't say anything but remained next to him, letting go of his hand when they climbed rocks, using their hands for support. A few minutes later they were in the clearing where they'd been when they'd first spotted the jaguar being chased by the leopards.

Darla kept climbing until she was sitting on the ledge then placed her call as she straightened her legs. The sun glowed against her blonde, long hair, making it glisten. She was so incredibly beautiful with her flushed cheeks and toned body relaxing against the flush grass growing on the ledge. Rock moved in next to her but remained standing, scouring their surroundings for any sign of movement.

"Hi, Kane," Darla said, pressing her phone to her ear. "Yes, I'm fine. Rock found me." She paused for only a moment. "I'm with him now. No, I was at the Snipes den up the mountain. I'd mentioned it to Rock so he knew where to look for me. But two of the

males there, Jeff Simon and Rodney Jordan, both practically confessed to being part of the group of leopards who chased that jaguar off the cliff." She sounded excited.

Kane's brutal tone growling through the phone didn't surprise Rock. His sister had mated and moved out of Banff a couple years ago, but when she'd lived with their nest, Rock and his brothers were very protective of her. Rock understood Kane's fury.

"I'll be at our den soon," Darla snapped. "But I made progress today in learning what the jaguars are doing here and who ran the male off the cliff. I'd like to be honored for that." She hung up the phone and tossed it on the ground next to her. Then, lying down so her long hair fanned around her face, she stared up at Rock. "I suppose you're mad at me too."

She'd scared the crap out of him. There was no sense in pointing that out to her. She would only insist she was capable of taking care of herself. Rock sat next to her, keeping his legs bent so his feet wouldn't hang off the edge of the ledge.

"If I hadn't shown up when I did," he began, and paused. His emotions were too close to simmering over and dishonoring him. Rock stared ahead instead of glancing down at her pretty yet concerned face. "You were very close to being in serious danger."

Darla sat up next to him and placed her hand on his shoulder. Her touch singed through his shirt and burnt his flesh into a frenzy of need.

"You honored me more than anyone ever has, Rock." Her whispered breath tortured the side of his face as much as her touch did. "Rock," she murmured, repeating his name.

He looked at her, although he feared it was a mistake. He was too close to the edge. Every inch of him tensed when he shifted and faced her. Darla's hand moved behind his neck as she drew herself closer to him. He watched her long lashes flutter over her green and golden eyes before she pressed her lips against his.

She tasted too good. Her lips were soft and moist and she opened for him too willingly. He might blame it on his emotions being too close to the edge later. At the moment, she was food for a starving owl. Rock wrapped his arms around her, crushing her against him, and devoured her mouth. He took what she offered and immediately wanted more. As his hands tangled in her hair, a soft murmur escaped her and breathed into his mouth.

Darla's breasts pressed against his chest. Her nipples turned hard as small pebbles and he was acutely aware of them brushing against his chest.

"Please," she gasped.

His little female leopard was strong, willful, demanding and determined. But when she begged, submitted to him completely, he was lost to her. Before he realized his actions, he'd pulled her shirt loose from her jeans and ran his hands along the bare, warm flesh underneath. His fingers found their way under her bra and he cupped her soft, round breasts. Her nipples were hard against the palms of his hands.

"May we not live to regret this," he grunted into her mouth.

Darla opened her eyes, her gaze masked as she stared up at him with eyes that were almost golden. Her emotions and desires overcame her, drawing forth the change. She wasn't the only one who felt sparks racing up her spine. Rock managed to focus as he took her down, pressing her back against the ground as he captured her mouth again.

"If you and I believe in our hearts this isn't wrong, then it isn't," she breathed when he finally let her up for air.

Darla was right. He placed too much value on the opinion of the parliament. It was all part of his damn honor, which was too much a part of him to ever let it go. For once in his life though, Rock wouldn't worry about the repercussions of his actions before he committed the act.

Rock pressed her against the ground, keeping her arms by her side when she would have torn at his clothes. He never doubted Darla would be a wild lover, but he would control their lovemaking. If he were to hold on to her submission, it was imperative he show her how to remain submissive and trusting in his arms, and not try to take control of something she wanted so desperately she would toss him over the edge before he could bring her pleasure.

"Relax, my little cat," he murmured above her face, staring down at her wild eyes as green flecks now mixed with an amber gold shade. "You aren't in charge here."

"What?" she gasped, her focus tearing over his chest and arms before returning to his face. "I never thought..."

He didn't want her thinking. He wanted her surrendering, giving over to him in full trust. Rock would learn her body, master every inch of it, and discover what made her howl and what made her purr.

He nipped at her lip, causing her to gasp out the last half of her sentence. Only after she relaxed against his sensual kiss did he remove his hands from her arms and glide his fingers underneath her shirt. As he broke off the kiss, he tugged on her shirt, pulling it over her chest and head. Darla didn't fight but raised her arms, watching him until she couldn't see him anymore as the shirt blinded her momentarily.

The moment he tossed it to the side, Rock lifted her in his arms, unclasping the bra from behind her with one fluid movement. The straps glided off her slender shoulders and hung against her toned biceps. He placed a chaste kiss at the top of her arm, using his fingers to push the undergarment from her body. His vision was blurred with her body so close to his, her scent wrapping around him, and the intoxicating mixture of their lust overwhelmed him. As her breasts bounced free of their confinement, he managed to have his hands right where they needed to be. He cupped the full, round flesh, learning their weight, brushing his thumbs over her nipples and exploring with his hands as she sighed again against him.

"I want you naked too." Already she was clawing at his shirt.

"You will have me naked, little cat. You'll have all of me."

"No stopping?" She raised her attention to his face.

"I'm not sure I can stop at this point."

Her smile managed to make his cock even harder than it already was. Warmth traveled through him, mixing with the overwhelming lust eating him alive. The possessiveness he'd learned to live with over the months, the determination to keep her at arm's length although he'd already let her into his heart, all of it swarmed beyond his control and whirlwind inside him as if a hurricane were ready to erupt.

Rock smelled the lust. There was no denying it. But there was something else too. Something stronger, with a richer, fresh scent. At first he thought it came from him, but then believed it came from Darla. They began undressing each other, both somehow managing to silently agree to make the process slow and as torturous as the two of them could endure. All the while their gazes remained locked. Neither of them shifted their attention to their nakedness. They'd flown and run together many times now and both had seen the other without clothes on. This was different though. And the richness of this new aroma, which now appeared to be seeping from both of them, was bonding them so tightly together it was hard to breathe.

"I knew it would be big." Darla reached between them, her hand finding his cock before he could regain control of the moment.

Every inch of him hardened and he swore his spine snapped as he arched against her, a hissing sound, which was anything but dignified, escaping from him as he gritted his teeth together.

"Little cat," he rumbled, grabbing her wrist.

Darla tightened her grip then brushed one finger over and around his swollen tip. "Mine," she growled as if she were willing to fight him for his own cock.

There must have been something in his expression she'd never seen before when he raised his face and stared into her eyes. Her lips parted, and surprise, maybe shock, registered as her pupils narrowed and she brought him into focus.

There was no way he could comment. Not only was his brain way too charged with rough zaps of raw, unleashed lust, but his mouth went too dry then too moist as he managed to press his fingers around hers and remove her hand from his cock. As incredible as the torture was, the moment her touch left his hard and swollen shaft, he immediately missed it.

Blood did rush up through his body though, returning to his head and allowing him to regain control of his actions, and hers. This time when he pressed her flat on her back, she was completely naked. This was what he wanted, time to learn her body, feel her soft curves, run his fingertips along her flesh and watch her shiver as her need coursed through her body.

"You're getting more than just my cock," he explained to her when rational thought was somewhat back in place. He ran his finger around her light brown areola and relished in her skin puckering immediately, her nipple rising as it hardened from his touch.

"You're getting more than my body," she whispered, showing she did understand his meaning. "All of you is mine and all of me is yours."

She was serious. One look into her beautiful eyes and he knew she meant every word she uttered. This wasn't lust making her talk. He'd been flying with Darla as she ran for over a year now. Although he knew she'd tried as hard as he had for months to keep their relationship friendly, there was too tight of a bond right from the beginning. At the time, Rock didn't understand it. Since it lacked logic, he tried ignoring it. But as the months turned into a year, the feelings for Darla grew stronger, growing possessive until they became what they were right now.

Crap! Was this love?

How could it not be? Already they'd just informed the other there was more here than a physical release. Rock searched for the logic and was stunned when he found it too easily. They loved each other. Both were willing and very aware of the repercussions of their actions. They weren't entering into this blindly. If she thought Kane was mad at her for taking off without telling him where she was going, it would be nothing to his wrath when she came home smelling like an owl. Already Kane suspected. Rock had sensed it.

Rock knew Heath suspected as well. His brothers had always honored him, backed him, had his tail feathers whenever he needed it. There was a strong possibility they would shun him, ask him to leave his nest when he returned with Darla's scent embedded in his pores.

The two of them understood making love right now would change their lives forever. And both of them knew being together meant more than remaining as things had been. The torture would end and the challenges would begin.

"Yes, my little cat, you're mine and I am yours," he grumbled, and lowered his mouth to hers as his hand moved slowly down her middle to the source of her heat.

Chapter Six

Darla bucked, feeling her back arch off the rough ground underneath her but not caring. Rock pressed his fingers over her soaked pussy and damn near pushed her over the edge. She grabbed his hand, trying to direct his fingers where she wanted them.

"I'll do it," he whispered into her mouth, his round gray eyes staring down at her with heavy lids as his pale blond hair fell around his face. His expression was flushed, his gaze intense as he watched her and at the same time grabbed her wrist, pinning her other hand under his body. "Relax, precious little cat," he instructed. "I'm going to learn what makes you come and you aren't going to fight me."

Darla had wondered for months what kind of lover Rock would be. He was such the master at existing without an emotion anywhere in him. For the most part she never smelled his happiness, his sadness or anger. Even when she knew one of the emotions existed in him by his actions, she never smelled them. At the Snipes den, Rock had looked so fierce, every inch of him bulging with fury in a way she'd never seen before. All the leopards around her had reeked of too much fear and anger for her to find Rock's scent. But when they'd marched out of the den and hurried through the woods along the side of the mountain, there were whiffs of outrage.

She'd never smelled outrage so faintly. If a male or female were that enraged, their scent was stronger than a fresh patch of onions. Darla had learned today how tightly owls confined their emotions. Rock had to be livid with fury for the faintest glimpse of a scent to escape his body. Nonetheless, she'd known not to push him at that moment. He would have thrown her over his shoulder and marched just as fast through the woods if she'd tempted his anger in any way. As much as she cared for him, there was no way she'd willingly enter into a fight with him and end up humiliated at the wings of an owl.

"Darla, you're the sexiest creature I've ever laid eyes on." His whispers of praise created chills rushing over her flesh as much as his touch did.

"You make me feel beautiful." She arched off the ground, almost purring as her lashes grew heavy and fluttered closed. Her world was suddenly an explosion of warm colors swarming around her as his finger stroked and caressed her swollen, sensitive entrance.

"Why do you shave?" he asked.

His question barely managed to bring her floating back to the ground. "I think it looks nicer, don't you?"

His hand stilled, cupping her incredibly hot pussy. "You've shaved for a while?"

She smiled, nodding, although she didn't feel shy at all. This was Rock and it felt right and normal to discuss anything with him. "Not quite a year," she told him.

"Who were you shaving for?" His hand still didn't move.

She raised her hips, urging him to continue caressing her. "For you, silly owl," she said, guessing he was jealous of some imaginary competition. "I've hoped for this for a long time, Rock." Her expression grew serious. "And I've kept my body as clean and ready for you as I could at all times."

Without notice, he plunged his fingers deep inside her. "My wild little cat," he growled, taking his attention from her face and staring down her body. "If all of this is for me, I'm the most honored bird in Canada."

Darla's laughter sounded husky, even to her. "I've been your female for quite a while now, Rock. And I think you've known that. We needed to come to terms with how this would affect our lives. I know I've decided it will all be worth it so I can be with you. I hope you've decided the same thing."

"I have." He still didn't look at her face but seemed intent on watching his fingers as he sank them deep inside her then pulled them out and traced her thick cream over her smooth flesh. "This will definitely change both our lives, and possibly for the worse. Both of us must be ready for all the negative consequences that might occur because we love each other."

She made a very embarrassing sound, something between a gasp and a squeal. "What did you say?" she demanded, almost choking out the words.

His fingers moved deeply inside her and this time he thrust harder, pressing his knuckles against her pelvic bone as he twisted and moved his fingers, exploring the inside of her pussy. Darla cried out, thrusting against his hand as she furiously fought to free her hands and touch him. Instead of repeating himself or commenting on what he just said, Rock fucked her with his fingers, not relenting until the dam broke inside her. The moment she cried out, Rock pulled his fingers out of her and moved before she could react.

Lifting her legs and spreading them, Rock positioned himself between. When she thought he would fuck her, instead he lowered his face and lapped at her come with his tongue. When Rock pressed against her inner thighs with his palms, Darla realized he no longer confined her hands. She reached for him, digging her fingernails into his thick hair. He continued feasting on her, running his tongue along her opening, darting it around her swollen clit and penetrating her, lapping at her come.

"Don't ever stop," she begged, not caring about honor or pride. Nothing had ever felt better. Darla held his head in place, tightening her grip so he wouldn't move or stop devouring her pussy with his mouth. "That feels so good," she gasped, taking her time uttering each word.

Rock growled and looked up at her. He let go of her legs but continued teasing her pussy and clit with his tongue. When he reached up her, grabbing her breasts and tugging, the swelling she'd just relieved with her orgasm erupted once again. She was filled with need, pressure building inside her with more ferocity than before.

"That's it, my little owl. Don't fight it." His words tickled her overly sensitive flesh while his tongue did a number on her she wasn't sure she'd ever recover from. "You're going to come even harder this time."

Darla didn't have a clue how he knew these things. It seemed to her she would come as hard as she did a few minutes ago. And she'd be content to continue coming, having orgasm after orgasm for as long as she could get him to continue licking and sucking her pussy.

She tried focusing on what Rock was doing to her. In order to move long strands of hair away from her face, she had to let go of his head. But the second she brushed them to the side, she extended her arms, grabbed his head and used what strength she found to make sure he continued giving her pleasure.

"I'll come if you promise never to stop."

Rock laughed with his face between her legs. Darla was positive she'd never heard him make that sound before. She managed to focus and caught him staring up at her, half his face buried in between her legs, and the part she saw glistening with moisture from her. The scent floating in the air was rich, erotic, and so incredibly intoxicating one deep breath made her feel drunk.

"You laughed," she managed, her breathing coming hard. "I heard you laugh." It was hard to talk or remain focused on him. She wanted to close her eyes and drift away. She wanted to let her head fall back and float over the edge.

"It would be impossible for me never to stop."

If she hadn't been staring down at him, fighting to keep her gaze locked on his beautiful large gray eyes, she wouldn't have caught his smile. Did owls let their guard down when they made love? Had she discovered some secret about his species none of them would voice out loud or ever admit, even in barely audible whispers?

In spite of knowing his grin was due to him teasing her for making an incredibly illogical comment, she smiled back at him, drowning in his incredible good looks. There was something seriously wrong with the world she ran in if being with Rock was wrong. As she continued watching him, her insides swelling until she couldn't bear it any longer, Darla would have admitted he'd been right, if she could have spoken.

As her orgasm hit her, rushing over her as if a giant tidal wave flooded her, taking all her rational thought and coherence from her, Darla agreed Rock had been right. She was coming even harder than she had minutes before.

And she howled. If anyone was anywhere within earshot they would know Darla Sheridan was having the best sex any leopard had ever known. She wouldn't pity any of the male leopards in her territory. It wasn't their fault none of them would ever hold a flame compared to the talents her magnificent owl possessed. Just as it wasn't her fault for falling in love with him. They were meant for each other, for better or worse,

and she wouldn't fear the worse when it attacked. Not with Rock at her side. Together they were invincible and would easily handle any battle thrown their way.

"You are so incredibly beautiful." Rock crawled over her.

Darla still trembled, aftershocks from her orgasm creating shock wave after shock wave as her pussy throbbed and ached for more. She wasn't sure when she closed her eyes, but opening them now, seeing Rock over her, his blond and silver hair falling around his face as he stared at her with so much love and adoration, she smelled it as easily as she saw it.

"You're beyond perfect," she purred, lifting her legs and wrapping them around his hips. "Fuck me now, owl," she growled. "Give me all of you. I can't wait any longer."

His cock pressed against her tender entrance. "I can't either," he moaned, and eased inside her.

Darla watched, her attention focused completely on his face as his features hardened, his cheeks turning red and concentration causing his lashes to flutter over his eyes. Owls hardly ever blinked. Darla was witnessing action after action so out of character for Rock while he made love to her. She didn't have a problem with his logical behavior, his solemn behavior and serious nature no matter how exciting or dangerous a situation might be. And, as much as she was cool with his lack of emotions, most of the time, she was also ecstatic to see them flow from him as he sank deeper into her heat.

"Darla," he hissed, his mouth barely moving and his teeth clenched together. "Damn it, female. You're incredibly hot, so slick, so tight."

Apparently all of those were good things. Males always praised a female for being tight, or so wet, or burning him alive with her heat. None of these were things she had any control over. All she knew was, as he filled her, stretched her open for him and continued to bury his cock deep inside her, every inch of his cock felt perfect.

"I want you to fuck me hard, fast," she said, getting the words out on a breath.

For a moment he focused on her. "This is how you like it?"

"Yes." She nodded, and her hair again draped across her face, clinging to her moist skin. She brushed it away, smiling up at him.

Rock wasn't grinning anymore. "How do you know this is how you like it?"

No way would he get so possessive of her he would turn a blind eye to her having a past. "I'm no more a virgin than you are," she said, keeping her tone level. "Now fuck me, my beautiful owl. Take me over the edge again. I want to fly with you."

Rock didn't take his attention off her face when he plummeted deep into her heat. Darla howled again, barely able to hold on in spite of lying flat on level ground. She swore she would topple off some incredibly high cliff and fall forever. As he thrust a second time, impaling her, Rock ignited more heat inside her than she imagined possible.

"You will fly with me, Darla," he breathed, his voice exceptionally deep and gravelly. "Look at me."

She obeyed, trying hard not to blink even when her eyes began burning.

"Such beautiful eyes. Gold and green. Perfect."

She wouldn't ever grow tired of him praising her. Especially when he loved characteristics about her others found odd, even disturbing. Darla had never seen another leopard with eyes like hers. But there were other traits about her unique to very few leopards and as she stared into Rock's face and he started fucking her harder and faster, one of the biggest secrets about her exploded forward with more force than any of her orgasms.

Suddenly Darla wasn't staring up into Rock's face but was looking down at him. She almost fell on top of him as she stared in horror at his closed eyes and blood-streaked flesh.

"No!" she screamed, every inch of her tensing.

Darla blinked and stared up at Rock. Once again he was above her. There was no blood on his face. His round gray eyes stared down at her. Talk about lousy timing for a vision.

She wouldn't think about it. No way would she allow the image of Rock bleeding and not moving as he lay on the ground to remain in her brain. It would ruin their moment, their uniting. Darla wouldn't weaken the intensity of their bonding. This was more than making love for the first time. Maybe Darla hadn't ever bonded with a male before. That didn't mean she didn't recognize the flooding of emotions, the heat scouring her insides while the air around both of them swarmed with their scents, intertwining, combining and creating a new scent. From here on out, the two of them would both carry this aroma.

Since the beginning of time, when a male and female fell in love then made love, the strength of their feelings for each other caused the scent of their love, their happiness, their excitement and even nervousness of running together for the rest of their lives to rise into the air around them. When they came together, each of them carried a scent unique to only them. It was the smell that identified them to their den or nest, to their friends and those who knew them in their territory. After a male and female in love fucked, making passionate love as their bodies embraced, wrapping around each other, and their scents rose into the air, their two aromas bonded just as their bodies did. After their torrid sex, the male and female ran or flew away, carrying each other's scent. But it was more than Darla wearing Rock's smell and him wearing hers. Both their smells were now altered. They'd fused their scents together, creating a new, unique smell, which both of them would now wear with pride. It was how all others knew if a male or female was mated. They wore the smell of their mate, which wrapped around their own.

Had Darla's vision just shown her what the results of their lovemaking would do?

As the atrocious vision faded, blood drained from her head. She swore for a second she floated, not quite in line with her body. Rock, still focused on her face, watched her with every muscle in his body taut, his entire body rigid except for his hips, which thrusted repeatedly. He increased the momentum, and for a moment she was thrown off from his steady rhythm.

Possibly he detected Darla's momentary distraction or how she wasn't in sync with him. The muscles in his arms bulged noticeably as he kept them straight on either side of her head. Rock held his body straight over hers, not quite touching but brushing against each other in slightly different spots each time as he impaled her harder, deeper, swelling as the intensity increased.

"Oh! Oh!" she howled, thrashing her head from side to side, and this time making no effort to brush hair out of her face when it clung to her. "Damn, Rock!"

He was searching her face, his expression lined with concentration and hardness, which revealed how much effort he put into not letting go yet. Darla blinked, couldn't find her breath and simply let go, clutching his shoulders as her legs tightened at his waist.

"I can't hold on," she cried, again fighting to get each word out.

"You don't have to." Rock's words were tight and rough. "I will always be there for you, with you, forever." As he managed the last words out of his mouth, a deep, rumbling growl followed. "Darla," he growled as his cock seemed to grow even larger as he buried himself deep inside her. "Darla," he repeated. "My sweet cat."

With his final thrust, he let go, his growl growing until every inch of him vibrated on top of her as he released himself deep in her womb. His heat spread throughout her insides, coating her, filling her with the come from the male she'd loved for quite a while now. Darla had wanted this for almost a year now. Her craving for Rock had grown with each passing month until he became too much of a distraction. She hadn't been able to sleep or stay away from him for long periods during the day. Inevitably, she'd always found reason to sniff him out. More times than not, Rock appeared wherever she was. He'd sniffed her out too.

The two of them ached to unite, to become one, to bond and mate in spite of what their litter and nest would feel. They both now had what they'd wanted for quite some time, but at what price?

Darla turned her head, resting it against the side of Rock's arm. She breathed the scent the two of them had created together deep into her lungs and prayed she hadn't seen her vision accurately. Rock was incredibly perceptive and even in this moment of blissful happiness, he would be incredibly aware of her stomach twisting in knots as panic grew inside her. If it weren't for the fact every one of her visions always came true, she might not be so worried.

Chapter Seven

Rock landed on a thick branch. Darla had already stopped running when she found a secluded clearing with thick groves of trees practically surrounding her. He wrapped his talons around the bark and watched Darla as the change began rippling through her. Black rosettes created patterns and covered her entire lean, firm body. The rosettes spread over her golden-colored coat underneath. Darla looked up, sniffing and searching until her golden eyes, the same color as her coat underneath the rosettes, captured his gaze and held on.

Darla was a fierce predator, her long, sharp, white teeth, perfectly shaped jawline made to kill swiftly and without mercy. Lean muscles and a slender body gave her the gift of speed. Not only was she a gorgeous creature in her fur, the incredible intelligence glowing in her eyes added to her beauty and captivating nature.

Rock held her gaze as sparks ignited up his spine. He shivered, instinctively stretching his wings when charges zapped throughout his body. His blood began boiling in his veins. In spite of the change being an incredible and fulfilling transformation, holding Darla's gaze made it even more powerful. As illogical as it was, the strongest sensation hit him when he swore he felt them changing together.

He jumped to the ground near Darla before his weight broke the branch he'd been perching on. His feet changed to flesh as he hit the earth underneath him. He felt the cold, hard dirt and the moist, fresh moss, which aided in making his landing less painful. Rock didn't look away from Darla when he began straightening, growing in height until he stood naked, looking down at Darla. Her body glistened with sweat and her breathing came hard. She was still the most ravenous creature he'd ever laid eyes on. For a few moments the rosettes remained even as she gained her human form, spreading over her flesh.

"My beautiful leopard," he grumbled, adjusting his eyesight as he pulled Darla into his arms and pressed her naked body against his. Rock's cock hardened eagerly. He was more than ready and willing to join with her again, enter her heat and strengthen the already-strong smell clinging to both of them. "Let's get you dressed. It's time to face our nest and litter."

"I think it would be best if I entered alone, Rock." She spoke quietly, sensing as she searched his face that he wouldn't like her suggestion.

And he didn't. "These are our battles now, Darla, not your battle and my battle separately."

She didn't stop him from untying her clothes, which she'd twisted into a rope and tied around her waist. His knuckles brushed against her smooth, damp skin, spawning his need for her more until it was almost unbearable standing this close to her. Her den

was visible through the trees. This was not a good location to make love to his sexy little leopard.

"I know, Rock." She lowered her gaze, grabbing her clothes when he loosened them then untwisting them before dressing. Her attention was on her clothes when she continued talking. "Kane and Jin will be outraged. Give me time to soothe their tempers before presenting yourself to them. Trust me, it's the best way."

"We might not have the choice of soothing feathers." Rock pulled his jeans on as he nodded at her den.

"Oh crap," she hissed, pulling her long blonde hair out from under her sweater before adjusting it on her body. "This can't be good."

The smell of her frustration, laced with fear, was doused heavily with their combined scents. Any emotion he breathed off her would also carry their newly made, united aromas. Rock smelled her on him, seeping from his flesh, as he adjusted the flannel shirt he wore and buttoned it. Then, tucking it into his jeans, he focused on Darla, watching as she nibbled her lower lip and stared through the trees at her den.

"There is only one choice, darling." Rock came up behind her, grabbed her shoulders and stared over her head at his nest as they parked outside the den and walked to the entrance.

Heath and Beel spoke quietly to each other, and although Rock didn't catch every word, they were talking about jaguars. Suddenly, it was imperative to learn everything possible about this remote species. Beel knocked on the door and Heath stood behind him. Just before the door opened and they were invited inside, Heath glanced around, sniffing the air. His expression was focused when he entered the cabin.

"Do you think he smelled us or something else?" Darla asked, her soft voice filled with concern.

Rock massaged her shoulders before he was aware of his soothing actions. He'd wondered the same thing. From this distance, and even in the trees, Heath would have spotted the two of them if he'd looked in the right direction. Rock's and Darla's scents were now altered, but still incredibly noticeable and would be for a few days at least until their smells saturated into their skin. If the two of them were never to see each other again, or think about each other, eventually their smells would return to their original scent. But with the two of them spending all their time together, and especially if they continued being intimate, which Rock had every intention of doing, these new smells on them would become permanent. It was how most species differentiated between mated and single females and males.

"I'm not sure," he mumbled, carefully canvassing their surroundings and trying to hear every sound around them with his human ears.

Darla looked over her shoulder at him, her large green eyes speckled with gold, searching his face. "Maybe we should take a look around before going inside."

His little leopard wasn't afraid of taking on the unknown. Possibly it helped make the two of them so compatible. They'd both just entered unchartered territory with their relationship. Although not quite the same, now she easily suggested they search the undeveloped terrain around the den to make sure no one else was out there.

"Agreed." He kept one hand on her shoulder and moved through the trees.

Darla didn't need to be told to be quiet or to move over the underbrush with care. All species were natural-born predators, killing an instinct as native to them as eating. She remained at his side, not making a sound, with only her head turning as she searched their surroundings. The two of them walked together and did a full circle around the den. When they were at the opposite side from where they started, facing the back end of Heath's black SUV, they paused. Darla didn't say anything still but looked up at him.

Rock stared down the rough road that led up to Darla's den. Her litter had worked to clear the road so most vehicles could make it up the mountain to their den. He studied the tire grooves in the ground and scanned the thick foliage lining each side of the road.

"What's that?" he asked, keeping his voice low.

Darla turned and focused in the direction he stared. Instead of explaining, he began descending down the rough road. He wasn't sure what he saw, but if he was right, a pair of eyes was watching them behind the thick row of trees halfway down the road.

"There," he whispered, nodding his head but not pointing.

Not that it mattered. They were close enough to attack and he focused on bright green eyes next to a group of trees just off the road.

"Where?" she whispered, but immediately followed it with, "Oh." Darla stiffened next to him, her scent growing aggressive as she appeared ready to attack in the next moment.

"Come out from your hiding place and identify yourself," Rock yelled louder than necessary. They were no more than ten meters from whomever it was standing just out of clear sight.

He got the results he wanted though. The cabin door flew open behind them and multiple footsteps pounded down the rough road as Heath, Beel, Kane and his mate closed in behind them. Rock held up a hand, indicating they remain silent, then pointed to the group of trees where someone stood watching them.

Darla started to leap and he grabbed her arm, causing her to swing back at his side before regaining her footing. There was a growl behind him but Rock didn't dwell on it. He stared at the green eyes, which still hadn't shifted their attention. Whoever it was never took their focus off him.

"Who are you?" Kane bellowed, marching around Rock and Darla and heading to the trees.

That was enough to spook their uninvited guest. Branches snapped and leaves flew as not one, but several individuals flew into motion. At the same time Rock and Darla both leapt into action, racing after them with Kane in the lead. There wasn't time for

any of them to change into their faster forms, but even as humans, owls and leopards were in incredible shape. Flying around the mountain helped Rock remain in good shape as a human.

"This way!" Heath yelled, and Rock turned, grabbing Darla as he followed Heath.

"But—" she howled, although she didn't finish her sentence.

Rock had no intention of her running in any other direction than by his side. The best he could tell, they were chasing three males, all with straight black hair, and none of them smelled mated. If there were rogue males on the side of the mountain, regardless of their species, he'd be damned if Darla would take off running by herself.

"There's a cliff up ahead," Darla announced, although not loud enough to warn all of them.

"How far?" Rock asked.

"Less than a kilometer."

Rock let out a low screeching sound, matching the alarm they would initiate in their feathers if trouble lay ahead. He pulled off the sound fairly well with his human mouth and both his brothers looked at him.

"Cliff," he said, not having to yell. With Beel and Heath watching him, they would catch the word without Rock having to announce it to everyone.

As soon as he uttered the word, his nest slowed, although all returned their attention forward, training their eyes on the males running ahead of them. The males leapt over broken branches and rocks protruding from the ground, maintaining a decent lead. They were running incredibly fast in their human form.

"It's just ahead." Darla squeezed his wrist.

Rock focused on the line of trees in front of him. If he hadn't known what to look for he wouldn't have noticed how the trees ended not too far down the hill. The ground disappeared, although he couldn't tell from where they were how steep the cliff was.

Before any of them slowed, the males running at high speed ahead of them suddenly broke off, two of them darting to the right and the other racing to the left.

"Son of a bitch," Rock snarled, suddenly understanding the males' plan. They'd intended to lead all of them to the cliff with hopes each of them would be running too fast to prevent falling over the edge of it. The three males were trying to get even for one of their own being killed.

Which made sense. Tracking the males allowed Rock to breathe in their scent with each breath he took. He smelled their outrage, their determination. Rock was also positive they weren't leopards. They didn't smell like leopards. All the leopards he'd ever met had blond hair, sometimes with hints of red. He'd never seen a leopard with black hair before. The males they were chasing were jaguars.

"That way!" Heath pointed to the left, focusing on Rock. "Get him!" The moment after he yelled out the command, Heath and Beel took off to the left.

Kane remained with Rock and Darla. His mate stuck at his side. The two males ahead of them weren't wearing out but instead appeared to be gaining speed.

Rock glanced over at Kane. "Change," he ordered.

Kane gave him a hard look for only a moment before nodding then slowing drastically. Rock and Darla pushed it as hard as they could, managing to pace the two males ahead of them but not gain any speed. As long as they kept them in sight, when Kane and Jin changed into their fur, they would easily catch up and be able to apprehend the two males. Once the jaguars were detained they would hopefully get some answers.

The plan was solid, except at a break in the trees, with large boulders creating a wall of mountain in front of them, the two males split up. One leapt at the rocks, showing he had decent skills in rock climbing as he raced up them like a spider, escaping from some predator. The other male broke off to the right, racing along the edge of the incline and disappearing into the next grove of trees.

"We chase the one on the ground," Rock decided.

Darla didn't argue but nodded. A sheen of perspiration broke out on her forehead and cheeks. Her hair was tangled but her eyes glowed with adrenaline from the hunt. Even in their human forms, his kind and Darla's enjoyed a good hunt, especially with a worthy prey. The male jaguar ahead of them would definitely make an honorable catch.

A minute later something large and fast came up behind them. Rock glanced over his shoulder then grabbed Darla and made room when Kane came charging up from behind. He leapt past them, roaring as his large, muscular body tore at the ground in hot pursuit.

The male they were chasing realized his apprehender was now in fur. Rock caught the male looking over his shoulder, saw his green eyes suddenly glow in fear. The male didn't bother stripping out of his clothes but tried to change before Kane reached him.

Darla cursed under her breath as she jumped to the side. Jin raced past them, appearing bound and determined to catch up with her mate.

Rock immediately sensed in their leopard forms, Kane and Jin wouldn't stop before tearing the male to shreds. He let go of Darla and bounded after them. There was no way he would catch up in his human form, but Kane and Jin would be able to hear him.

"Don't kill him!" he shouted, doing his best to reach Kane before the deed was done.

He didn't make it. Kane looked over his shoulder, releasing the male, whose neck was already torn open. Kane glared at Rock, his eyes glowing with fury as blood soaked his fur around his mouth. He took a step toward Rock, ignoring the limp body on the ground, when suddenly Darla leapt in front of Rock.

"Don't you dare," she hissed.

Rock grabbed Darla by the arms and pulled her against him then to the side. He watched Kane's glowing gold eyes warily. Kane's senses were ten times stronger in his fur. And he'd just picked up Rock and Darla's new scent.

Jin moved around her mate, almost half his size but her slinky movement suggested her anger had peaked faster than Kane's. She tilted her head, almost looking as if she were trying for a wicked grin, and released a rumbling growl. She leapt sideways, moving closer to Rock and Darla as she bared her teeth, hissing and continuing to growl.

"I'm not even going to begin to discuss this with both of you in your fur." Darla was pissed. Her salty smell wrapped around her and she didn't care. Instead, trying to release herself from Rock's grasp, already her hands were fisted at her hips as she tried moving closer to Jin. "You can accept who I am and what I want," Darla informed Jin, focusing only on her as she whispered, her fury growing by the moment. "But I'm not going to stand here while you prance around in your fur. Don't try to bully me, Jin. It won't work. If you want to discuss this, change."

Rock looked past Jin at Kane. The male was pissed but not unreasonably so. Something told Rock if Kane's mate had tried leaping on Darla, he would have stopped her. Kane met Rock's gaze and the two males studied each other a moment. Rock had to admit, living with both of these females, especially when Darla came of age, had to be challenging for him, yet Kane wouldn't throw her at just any male in order to get her out of his den. For that, and other reasons, Rock respected Kane.

"I'm walking with her to your den," he informed Kane then put his hand on Darla's shoulder, wrapping his arm around her when they turned around and started down the mountain. "The other male leapt up those rocks," Rock called out, glancing over his shoulder, not surprised to see Kane and Jin trailing them, and still looking pissed.

Both of them shifted their attention when Rock pointed ahead of him toward the rocky incline. "I didn't pay attention to which direction he went since we raced after this one."

Kane and Jin didn't have to look at each other. The two of them leapt into action, tearing the earth as they raced past Rock and Darla and hurried up the side of the mountain as easily as the jaguar male had.

Rock watched until the two of them disappeared but knew this was far from over. Listening to a few growls would have been a hell of a lot easier than hearing what Kane and Jin had to say once they were in their human form again. And there wasn't a shred of doubt in his mind both of them would have plenty to say. Rock tightened his grip around Darla's shoulder, pulling her to him as they started down the mountain. Regardless of what was said, Rock knew he wouldn't be able to let her go.

Chapter Eight

Darla stood at the back of the huge barnlike structure where leopards often met for meetings. It was an isolated building, close to the top of their mountain, with land around it. Most of the litters had grown to accept the area as sacred ground. All ceremonies were held there. Leopards could be damn annoying with the amount of antiquated traditions they held on to.

It had been one hell of a day. After running with Rock last night, chasing the jaguars, then standing by his side when the two of them spoke to Kane and Jin, she'd felt closer and more secure about their relationship. Then all of today passed by without hearing a word out of him.

Granted, Kane and Jin both watched her every move, continually sniffing the air every time she moved, second-guessing what her thoughts might be and what she might do next. If the phone rang, one of them snatched it. She listened but never heard them say anything to the caller at the other end of the line that suggested the call might have been for her. As the day turned into evening without a word from Rock, and Kane and Jin riding her every nerve, she was beyond grouchy.

It might seem impossible now, but Rock and Darla would make things work, somehow. They would do this by standing by each other, running and flying together, by being a team. That sure as hell wasn't going to happen when Rock didn't bother trying to reach her all day.

Kane had howled for a meeting among the litters to discuss the jaguars. It was the last thing Darla had felt like doing this evening, and she acknowledged now she was feeling selfish. The safety of all of them always came before her own personal issues in a relationship. Rock would feel the same way, which was one of his many commendable qualities. She fought to keep her pity party and frustration stuffed down low enough the other leopards around her wouldn't smell the bile emotions. Although, as she thought about it, she almost laughed. As if any of them would pay attention to what her mood smelled like when they could sniff out Rock embedded in her flesh. That was a much more appealing, repulsive odor to howl about than a pity party.

"Everyone's questions will be answered after I explain what we've sniffed out. We aren't sure right now how many jaguars are here on the mountain with us," Kane was saying. He stood at the other end of the barn, facing all the litters who'd assembled that night to discuss the jaguars. "Nor are we completely sure why they're here."

"There's only one reason jaguars exist," someone to Darla's right yelled.

The statement was immediately followed by an outbreak of comments. Darla remained against the back wall, watching all the litters in rows of chairs in front of her. She'd intentionally entered the barn a few minutes after most of the leopards were inside. The past twenty-four hours had been pure hell and she wasn't sure how much more she could take of it. But meeting publicly like this, being around all the litters on the mountain, and enduring their shocked stares as they sniffed the air around Darla had moved past annoying within seconds of arriving there with Kane and Jin.

And Kane and Jin had been bad enough. From the moment they'd arrived back at their den, the two of them laid into her without mercy. They'd used all claws and teeth to berate her poor judgment, to remind her who she was, and the proud line of leopards she came from. If Darla had to hear one more time how owls were an incredible species, but not to mate with, she swore she'd howl louder than a werewolf.

Didn't they see how incredibly hypocritical they were being? If it weren't for the stench of Kane and Jin's outrage over the way she smelled, Darla was positive their bigotry would have stunk bad enough none of them would have remained in the den.

"We aren't going to pass judgment on their kind without knowing more about them," Kane roared, silencing everyone in the room. "There are several male jaguars somewhere on the mountain," he continued. "Once we apprehend them, we'll be able to learn more about why they're here."

"Are our cubs in danger?" one of the females sitting up front asked, her voice loud and shrill and full of fear and apprehension.

"Jaguars aren't right in the head," one of the single males in the back of the room announced loudly. "Something doesn't click on right in their heads. You can smell it on them. They'll kill anything that moves and don't even care about their own."

Darla couldn't tell which male yelled such atrocities, but she was sure she smelled his lie. There were a group of single males in that corner, rustling around, full of energy and barely able to maintain their seats. After the one male's outburst, the lot of them moved even more, a few slapping each other on the back while others shouted their agreement.

"I'm right here if any of you females are feeling the need for protection," another one of the males called out.

This was followed up by a chorus of single females, challenging his masculinity and sending snide responses across the room.

"Enough!" Kane bellowed, his ferocious roar as intimidating as his face when he grabbed everyone's attention. His hair had gone noticeably white and his eyes were narrow slits, a radiant pale blue that made him appear even more dangerous than he probably was at the moment. "I said, enough!" he repeated, not quite as fiercely, but the condemning glare he shot to the corner of the room where the single males continued rustling around on their chairs was enough to say to any of them he dared, and welcomed, a challenge.

The room grew quiet. Kane's incredibly blond hair slowly darkened as he began breathing. It was obvious his reaction to the leopards' outburst was taken personally. Kane had fought against his breeding all his life. He and Jin were both white leopards, sometimes called snow leopards, an incredibly vicious and rather rare breed of leopard.

The rumors of his instability made it harder for him to gain the title of hunter, yet he'd done it. With a look, he reminded everyone sitting there that generalizing based on someone's breeding often proved inaccurate and made an ass out of whoever made the declaration.

"As we speak, I have sent a message requesting all information known on these jaguars to several different sources," Kane continued, not yelling quite as loud this time since he once again had all litters' attention. "We will know the truth of their kind, but I'm willing to bet they are a panthera breed, with good and bad in their bloodlines—just like us."

Darla wasn't sure where Jin had been sitting but she moved to stand next to her mate and faced everyone. The rows of seats were broken into two sections with a large aisle between them. From where she stood, near the entrance of the barn, she had a good view of Jin. The female stared at her for a moment and it tore at Darla how sadness seemed to make her expression darker. Jin cared about Darla even though they weren't blood-related. Darla thought highly of Jin too. Seeing her look so crushed because Darla loved Rock hurt more than she thought Jin would ever know. However, at the moment, the pain smeared across Jin's face was probably from her history of hiding her true birthright from everyone, and going as far as living in disguises, from wigs to colored contact lenses. Both Jin and Kane knew prejudice and bigotry too well. They clasped hands, facing all in the barn, as they stared silently a moment, making sure their nonverbal message was clear. The silent and somber leopards who stared back, even the cubs and single males stilling, was enough to show their point was made.

If only Kane and Jin would show the same open-mindedness when it came to her and Rock.

"There is a large settlement of leopards in western Colorado," Jin announced, speaking loudly as she looked around at the leopards facing her. She made eye contact with many of them as she spoke. "We contacted them earlier today, asking for any information they could send us on jaguars. An hour ago we received an answer via email."

She took her time searching the group as she held a piece of paper in front of her. Then lifting it high enough it almost blocked her face, she began reading.

First she read the short but to-the-point email she and Kane had worked up together. There had been a brief respite when the two of them hadn't lectured her about the importance of choosing her mate wisely that they'd focused on preparing this email. Darla was so upset at the time she'd lain on her bed, yearning for Rock, but had overheard the two of them discussing the wording of the emails they planned to send to several prominent leopards down in the States. In spite of her pain and anger, Darla agreed their wording in their emails was well-chosen.

"Here is the response," Jin continued.

She cleared her voice and once again shot a quick glance around the room. All leopards were silent now, the general smell apprehensive as they waited to hear what another of their kind, who lived so far away from them, would have to howl about when it came to jaguars.

"I am Cord Montiquo, leader of our leopard colony in the Grand Mesa National Forest. We are aware of the jaguar colony south of us. The jaguars keep to themselves and have as long as they've been here, which has been at least forty years. We've never had problems with them since they keep to their mountain and don't stray from there to do their hunting. Recently though, we're hearing quite a bit about our reclusive neighbors. From the howlings, it appears the jaguars are in agreement with humans and serve as professional killers for them. They are killing whomever they're told to kill and in return are being paid for this dishonorable act. I'm sure you would agree with us when I tell you this has changed our opinion of the jaguars. Anyone who would kill on order without thought as to why the creature, be they human or not, should be dead, is acting without honor or respect for life. I have no intention of seeking the jaguars out to discuss any of this with them. Therefore, anything else I would share with you would be complete howlings and nothing more. If you wish to hear it, I will honor your request but only on the understanding that none of it can be validated since obviously we have no association with that breed.""

Jin glanced up from her piece of paper and again studied the leopards in the barn. Darla knew Kane and Jin planned to watch the leopards carefully, intent on sniffing out the immediate reaction to what would be said throughout the evening. Kane had already gone to speak with a few litters, those who ran with Snipes. He was gathering possible names, hoping to find the males who had chased the jaguar off the cliff. Before they'd known about her and Rock, most of what they did concerning the litters was shared with her. There was nothing worse than feeling shunned in her own den. Darla knew they wouldn't send her running, in spite of Rock suggesting they might. They knew she'd run to Rock. Instead, they planned to imprison her in her own den, allowing her to leave only when one of them escorted her.

"Needless to say, his email had our curiosity piqued," Kane announced.

Darla glanced around the room as the litters in front of her murmured their agreement. The smell of everyone's curiosity almost blocked out the frustration and anger she'd smelled on everyone when they first arrived. And if they hadn't smelled that way, the moment they smelled her, their anger piqued.

"We emailed Cord Montiquo again and asked to hear their howlings. We assured them we understood how the leopard grapevine can run and wouldn't believe anything he shared with us from this point forward until it could be verified," he continued. Kane looked at Jin, who was still watching the leopards facing them, but when he touched her shoulder, she returned her attention to the paper in her hands.

"Here is his response," Jin began. "From the howlings I've heard over the years, and I will add the jaguar colony has been in southwestern Colorado for at least several generations now. Although I've never personally seen a jaguar, there are always

howlings about what we don't know or can't sniff out. I'm not the only one who has heard the jaguars inbreed. They are already known for their deadly bite. Their species has a jaw in their fur that can puncture through a skull and instantly kill their prey. Apparently their leaders are intentionally prearranging matings in order to breed killer jaguars. They are known as being fierce, unpredictable, incredibly fast even as humans, and trained specifically to track and kill. The jaguars have made themselves into a species many of us feel should be exterminated. We fear, as long as they continue bargaining with humans, who are in positions to barter with lots of their money and have influence on other humans, the jaguars will be allowed to continue inbreeding and creating a species so deadly, no other species will want any contact with them.'"

Jin stopped reading but this time didn't look up at first. She stared at the paper in her hand. Darla could see most of Kane, although several males sitting in chairs in front of her, blocked part of her view. The smell in the room slowly changed until the thickness of apprehension and anger became almost nauseating. Her stomach tightened and a few shocks zapped her spine as the change surfaced just enough to make her aware of it. She was pretty sure she wasn't the only one incredibly affected by the email. It was quite possible they still had trained killers, bred to destroy others, with unpredictable natures in their midst. If any of Montiquo's howlings were even close to being true, these jaguars might be a threat to the leopards, especially if they were faster and stronger as both humans and in their fur.

After the meeting ended, Darla slipped out the door and headed to the edge of the clearing. If Kane and Jin worried she might run, it would serve them right. She had no intention of standing where all the litters mingled, catching up on their own howlings, and waiting for Kane and Jin to come out of the barn. As it was, her ears tickled from the whispers when any of the leopards caught sight of her standing in the shadows by the trees.

"Did you get a whiff of that female?" an older female said, whispering louder than most, as her almost-grown litter stood around her. Her cubs, and the other litter she addressed, made a show of all looking her direction.

Darla glared at the lot of them, almost curling her lip just to show them what she thought of idle howling.

"You've heard what Darla Sheridan did, haven't you?" a single male said, being a bit more discreet when he joined friends and they formed a small circle not too far from her. "Can you believe a hot bit of tail like that would go for an owl over us?"

It dawned on her, after standing and waiting for Kane and Jin for almost ten minutes, the leopards she heard talking were spending more time howling about her than the jaguars who might be in the area. The only answer coming to mind was the jaguar news was a bit too terrifying. The howling she provided for all the litters served as comic relief. At least it did to many of the litters. Darla caught wind of anger and jealousy on most males who mentioned her, and even a few females. But mostly, the leopards so callously howling about her weren't upset about it at all. She was simply

something new to talk about, and her subject was a lot less stressful than trying to figure out what to do about any jaguars who might or might not still be on their mountain.

Almost thirty minutes passed and most of the litters had moved into the trees, changing and running to their litters to settle in for the night or heading back out for a nightly kill. Darla realized she could take off and possibly make it into Banff before she would be missed. In spite of her being a flight risk, there were more urgent matters stinking up the mountain. The jaguars were a matter to be taken seriously.

First Kane then Jin behind him exited the barn. There were a handful of leopards around them, all of them speaking in low, serious tones as Kane turned and secured the building. He checked the locks before turning. Kane and Jin spotted her almost at the same time.

"Five leopards chased one jaguar off a cliff," Kane was saying to a few males around him. He pinned Darla with a possessive stare as he began moving toward her. "Yesterday we killed two of them but were unable to apprehend the third jaguar for questioning. There were two spotted in Banff."

"We have no idea if the jaguars in Banff were the ones who died here on the mountain?" Alex Gibbons asked. He and his mate moved to the mountains when Kane and Jin started their den there. They had a good-sized litter and many claimed his mate Moira kept a very tight leash on Alex.

Jin looked around her mate to answer Alex. She shook her head as she spoke. "We don't have a solid-enough identification on the males who were in Banff. So no, we can't confirm or deny how many jaguars might still be around."

The small group stopped within sniffing distance of Darla. Alex Gibbons glanced her way, sniffed the air, and quickly diverted his attention from her. George and Sara Miles stood behind Kane and Jin. They were an older mated couple, their cubs having moved out of the den before Darla moved to the mountain. Sara made jams and other canned goods, and sold them to the litters on the mountain. Most times everyone bartered their fresh kills with the Mileses for their canned goods. Darla had heard Kane and Jin comment more than once they believed George's sight was going and he didn't hunt as well as he once did.

"Sounds like it might be a good idea to send scouts out on the mountain, discreetly of course," George said, his rough, scraggly voice and his slow drawl always enough to silence any group and turn heads to listen to the older male. "I know I wasn't the only one to smell the nervousness in that barn."

"My George can smell a bug on a tree a mile away," Sara boasted, and wrapped her arm around her mate's.

Darla envied such strong love, which had obviously endured quite a few years. More than anything, she ached to figure out a way to provide a life like that for her and Rock.

George patted Sara's hand. "At least a few in there no more than the rest of us. They were staying as quiet as a snake on the ground."

"I'd be curious to know their reasons." Kane shook his head and returned his attention to Darla. "Ready to head to our den?"

If he spoke directly to her, asking such a redundant question, to draw everyone's attention to her and force her to endure more disapproving scrutiny from even more litters, Darla wasn't sure. She smiled at Kane, nodded to the rest of them as if she didn't mind at all being included in the group.

"Whenever you're ready," she said easily. "And I'm the one who saw two jaguars in Banff. I was in an alley, ready to change, when three male leopards approached the two jaguar males."

"You didn't mention this to us," George said to Kane, speaking as a sire would to his cub, his reprimanding tone firm yet more filled with concern than with disapproval. George studied Darla with his watery eyes. He had a large nose, puckered with small scars, and when he sniffed, half his face moved. George nodded at her, giving no indication he found her scent odd at all. "Tell us what you heard, Darla."

"They were discussing killing someone," she began, keeping her attention on George, Sara and Alex and intentionally not looking at Kane and Jin. She'd had enough of their disapproving glares. "I overheard the entire conversation while hiding in my fur behind a human Dumpster."

George made a growling sound in his throat. "There's a stench strong enough to hide a pretty female from five rogue males. Tell us the rest, little cat."

He sounded as if he were hearing an amusing bit of howling instead of lifethreatening news. Darla always liked the Miles litter. She didn't smile at the old male but instead nodded somberly.

"The jaguars said they were going to find a place to stay in Banff. They planned to learn the town before they started their hunt. They told the leopards the leader would be dead in a week."

"'The leader'?" Alex asked, sounding and smelling a hell of a lot more nervous than the Miles litter.

"That's what they said," Darla said, nodding. She caught Alex sniffing at her again then scowling. He looked more confused than upset.

"My guess is if the jaguars are in Banff, they might still be there. I'm not sure why there would be more jaguars here on the mountain though. If they are staying in Banff, it sounds as if their prey is Heath Halk."

"Don't rule out a hit on your own head." George looked more serious as he pointed a finger at Kane.

"That's what I told him." Jin wrapped her arm around Kane's the way Sara had hers wrapped around George's. "We can't be sure which leader they're after. Why would leopards hire jaguars to kill the owls' leader though?" she asked as if the

question made her point. "That's the part I don't understand. It just doesn't smell right."

"Planning murder never smells right. Some might still hold a grudge against the Halk nest for managing to maintain control of the retail stores in Banff." Sara was softspoken, almost timid-sounding.

Darla knew for a fact the old female could still haul ass down the side of the mountain in pursuit of a young buck. Shifting her attention, Darla moved when Kane wrapped his arm around Jin and started toward her.

"It's late," he announced. "I'm taking my females to the den for the evening. Any of you are more than welcome to run by tomorrow to share any thoughts on the matter." Kane patted George on the shoulder as he walked past the old male. "Good idea about the scouts discreetly taking a good run around the mountain, sniffing out what they can. I think I'll put that together."

"If I were a bit younger I'd lead the group." George wasn't apologizing for his age.

Kane appeared to know that. "You thought up the idea. That's honorable enough. My mate and I will be down to your den in the next few days to pick up some canned goods. We've got some fresh fish your mate might enjoy fixing for the two of you."

George patted his belly. "I love eating that female's fresh kill," he said, winking at Kane and patting Sara's rear.

She growled at him, moving easily out of his reach, then rolled her eyes and smiled at Darla and Jin. "Be sure and bring Darla with you."

"Don't worry," Jin said before Kane could respond. "She will definitely be with us."

Sara stared at Darla, her smile fading but her soft green eyes focusing on Darla as if she knew her every thought. Darla didn't know of the old female having visions, but it wasn't something leopards asked about each other. Since Darla grew up knowing visions weren't discussed with anyone, for fear of their lives, she never questioned any leopard about it.

"We'll have a good talk," Sara said, almost whispering when her mate led her past Darla.

Alex said his farewells as well then almost ran across the grassy area in front of the barn to the trees on the other side. Kane turned before the male disappeared from sight and put his hand on Darla's shoulder while wrapping his other arm around Jin's shoulders and leading them into the woods.

"I'm almost surprised you didn't take off running to your owl when we took so long coming out of the barn," Kane said.

"Kane," Jin hissed, hitting him in the chest.

He ignored his mate, took his hands off both of them and stepped around some underbrush, faced them and began loosening his shirt. "Are you having second thoughts about your actions last night?"

Darla saw the hopeful look in Kane's expression. She knew setting him straight would harden his features once again. There was no way she would lie to him though.

"I have too much honor to run from my litter," she informed both of them, and slipped out of her coat then laid it on the ground so she could put the rest of her clothes inside it. "I can't believe either of you believe I would do that to you either," she added.

"We didn't think you'd get so close to that owl," Jin told her. "Apparently, we can't predict your behavior."

Darla sighed, hurrying to undress. The faster they were in their fur, the sooner this conversation would end. "I've known how I've felt about Rock for almost a year. Nothing anyone on this mountain says or does will change how I feel about him. We knew when we made love it would make everyone we care about angry at us. I guess it is too much to ask you simply to be happy that I'm happy."

Darla allowed the change to take over before she went too far and told them she loved Rock.

She wasn't surprised when the conversation continued once all of them were settled in their den. Darla came out of her bedroom, her stomach growling and demanding she find food. Jin was already in the kitchen, cutting meat with a long, sharp knife.

"Need any help?" Darla asked, moving in next to Jin and breathing in the wonderful smell of raw, fresh meat.

"I'm just going to fry a few slices and make sandwiches. Are you hungry?" Jin searched Darla's face as she held the knife upright in the air.

"Starving. I'll help." Darla got busy pulling out bread and pouring tall glasses of cold milk as the smell and crackling of frying meat filled the kitchen.

"Darla," Jin said softly, and waited as Darla returned the milk to the refrigerator.

She shut the refrigerator door then turned and stared into Jin's concerned expression. Jin had changed after their run and now wore cut-off jean shorts and a tank top, which showed off her breasts a bit too well. Darla didn't doubt as soon as she retired for the night, Jin and Kane would make love for hours. It sucked thinking she would be curled into a ball under her covers all alone.

"I know you think you love Rock Halk," Jin said, keeping her voice low and glancing toward the living room where her mate was messing with the fire in the fireplace.

Jin would endure an argument and possibly not get that sex she was obviously dressed for if Kane overheard her. Darla stared at her, wondering why she brought up the subject.

"You're carrying his scent with pride, even at the barn." Jin touched Darla's arm. "Kane won't admit it, but he feels he's let your litter down by not seeing something developing between you and Rock and putting a stop to it before it got this far."

"Males are stubborn, prideful creatures," Darla murmured.

"You convinced Rock it would be okay to take your feelings for each other to the next level?"

Even if Darla were to consider lying to Jin, with the two of them standing facing each other, Jin would not only smell the lie but see it too. But Darla knew lying about her emotions would add fire to Jin and Kane's argument. It wasn't wrong to be in love with Rock and she would never be ashamed that she was.

"It didn't take a lot of convincing," Darla admitted, remembering challenging him when they'd been alone up in the mountain. "He always insists if something isn't logical, then it can't possibly be right. But love isn't logical, is it? If it were, I certainly would be running alongside some respectable male leopard right now."

Jin smiled, although it didn't reach her eyes. When she turned to the meat on the stove, the tattoo on her arm flexed over her muscles. She was trying to understand how Darla felt. Darla stepped over to the counter, leaned against it and watched Jin flip the meat.

"There's something about his logical mind though," Darla added, and suddenly ached to curl up and share all her worries and happiness when it came to Rock. "He sees things so differently than I do."

"And you don't think that will cause trouble between the two of you?"

"Do you and Kane see everything eye to eye?" Darla asked.

"Good point." Jin made a snorting sound and used a spatula to scoot the meat around the frying pan. It sizzled as the air grew stronger with the meat's rich aroma. "Have you had visions about him?" she asked, glancing sideways to stare at Darla.

Jin looked past her before Darla answered, glancing at the doorway. Darla turned and stared at Kane, who leaned in the doorway, his arms crossed.

"Is this a private conversation?" he asked, his rumble a bit lower than usual.

"Of course not." Jin smiled at him. "Sit down," she added, nodding at the kitchen table. Then, reaching into the cabinet over Darla's head, she pulled down plates.

Darla didn't answer but carried the three glasses of milk to the table. Once they were all seated, Darla dove into her food, anxious to eat before the two of them ganged up on her again. The meat tasted good. But if Kane and Jin managed to piss her off again, her stomach would twist in knots and she wouldn't be able to enjoy it.

"You didn't answer Jin's question," Kane said, after eating half his sandwich.

"I know." Darla took another bite then swapped her sandwich out for her milk. She took her time washing down the food before glancing at each of them. "And yes, I've had visions about Rock," she informed them.

"Does he know you have visions?" Jin asked instead of inquiring what the visions were.

"No!" Darla exclaimed without hesitating. "Of course not."

Kane glanced up from his food. "Why not?"

Darla stared at him, confused. When she shifted her attention to Jin, she watched Darla expectantly. It was hard not getting the impression there was a right answer. Darla tried to remember why she'd been so adamant about not telling Rock her deepest secret.

"I'll tell you something," Kane said, lifting his glass and drinking while staring at Darla over the rim. He licked his milk mustache before putting the glass down and reaching for Jin's hand. "I had a vision of Jin before I met her."

Jin smiled as if the memory just came back to her. "Of course, the poor male was confused as hell when we first did meet. His vision was about a pale blonde female, not a female with coal-black hair and bright green eyes."

Darla stared into Jin's pale blue eyes. For years, Jin had hidden her true heritage and endured an incredibly bad reputation. Although Darla had lived with her sister and mate before moving to the mountain outside Banff, and had witnessed some of the accusations, which hung heavily in their den when Kane started sniffing around her, their affairs had never been a major concern for her. What mattered was the two of them were happy now. She blinked as the similarity hit her. Suddenly both of their circumstances smelled very much alike. "I remember some of the howlings," Darla began, treading carefully and not daring to allow any emotions to start smelling.

Jin nodded. Despite years of living on the run, after being reared by the leopard who was condemned by all leopards for trying to destroy all who had visions, Jin appeared very relaxed today. There were still times when it was hard to sniff out Jin's reaction to some situations. Right now was one of them. In spite of the female living happily with her mate in a leopard community, which honored both of them, her past had left scars.

"They were tough times but we got through them." Jin pulled her hand out from under Kane's and put hers on top of his.

"You even went as far as to hide who you truly were. Today though, everyone honors and respects both of you. And everyone knows you're both white leopards."

Kane made a growling sound in his throat then pointed a finger at Darla. "I know where you're going with this and it is not the same."

Darla stared at him, not sure she agreed, but also doubting he'd see her way of it no matter how good her argument. She shifted her attention to Jin, curious if she might be able to pull her over to her side, even a bit.

"I'm not saying it's the same," she told Jin. "You and Kane are who you are. Rock and I are who we are."

"We're the same species," Jin said, her voice low but not threatening.

"And we aren't." Darla held her head high, needing both of them to see how much Rock being an owl really didn't matter to her.

"What were your visions?" Kane demanded, changing the subject.

Darla bit her tongue not to snap at him. He might not be her sire or even blood related, but this was his den, his litter. She was honored to live here with them. It had been a couple of years now and she did feel they were a litter in their own way. Either way, Darla wouldn't howl too loud at Kane and dishonor him. He was the male of the den. It was another frustrating, antiquated tradition leopards held on to with both claws. Darla doubted leopards would view males and females the same for at least a few more centuries.

But she did sigh, giving him a long look she hoped he read as her not appreciating being interrupted and the subject yanked out from under her. "Both visions were recently. I'm guessing because my thoughts began strongly leaning toward accepting Rock and I would be intimate."

Kane growled again and Darla watched Jin's hand tighten over his. Jin kept her attention on Darla, her expression neutral. Kane, however, suddenly looked as if he might leap at her from across the table.

Darla decided she would continue being blunt and open with both of them. They were trying to determine which way she ran. It wasn't acceptable. Kane and Jin would see how far she'd already run on her own. They would learn she had no intention of turning around and running in a different direction.

"I've made no secret about spending most of my time with Rock over the past year. My first year here was rather lonely. And honestly, back in Kenora, my sisters both mated with hunters. They were always busy handling one predicament or another. You both know Dover Down, Rock's younger sister's mate. I'm sure you remember I was encouraged to run with him as my escort."

"That's because your litter trusted him," Kane said, not moving his lips and speaking through clenched teeth.

Darla doubted anything Jin tried would appease Kane's growing temper. She just prayed they would both be able to ride it out before he started throwing things.

"As they should have. Dover was a very honorable owl. But I also became very comfortable with his species. When Rock and I first started spending time with each other, I felt as if I'd found an old friend."

"Obviously Dover and Rock are nothing alike." Jin shook her head at Darla. "I know Dover fairly well. He would never dishonor any litter by disgracing one of their females."

"I have not been disgraced," Darla snapped, hitting the table with her fist.

Jin didn't say a word or even bat an eye. Kane glared at her but also remained quiet.

Darla sucked in a breath, tasting the anger floating heavily in the air. "For months Rock and I were just friends. He was easy to talk to and I enjoyed hearing how he thought about things. After a while I started seeking him out, running where I knew he would be. At the same time, if I was in Banff or somewhere public on the mountain, Rock always flew to join me. We became best friends."

Those were such simple days, she recalled. They never worried about anyone sniffing them out or howling about the two of them always together. She remembered Rock telling her it was always easy to find her because her scent was as enticing as the rest of her. Darla's insides warmed as she recalled how easily he charmed her. And to think she'd worried about whether he wanted her or not. Maybe owls were experts at hiding their emotions but, looking back, he was a lot easier to read than she thought.

"Why did you let it go past that?" Kane demanded, his hand fisting underneath Jin's hand.

Darla didn't see a reason to honor his question with an answer. "I guess it began a few months ago," she continued then met his fiery gaze. "You want the truth and that's all you'll smell. So growl all you want, Kane. If you can't handle it tell me now and I'll stop."

Jin shot her a warning look.

Kane's tone was fierce as a fresh wave of anger poured through the kitchen. "Don't begin to suggest what I might or might not be able to handle, little cat," he hissed, his pale blue eyes suddenly lined with streaks of silver. They looked like lightning bolts and the thunder would come along any moment. "And you're damn straight you'll share every detail. Don't worry about my feelings at this point. You obviously weren't too worried about them when you decided to have sex with an owl."

His words stung, which was probably his intention. Darla sucked in a slow breath, looking from him to Jin, who focused on her hand covering Kane's and didn't meet Darla's gaze.

If anyone were running anywhere near their den outside, they would believe Kane might be killing both of them with the extent of outrage bouncing off the walls. As easily as Kane tore into her heart, wounding her deeply with his insinuation that she didn't care about him or Jin, the pain from his words transformed into raw fury easily matching his.

"I'm a grown female, with a grown female's needs and desires." She met Kane's icy glare with an equally harsh stare. If he were trying to hurt her as he felt she'd done him, he would be shown the extent of his efforts. "You tell me I've done damage to this litter and wasn't thinking last night when Rock and I made love. Are you taking into consideration at all that I am not the kind of female who sleeps with a male just because he applies a bit of charm? Because I'm not, Kane."

"Kane doesn't think you're easy, Darla," Jin said, her tone soft but her hackles up. She would defend her mate no matter what.

Darla understood her protectiveness. She would also defend her male. "Rock is incredibly handsome. He is charming, intelligent and cares very much for me. We gave a lot of thought to having sex with each other before doing it. It wasn't something we jumped into doing without considering the repercussions." And Rock fought her for this very reason. He didn't want her enduring the wrath of her litter. She ached to talk to him. Was he enduring the same from his nest?

"The two of you need to understand," she continued, deciding for a different angle. She forced herself to relax and looked imploringly at both of them. "He's everything I've always wanted in a male. Do you understand? Because we're different species, we spent a lot of time discussing and analyzing how our actions would affect those who love us." She took a breath, slowing and allowing Kane to digest what she was saying. "You asked earlier if I threw myself at him, and I guess I did. Rock is incredibly honorable. His feelings and emotions are always under lock and key. It began frustrating the hell out of me, especially when I knew he felt the same way about me that I did about him."

"Who instigated the two of you having sex?" Kane demanded.

If he was looking for cause to run to Rock's nest, demand retribution, he would be sorely disappointed.

"Like I said, we spent a lot of time discussing it. But I knew no matter how thorough his arguments were or how logically he laid out the pain we would inflict on our litter...and nest," she added, "I want him. Kane, Jin, I..."

"No!" Kane roared loud enough Darla jumped. "This will not continue. Whatever you think you feel for the owl will end. It must." He shoved his chair back, standing fast enough to make the table rock.

Jin stabled the glasses with milk still in them and watched her mate warily.

"You think I'm capable of shutting down my feelings simply because you howl for me to do so?" Darla also stood. "I knew you'd be upset," she yelled, her emotions brimming over. Tears threatened to fall but she braced herself, shoving her fists into her sides and taking Kane on. "Maybe I am a fool. But I'm not a fool for falling in love with one of the most honorable and respected owls in Banff. I'm a fool for believing I was part of a litter who truly loved and cared about me. I was an idiot to think you would see beyond your wall of stubborn hypocrisy and be happy for me because I'm happy. I'm not the only one who chose the more difficult path in life," she shot out then stormed out of the kitchen, her spine popping as emotions burned worse than a wild fire and the change threatened to spring to life inside her.

"Darla!" Kane roared.

"Kane, wait," Jin said. "Give her a few minutes."

Darla hurried to her room and slammed her door, immediately pacing as tears streamed down her cheeks. She jumped and shrieked when her bedroom door flew open and slammed against her bedroom wall.

"This is my den!" Kane hissed, the deadly rumble in his voice creating an icy chill in the room. "You will never call me names in my own den or suggest I don't understand what you're thinking."

He filled her doorway, damn near foaming at the mouth as his eyes turned a cold shade of silver. Jin stood behind him, trying to get around him, but Kane didn't budge, nor did he quit glaring at Darla.

"Regardless of how grown you feel you are, little cat, you've led a very sheltered life. You've done so because of the amount of leopards around you who truly love you. Now you've made the most ridiculous decision hopefully you'll ever make in your life. You're running down a path that is simply not acceptable. Don't howl at me about how honorable or decent a male he is. That has nothing to do with any of this. All that matters is he is an owl and you are a leopard. End this now, on your own, or I will end it for you."

Chapter Nine

Rock circled, enduring a heavy mist as he focused on streets and alleys below. It was well into the night and morning would be here soon. He doubted a glorious sunrise would signal the end of their search. Thick, heavy, gray clouds hung low enough Rock swore he flew into them a few times.

Beel flew ahead of him, leaning as he circled and angled toward the next block. As tedious as their job was, its importance demanded they pay meticulous attention to every piece of trash, every doorway, and any and all movement they might spot. Since midnight they'd flown over Banff, maintaining altitude so as not to be easily spotted. If there were jaguars in town, they hadn't come outside tonight. Rock would swear to it. This was the second time they'd circled the town, gliding over one building then the next. He'd stared into every window, searched every alley, flown up and down every street. As bad as the weather was, there weren't many out tonight at all.

His cell phone buzzed inside his clothes he had stuffed in his clothes bag and hung from his neck. Beel stiffened, pulling up as he soared over the buildings across the street. They met each other's gazes and understood both of them had been texted at the same time.

As much as Rock would have loved to find any type of sign indicating jaguars were staying in town, he didn't mind the break. Beel dove toward the street, then cut off and flew in between buildings. Rock followed, letting his brother lead the way back to their complex. The two of them landed on the roof at the same time Heath pushed open the door from the stairs and came out into the heavy mist.

"We have a situation," he announced, not waiting for his brothers to change before he started speaking. "I just got a call from Kane Masters."

The change had just spawned to life inside Rock when he snapped his attention to Heath. His brother watched him, his solemn expression not giving any indication how serious the situation might be. He couldn't demand answers while still in his feathers and encouraged the change to embrace his system.

"Apparently there was a rather heated fight in their den this evening," Heath continued.

He wasn't going to allow Rock to enjoy the change at all. Ever since he'd returned to his nest the night before, both Beel and Heath had attacked from all angles with claw and beak. They were merciless in their berating of him, almost going so far as to allow emotions the three of them were masters at containing release and explode all over their nests.

Fire burned through Rock's veins. As his body grew and feathers receded, his senses paled and he no longer detected the animosity he'd been able to smell on Heath

and Beel while in his feathers. Encouraging the change often made the pain outweigh the pleasure. Before he could straighten and reach for the clothes bag around his neck, he endured the overwhelming pressure as his spine altered in shape to support his human body. Rock squinted against the intensity of his body contorting, anxious to finish the change and demand to know what happened to Darla. Heath wouldn't have called them both back to their nests over a fight. It was what happened after the fight Rock was worried about.

Leopards were the most emotional creatures Rock had ever met. Fighting in a den was about as normal as owls sitting around debating the latest current events. Instead of discussing something rational, leopards preferred to bare their teeth, clawing at each other to see who could growl the loudest.

If Rock had met a female owl who displayed the amount of emotions Darla did, he would not only be turned off, he would be grossly repulsed. Darla never tried hiding any of her thoughts from him. Her feelings floated around her continuously, as much a part of her natural scent as the logical, rational part of her was.

With Darla, watching her emotions shift from happy to excited to turned-on and craving him excited Rock more than he ever thought possible. Being emotional was as much a part of her as honor and logical thought process was a part of him. Darla glowed when she was happy. Her pretty green eyes flickered with dominating streaks of gold when she was angry. Her cheeks would flush beautifully when her mood turned sensual. Reading her was as easy as stepping outside and learning what the weather was about.

As leopards had grown more in population around Banff until the mountain just outside of town ran thick with them, Rock and his litter grew accustomed to their nature. Darla wasn't the first leopard Rock had met. Although she was definitely the first leopard he spent a large amount of his time with. Not seeing her today made his day seem less fulfilled. Rock felt as if he couldn't call it a day without at least talking to her. More than anything he ached to hold her in his arms, breathe in her ripe, sensual aroma, and smell himself embedded in her flesh.

"Apparently the fight turned explosive," Heath informed him when Rock stood barefoot on top of the roof.

"How explosive?" Rock asked, untwisting his clothes then hurrying to dress. In his flesh it was suddenly cold as hell outside. The mist was almost rain now and his hair and skin were very damp before he could pull his shirt over his head. "Where is Darla? Is she okay?"

Heath just shy of glared at his brother. "Kane called because they ended the fight with tension still so thick in the air he said he could slice through it with his claws."

"Kane has a mean temper," Rock muttered.

"And right now his anger is justified." Heath turned from both his brothers, taking long strides to the doorway leading to the stairs. "He called to inform me he woke up after being asleep a few hours and discovered Darla has left their den."

Rock looked at Heath quickly, pulling in a sharp, tense breath. It was a cold, wet, incredibly cloudy night. Before dawn a dense fog would probably smother the area, making it damn hard to see a thing, even in his feathers. He almost cursed under his breath as he stared into the gray, murky night.

"I'll go find her." Rock finished dressing and reached for his phone.

"Like hell you will." Heath had also been on the verge of exploding since Rock had returned the night before. "You will go to your nest and stay there. And that isn't a suggestion."

"You have no right..."

Heath held up his hand and stalked over to Rock, stopping when their faces were inches from each other. "Until you start thinking with the head on your shoulders again I have every damn right," he hissed, barely moving his mouth.

Beel also moved in on the two of them, not saying a word but watching very carefully.

"I informed Kane if I saw Darla I would contact him immediately. I promised to return her to her den. If she refuses to go, I assured Kane I would keep her here at the complex, locked up with a few of our females and kept safe until he could come get her."

"So, you're telling me you promised Kane you wouldn't let me see her," Rock grunted, fighting the urge to shove his brother out of the way and head downstairs. Hopefully Darla's phone was on and if she wasn't in her fur, he'd learn her whereabouts soon enough.

Heath didn't confirm Rock's fears. "Did you not make that promise?" he pressed.

Heath shook his head. "Head down to your nest, Rock. Beel, go with him. Don't make this worse than it already is."

"I've done nothing to make this into a mess," Rock said, starting around his brothers. "You and Darla's den have turned this into the mess that it is. Accept how things are and stay out of my life. I can handle my own affairs."

"You proved last night you couldn't."

Rock turned on Heath, raising his hand and fisting it without giving any thought to anything other than pointing out to his nest right here and now he would not tolerate such incredible humiliation. Not only was he a grown male, he was an honored and respected male in their parliament. It wasn't a position dropped in his lap. Rock had earned the honor he carried with pride through hard work and treating all owls around him with consideration and equal and fair treatment.

"Stand down," Rock hissed, damn near shaking as he fought to contain the fury threatening to explode inside him. "Look past the bigotry swarming around you. You stand here, acknowledging how you'll honor Kane Masters' den with consideration toward Darla, and in the same breath condemn her and my actions toward each other."

"Have you lost your fucking mind?" Heath squawked.

"Rock, hear what you're saying," Beel said, stepping closer to him.

Rock threw out his hands, forcing both of them to step backward. "I've chosen an honored female from a den who is revered and respected not only among their own kind but among all who live on the mountain, throughout Banff, and in many nests and dens surrounding the area. Not only is she beautiful, intelligent and friendly to all, she has done nothing other than respect both of you and your nests."

"Don't cite information that is common knowledge to all of us," Heath said, leaping at Rock. "You're being an idiot and twisting logic around in a futile attempt to justify insane actions."

"There is nothing insane about falling in love," Rock roared, and plowed into Heath.

He sent his brother stumbling backward and regained his balance, holding his place when Beel leapt forward and grabbed Heath's arms. Heath yanked his arm free of Beel's hold but glared at Rock.

"What are you thinking?" he hissed. "You know better than anyone you can't mate with a leopard. What kind of nest would that be? Would you fly or run? You're trying to rationalize the impossible."

"Now you aren't making sense. Darla and I aren't trying to rationalize anything. All of it is quite clear. And if her den has sent her running, she will not return with her tail between her legs, begging for forgiveness over something she is far from sorry for."

"And how do you know she doesn't regret her actions?" Heath challenged.

Rock didn't hesitate. "I smelled her emotions as strongly as I smell her scent on me right now."

"You disgust me," Heath said, slicing his hand through the air and turning his back on Rock. "I don't know what you've become but you aren't my brother who flew with honor before last night."

"How dare you suggest I have no honor." Rock grabbed Heath and spun him around to face him.

Rock was an inch or so smaller than Heath but more muscular. Heath was the oldest of their den and, by right and traditions that went back further than any of them knew, he led their litter. That didn't mean Rock would stand there and allow his own nest to insult and berate him.

"Then quit flying as if you don't. Put this atrocious act behind you, Rock." Heath lowered his voice, standing close enough to Rock his hard breathing filled the air between them. His large, round gray eyes flashed with the emotions he barely managed to control and his stare was hard and determined.

Rock didn't doubt he looked much the same way as he held his brother's gaze. "I will never forget last night. I plan to remember it as one of the most honorable moments of my life."

Beel sighed loudly and damn near rolled his eyes before looking away from both of them.

"I'm glad the three of us are alone up here," Rock informed them. "You two amaze me with your lack of honor. Where is the logic in any of your comments? You're both being hypocrites and displaying a vulgar amount of bigotry. Just yesterday you two would squawk with pride how you fly close to the Masters den and hold their opinion on matters with high esteem."

"How dare you say we have no honor." Heath's eyes flashed with anger as his jaw twitched and his body tightened. It was the worst insult one owl could throw at another.

Rock held his ground, staring at both of them. "You dare state you'll honor Kane Masters' request and in the same breath suggest Darla isn't good enough for me."

"You're flying completely insane," Heath said, stepping into Rock's space. "And don't think for a second I won't go to any means necessary to set you back on course so you are flying straight."

"I will not give her up." Rock couldn't imagine the amount of dishonor and unbearable humiliation it would place on both him and Darla if he were to denounce her. He couldn't imagine doing such a thing. "Suggest one more time I should do so and you will regret the words leaving your mouth."

"Go to your nest now."

"Not until I find Darla."

"You're not seeing that bitch again."

"Not only are you squawking irrationally but you top it off with a lie." Rock was stunned by Heath's behavior. He'd never seen his brother overreact to anything like this before.

"Now I'm a liar too?" Heath snapped, his face growing red as the cold night air suddenly reeked with anger.

"You've never disliked Darla yet suddenly you call her a bitch." Rock shook his head, unable and unwilling to hide his disappointment in his nest's behavior.

"She's never committed such a terrible crime against our nest before now."

"What crime?"

"Destroying the honor in our nest is damn near the worst crime anyone could commit."

"How dare you!" Rock reacted to his instincts. He didn't give a thought to the logical side of his brain. No one would ever insult his female and live to squawk about it.

Rock swung with one thought on his mind. His fist hit flesh and connected hard with bone. Heath howled as he flew backward. Beel leapt at Rock. The two of them tumbled backward and Rock barely managed to throw Beel off him when he saw Heath

fly through the air. His brother landed on top of him and both of them crashed to the hard, cold and wet roof.

"Stop it!" Darla yelled, flying through the door and onto the roof. She slid to a stop, staring in horror at the three males piled on top of each other in the ground. "Oh my God! All three of you. What the hell are you doing?"

Rock leapt to his feet, untangling himself from his brothers, and hurried to Darla. Her expression was pinched with pain and her eyes welled with tears as she stared up at him.

"You're fighting with your own nest," she gasped, her voice breaking as she shook her head and a lone tear slid down her face. "The three of you are fighting." She repeated as if trying to digest what she'd just seen. "Are we destroying the nest and den we both love and cherish?" she asked, and more tears slid down her face. "We can't let this happen, Rock."

"They will destroy themselves if they don't accept us." Rock pulled Darla into his arms and buried his face in her damp hair.

"It's our duty to see they remain strong and honorable." She buried her face against his chest, collapsing willingly and wrapping her arms around him.

Rock tightened his grip when her voice cracked and she shuddered. He smelled the outdoors on her, probably because she ran here in her fur. If everything weren't so screwed up right now he'd lecture his little cat for taking off by herself this late at night. But he also picked up the incredible amounts of pain ransacking her system.

"Let go of her, Rock." Heath still had the nerve to squawk with a condescending tone. He'd already pulled his phone out and pressed it against his ear.

Rock did let go of Darla. He moved so fast neither of his brothers had time to react. Rock grabbed Heath's phone and aimed to throw it. Darla also moved with impressive speed, grabbing his wrist and stopping him. His hand remained in the air, clutching the phone as he stared down at Darla.

Apparently a good, hard run helped ease her anger. "We will not dishonor our dens," she whispered, her look imploring as she stared up at him with her eyes flashing gold streaks over green.

Rock wasn't sure what she saw in him at times. Darla was beyond gorgeous. Her heart and mind were as perfect as her body. As she focused only on him, ignoring his brothers who watched both of them warily, her fingers brushed over the pulse in his wrist. He might not be revealing the rage burning in his veins as well as she showed him the pain conflicting with her emotions. When she pressed her finger over the artery in his wrist, she felt how hard his heart pounded. Darla knew his frustration matched hers. He saw it in her eyes.

Rock lowered his arm, still holding Heath's phone, and ran his free hand down the side of her head, stroking her long, blonde strands. "Kane called here shortly before you arrived," he explained. "He asked Heath to contact him when you arrived here."

Darla nodded once then hugged herself. She sucked in a breath when she gave Heath her attention. "Call Kane. Let him know I'm safe and unharmed. If you'll permit it, I will talk with Rock for a bit. He can escort me back to my den."

Heath eyed her with a fair amount of scrutiny. "I will contact Kane," he said, speaking slowly, then extended his hand, shifting his attention to Rock as he waited for him to return his phone. Heath didn't agree to her other requests.

Rock studied his brother as he handed him his phone. Anger still coursed through him at a dangerous rate, but with Darla standing next to him somehow he gathered enough control to manage it. His voice was calm when he spoke.

"Stay out of this, Heath," he suggested, not making his words a demand. It was a strong bit of advice his nest would be smart to follow.

"The leopard hunter made a request." Heath's voice was hard but he also appeared once again to be in control. "It would be incredibly illogical to ignore it."

"I'm not suggesting you ignore it. And I agree with you. Owls and leopards are on good terms. It is advantageous to keep it that way. But one has nothing to do with the other. I'll fly in the direction I choose, as do both of you."

Rock didn't wait for either of his brothers to say anything. He put his arm around Darla, pulling her close to him, and walked to the door leading to the stairs.

"This is really not cool," Darla complained as she trotted down the stairs alongside Rock. "You said everything would go wrong if we made love, and I admit I was blinded by my need for you, but, Rock," she wailed, keeping her voice low, "I still need you."

Rock's insides swelled and grew warm when he touched Darla's shoulder and opened the door leading to his floor. She needed him. It had been twenty-four hours, more or less, since he last saw her. It seemed like a lot longer, and it was enough time to worry she didn't want him. Such feelings weren't logical or rational. If there was a way he could think to broach the subject with his nest, he would ask them what love felt like. So far, it appeared not to make a lot of sense. Whatever its true sensation, the last twenty-four hours without Darla had been hell.

"Just because I predicted the outcome doesn't mean I'm enjoying it any more than you are," he said, unlocking his nest then holding the door and allowing her to enter. "You saw how my nest is reacting to it."

"Which is about the same as my litter." Darla faced him in the middle of his living room.

Her long, silky blonde hair clung to her shoulders and tapered over her full, round breasts. She wore a dark blue turtleneck. The knitted material fit close against her figure, showing off the perfect curves he ached to touch and explore once again. She shifted her weight and her captivating gold and green eyes dropped from his face. Darla was taking him in too. Rock focused on how her faded jeans hugged her slender legs and narrow hips. What he wouldn't do to have those legs wrapped around him as she threw back her head and howled with pleasure.

"Why are you here?" he asked, not really caring. All that mattered was she was here. He closed his door behind him, not taking his gaze off hers, and locked it.

"Because I was sick of the hissing and howling," she grunted, wrinkling her nose and looking even sexier than before. "I knew Kane would believe I'd run here first." She shrugged. "So I decided not to disappoint him."

Rock cleared the distance between them, lifting damp strands of hair off her shoulder and brushing it down her back. He brushed his knuckles along her jawbone and she hissed in a breath, her lips parting and her thick, long lashes fluttering over her eyes.

"You can't stay at my nest." Just touching her smooth, soft skin wasn't enough. He wanted to keep touching her, feeling her silky, warm flesh under his fingertips.

"I wish I could."

Immediately his cock sprang to life, although just having her in his nest had already stirred him. Now, however, heat swarmed to his groin with such an overwhelming force, the drain of blood damn near made him lightheaded.

It was growing harder to think logically. "Darla," he breathed, his voice rough. "I don't know yet where this is going."

"Where do you want it to go?" She let her head fall back when he combed his fingers into her hair.

"I want you with me." The words slipped out before he gave thought to his answer, as if his brain already knew the truth in spite of the nature of his ways insisting he analyze the situation and find the best solution for all nests and litters involved. Unfortunately, his entire parliament, and every leopard in the territory, would be affected by his decision concerning him and Darla.

She opened her eyes, staring into his face, as if she sensed his turmoil. "It isn't logical to try to please everyone with your actions."

At that moment, Rock was sure he loved her. Again she must have known his thoughts because her moist lips curved into an enticing grin. Rock feared in spite of his efforts, his emotions must be creating an aroma Darla sensed.

"We must consider our nest and litter." He didn't want to discuss this when his cock throbbed in his pants and her scent wrapped around him, luring him in closer until he had both his hands on her.

"I have been." She didn't whine but it was obvious she was already feeling the strain of fighting with them. "I might as well try scratching at a stone wall."

Rock imagined arguments between leopards grew quite loud, rough, and might end up with a few teeth and claws bared. It wasn't a pleasant thought, and at the same time, Rock understood he and Darla wouldn't always see the same logic in a situation. She wouldn't fight logically at all. More than likely Darla would learn a more cunning and shrewd way to argue her way around his logic. Thinking of her with her hair wild, her face flushed, and her breath coming hard in anger didn't make him react as he

should. His mind saw his gorgeous leopard and him working even harder to push her to the edge so they would have wild sex when they made up.

Just being around her seemed to wipe logical and rational thought clear out of his mind. "Tonight was the first time the three of us started shrieking at each other. In our defense, nerves were already strung tight from a night of scouring the town for jaguars."

Her expression sobered, although she took the moment to press her palm against his chest and focus on her fingers when she stretched them over his shirt. "I take it you didn't find any of them."

"No. But knowledge of the leopard meeting held last night has worked its way into the parliament. We have to move on this, do our best to confirm or deny if we have jaguars among us, or we'll end up with feathers flying everywhere."

"I'm sorry," she whispered, dragging her hand up to his collar then touching his collarbone.

Her bare fingers on his flesh created sparks of anticipation. They were almost strong enough to ignite the change deep inside him, and forcing the urge down made it harder to hide his growing lust.

"There is nothing for you to apologize for, little cat," he said, barely able to move his mouth as every inch of him stiffened when she continued to explore his neck with her fingers. "You didn't instigate the meeting of all your litters."

"No, Kane did. He and Jin wanted to watch the reactions of each litter as they shared the knowledge we have on the jaguars."

Which was actually a pretty good idea. "What did they learn?"

She shook her head, keeping her attention on her hand as she moved her fingers to his hair. "I'm not sure. The topic wasn't on the meeting as soon as Kane and Jin left the barn. An older mated couple stalked to talk to us and Kane was positive they were upset by my scent."

Rock was sure Darla experienced a fair bit of ridicule or unfair judgment even if it was nothing more than hostile looks or low growls. It had been his experience leopards didn't hide their thoughts on any matter. If she was at a meeting with most litters on the mountain present, then every leopard in the territory knew she'd slept with an owl. The urge to pull her against him, insist she never return to the mountain and instead remain where he could protect her, overwhelmed him.

He ran his hands up her arms then moved his fingers under her chin so she stared up at him. "This will pass," he insisted. "I know what you're enduring right now isn't pleasant."

"I've endured worse in the past." Her eyes flashed with the truth of her statement.

Rock realized how little he knew about her past. He knew Kane and Jin weren't related to her by blood. Dover Down, an owl from Kenora, brought Darla to Banff to stay with the leopard hunter. Dover had mated with Rock's sister and returned to

Kenora, leaving Darla here. From the squawking he'd heard over the years since Darla had been here, her litter, which consisted of two sisters and their mates, who were also both hunters, didn't approve of the males sniffing around Darla. Rock would thank them for that, although he safely guessed they would approve even less of him.

"Soon, I would like to learn what you've endured."

Her eyes fogged over, making it appear there was some secret in her past. But as easily as doubt registered in her face, it faded and was replaced with solemn convictions.

"We both have pasts," she told him. "But I don't have many secrets, Rock. I don't want you trying to sniff out something that isn't there. Right now all your attention should be on finding these jaguars. I'm a distraction."

He would argue but something told him she'd embrace the fight, and when they made up, the two of them would latch their scents to each other even more so. Rock loved the thought of permanently making her smell of him. But regardless of what she said, her face betrayed her. Darla had been through enough right now. If he sent her to her den with his scent even stronger than it was now, all hell would break loose.

"Let's take a walk." He enjoyed how her facial expression changed with each emotion she experienced.

Darla narrowed her eyes on him. "Do you know what kind of night it is out there? You want us walking outside in our flesh?"

"I have an extra coat for you. My nest and I flew over Banff for a couple of hours, focusing on every street, alley, park and field. We saw nothing to help us learn where these jaguars might be staying. Maybe if we walk for a bit we might learn more. And my nest and your litter can't throw as big of a fit if I'm enjoying your company in public."

She rolled her eyes and grinned. "Sometimes you are the most antiquated male," she said, chuckling, then wrapped her arms around his neck and leaned into him.

For a moment all thoughts flooded out of his brain as if someone had just released a latch, letting all rational thought and logic seep from his mind. Nothing seemed to matter when Darla was in his arms. Her breasts were pressed against his chest. Darla's soft, moist lips opened for him. Her thick lashes fluttered, hooding her gaze. But when she sighed, relaxing into him, the whole world was lost to him.

Rock took what she offered, devouring her mouth and impaling her with his tongue. She tasted too good, smelled even better, and felt like paradise. He ran his hands down her back, cupping her ass, then lifted and pressed her against his hard cock. When he growled, she purred into his mouth, the sound as erotic as if she'd just come and cried out his name. She rubbed her body against his, slinking up his body like the cat she was.

There was nothing for the moment but him and Darla. None of the problems surrounding their species, no politics or potential danger lingered around them. As he kissed her, feasting on her sensual passion, Rock knew only a world with the two of

them in it. A place so close to perfection there would never be concern of where either of them came from. They were perfect for each other. There wouldn't possibly be another female out there Rock would feel more strongly toward. All he saw in his future was him and Darla, flying and running together, building their nest together and making sure it also offered the comforts of a den. Whatever it took, wherever they had to go, Rock would make sure it happened so they would always be together.

"If we don't leave now, we aren't going anywhere," he informed her, breaking off the kiss. He was barely able to catch his breath.

Darla slinked down his body, no longer leaning into him on her tiptoes. Her lips were parted, moist and swollen from their kiss. Gold laced around green in her pretty eyes. Her skin was flushed with desire and her expression reflected the yearning pumping through her.

It pumped through him too, burning in his veins. The compelling need surging through him leapt forward almost stronger than the change. Interesting. Rock wanted Darla more than he wished to change into his feathers. There was never an urge that outweighed his need to fly in his purest form. Until now.

"I know," he whispered, caressing her flushed cheek with the back of his knuckles. "I want you too."

Darla stared up at him but didn't say anything. Her eyes flashed with vibrancy, her skin was warm and soft. Her pale blonde hair was tousled and her lips remained parted. Damn. She was an incredibly sensual, vibrant creature any male would fight and kill for. And she was quickly becoming his. There was no way he'd let her slip out of his wings. Whatever it took, Darla would remain at his side, his female, regardless of what their worlds thought.

Rock forced himself to quit speculating, worse yet, dreaming. All that mattered was the here and now. The only logical way to push the two of them forward was to pragmatically create events that would lead them in the direction they needed to go. Rock needed to watch his tail feathers carefully, and at the same time protect Darla. Right now everyone in both their worlds was against them being together. In order to keep the glow in her eyes, he needed to make sure those events showed her den and his nest how much they needed to be together.

"I'll get you my coat." He dropped his hands, stepping away from her. His fingers tingled, aching to stroke her warm flesh more.

Darla didn't move. Her head remained tilted, her gaze focused upward as if he hadn't moved, and she continued to stare at him. Rock turned, studying her. Her breathing increased until she almost panted. He moved to her and she jumped, her entire body jerking as if she were dodging a blow.

"Darla?" he questioned, reaching for her.

His fingers touched her arm and she jerked again, turning on him, her expression hostile. For a brief moment the cold in her eyes brought him pause. Her face softened

with no transition. One moment she appeared ready to attack him, the next, her expression returned to one of painful desire.

"What?" she whispered, her voice sultry as she stepped into him. "Are we leaving?"

He studied her, keeping his expression solemn. Something had changed inside her. She was trying to show him her craving for him was as strong as it had been when they ended their kiss. If he hadn't been standing there, aware less than a minute had passed, he possibly would have believed more time had slipped away. Her actions weren't crystal clear, but it was the only way he could interpret it.

"Yes. I'm getting your coat."

She smiled. "Thanks."

Whatever just happened to Darla, she didn't want him aware of it. Rock headed down his hall, grabbed the extra coat he had in his closet.

He reached the end of his hallway, staring into his living room, and studied her as she turned slowly and faced him. If something had just crossed her mind, it really disturbed her. Darla's expression was relaxed enough now. Her grin appeared sincere. She held out her hand for the coat.

"Where are we going to go?"

Rock held the coat so she could slip her arms into it. "I'm not sure. I guess we'll head toward downtown then possibly cut into the neighborhoods. No owl has come forward to inform us of anyone staying with them. You said as humans their eyes are different."

"Kind of opal-shaped. All of them had straight black hair. It was dark." She dropped her gaze and shrugged as she adjusted the oversized coat on her. It hung low and was at least several sizes too large. Her thin legs were visible below the large coat and her blonde hair tangled around the high collar. "Since I was in my fur, I saw more than as a human, but I focused more on their words and keeping myself out of sight."

"Let's go see if we can find some opal-shaped, black-haired jaguars." He put his hand on her back, leading her to his door.

When they were out in the hallway, heading to the stairs, Rock was surprised no one from his nest had checked on them. Possibly both his brothers were distracted by their mates. Rock didn't need a babysitter. He doubted anyone in his nest thought Darla wasn't safe with him. They might not approve of his choice of females, but it was clear Darla ran to him of her own accord.

"Darla," he said when they reached the bottom of the stairs and entered the lobby of the complex. There weren't any other owls around and as they stepped outside, a thick fog had descended on Banff, turning the black night into a world filled with different shades of gray. "What happened upstairs?"

She glanced up at him, shoving hair behind her ear and searching his face. "When we kissed?"

He met her gaze but then focused ahead of them, sniffing the air and making sure if anyone were around them, he knew where they were. Rock didn't smell anyone other than a couple of humans hurrying to their car across the street. Neither human gave either Rock or Darla any thought but opened car doors and slid inside.

"I know what happened during the kiss," he said, shifting his attention from the humans to ahead of them. The fog was thick and his human eyes limited, making it hard to see too far ahead of them. Although anyone else in their human form would have the same limitation in seeing them. "I don't mean the kiss, Darla. I think you know that."

She said nothing and as they continued walking, coming closer to downtown, he picked up her scent, not that he took a breath without inhaling her. But a new smell—apprehension, concern, possibly fear—reached his nose.

"What happened?" he asked, looking down at her. As he did, something caught his eye. They were at a side street and a shadow appeared on the sidewalk, paused and faced him. The smell of danger drowned out everything else.

"Rock, damn it, run!" Darla grabbed him, suddenly frantic as she used a fair amount of force to push him backward.

Chapter Ten

Darla hated not knowing when her visions would happen. She pushed harder against Rock, her hands flat on his chest, willing to let the change come forward just enough to give her more strength.

"Trust me. Please," she stressed, looking into his face.

Rock wasn't focusing on her though. With little effort he grabbed her arms and lifted her, turning slightly and placing her, none too gently, on the ground behind him. Then, holding his arm out to shield her, he started for the street.

"Not that way," she complained, the images of her vision returning her. The visions that were just flashes were the worst kind. Darla had never learned how to control or manipulate them as some leopards with the gift did. "Rock, please. We've got to go. We're in danger."

"How do you know that?" He didn't look at her but headed across the street, picking up his pace.

It was embedded too deep in her makeup to let him know about her visions. She never considered it an option when trying to explain to anyone why they should do something different than what they planned when danger was around the corner. This was worse than danger. They were walking into an ambush.

"Call it a hunch." They reached the other side of the street and she squinted into the fog, which circled around in front of them, taunting her. There was someone standing at the edge of the alley half a block down. They faced Rock and Darla, and didn't move. "Rock, stop. Just for a minute." She grabbed his arm.

Rock stopped. Thank God for small favors. He stared down at her, searching his face. "Why should we stop, Darla?"

It shocked her that for a moment it was right there, on the edge of her tongue, to tell him what she saw. The three males, leaping from a thick fog, attacking with brutal force neither one of them had the strength to ward off, sent a shiver rushing over her. Darla opened her mouth, trying to let the words come out.

Rock grabbed her arms, lowering his face to hers. "My little cat," he whispered. "What's wrong with you?"

She shook her head, hating emotions that attacked her when he looked at her with so much concern. Rock would understand. There wasn't any danger in telling him. It would only bring them together, make their bond stronger. At the last minute she remembered none of her visions had shown her a future with the two of them together.

Although there was the vision with the female asking if she cared she could never have cubs. Darla and Rock wouldn't be able to have cubs. Her vision didn't say that

was the reason. Maybe there was something wrong with her she just didn't know about yet.

"I smell danger." Her voice cracked and she shot a furtive look down the street.

The male standing in the fog wasn't there anymore. Had she allowed enough time to pass? Visions could be changed if the leopard who had them understood all the consequences around the vision and altered them.

"I have a good smell about these things." She didn't smell as if she were lying because in a way, what she said was true. Darla touched Rock's face. "I think the jaguars are very close but I'm afraid we aren't a match for them. They are fierce and incredibly deadly. Rock, they're stronger than we are," she said, a pleading in her tone. Her voice cracked as she finished speaking and she cleared her throat.

"How do you know this?" Rock narrowed his gaze on hers, his grip tightening. "Darla, if you know anything about them you haven't told me yet, now is the time."

"They can kill us. I don't want you hurt." Her emotions grew too strong. The pain she experienced in her vision ripped through her. She wouldn't see Rock sliced open, his body tossed around as if it weighed nothing. He wouldn't be ripped from her life before they'd had a chance to live together. "This was a mistake. We should go back."

Rock studied her another moment then maintained his grip on her arm as he started walking. They didn't head toward the alley where the shadow of a male had stood waiting for them. Instead, he picked up a brisk, fast-paced walk, almost forcing her to run by his side as he maintained a vise grip on her arm.

"Where are we going?" she asked, breathless, after they'd cleared two blocks in half the time it had taken them to walk this far.

"To talk."

Her nerves were rattled, but the panic from her vision subsided. Rock was upset with her, but he was alive. She'd take his wrath, witness those emotions he was such a pro at masking anytime over watching him be filleted with little effort by dark shadows who were so cold their emotions chilled her blood.

Rock slowed when they came to the end of the downtown shops. Earl's was across the street, doing a fair amount of business, and she was acutely aware of owls coming and going, sniffing the air, and looking their direction. Apparently Rock wasn't worried about what anyone in their parliament thought about the two of them being together. In spite of being shaken by her vision then knowing they'd just faced a close call, a wash of pride warmed her. He would fly by her side regardless of what anyone else thought. That or he was so preoccupied by her actions and the jaguars he didn't pay attention to any of the owls watching them. They turned the corner, heading into a neighborhood, and he picked up his pace once again.

They walked so quickly, by the time they reached a secluded park, with waves of fallen clouds hovering over the ground, Darla was far from cold. Her heart thumped in her chest as she breathed in the frigid night air. The homes around them were filled with humans. She picked up their stale smell easily, created from so many emotions

built up inside them over the years, which they held on to since they couldn't change and create an outlet to release them. They were a species she'd always pitied.

"Sit." Rock stopped at a swing set, let go of her and pointed to one of three swings.

He took the one in the middle, straddling it sideways so he faced her. Then pushing with his legs, he brought his swing closer to hers when she sat hesitantly on the damp black belt attached to chains.

"Now," he began. "There is something said about leopards, knowledge most of us have heard bits and pieces of over the years. Squawking is just that, but when I witness something with my own eyes, it's easier to confirm or deny previous rumors."

Darla knew where he was going with this and took her time raising her attention to his face. She didn't bother moving loose strands of hair, partially covering her eyes, that were no longer tucked inside Rock's oversized coat. It wasn't as if she needed a shield from Rock. Her heart ached to share every detail of her vision, bring him closer into her world where sometimes visions guided her in spite of their ambiguity.

Rock pushed closer in his swing, moving one long leg behind her and pressing it against her ass. The other he draped over her legs, pinning her and forcing her swing to hang at an angle as he held her against him. He brushed her hair from her face.

"I know you trust me," he whispered, as if speaking too loud might disrupt the heavy fog surrounding them. "I've always smelled it on you. What is it, my little cat?"

Her insides ignited with flames that kindled to life, warming her even more against the chill of the night. His deep gray eyes stared at her, searching beyond her face into her heart and soul. When she was alone with him, too often she swore he saw all her emotions and understood them more than she did.

"You're right." She buried her hands in the deep pockets, Rock's scent wrapped around her in his coat, and drifted toward her with him so close. He meant so much to her. She needed him to accept a part of her she'd never fully understood. "It's not about trust. Not with you and me. Not now," she continued, hating it when she didn't make sense. She tried again. "If I were to ask you to show all emotions you were feeling deep inside, you would balk. It's not in your nature to do that. It doesn't mean you don't trust me. It means you don't express emotions the way I do."

"I don't keep that knowledge a secret." He petted her hair, studying her.

She hated how easily he proved his point against the only example she could think of to compare the two of them.

"What do you know about these visions leopards are supposed to have?" he asked.

Rock's ever-powerful self-control was wrapped strongly around him. Even though he held her in a rather erotic position, pinning her to him with his strong legs in front and behind her, his expression remained relaxed, as if all he might be thinking was a pleasant swing might alleviate all their worries and stress.

"Not all leopards have visions, and those visions about destroyed our species," she answered truthfully, easily remembering running with her litter and helping one den

after another cross the border as they fled for their lives from the monster Leo Pard, who tried to capture leopards with visions and force them into matings that would give him power over their kind. "For those who had them, it made the time in our history when Pard tried to take control very dark."

"I've heard that." He brushed his thumb over her cheek, causing her skin to prickle as tiny shocks of excitement triggered her nerve endings and made every inch of her an erogenous zone. His attention shifted to his hand and he watched his thumb caressing her, as if he saw how his touch ignited raw, carnal need inside her. "I've never actually witnessed a leopard having a vision." His knowing gray eyes met her pensive gaze. "Have I?"

He tricked her. His question was so direct there was only one answer. Darla wouldn't lie. It was pointless when any untruth made the air fill with nauseating stench. More than anything she wanted him to make love to her, fuck her until it was all they could do to stand. She wanted him inside her, easing the swelling growing and spreading with his every touch.

Rock studied her a moment longer before suddenly pushing his swing back and standing. Darla rocked back and forth before grabbing the chains on either side of her and hopping up when Rock lifted one leg over his swing and stalked off toward the trees bordering the park.

"Rock," she cried after him, hesitating in yelling since humans in the houses around them were asleep. She ran across the wet grass, her hair growing more damp in the heavy fog as she chased after him until trees surrounded both of them. "Damn it, don't you dare walk off on me," she hissed, catching up and grabbing his arm.

He spun around and she swore she saw rage and pain twisted in his tight expression when he glared down at her. "I thought I knew you, Darla," he said, his voice clipped, tight and too controlled. He pierced her heart with gray eyes heavy with emotions. "There is a part of you that makes up the basic core of who you are and for whatever reasons you seem to think we're better off without me knowing. Yet it is what makes you the female who is standing before me."

He was seriously pissed just because she hesitated in answering. Rock didn't understand. He didn't know about the many years she and her sisters ran with an organization, every minute of their lives possibly being their last. They never talked about their visions. She barely ever mentioned them to Jin or Kane, and both of them also had visions. It just wasn't discussed.

"I'm sure there are parts of your past you haven't shared with me," she shot back, immediately defensive. Not telling him about her visions didn't have a thing to do with her feelings for him. He was out of line to suggest otherwise.

"What do you want to know? I learned to fly when I was six, a year older than Heath and a year younger than Beel," he stated, his voice soft and very deadly sounding. "The first time I flew I left a branch and did a nose dive, finally hitting the ground and spraining a wing so I couldn't try flying again for a week. It was the longest

week of my life. My sire and mother both died when I was barely grown, leaving the nest we were all hatched in and the complex for our nest to continue existing in. And for years I thought all I wanted in life was to end up with the perfect female who would hatch our young so they would run up and down the halls of the complex just the way my brothers and sister and I used to do."

She stared at him, realizing what being with her would force him to sacrifice. "I'm sorry, Rock."

He sighed, actually sounding exasperated. "What are you sorry for?"

"That I won't ever be able to give you cubs or fledglings." She tried laughing, willing the tension between them to fade. Instead, the sound choked in her throat as tears welled in her eyes.

"Do you want cubs?" he asked, his voice suddenly gentle.

Darla shrugged. "I want you, Rock. And all the good and bad that will come with being with you."

"Then there will be no secrets between us, ever." His firm tone returned. "I want to know what happened to you in my nest."

She bit her lip and willed the words out of her mouth.

"I saw something." She stared up at him, willing herself not to look away and let the words spill out of her. "I don't have control over it and never know when they're going to happen."

"You don't feel different right before, or anything?" Rock's anger was gone. He was incredibly curious.

Maybe she should be flattered. A part of her she had no control over fascinated him. Darla knew he wouldn't talk about her visions with anyone. If she could just get the sensation out of her gut, which made her feel she was doing something wrong, all of this would be so much easier.

Darla shook her head. "I've had visions since I was a small cub. I don't even remember how long ago I had my first one. They are as natural to me as flying is to you. Although I admit sometimes they can be a bit awkward," she added, shifting her weight but refusing to lower her gaze.

Rock rested his hands on her shoulders, sliding them inside her coat, then gently began massaging her. "I don't ever want you feeling awkward around me, my precious cat," he said, his voice rough and raspy. "You're my other half, regardless of your running and my flying. We were meant to be together or neither of us would feel the way we do."

She nodded, sometimes hating his skills at suppressing his emotions when at the moment all of hers wanted to spill right out. She wanted to leap into his arms, howl into the thick fog, purr as she rubbed against him and shed tears of happiness.

"Tell me what you saw," he encouraged, possibly seeing an emotional meltdown was pending and doing his best to prevent it.

She sucked in a deep breath, finally pulling her gaze from his. If he wanted her as she was, then occasionally that would mean dealing and coping with her feelings. Darla had no problem training her wise and logical owl how to do that.

"There were three males coming toward us. You were standing next to me, similar to how you were in your nest, but we weren't in your nest anymore. We were outside. I felt the cold biting at my face."

"What did the males look like?"

"They were more like shadows, the way the male appeared when we saw him down the block from us a few minutes ago." She gestured over her shoulder, indicating the way they'd come to the park. Her coat slid down her shoulder and Rock grabbed it, tucking it again close to her neck but keeping his hands inside it. Darla swore they warmed her more than his coat did. "I saw their straight black hair. And their faces were masks of evil."

She shivered, remembering how the three males stared at them, and her feeling of helplessness a few moments later. Rock wrapped his arms around her, pulling her against him, and stroked her back under her coat.

"It was just a vision. Do they always come true?" he asked, speaking into her hair.

"Oftentimes, yes." Darla loved being in his arms. It was all she could do though to maintain her fear. She needed a clear head if she were to protect Rock. Just because she altered her last vision didn't mean there were three jaguars in Banff who wanted him dead. "If enough is seen, I can alter them if I need to. Visions aren't always bad though."

"Later you can share some of your good ones with me," he whispered. "What happened next?"

She raised her head, letting it fall back, and stared into his face, which was a breath away from hers. "They attacked," she told him, forcing the words out. If only she didn't have to tell him, but he was right, and if they were going to truly bond there could be no secrets. "They tore you apart, Rock. They threw you around as if you were no more than a pile of clothes and attacked. I couldn't stop them and I couldn't move. We need to learn more about these jaguars before we go seek them out. I want to know every fighting tactic they use. It's the only way we'll be able to stop them."

Twenty minutes later they were in Heath's nest. Darla wouldn't discuss anything she saw with his nest until she spoke to her den. It wasn't an easy phone call when Jin answered and damn near spit at her through the phone.

"Kane has done nothing but pace this den like a caged animal," she accused, her tone bitter with anger. "You're being one hell of a selfish bitch right now, and you're going to quit thinking of yourself and start thinking about those who care about you. If you don't, Darla, you'll deal with me. No one hurts my mate like this."

Darla's insides constricted. Jin wasn't a female to mess with and she'd graciously provided Darla with a den for a couple of years now. The two of them had had their

issues in the past, but they were petty compared to this. The best way to handle the irate female was with humility and graciousness. Darla knew when to belly-up. She didn't like it, not when she'd been a cub and even less now as a grown female.

"I didn't mean to hurt either of you," she said gently, standing in Heath's kitchen and speaking softly. Rock and his brothers, along with their mates, were in the living room drinking coffee and talking quietly among themselves. It would have been easy to hear their conversation if she weren't focusing on her own. Darla knew Rock wouldn't share her vision with any of them. She did trust him, with all her heart. "There is something I need to tell you two though. I had a vision, a bad one," she added, knowing it would grab Jin's attention.

After speaking to her and to Kane, who was all business when he got on the phone, both agreed to come to Heath's nest.

"There is one more thing." Darla straightened, glancing over her shoulder to the open doorway leading into the living room. She couldn't see anyone, but all the owls were in there. She breathed slowly, knowing if she didn't sound sure of herself, Kane would pick it up, even over the phone. "I'm going to share my vision with all the owls."

There was silence on the other end of the line.

"Kane," she said, dropping her voice to an even softer whisper. "I think they're here to kill Heath."

The sun was almost ready to appear on the horizon when Kane and Jin arrived at Heath's nest. Although the complex was quiet, there would be a few owls rising early, or going to bed really late. No one spoke until all were in Heath's living room and he and his mate were busy making sure everyone had coffee.

"You honor us by coming to our nest," Heath told Kane soberly.

"Do you know why this meeting is occurring at such an unusual hour?" Kane asked.

Darla stood across the room, leaning in the doorway from the kitchen to the living room. She knew Kane respected Heath and thought highly of him as a leader among the owls. Kane wouldn't allow Heath to feel at a disadvantage if he suggested he knew more than Heath did.

"I think we'll find out soon," Heath told him, helping as host and topping off Kane's coffee. "You and your mate make yourself comfortable."

Jin glanced at Darla before sitting next to Kane. It was more difficult picking out scents with so many of them in the room. With most of them owls though, the emotions Darla smelled were Kane's or Jin's. Having lived with them for the past years, Darla knew each of their unique aromas. Although to an untrained nose, the two of them would smell very much the same, as did all mated couples. Darla picked up on Jin's suspicions. She'd guessed Darla had already told Rock about her visions. Jin wasn't as sure if Rock had told his nest, but the shrewd look she gave Darla before sitting let her know Jin didn't approve of any of it.

Darla looked away first. She'd never tried curbing Jin's beliefs. Nor did she judge Jin for the many sins of her past. If Jin started snapping in her face, Darla didn't have a problem reminding Jin how long her list of transgressions had been. There was a major difference between Darla and Jin. Darla wasn't doing anything wrong. Jin's past crimes grew so long she'd been stripped of her title as hunter. That was another story though.

Darla forced herself to relax. She would speak to all of them in a moment and although she didn't have a lot of experience with public speaking, there would be no way any of them smelled her as weak.

Already Darla knew her decision regarding Rock would upset everyone in this room. They would bare their teeth or flap their feathers, but in the end, the decision of mating belonged to her and Rock, and no one else. Both of their sires and mothers had passed on. Those remaining didn't hold power over either of them to prevent a mating. And Darla wanted Rock. She wasn't sure if he hesitated out of fear of upsetting everyone, or if he worried for Darla's sake. She'd find out. It crossed her mind more than once in her mating, she would be the stronger, the more powerful, and if it meant making sure Rock was always honored and respected by everyone around them, she would begin right now by showing those in this nest how strong and determined she could be.

Darla waited until Heath and Shelly took almost-empty coffeepots into the kitchen then watched them return to the living room and sit on the opposite side of the couch from Kane and Jin. Beel and his mate were comfortable in the recliner, with Andrea curled on her mate's lap. Both looked as if they'd crawled out of bed to come here, and they probably had. When Rock moved around all of them, coming to her side, she held her hand out to him, making sure she didn't tremble as she stifled her fears and forced her confidence forward.

She spoke before Rock could. "Rock and I discussed something earlier this evening," she began, not surprised when all eyes shifted to her and narrowed.

Rock glanced down at her and she looked up, staring into his large gray eyes.

"We took a walk, curious if we might detect jaguars when Rock and his nest couldn't find any sign of them after flying over Banff several times," she continued.

"If this is about—" Kane began, standing so quickly he shook the coffee table in front of him with his knees.

Darla darted forward at the same time Shelly sprang from the couch next to her mate, and the two of them stabled all the coffee cups. Darla straightened first, staring Kane in the eye from across the coffee table.

"This isn't about Rock and me," she hissed, her stomach twisting when she stared into Kane's outraged pale eyes. Kane's reputation preceded him. He had one hell of a vicious temper. "This is about all of us," she continued, daring him to say a word when he damn well knew why he was here already. "I didn't trick you," she whispered. "Please sit down."

Her confidence grew when Kane did as she asked, returning to the couch and forcing Jin to practically sit on the armrest when his large frame took up almost half the space.

"I've decided to share a vision I had earlier tonight with all of you."

That grabbed all the owls' attentions. Rock's hand moved to her back and his fingertips brushed over her spine. His touch created sparks that danced up her spine, creating heated sensations of pleasure that were impossible to ignore. Darla straightened, clasped her hands in her lap and exhaled as she focused on her words.

"I'm not always sure of the exact time when what I see will take place, but I can tell you as long as I've lived and had visions, they've always happened, although sometimes only seeing part of a scene can give an inaccurate impression of what will happen."

"Interesting," Heath muttered, and the other owls made similar comments.

Darla kept going, not leaving out a single detail as she told them about the three males in the alley, barely more than dark shadows, and how they shredded Rock. She shivered when she finished and once again Rock caressed her back gently.

"That's what happened, or what will happen," she finished to a quiet and sober room. "But I fear what this might mean is someone brought the jaguars here to kill you, Heath."

She wasn't the only one to stare at him when she finished speaking.

"To those who don't know us, we look a lot alike," Rock offered, and met his brother's hard gaze.

"I agree." Heath didn't appear upset, worried or scared.

Not that Darla was too surprised. All of them were pros at not revealing any of their feelings.

"The question is," Heath said, standing and patting his mate's head with his hand as he moved around the coffee table and began pacing. "Who would ask them to come here and why?"

"I have a speculation," Kane said, although he didn't stand. His large body was draped over half the couch and his long legs were crossed alongside the coffee table. If someone didn't know, they might guess this was his den instead of Heath's nest. "Mind you, it's only speculation, but if you'll remember about three years ago."

Heath spun around, pointing a finger at Kane. "A lot of leopards came here and tried to buy out our businesses."

"We managed to stop them," Beel cut in.

"And I'm sure all of us made a few enemies out of the deal," Rock finished for all of them.

"But the leopards know you are eldest in your nest." Kane leaned forward, lifting his arm and removing it from behind Jin. He rested his elbows on his knees and his alert eves flickered from Heath to Beel and Rock as he spoke. "We've always honored the oldest as the one in charge of his den. Leopards would view you as responsible for preventing them from moving ahead in this territory."

"So who stood to lose the most when we stopped them from buying out our shops?" Heath didn't appear to address the question to anyone but instead began rubbing his chin and pacing. "There were quite a few dens who offered deals to owls who had held businesses downtown for many years. I knew if they bought them out, those nests wouldn't be able to continue to survive, even if offered a fair price. Most of the owls knew that too."

"Several dens made serious offers," Rock said, giving his brother all his attention. He kept his hand on Darla's back.

She was acutely aware of everywhere he touched her but doubted anyone else in the room paid any attention to either of them at the moment. There were bigger problems to deal with than the two of them being together.

"Quite a few left when their offers fell through," Jin spoke up. "But not all of them." She touched her mate's shoulder and he twisted to look at her. "The Gibbons den tried buying into downtown when they first moved here. I know the Lockhams also sniffed around pretty heavily. Many of the dens who wanted to open shop in Banff left when they were unable to do so, but those two stayed."

Kane nodded and returned his attention to Heath. "I'll do some sniffing around. I'm going to have to agree with Darla though, and I don't admit this easily, but it sounds as if these jaguars are highly trained, ruthless killers. Darla's vision will come true, although we can prevent it from happening the way she saw it. Until further notice I would suggest your entire nest move around town heavily escorted."

"They want me. There have been no reports of violent outbreaks and we know when they arrived. I don't know how angry they will get when they don't get me, but I'll worry about that when it happens. Get back with me as soon as you know more about your dens and who might hold a serious grudge."

Darla wondered if the leopards and owls working together to defeat the jaguars might make all parties a bit more receptive to her and Rock being mated. The thought brought her pause, and it took a moment for her to realize she'd curled into Rock, her hand on his chest and her head resting against his shoulder. She still wore his oversized coat and his arm was securely around her, keeping her close.

And she'd just told herself she planned to take Rock as her mate. It was almost impossible to prevent the warmth she suddenly felt spreading throughout her body to remain inside her and not create a new, interesting scent for all to breathe in. Darla wanted Rock as her mate because she loved him. She'd thrown a fit before they reached the alley to keep him alive because she loved him. And she'd sprung out of the swing, not giving a thought to her own pride and convictions, but chased after Rock, giving him what he needed from her when she'd shared her vision because she loved him.

As soon as this jaguar mess blew over, Darla would make him her mate.

Chapter Eleven

Rock locked his nest's door, having half a mind to turn off his cell phone and insist Darla do the same. They'd left Heath's nest with him still discussing possible plans concerning the jaguars with Shelly. Kane and Jin had decided it would be best to get started, paying several dens a visit before anyone got too far into their day. Most leopards ran at night and weren't early risers. Kane wanted to catch the leopards he needed to see before they left their dens for the day.

"What did you and Jin say to each other before they left?" he asked Darla, reaching behind her then slipping his coat off her shoulders. "Do she and Kane know you're in my nest?"

She stretched, arching forward and pushing her full, round breasts against her shirt as she slid out of the coat and let him take it. Immediately, Rock was hard. He wanted Darla in his bed now. They could talk later. But he sensed her unease and smelled worry on her. He would calm her first then get her out of her clothes.

"She suggested I run with them to the different dens they were going to visit," Darla said, and walked farther into his nest, rubbing her hands together as if she wanted to warm them.

"She didn't look too upset." Rock had watched the two females exchange a few words, ready to jump in and pull Darla back if Kane's mate bared her claws. Darla was a strong female, a pure spitfire, but he wouldn't force her to be in a position where she would be attacked. "Does she know you're here with me?" he repeated.

She faced him, her chin sticking out as she stared at him defiantly. "Jin and Kane opened their den to me out of loyalty to my litter and my sisters' mates. But, Rock, neither of them control my actions." She took a step forward, hesitated only for a moment then sauntered closer. "I'm a grown female and although I will always honor the two of them and hear any advice or concerns they might have, we all know I make my own decisions."

Rock swore there was a bit more swing in her hips than usual and decided Darla speaking to everyone upstairs at his brother's nest had built her confidence. She didn't stop until her hands were on his shoulders.

"I told Jin it wasn't a good idea for me to run with them to the different dens. My presence during any form of interrogation would possibly create suspicions, especially if they were talking to the den guilty of bringing the jaguars here." She leaned against him, her nipples hardening against his chest, easily felt through both of their shirts, as she began running her fingertips over his flesh just inside his collar. "I told Jin if we entered the den who wished Heath Halk to die and they smelled your scent on me, it would be harder to learn the truth out of them."

"Interesting," he mused, seeing the satisfaction in his adorable cat's eyes. "And Jin followed and accepted this line of thinking?"

"It's the truth," she reminded him, sticking her chin out and staring up at him with her large, pretty eyes. "Jin knew it and couldn't argue the point."

They were back to his initial question. "So what did you say you would do?"

"Assist you and your nest," she informed him then grinned sweetly, the smell of her satisfaction making the air around them smell clean and sweet.

"I'll contact my brothers here in a few to learn if they plan to fly around town this morning."

"I really think we're on to something, thinking a den hired those jaguars. I just wish I could identify the leopards I saw in the alley talking to those jaguars."

"Let Kane and Jin worry about the leopards," he insisted. "We should focus on tracking down the jaguars."

"They've got to be staying somewhere nearby."

He nodded once, enjoying how she wrinkled her brow and the top of her nose when she started to give the matter serious thought. "I wonder why the male jaguars were walking down that alley in my vision?" she asked, her long lashes hooding her pretty eyes when she lowered her attention somewhere around his neck. "Were they headed somewhere, or coming from somewhere?" Her eyes widened when she returned her attention to his face. A small smile appeared and she kept her lips parted, whatever thought having just come to her getting her rather excited. "Are there nests for rent or let out on short-term basis above any of the shops downtown?" she asked, her grin broadening.

Rock would be content to remain right where they were, face-to-face, with her enticing aroma heavy in the air around them. Darla was a beautiful creature, but her captivating traits lay more in her excitement for life. When a thought hit her, she pounced on it. If something needed to be done, Darla was on top of the task with all claws bared. Her fiery energy appealed to him more than he ever thought it would. What he was falling in love with were the many emotions she displayed for him. No owl female would ever be able to give him that, nor would he want them to.

"There are nests above many of the shops." He pictured downtown in his mind and tried to line each shop on the block Darla had mentioned in her vision then tried to remember where each shop owner kept their nest. "Honestly, I'm not sure if all of them are used as nests. Some might be storage. There are some shopkeepers who live around town."

"That's what I thought," she said, her hair tumbling over her shoulder when she nodded. The long, pale, blonde strands were silky and soft. "Which means they might be inclined to rent the space out to someone who approached them—for a short period of time—to make some extra money."

"It's possible." He itched to lift her hair where it draped over her breast, to stroke the blonde strands between his fingers. "That isn't something we could check out this early. Most shops don't open for at least another hour."

"It sounds as if we should find something to do for an hour." She moved her hands, slipping his coat off his shoulders then leaving him to catch it or let it fall to the floor. She pulled his shirt up, pushing her hands underneath as she ran them over his bare chest. "I just had a wonderful brainstorm and deserve a reward. I've decided you should make love to me right now."

"I'm not going to argue with that decision." He tossed his coat to the couch and lifted Darla into his arms. If he didn't take them to bed, his cock would be so painfully hard he wouldn't be able to walk. With Darla in his arms though, her mouth immediately finding his neck and her teeth and lips doing wicked things to his flesh, he was damn lucky to make it as it was. "I think taking charge of a room really turned you on."

"Maybe." She moved to her knees when he placed her on his bed and pulled her shirt off, tossing it to the floor as her long, silky strands fanned around her bare shoulders. "I definitely want to make love to you, Rock. But it's more than an urge to relieve physical need. There's something I've decided and we should probably discuss it."

She didn't look at him as she reached behind her back, unsnapping her bra then allowing the straps to slip down her shoulders. She unceremoniously tossed it in the direction of her shirt then immediately began working on her jeans and shoes. Her scent had grown more serious and her actions methodical as if she were giving very little thought about taking her clothes off, or where she tossed them. There was definitely something else on her mind.

"What have you decided?" All blood was flowing at breathtaking speed to his cock. Rock stripped while standing at the edge of his bed, watching her as her clothes were soon on the floor.

When she returned to her knees, completely naked, her fingers wrapped around his stiff cock. "I've decided I'm going to mate with you," she said.

Rock might have blinked. He wasn't sure. His head was full of a thick haze of lust. His heart already pounded in his chest just from watching her strip. The only thought on his mind had been burying himself deep in her heat. He stared at her as her lips curved into a very satisfied smile.

"If I didn't know better I'd say the cat has your tongue," she said, her grin broadening. "And in this case, your cock also."

She tugged slightly then moved her fingers up and down the length of his shaft. Darla worked some strange magic on him. Her fingers had never felt better.

"Wait a minute." He wouldn't let her comment slide between them without addressing it. "Mating is a very serious matter," he informed her. "Quite a bit of logic

needs to wrap around the situation. Not to mention, I'm supposed to ask you, not the other way around."

One of her eyebrows arched and she puckered her lips into a sensual, stimulating pose. "Oh really? Is that some owl tradition?"

Rock stared at her. "Just as much as it is a leopard tradition," he pointed out. Damned if she would try to bluff him into believing her species viewed the matter any different than owls did. "We find our mates and claim them, and have since the beginning of time. That is why you carry my scent. Hundreds of years ago, that would have been enough to make us mated."

"In case you haven't noticed, my darling male," she said, her voice soft and as sultry as the soft curves on her body. "You are carrying my scent. It is rather well known that males are rogues, running, or in your case, flying, wherever they wish until a female sets her sights on him and tames him then mates with him, securing his unending loyalty to her."

She was playing with him. There weren't any doubts in his mind. But her expression was priceless and she truly smelled as if she believed everything coming out her adorable mouth.

"Interesting," he said, returning his attention to her gentle hand and fingers as she tugged slightly then stroked him until he worried he might explode any minute if he didn't give her actions all his attention.

"Interesting?" She tugged on his cock a bit harder than she had a moment before. "All you think of mating with me is it's 'interesting'?"

Rock grabbed her wrist and she tightened her grip even more on his cock, and at the same time extended one finger and tickled his balls.

"Crap, female," he hissed, swearing his eyes almost rolled back in his head.

"Come here," she whispered, tugging in spite of his hand gripping her wrist. "I want you lying down on the bed."

He'd knelt on the bed before any rational thought returned to his brain. There was a rather aggressive side to his feisty cat. Rock decided that letting her know how hot she was right now wouldn't be to his advantage. If he was going to train his adorable leopard to submit, he'd need to be a bit more subtle than that.

Rock stretched out on his bed, lying on his back, interested in seeing where she was going with her demands. Her bright green eyes sparkled from gold streaks and her deep breaths forced her large breasts to harden, her nipples ripe little berries he'd do anything to devour right now. Her long, blonde hair flowed down her arms, parting around her breasts, and added to her erotic pose when she kneeled next to him.

"As I was saying," she said, bending over and giving him one hell of a perfect ass shot, which he immediately forgot about when she stroked his cock with her tongue. "Once this mess with the jaguars is over, I want you to be my mate."

As soon as she finished speaking, Darla wrapped her hot mouth around his cock and took almost all of him deep inside. Her teeth barely scraped his overly sensitive flesh as it slid with her then tightened when her tongue flicked at his tip.

"My beautiful leopard," he hissed, gritting his teeth and reaching for her. Rock barely managed petting the side of her head as she continued stroking his cock with her lips, torturing him with the slightest scrapes from her teeth, and making it damn hard not to thrust his cock down her throat when she lapped at him with her tongue.

A chill wrapped around his wet dick when she eased it from her mouth. Rock gripped her hair, preventing her from moving her head when her lips were wrapped around his tip.

"If you're going to keep talking," he began.

Darla chuckled, teasing the top of his dick with her tongue as she shot him a wicked look.

He pushed her back down on his cock. When her eyes fluttered closed and she hummed, Rock was sure his toes curled with pleasure. Darla never struck him as the rough type, but she was a leopard. He'd never discussed their sexual practices with her, mainly because he didn't want to know what she might have done with other males.

Owl females were aggressive, if not vicious at times. The ones he'd fucked in the past though submitted quickly enough when he insisted. Rock would take control soon, but giving Darla her time, watching how her face glowed with happiness as she showed her assertive side, got him too damn hot to make her quit yet.

Rock wrapped her hair around his hand, pulling slightly. With each tug, Darla growled. Her hot mouth vibrating around his cock was almost too much to take. His little female had skills. If he let his mind wander even a bit, curious as to where she learned to do what she was doing to him right now, his blood began boiling. Chasing after males who might have been with her in the past would be incredibly illogical. Rock knew she hadn't slept with any other male since he'd met her. That would have to do. There was also the possibility her feelings for him were strong enough they brought out skills she hadn't used before on anyone else. That idea appealed to him a lot more.

When Darla braced her hands on either side of him and pushed as if she were doing a push-up, Rock let her up. His cock twitched between them, shiny and wet, swollen and throbbing. He wanted back in her warmth, but one look at her face with her swollen, glossy lips, and her tousled hair, and other ways of enjoying her popped into his mind.

"Come here," he ordered, repeating her command from earlier.

"Something you want?" she teased, remaining on all fours next to him.

Rock didn't answer but sat up, ignoring the lightheadedness he immediately felt and his swollen cock as he grabbed her, dragging her over his body. "There are many things I want," he informed her, pressing her back on the bed next to him, then coming over her.

"I wasn't done yet," she complained, immediately trying to sit up.

"I know you aren't done."

Although he was stronger than she was, Darla put some muscle into it, wrestling with him on the bed. "Trust me," she said, managing to sit, then pressing her hands against his shoulders. Her flushed face was fused with determination. "You'll love all the pleasure I'm going to give you."

"I know I will." He moved her hands so they slipped over his shoulders and she collapsed against him in her struggle. With their positioning, her large breasts bounced in his face. "I'm going to love every minute of it," he said then pounced on the closest nipple and sucked her deep into his mouth.

Darla cried out, arching and stiffening at the same time as her fingers dug into his hair. She held his head in place, proving to him she was stronger than her small features suggested. Rock had no desire to change positions. He let her keep him there as he devoured first one breast then another.

Both of them had so much to learn about each other's bodies. Rock wanted to find every spot of pleasure on her. He wanted to know what sounds she made when she was excited, surprised, about to come, and when her orgasms tore through her body. He loved how wild she looked when she took him on sexually. Something suggested she didn't have a lot of sexual experience. He had a feeling her actions were natural and not based on trial and error, although with Darla, he doubted anything she did sexually would be termed an error.

When he returned to her first nipple, he scraped it with his teeth then clamped down, tugging gently at first.

"Oh hell yes! Rock," she hissed, her cries encouraging him as much as the fresh smell of passion as it floated heavily in the air.

Darla liked having her nipples played with. Something he doubted he'd ever forget now that he knew. Her passion was sweet, intoxicatingly so, as it filled his bedroom, thick waves of it adding to the rich, salty taste of her flesh. Every one of his senses were heightened. He was overly aware of how she swayed, the arch of her narrow back when she pressed more of her breast into his mouth, and the satiny feel of her skin when she rubbed against him.

At first he cupped her smooth, round ass, making sure she didn't settle too close on his cock. As desperately as he needed inside her, he knew he'd enjoy fucking her even more if he allowed her to fully ripen. Darla was on the edge, teetering in his arms, her face staring at his ceiling, although he doubted she saw a thing. Her long, smooth hair swayed down her back, tickling his arms.

When he cupped her breasts, holding each of them and feeling their round, smooth fullness, Rock divided his time, nipping at each nipple with his teeth, scraping her puckered flesh then teasing her with his tongue. After applying torture, he would gently suck her into his mouth and drown in her rich smell of lust as she hummed her approval and tightened her grip in his hair, encouraging him to continue.

There was no way of proving if she simply relaxed on him, or if her motives were more devious, but Rock grew acutely aware of how hot smoothly shaved pussy was when she pressed it against the tip of his cock. In spite of his decision to take his time and make her come before fucking her, his body jerked when the intensity of her heat scoured his dick.

Darla also stiffened, as if just realizing he was right at her entrance. If Rock hadn't anticipated her next move, Darla probably would have succeeded. The moment she thrust down, ready to sheath him with her tight pussy, Rock lifted her off him, tossing her to the bed next to him.

Her hair tangled over her face and she moved her hands to part it. "Rock Halk!" she cried out.

Rock grabbed her wrists, preventing her from moving her hair, and pinned her hands next to her head as he crawled on top of her. It didn't surprise him when she immediately wrapped her legs around him and tensed her thigh muscles, clamping her legs on either side of his hips to hold him in place.

"Take it easy," he whispered over her face, watching her as she shook her head from side to side until enough strands fell to allow her to see. When she opened her eyes, the flash of defiance was as strong as the incredible amount of lust swarming through her. He loved how she glowed with need and craved him so desperately she was willing to fight to have him. "I want to taste you, my adorable cat. You can relax and enjoy it, or I can tie you down and take the pleasure I want."

Her eyes widened as her mouth curved into a small, tight circle. She stared at him a moment, searching his face, then breathed in deeply. Both of them were so turned-on he dared her to try to find any sign of whether he teased her or meant every word. Darla wouldn't smell a thing between them other than their incredible need to reach their own satisfaction and to please the other while doing it.

"You wouldn't dare," she said, barely moving her mouth. Her words were husky, scratchy, and she continued breathing heavily as she stared up at him. "Trust me, owl, you'll regret trying to ever put a leash on me."

Something told him she meant that. Her independent nature turned him on as much as every other quality she'd showed him she possessed.

"Honor my wishes and you'll always remain free by my side," he assured her, releasing her wrists and dragging his fingers down the insides of her arms. He watched her shiver and her breath grew ragged when he dragged his hands to her breasts and squeezed. "Relax and give me my turn. You've had yours. If you're going to be pushy about only gaining your own satisfaction, I will restrain you."

"You enjoyed the hell out of that blowjob," she immediately retorted. Then her eyes cleared as she frowned, making a face when she continued complaining. "Do all owls treat their females like this and get away with it?" she asked, her scent turning heavy with stubborn determination.

It wasn't the first time she'd almost pulled a smile to his lips. He scooted down her, keeping his gaze locked to hers as he parted her legs. "I hardly think it matters since you're not an owl. Now be still. You'll enjoy this. I promise."

Rock couldn't stop the guttural, carnal sound that crept up from deep inside him when he dipped into her hot pussy. She offered a feast to a starving male. Rock realized it was exactly who he was. He'd been starving for Darla ever since he last had her. He definitely needed to see to arrangements so they could do this more often.

It was all Rock could do not to grow greedy and lap up all she offered with quick, impatient strokes of his tongue. Like a fledgling, being given a sweet treat for the first time, he wanted to devour her all at once, suck and lick, torture and please.

"You are so incredibly beautiful." He forced rational thought into his brain, determined to see her explode before entering her. "Every inch of you." He ran his finger along the length of her entrance.

"Oh Rock, please," she murmured, her eyes once again closed and a small smile on her face. "Don't tease me. I mean it."

If she only knew the torture was ten times stronger inside him than anything she was experiencing. Not that he would ever tell her that. Instead, he enjoyed her satiny flesh, the heat escaping from deep inside her, and the incredibly appealing taste of her thick cream as he continued to impale her with his tongue, pulling out then flicking her swollen clit and stroking it gently until her breath was coming harder in quick pants.

Every inch of her body was tense. A moist sheen from perspiration covered her and made her glow. Her flat, taut tummy rose and fell, along with her breasts, causing them to jiggle as her nipples puckered and hardened. She was ready to come and Rock was ready for the show of his lifetime. He continued licking, stroking and sucking, and watched her as she moved closer to her explosive moment. It didn't take long for every inch of her to stiffen. She arched her body and began trembling.

"Rock!" She reached for him, her fingers groping as she tossed her head from side to side and rode out her orgasm.

The fresh, rich come flowed from her as her pussy quivered and tightened when he greedily lapped at every drop. He'd never seen a more beautiful sight. Before she completely came down, he moved over her, lifting her legs as he did, and eased his cock into position.

He buried himself deep inside her tight, steaming-hot pussy. Darla howled, grabbing his chest and scraping her nails down the front of him. His world damn near toppled to the side. With that first thrust, her scorching heat and firm muscles almost squeezing the life out of him, Rock nearly came. He held himself firmly, not daring to move for just a second, and watched as she caught her breath and her lashes fluttered.

"You feel so good," she whispered, the gold in her eyes as apparent as the green. Her cheeks were rosy and her lips wet and still swollen. When she ran her tongue over them, he remembered her incredible skills.

Managing Darla might be one of the biggest challenges he ever took on in his life. Their mating would be on a pedestal. They might as well set up their nest in the middle of Banff. Everyone would be watching them, owl and leopard, the nosier of both species predicting if they would make it or not. And those watching would only be the ones who were noncommittal in their decision as to whether the mating was proper or not from the start.

Others would strongly oppose it. His nest and Kane and Jin would fall into this group, which would make mating with Darla even more complicated. She ran with her emotions leading her, which was what made her scent so refreshing. Rock knew it wasn't how he could fly. Not that he didn't want Darla—he did, with all his heart. It didn't bother him how she focused on her feelings more than facts. Already he'd accepted it was a trait within her that he really loved. If they were ordered, forbidden to mate, would Rock be able to go against the wishes of those who flew closest to him?

There was no divorce among either of their species. A mating ended when one of them died. Or if one of them were killed, although violence like that seldom happened among owls. A competitor might challenge one of the mates for the right to take the other mate. He'd heard it happened mostly with werewolves, although if memory served there were a few times he'd been told about when it happened among the leopards. No one would ever take Darla from him, whether they were able to mate or not.

Rock looked toward the ceiling, refusing to be distracted by anything other than the incredible pleasure the two of them were sharing at the moment. When he began moving, creating a rhythm and enjoying her satiny inner walls, the way she stroked his swollen cock almost made him forget about any problems surrounding his potential mating with Darla.

She tortured him and made him feel better than he'd ever felt before, and all at the same time. He wanted Darla. Living without her was too painful a thought. But it would be a nonstop challenge maintaining his adorable leopard. There was no way she would dominate him. Something implied she might try to do just that. One way or another he would show her how to honor him, and in return, honor her. Darla wanted to mate. As was typical with leopards, she was ready to jump right in and figure out how to make it work afterward. Rock understood how imperative it was for both of them to learn the ways of the other. There would be a lot of controlling on his part, pulling in her reins, but doing just that to keep her next to him filled his heart with eager anticipation.

As the friction built, her panting shifting over to adorable-sounding grunts and groans, it dawned on Rock where his thoughts had taken him. He was going to mate with Darla. Already he'd decided and moved beyond that to how they would prepare for the rest of their lives. He had accepted the first step but knew taming her was of utmost importance. If he was to save his honor in their parliament, which he would do, Darla would submit to him.

"Rock!" Her voice turned pleading, her cries almost frantic.

There was a sting when she dragged her nails down his chest and it wouldn't surprise him to learn she'd marked him.

"Don't fight it." He focused on her face, letting his concerns go by the wayside for now. No way would he miss how beautiful Darla was when she came. "Give me all you have, my beautiful cat."

"I am, everything," she murmured, and her face flushed a deep shade of crimson as her pussy tightened around him with a fierceness he didn't have the strength to fight. "All of me. I'm yours, Rock. Forever."

He might have heard her words better if he hadn't come at the exact moment she vowed to be his female. Rock filled her, jerking several times as her heat penetrated his cock and filled his body.

"Mate with me," she whispered, looking up at him with an imploring look in her eyes.

"Soon," he told her, leaning down and kissing her nose.

Chapter Twelve

Darla stood at the top of the hill next to Jin. Kane and Jin smelled noticeably surprised when they returned to their den and found Darla in her bed. Rock didn't seem too upset when she'd suggested she return to her litter after they made love. He'd flown over her, with her running underneath him, as they'd done hundreds of times since first meeting. His scent was even more embedded in her, and through their entire run to her den, all she'd smelled was herself with every flutter of his feathers.

Traditionally speaking, the two of them were mated. Darla knew owls were close to being as antiquated as leopards. Species all seemed to take their time allowing any kind of change to enter their territories. When it came to their females, they were ruthless with pinning laws and rules on them. Some of which had existed since the dawn of time.

Darla hadn't sensed hesitation or doubt in Rock when he declined her offer to mate last night. Maybe she'd been spontaneous. Rock would certainly point out she had. Darla didn't think so though. Already, she knew without any doubt, Rock was the male she would run alongside for the rest of her life.

So why didn't he say yes?

He wanted her. He'd told her so in more than one way. He was proud to carry her scent. Last night, with his nest and her litter surrounding them, he continually touched her and kept her close. Yet when she'd suggested they mate, he'd said "soon".

"Tell me why we're here again?" Darla kicked at the ground, knocking some of the mud from her hiking boots and squinted at the sprawling ranch house below in the meadow.

"That is the Lockham den. Do you know them?" Jin held her hand over her eyes and scanned the land below.

"Not personally. But why did we hike here and not run?"

"They would smell us faster in our fur. And although I can't believe I'm saying this, your scent currently might confuse any leopard or owl." Jin gave her a strange, appraising look. "I don't want them knowing we're here yet."

Darla ignored Jin's comment and the look she gave her. She didn't want to talk about Rock right now. Maybe focusing on something else, giving it all her attention, would help clear her head and enable her to figure out what the hell happened last night.

Darla squatted. The hike across the meadow at the base of the mountain outside of Banff had helped get some of the kinks out she'd woke up with this morning. She still felt a slight sting in her thigh muscles, and the tenderness along with a growing ache

continued between her legs. She gave the large den below her complete attention, taking in the long, narrow drive, which circled around the front of the den and exited in two different locations on the highway. The home was wood and painted a deep mahogany red. There would be new grass coming up soon around the den. Two SUVs were parked in front. She didn't see anyone, although her human eyes limited her on how much detail she could pick up at this distance.

"Okay, so what are we going to do?" she asked, shifting her attention to the highway, which was the main road that went from Banff to other towns east of them. There wasn't much traffic but a car caught her attention when it came around the curve. She watched it move, fascinated in how it looked as if it were a cub's toy, until it disappeared from her sight.

"We're going to wait until the Lockhams leave their den." Jin squatted next to her and shoved her pale blonde hair behind her ears. "When we talked to them first thing this morning, they mentioned heading into town in a few hours. We both thought it a good idea if you were able to look at them and tell us if you've seen them before."

Darla shifted her attention to Jin, staring at her profile until the female turned her head and stared back at Darla. Many times over the years, she and Jin had argued. Darla hadn't known Jin really well when she'd agreed to come live with her and Kane. She'd known of her reputation though. Jin's past was jaded at best. But Kane loved her unconditionally. And in spite of their differences and locking into each other with tooth and claw more than once, Jin was a good female.

"You want to know if they were the males in the alley," Darla guessed.

Jin's expression turned mischievous. "Exactly."

"And if they are?"

"Then I'd say it would be a good day for fighting."

Jin's smirk turned into a toothy smile when Darla grinned. This was exactly what she needed. As long as Jin didn't start lecturing, because Darla really wasn't in the mood for that, the two of them might actually enjoy each other's company out there in the middle of nowhere.

"It's always a good day for fighting," Darla said under her breath, her thoughts again straying to Rock as she thought about marching to his nest and demanding he explain himself right now or she'd kick his ass until he agreed they should be mated. Just the thought of fighting with him until one of them overpowered the other then rolled around until they were making hot, passionate love again, threatened to fill the air with the smell of her lust.

Jin actually laughed out loud, although she stifled the sound quickly. They couldn't give their location away or risk ruining their plan. "Mark the calendar," she said, her eyes glowing with amusement. "There is actually something you and I agree on."

Darla smiled, but then shifted her attention to the house below when several males left the den and walked around the two parked SUVs.

"Come on," Jin said, gesturing with her hand as she whispered and moved to all fours.

They took advantage of the knee-high meadow grass, letting it shield them as they crawled farther down the hill to get a better look at the males. There were large rocks in the ground and hard-packed mud between them, left after the snow melted. The two females scurried from one rock to another and finally stopped, having a much better view now of the front of the den and the males who were getting into the SUVs.

Darla nudged Jin, the excitement inside her mounting so quickly she worried her scent would be carried in the wind to the Lockham den before they were closed inside their vehicles.

It was them! She nodded, meeting Jin's gaze. The female's eyes widened and it was obvious to see her excitement as well. They waited until the vehicles left the driveway before daring to talk.

"That was them," Darla said, brimming with excitement. "They were the three males in the alley. The two drivers and the male who sat up front in the first vehicle. I don't know the two other males. But that was them."

"Okay." Jin pulled her cell phone out of her back pocket and held it up, trying for a signal. "Crap." She shot a furtive look at the den below. "Let's do a bit of exploring. I might have a better signal down there."

Darla hurried down the hill after Jin when she stood then headed toward the den with a determined, purposeful gait. They didn't stop until they stood in the driveway where the SUVs had been parked a few minutes before. Darla stared around her at the incredible mountains guarding the den and the open space leading up to the giant fortress of rock. The Lockham den had a lot of money and had moved up here before Darla had come to live on the mountain. She didn't know a lot about them other than everyone said they were financially secure with human money from some business they'd left in the States after running from Leo Pard.

"This way," Jin said as they avoided crunching their boots on the gravel by walking alongside it in the deep, damp grass, toward the backside of the house.

Darla stared at the backside of the mahogany red den and for a moment didn't move. Her vision, the one she'd had when she'd walked toward a den and cubs had come running toward her. She half expected to hear the female's voice speak to her cheerily, asking if it bothered her that she would never have cubs.

"Darla?" Jin grabbed Darla's arm. "See something?" she whispered.

Jin also had visions, although she'd often told Darla and Kane they were nothing more than quick flashes and incredibly hard for her to translate.

Darla blinked, shaking her head. "No, but I've seen the back of this den before," she murmured, feeling a bit shaky.

"Good or bad?" Jin was all business. Between leopards who understood visions, when one was brought up, all stopped to listen and pay heed.

"Neither, both. I don't know." She didn't want to talk to Jin about it, but the female stared at her expectantly, willing to ignore all potential danger around them to hear what Darla had seen. "A female came running from that den," she said, nodding to the Lockhams' place. "There were cubs around her and she asked me if it bothered me that I would never have cubs."

"Oh." Jin looked at the ground, kicking it with her boot as silence lingered between them for a second. She turned away, apparently not going to comment, and stared at the den. "I've never had cubs and I'm doing fine," she said with a shrug then started across the yard leading to the den.

Darla opened her mouth, ready to give Jin a piece of her mind, if not a swipe of her claws for uttering such a comment after berating her choice in males since it first became apparent she and Rock were more than friends. Remembering where they were, she silently cursed the female and instead took in the backside of the den.

In her vision it hadn't been clear. It had been there, but Darla's attention was on the cubs then the female approaching her, although she'd never seen her face. Now she studied the one-story long structure, the windows evenly spaced, the lack of weeds near the den. The place was a hell of a lot nicer than any of the cabins in the mountains. There was a cool aura about the place. If she could smell emotions on buildings, which was obviously preposterous, but if she could she'd say this place was a dead shell. It was an odd sensation, but one that grabbed her firmly, almost giving her a firm shake. An odd feeling of sadness washed over her as she stared at the beautiful den, almost wanting to apologize to it for having such heartless, cruel leopards living in it.

"Darla!" Jin hissed.

She snapped her attention to Jin, who was gesturing with her hand for Darla to follow her. She hurried across the yard, realizing it wasn't the first time Jin had called for her.

"Were you seeing something else?" Jin asked, still whispering.

Darla reached the female, who stood at the other end of the back of the house and just a few feet from sliding glass doors and a wooden deck. Someone could recline on that deck and stare at the incredibly tall trees lining the south side of the den's property.

"No, sorry." Darla wasn't about to share her strange thinking when she'd studied the beautiful den.

"Nice place, huh." Jin had already turned from Darla, content with her answer, and moved alongside the den, her black leather jacket brushing against the mahogany wood as she neared the deck.

"Yes, it is."

Jin held up her hand, silencing Darla. Then, glancing over her shoulder, she brushed her pale, shoulder-length hair out of her way as she caught Darla's attention then nodded toward the den.

"What?" Darla mouthed.

"We aren't alone," Jin told her, also mouthing her words.

Darla's eyes grew large as she looked past Jin, staring at the tall glass doors, able only to see the reflection of the many tall trees. "How do you know?"

"Take a look." Jin eased back, indicating Darla move closer to the sliding glass doors. "Tell me what you see."

Darla would be damned if Jin smelled an inkling of fear on her. Nonetheless, she wasn't able to keep her heart from pounding brutally in her chest. There had been very few times in her life when she'd had to change without having the time to undress. She prayed this wouldn't be one of those times.

Darla moved silently along the wooden structure, neared the sliding glass doors and peered inside. The den was well built, she'd give it that. More than likely in the harshest of winter storms the large fireplace she saw along the wall inside kept it nice and cozy. She didn't smell any leopards, not even the faint residue so common around dens when leopards had lived there for years. It said something about a den so solid it kept all emotions and feelings of those who lived there inside. Maybe she'd judged this place prematurely.

All thoughts of the beautiful den disappeared when she focused inside, glimpsing through the glass doors. There were two males, each sprawled out on large couches. The two couches faced each other, one along each wall in a large room where the litter probably spent most of their time.

Darla stared at each male, not daring to even breathe as her heart started in on a very irritating, painfully rapid beating against her ribs. She fisted her hands inside her coat pocket, pinching her palms with her nails, and studied both of them.

They both had straight black hair, which fell past their ears. Although tousled and partially covering their faces, she noticed thick, long lashes on one of the males. Both of them had darker skin than hers, olive-colored. By the size of their bodies, she'd guess them both to be about Kane's size but not quite as thick-chested.

As she stared, her mouth went dry. The night in the alley when she'd lain crouched on the damp, broken concrete hidden by the human trash Dumpster and its nauseating stench, she'd watched these two males enter, walking with slow, deadly confidence. Even lying on couches, appearing to both be out cold, sleeping without a care in the world, it was easy for her to see them as cold-blooded, hard-calculated killers.

Jin touched her arm and Darla squealed, slapping her hand over her mouth at the last minute to stifle the sound. She tripped backward, falling against the female.

"Is it them?" Jin whispered in her ear, gripping both of Darla's arms. "Are those the jaguars?"

Darla nodded, found her feet again and straightened. She glanced through the window again, needing to know if she'd disturbed their sleep. Both males were still crashed on each couch but someone now stood in a doorway leading farther into the den. Darla stared into the most intriguing emerald green eyes, the shape of them more like a cat's than a human's. A female, stunningly beautiful, gazed at Darla, tilting her

head as if more curious to find her there than pissed off there was someone outside the sliding glass door.

Darla backed up again, this time side-stepping so she wouldn't trip into Jin. "We've been spotted."

"What?" Jin hissed, suddenly glaring at Darla as if their imminent capture was completely Darla's fault. "Crap," she muttered, looking down quickly and rubbing her face with her hand.

Darla didn't wait for her to digest the information but scurried toward the back of the house. Jin grabbed her before she could dart across the yard.

"Wait."

"What?" Darla spun around, shooting a pensive look at the den. "We've got to get the hell out of here. We're outnumbered. There are at least three jaguars in there and in case you've forgotten, I got to see them in action in my vision."

"Exactly." Jin straightened, staring Darla head on. "So run and they'll attack. Stand still and they won't."

"How do you know?"

Jin shrugged. "Nature of the beast."

Jin looked over her shoulder at the same time Darla looked past her at the sound of the glass doors opening and someone stepping onto the deck. Jin turned and faced Darla, her scent turning anxious.

"You've sprained your ankle. We don't have signals and I can't carry you back to our den. We were checking to see if anyone was here since no cars are out front," Jin whispered, speaking so quickly it was hard to catch her words. "We were trying to decide if we should knock and wake the males up, especially when we realized they weren't leopards," she added at the last moment.

And at the same time the female Darla had spotted inside stepped around the side of the house and stared at the two of them.

"Good hunting," Jin announced, facing the female and smelling friendly.

Darla actually wondered how many of the howlings she'd heard over the years about Jin were correct. Jin had thrown their plan together so fast Darla barely had time to let it sink in. She remained where she was though, knowing she at least had a few meters' lead if she needed to haul ass out of there. She also reminded herself she had home turf advantage. Darla knew this land as well as she knew her four paws. The female staring at both of them cautiously wasn't from this territory. Darla would have known if she'd seen her before.

"Why were you at the door?" the female asked, her voice soft, harmless-sounding, but somehow commanding.

"Forgive us please." Jin had been around, in and out of many territories and dealing with many more species than Darla ever had. She showed off her skills with

flourish as she approached slowly, lowering her head out of respect as well as offering a display of submission. "Our intention wasn't to startle you."

"What was your intention?" The female was distractingly beautiful with her catlike, green eyes so bright they reminded Darla of the fake contacts humans made to give someone a more intense, different eye color.

"It's my fault," Darla spoke up, not moving but remaining in the middle of the yard. If she was supposed to have sprained her ankle she'd rather not move than pretend to limp and be caught faster in a lie. "My friend honors me by speaking on my behalf." She dropped her gaze. "I've sprained my ankle. We were out running, enjoying the morning without males around."

The black-haired female stared at her, giving no indication whether Darla's story impressed her or not. She returned the stare, equally fascinated and apprehensive by the female's different and captivating appearance. Her mouth went dry as she continued with her story, intent on keeping it as close to the truth as possible.

"Neither one of us have signals out here. When we changed, needless to say, the pain grew worse." Darla was thankful for the distance between her and the female, and forced herself why these jaguars were here. She would lie to prevent Rock's brother from being murdered. "We knew the Lockham den was here but their cars weren't."

"I told her there were males inside I didn't recognize," Jin said, half turning and pointing at Darla. "She wanted to see for herself." There was almost a mischievous grin on Jin's face when she turned to face the female on the deck. "Especially when I described them to her."

"If you need to use a phone to call your den I will permit it." The female never changed her expression but turned, walking gracefully back into the den.

Darla froze. They were being invited inside the Lockham den without the Lockhams being here. And there were at least three jaguars inside. She was barely able to swallow and willed the stupid vision she'd had out of her head as she forced herself to step forward. It wasn't hard to pretend she was limping, her legs were as wobbly as if all her bones had suddenly disappeared. She damn near stumbled over her own boots trying to reach the deck.

Jin, on the other hand, pranced inside, leaving the sliding glass door open for Darla, and was on the phone already when Darla finally reached the deck.

"Yes, we're at the Lockhams," Jin said, glancing at Darla when she paused in the doorway. "If you'd bring the truck over to get us," she continued. "I know, but Darla sprained her ankle."

The two males who'd been asleep on the couch were now both sitting, their straight black hair tangled, and their expressions groggy as they focused on Jin then her.

Jin nodded without saying anything and held the phone by gripping it close to her ear. Darla wondered if she held the receiver the way she did so it would be harder for anyone to hear anything Kane said. Darla was barely able to pick up a word he said. She guessed Jin gripped the phone the way she did on purpose.

Jin smiled when she hung up the phone, smelling very much at ease. "My mate is on his way. Please let the Lockhams know we appreciate their hospitality on your behalf," she said, focusing on the female.

Darla watched one of the males stand. He remained in front of the couch on the far wall and took his time giving her a scrutinizing once-over then did the same to Jin.

"Who is your mate?" he asked Jin in a deep, slow drawl.

Darla stared at his captivating green eyes, so rich in color they stood out against his thick, straight, coal-black hair that almost fell to his shoulders. His eyes were definitely a distraction but he would have grabbed anyone's attention with his overwhelming good looks. As handsome as the male was, there was also something cold and calculating about him.

Jin didn't hesitate. "Kane Masters." Instead of acting concerned about how the jaguars might react to her mate's name, she continued grinning then pointed at the female. "I've got to ask," she continued as she waved her finger at the two males. "I moved around quite a bit, even down in the States, before mating. Tell me, you three are jaguars, right?"

"Yes," the male standing in front of the couch said, straightening and showing both of them the pride he held in his species.

"I knew it!" Jin laughed and slapped her leg. "Darla, you couldn't have picked a better time to sprain your ankle," she said, looking at Darla and winking then pushing away from the side of the counter and moving farther into the room. She looked over her shoulder at Darla then gestured to the two males and female, who all appeared to be trying to figure Jin out. "Jaguars are a very reclusive species," she informed Darla, suddenly offering a species lesson. "There are two jaguar territories, one in Colorado and one somewhere in South America." She spun around, her pale blonde hair fluttering over her shoulders. "Am I right?"

"You're interested in jaguars?" the male sitting on the couch asked. None of them confirmed what she'd just said. He stood slowly, tugging on his button-down shirt then running his fingers through his black hair, straightening it. "What is your fascination?"

"Don't different species fascinate you?" Jin didn't seem to notice the male give her a curious once-over. And if she did, she didn't react.

Again Darla wondered how much of the old Jin—Jin Rose, the notorious hunter before she mated with Kane—was coming forth at the moment. Jin had always been confident, sometimes cocky, but she'd never smelled happier. If Darla didn't know better, she'd swear Jin was creating the clean scent of happiness intentionally to throw the jaguars off. If she was, it was a trait Darla never knew Jin possessed.

"Sometimes," the male who'd just spoke acknowledged, stepping closer. "How long before your mate arrives? What did you say his name was?" There was the slightest of accents in the male's voice, almost sounding South American.

Were these jaguars from that far away? If so, what did the Lockhams offer them to create such an incredibly sweet deal for them to run all the way to Canada?

"Kane Masters. I'm Jin." She walked away from the male, moving closer to the female, who had remained in front of the doorway leading into the rest of the den. "What are your names?"

When no one responded right away, Jin lowered her head, making a humming sound in her throat before shooting Darla an almost amused look. "Possibly our breeds have different customs during introductions. Forgive my excitement over meeting all of you, or almost meeting you. The two of us will wait outside for my mate, with your permission of course. It didn't cross my mind you wouldn't want to visit while we waited. Darla, shall we? Here, I'll help you," Jin said, moving across the living room and extending her hand to Darla.

"Your mate is one of five hunters among the leopards," the female said in her soft, soothing voice.

"Yes." Jin seriously smelled excited. In fact, all her emotions since entering the Lockham den seemed stronger than normal. "You've heard of him? You really flatter our den. Forgive me for not knowing more details about inner politics among jaguars. Are any of you of higher rank?"

"Jaguars gain rank by their achievements, not by the den they come from," the male in front of the far couch informed her.

"My mate's title of hunter had nothing to do with his den," Jin said, her smiling fading for the first time. She focused on the male, her back to Darla. Her incredibly pale blonde hair was a noticeable contrast to the incredibly rich black hair on the three jaguars around her. "He was challenged and turned down repeatedly because he's a rare breed of leopard."

"As you are," the female commented, not making it a question.

Jin nodded and straightened, showing pride in her heritage. "My mate and I are white leopards, a breed actually rarer than jaguars."

"Quality isn't always based on quantity," the male closest to Darla said. He moved closer to Jin, trapping her between both males. "Do all leopards allow their mates to run alone, risking their well-being from an accident, or worse?" he asked.

Sparks rushed down Darla's spine as she tightened her grip on the doorway. It was all she could do to keep her sudden apprehension from being noticed. No one had commented on her remaining at the door. If she let her scent grow too much, the jaguars might detect Rock's scent on her. As proudly as she carried his scent, letting the jaguars smell it didn't seem a good idea. Jin, on the other hand, waved the comment away while snorting in a very undignified manner.

"We're in the twenty-first century, jaguar," she said, turning on him. He stood almost head and shoulders taller than Jin, but she didn't show any hesitation when she approached him. "This is our territory. Our den has no grief with anyone around here. Are you suggesting you're a threat?"

"No. He isn't," the female said, taking a step closer to both of them. "Franc, remember yourself," she said, curling her lip when he looked at her. "The females will be gone soon. Maybe you should head back to one of the bedrooms and finish your nap."

"You didn't run here to babysit, and you don't howl orders," Franc growled, brushing past Jin as he stalked toward the female. "You'd do well to remember yourself."

"I'm remembering myself." The female didn't sound threatened or intimidated. "And it's tiring watching out for you too."

"Then I suggest you quit." The male's muscles bulged in his back. He looked as if he'd attack any minute.

Darla couldn't see the male's face, although the sudden repulsion in the room was spicy enough she almost sneezed. The female simply lifted one perfectly sculptured eyebrow, didn't back up but straightened, as if she eagerly awaited the male's attack. And owls said jaguars were too aggressive.

"Franc, back down," the other male said, his low, rich voice as smooth and calm as it had been before. "You're spooking our female guests. Go finish your nap and you won't be so grouchy."

Possibly he was the alpha male in their group. Franc snarled at him then pushed the female out of his way and stalked down the hallway. A door slammed and the den shook. Darla's heart had pounded too hard long enough. Her chest was sore from the continued adrenaline pumping inside her.

"Forgive my littermate," the male said, his cool way of speaking almost making him sound as dangerous as Franc yet in a very different way. He glanced at Darla and winked, the corner of his mouth curving slightly into something remotely similar to a smile. "We've had a long trip to your territory and I'm afraid it's taken its toll on all of us."

"So you've just arrived?" Jin didn't miss the opportunity to ask.

"We have. And we'd be honored to meet your mate when he arrives."

"I'm sure he'll want to meet all of you." Jin nodded as if the information would be assumed. Which it would be if the jaguars understood anything about a leopard community. Anyone new to their area would seek out the head leopard den and request permission to remain for however long they needed to be there.

"Do you think he'll be here soon?" the female asked.

In answer to her question, there was a firm, hard knock on the front door. The female turned around, disappearing into the den. The male remaining in the large room glanced at both females.

"Remain here," he said to Jin, nodding, then disappeared out of the room in a few long strides.

"Damn," Jin whispered, moving next to Darla. "We couldn't have scored better." Her words were barely audible. "They sure are an uncivilized bunch," she added, shaking her head but grinning. "Kane is going to eat them alive."

Darla immediately noticed Jin no longer smelled of any emotion. Which was more like her. Jin could get pissed as hell and prevent her surroundings from growing too spicy.

"Stay here and remember your ankle hurts." Jin left Darla, almost skipping out of the room and following the two jaguars.

Darla ached to follow them but knew Jin was right. The best way to make a show of her sprained ankle was to remain where she was. She didn't need to wait long before the two jaguars, Jin and Kane entered the room.

"Where is the Lockham litter?" Kane's deep baritone bounced off the walls as he glanced around the den, seeming to take in everything around them.

"They headed into town to handle some business." The male spoke, moving to stand next to the female. He stood tall, about the same height as Kane. Both males were well-built, muscular and in their prime. Their only differences appeared to be their breeding—Kane with his thick, straight, pale blond hair and light blue eyes and the male jaguar with his straight hair, about the same length as Kane's except black as a starless sky. His skin shade was darker and his eyes a piercing green with their catlike shape. Other than those cosmetic differences, the two appeared equal matches.

Darla's vision came to mind and she wondered for the first time if there were extending circumstances not clear to her, which made Rock unable to fight back when the jaguars attacked. From what she saw studying this male jaguar in person, he didn't appear any stronger than a male leopard. Owls were equally aggressive when provoked. She knew firsthand how strong Rock was.

Kane pulled out his cell phone and tapped it with his finger. "What was their business?" he asked, looking up at the two jaguars.

The male looked at the female. Jin stood at her mate's side, now silent and serious. Kane was the hunter for the leopards in this territory, which basically gave him rank as their leader. Leopards didn't have a democracy, but when someone showed up in their territory unannounced, they would be thoroughly interrogated. The jaguars had the good sense to hide their ill-tempered nature from Kane, which showed they were intelligent.

"They're meeting with someone at one of their shops," the female offered.

Kane nodded. "Are they leasing one of their empty shops in the strip mall they own to someone?"

"You'll have to ask them," the female said, her soft tone neither sarcastic nor too friendly.

"How do you know the Lockham den?" Kane glanced around the room. "I thought there were three of you."

"Franc is sleeping in the back room." The male nodded in the direction Franc had stormed off right before Kane entered.

Darla seriously doubted the male would have fallen asleep that quickly not to have heard Kane enter the den. As aggressive as he had appeared, it was rather odd when he didn't reappear to sniff out the new male in the den. She glanced through the doorway leading into the rest of the den. Would Franc have slipped out a window, running to warn the Lockhams they had company? If these were the jaguars here to kill Heath, it would make sense they would be leery of any visitors.

"And you two are?" Kane asked.

"I am Lorenzo Carducean." The male lowered his head then nodded toward the female. "This is Flora Carducean."

"You two are mated?"

Flora chuckled, a deep, throaty sound as she moved her long, thick hair behind her shoulder. "Not at all," she said before Lorenzo could respond. "Lor and I are cousins. The Carducean den is very prominent in our territory."

"Where is your territory?"

"In the Colorado Rocky Mountains," Flora said, and smiled as she moved slightly and gestured to the window. "Your Canadian Rockies are equally as beautiful. Obviously good hunting territory."

"Very," Kane growled, causing the female to snap her attention back to him and for Lorenzo to straighten, holding his hands at his sides. "Franc is also from your Carducean den?"

"He is my littermate," Lorenzo said, his voice a bit deeper than it had been a moment before. "We ran up here to do business with the Lockham litter," Lorenzo offered, apparently understanding Kane would continue with his questioning until he knew everything about the jaguars. Lorenzo was smart and honored Kane by simply offering everything he believed Kane would want to know. "As you just mentioned, the Lockham litter own a strip mall in your territory. We're considering opening business up here and have come to check out the available space as well as your territory."

"And the owls," Flora added, rocking up on her heels and raising her eyebrows when Lorenzo looked at her. "Would you want to know where any strangers planned on running while they were in your territory?" Flora relaxed, facing him. "Relax, Lor. I don't smell aggression on these leopards. Do you?"

"I wasn't aware jaguars were merchants. What kind of shop do you plan on opening here?" Kane ignored the female's attempt at flattery.

"We're a breed similar to your own," Lorenzo said, his voice still a low, flat tone, close to a growl. "Jaguars run in many directions. Our den has been merchants for several generations now."

Kane walked away from them, leaving them standing next to each other, shifting and watching as he inspected items on a far shelf, then strolled to the doorway, glancing down a hall where they'd told him Franc had gone. When he turned, he glanced at Darla, or past her at the view outside.

"From the howlings I've heard, jaguars are known to be skilled in one profession, and one profession only." He didn't look at either of them when he spoke, instead continued to focus outside.

"Where we come from, howlings often weaken the more they are howled," Flora said, smiling slightly when she glanced at Kane.

Jin stepped into her space, causing Lorenzo to stiffen.

"Don't ever dishonor my mate by suggesting what he says isn't accurate," Jin snarled, the carefree female who'd almost pranced around the den earlier completely gone.

Before Lorenzo could decide whether to step into Jin's space or not, Kane moved back into the middle of the room, his hands fisting at his side when he put his hand on Jin and backed her up next to him. Jin didn't fight him but apparently wasn't done with what she had to say.

"Don't think for a moment leopards are fools," she hissed, trying to step toward the female again. Kane's hand noticeably tightened on her shoulder. She didn't shove him off, but didn't appear too daunted by his silent warning either. "I've traveled all over the States below, as well as throughout Canada. Your colony exists for the sole purpose of breeding killers. I won't begin to speculate exactly how you two are related."

"Enough," Kane roared when Flora growled. "I'm not interested in baring claws while we hiss insults at each other," he snarled, glaring at both jaguars and pulling his mate physically back until he had her pinned next to him. "Here's how it's going to be. The three of you will remain in this den, without permission or consent to run throughout territory. And before I've left this den, the owls will support me on this decision as well. Until I'm satisfied you are here to possibly open a shop in the Lockhams' strip mall, you aren't going anywhere. Because, believe me, it doesn't take sniffing either one of you out to know why you're here," he finished, his tone turning into a threatening growl. "I suggest if either of you can reach the Lockham litter, you howl for them and inform them they need to return to their den immediately. I will be back to visit with them."

"What are you suggesting we're here to do?" Lorenzo asked, tilting his head slightly and staring at Kane as if suddenly he fascinated him.

"My mate is already pissed that you're insulting my intelligence. Don't make it any more obvious," Kane said, glaring at the male and almost pushing Jin ahead of him toward the front door.

Kane then moved around all of them, concern on his face as he walked up to Darla.

"I thought you ended your clumsy stage when you were a cub," he said, his voice more nonthreatening when he stood in front of her, blocking her view of everyone behind him. "I'll carry you outside." Instead of lifting her into his arms, he turned his back on her. "Jin, head outside," he ordered, and apparently the look he gave her worked. Jin turned without a word and the front door opened and closed. Kane turned and lifted Darla into his arms, lifting her with little effort and making her relatively comfortable in his arms. He'd opened the sliding glass door but returned his attention to the two jaguars before exiting the den. "Get your other male and meet us out front. I will know all of you before taking the females to the den."

He didn't wait for an answer but headed out on to the deck, down the stairs and around to the front of the mahogany den. Kane didn't let her down until they'd reached the truck. Jin opened the passenger door, reaching for Darla to help her inside.

Kane stuck his head in the cab when Darla adjusted herself in the front seat. "Call Rock," he whispered.

Darla couldn't hide her surprise as she stared at him. Her first thought was Rock must have been trying to reach her while she and Jin were out here with no signal.

"Tell him what has happened here and have him inform his nest."

She immediately saw she was simply a convenient tool to alert the owls of the sudden situation on their paws. "We didn't have a signal earlier."

"Use the truck phone." Kane straightened and closed her inside the heated cab.

Darla wanted to hear the rest of what would be said when Kane turned his back on his truck and put his arm around Jin, the two of them facing the den. So far, the jaguars hadn't come outside.

The truck phone was an older model but effective, especially when more modern cells didn't offer signals in certain parts of the mountain, or in this case, low in a valley next to a mountain. Darla untangled the twisted cord to bring the receiver to her ear. She played with the cord, which was wrapped around itself, and stared at her fingers, thinking of what she'd say to Rock. He hadn't agreed to her offer of mating. And telling her "soon" simply told her he believed they'd mate when he decided the time smelled right, not her.

Darla would tame that owl, get his feathers to lay a little less ruffled, no matter how much it hurt to do so. She knew what smelled right, and when a male was trying to put her on a leash. Rock cared about her, probably even loved her. She was sniffing out a new side to him though, a side she wouldn't have been aware of until they'd had sex. His possessive nature, the way he always flew over her, watched her as if her safety and happiness were all he cared about, definitely had its appeal. The problem wasn't there. It lay with Rock thinking he needed to be the one instigating any actions between them, from which way they flew and ran, to when they mated.

She sat there, fighting with the cord and growing more disgruntled when suddenly she wasn't fighting with a tangled phone cord but instead a vine. Darla looked around her, momentarily confused when she wasn't sitting in the warm truck but on a very cold rock, naked. Her fingers shook, making it harder to do whatever it was she was doing with the vine.

"Why are you helping me?" The female asking lay on the ground next to the rock, in a pool of blood.

Darla stared down at Flora and her mangled leg. She was struggling with the shirt to make bandages, or to tie off the female's leg. Flora watched her, wary and confused, with those intense green eyes. At the moment though, they weren't as vibrant with life as they usually were.

"You've made it apparent that all jaguars aren't bad," she explained.

Darla almost fell against the door when she put some muscle into tearing the vine and almost yanked the phone cord out of the dash of the truck.

"What the hell?" she snarled, and stared out the window at Kane's and Jin's backs.

Chapter Thirteen

Beel caught the box Heath tossed down to him out of the truck behind the hardware store. He stacked it on top of the other boxes they'd unloaded, supplies and merchandise for the store. Heath was ready with the next box when Rock's phone rang. At the same time, Beel came out the back door, pushing a metal dolly in front of him. Heath dropped the box on the edge of the back of the truck and sat on it, apparently willing to take a break so Rock could answer the phone.

In spite of the chilly morning, Rock wiped sweat from his brow as he stared at the unfamiliar number and watched Beel begin stacking the boxes on the dolly.

"Who is it?" Heath asked.

"Not sure." Rock studied the number another second and decided to answer. "Yes," he said gruffly, frowning at the ground as he instinctively tried to focus on background noise before whoever was on the other end began speaking.

"Rock," Darla said, her soft voice immediately making him relax and at the same time stirring awareness inside him to life with a rush of heat and pressure mixing together. "I need to talk to you."

There was an edge of concern in her tone he didn't like. Phones seriously sucked sometimes because they didn't allow him to sniff out who he was talking to, especially when it was a leopard, and more particularly, his leopard.

"What's wrong?" If something bothered her about last night, he would like to hear it. She'd been quiet after making love and seemed almost too willing to return to her nest.

"It's a long story," she began. "But the short version is we've met the jaguars at the Lockham den outside of Banff."

"What? Where?" It was the last thing Rock expected to hear. He shifted gears quickly, straightening and dragging his hand through his hair as he stared at the ground. "Who are you with?" he demanded.

"Jin brought me out here to confirm if the Lockham den were the males I saw in the alley. They were. I identified them as they left. Jin wanted to check out the den though, and when we got close enough to see inside, there were jaguar males asleep on two couches."

Rock continued listening as Darla explained what happened once they went inside the nest. His insides tightened, awareness hitting him harder than a brick wall. She'd been in incredible danger, even if she had remained close to the door. Two females were no match against two males and a female, regardless of species. "Kane carried me outside, keeping with our story of spraining my ankle," she said, her soft voice caressing his brain while at the same time fire burned ruthlessly inside him, his anger threatening to erupt. Darla had been in incredible danger and he'd been in the alley behind the hardware store, unloading boxes, and completely oblivious. "When he placed me in his truck he asked me to call you."

"Kane asked you to call me?" Rock hadn't noticed Beel and Heath approaching him. His brothers now stood on either side of him, their heads cocked, noticeably eavesdropping.

"In so many words. He said the owls needed to be made aware of this," she finished.

"Interesting," Rock muttered. Kane might have known Darla would call him if she was ordered to inform the owls, but that was far different than if Kane had suggested she call him.

Rock shot Heath a hard look. Heath straightened, clasping his hands behind his back, and returned the look. Rock really didn't want to waste time repeating the entire conversation if both of them already heard it. Beel was a bit easier to read when he simply glanced at Rock, but kept his head tilted, not trying to hide the fact he'd been listening to their conversation. "Where are you now?" Rock asked, shifting his attention back to Darla.

"Still sitting in the truck." She paused and the sound of a heater blowing created a humming in the background. "Kane and Jin are standing outside the truck with their backs to me," she continued, lowering her voice to a soft whisper. "Kane told the jaguars they all had to come outside and speak with him. He hasn't met Franc, the short-tempered male, yet."

Rock didn't need to give any of this a lot of thought. "I'm flying out there. I should be there in a few."

"Okay," Darla whispered, her voice turning husky. "I'd like that," she added.

Heath and Beel had never honored his relationship with Darla. He'd be damned if they listened in while Darla shared any personal feelings. "Call me when you're at your den," he instructed. He wanted to add if she didn't call, and he didn't see her at the Lockham den or driving somewhere in between, all hell would break loose. Instead he ended the call, keeping it serious. Inside though, it was hard to maintain control when Darla sat so close to danger. If she were hurt in any way...

"What's your plan?" Heath asked, not moving but staring head-on at Rock.

Rock didn't hesitate. "Let's get the boxes already down inside the shop, lock up the truck for now and fly over toward the Lockham den."

"So the Lockhams are harboring jaguars," Heath muttered, already turning to the truck. He jumped up on the back to pull the door down and lock and secure the shop merchandise still in the truck. After placing a quick call to the truck driver, who was paid only to drive and not unload or load, Heath called his mate, explaining where they were headed. "The Lockhams were rather pissed when they weren't able to buy out

many owls and take over most of the shops downtown," Heath reminded Rock. "Did the female tell you who all was out there?"

Rock stared at his brother for a moment, barely able to maintain anger that exploded to life from Heath's wording. "Darla told me she's at the Lockhams with Kane and Jin and three jaguars," Rock told him, emphasizing Darla's name when Heath insulted her by simply calling her "the female". "Apparently the Lockhams aren't there."

"Interesting." Heath looked away first and focused straight ahead.

Rock wondered what Heath found interesting, that Rock would almost allow his feelings to show if he thought Darla was being dishonored, of if he referred to the jaguars being at the Lockhams.

Beel walked behind the two of them, on the phone with Andrea, his mate, as he quietly gave her a very abridged version of what they were going to do. After all three of them had talked to their females, they headed for the complex and up to the roof.

"When they weren't able to buy into downtown Banff, the Lockhams had a strip mall built outside of town," Rock pointed out. "If you're suggesting they might be the den who howled for the jaguars and put a mark on your head."

"I am."

"There is solid logic to your speculation. But I see a few holes as well. The first one being they do now have the strip mall, and are even leasing shops out to humans. I don't think the Lockhams are suffering."

"Their pride might be suffering." Heath focused ahead of him, staring at their apartment complex when it came into view. "And pride is a deep wound to heal in any species."

"Might not be a bad idea to call in for backup," Beel suggested as he pushed his way in between his brothers.

* * * * *

They were on the roof, stripped out of their clothes and rolling them into cloth bags when the roof door opened and four other males, Peter Osborne, James Rome, Brad Jones and Albert Cummings, joined them.

"Hurry up, males," Heath ordered. "We're off to check out some jaguars and if needed, join with the leopards against them."

Heath had filled each one of them in on the phone prior to their agreeing to join as backup. It was too difficult speculating the many ways this flight might turn out. Rock finished fitting his clothes in his cloth bag, pulled the string tight then draped it around his neck. The males around him talked among themselves, but Rock didn't pay attention. If everything were fine, there wasn't any reason why Darla wouldn't have returned to her den by now. She would call when she arrived there. He had his phone

in his jeans pocket, secured in his bag. Although he wouldn't be able to answer it in his feathers, he would hear it ring. The thing was being annoyingly quiet.

Within minutes all were ready to change and fly toward the Lockham den. Rock encouraged the sparks to travel up his spine. An odd sense of peril gripped his insides, creating a disturbing sensation he didn't know how to interpret.

"I don't know what to expect," Heath said, shivering as his skin began darkening, the change already flushing its way through his system. "We fly together and don't get too close to any jaguars. I'm not in the mood for any funerals tonight."

As the change transformed Rock and the males around him, his senses grew more acute and quills pricked through his flesh, the feathers soon opening and spreading over his back and chest, protecting him from the elements. Even as he focused with new eyes that were capable of seeing so much farther, and with incredible detail, his brain also transformed, the purer side of him surfacing.

When in their human form, training since they were fledglings gave them control over emotions and helped rational thinking prevail. In his feathers though, it was as if his system were washed clean, all remote feelings or troubles creating unease and tension inside him dissipated the moment he took flight.

His mind was clearer, just as his hearing was stronger, his sense of smell capable of breathing in odors his human senses wouldn't be able to identify, and his vision more powerful than most species on this planet. Rock spread his wings, flying with his brothers, and males he'd known most his life surrounding them. It was the middle of the day and more than likely, within minutes, half the parliament would be squawking over why the Halk nest, with a handful of prominent, honorable males from the community, would be soaring toward the mountain, as if there might be trouble.

Rock didn't dwell on what speculations they might produce. Instead, the obvious solution he had blocked when he stood as a man now was clearer than crystal. The knot in his gut still twisted and burned. Yet the reason for it wasn't a mystery. They were flying straight into danger and adrenaline could only pump so fast through his body before it balled up and fought for a place to go. The danger around them was real, deadly, and Darla was right in the heart of it.

He stretched his body, straightening his wings, and put some effort into increasing his speed. Diving down a few meters when air currents would have slowed him, Rock raced full speed under the pale blue sky toward the Lockham den. The moment it came into view, Rock took in the surroundings outside the mahogany structure. The truck Darla was in was still parked out front. As he flew closer, more detail became apparent. Kane and Jin leaned against the passenger side, standing next to each other and facing the Lockham den.

Both of their arms were crossed, yet the owls were still far enough away not to be noticed. Rock's eyesight was good enough in his feathers that he picked them, and all activity around them, up. The slinky black cats coming out the side of the den, moving silently as they hugged the wood walls of the den, grabbed his attention as the same

time as two other figures, running at incredible speed almost directly underneath them, also came into view.

Kane, Jin and Darla were going to be ambushed. Rock looked at Heath and guessed his thoughts. Why were they deciding to go after the Masters den if it was Heath they were sent to kill?

Not that any of them had confirmation the jaguars were here to take out Heath. All pieces of logic pointed that way though. Either way, Rock focused on one thing. Darla would be attacked, possibly killed, if he didn't fly faster and outrace these jaguars to protect what was his.

With a shrilling scream, Rock dove down, reducing elevation until he flew just over treetops. Heath was above him, squawking orders, but Rock didn't pay attention. He focused on the trucks and how near the jaguars were to Darla. Rock screeched a warning, this time close enough to grab Kane's and Jin's attentions. Darla opened the truck door, starting to get out and looking toward the sky, her expression confused and hopeful. Rock's piercing shrill, which he repeated several times, was enough to let all of them know there was serious trouble.

Kane jumped in front of Jin, pushing her backward as he did, probably indicating she get in the truck with Darla. As much as Rock approved of the command, already he knew the stubborn, willful nature of a female leopard would put her in harm's way more times than not.

Leaving Kane to block the females and hopefully keep them at the truck, Rock neared the Lockham den and swerved at an angle, dive-bombing at the side of the house. His actions not only took the jaguars by surprise, he also showed Kane where the danger was.

Rock's expression was fierce, his deadly talons stretched forward and his beak open, proving to anyone who might have doubts how incredibly dangerous an owl in battle could be. They'd been able to fly to the den faster than the two jaguars racing toward them could reach their destination. With any luck, Heath and the others would detain those two.

It's not nice to play in your fur while others are still in their flesh, Rock shrieked, mocking the jaguars when he damn near landed on the back of one of the males, felt his talons dig deep into flesh then ripped himself free and flew into the air. The large male roared in pain but also managed to leap at Rock, his long claws almost scraping Rock's legs.

When Rock flew over the roof of the den, he immediately shot his attention to Darla and her litter. All three of them were changing into their fur.

Son of a bitch! No! Rock screamed, grabbing Darla's attention when she lifted her head and stared at him with bright, round gold eyes. Her ears perked up as she leapt around Kane and Jin, ignoring their growls of protests as she leapt toward Rock, howling loudly at him.

Which alerted the jaguars.

Rock flew at them from one angle, and Beel tore at them from another. Kane leapt over Darla, forcing her to fling her body to the ground to avoid being trampled. He and the large male jaguar met each other at full leaps, their large bodies crashing against each other as vicious snarls and roars violated the air. The two other jaguars flung themselves into the fight, anxious not to be left out. Immediately the smell of fury, aggression and fresh blood drowned out all other scents.

Jin let out a bloodcurdling howl, which pierced Rock's eardrums. The female moved along the ground, flying fast enough she was a blur as she attacked low, fast and with intent to seriously do damage. The large male jaguar tumbled backward, stumbling a few times before regaining composure.

Darla's vision showed the jaguars as being too strong, too powerful, for either her or him to take on. It didn't appear the leopards were grossly outmatched though, in spite of their being two males and one female jaguar, and two females and one male leopard. Rock would be the first to admit female leopards were easily as vicious and ready to attack as any male. It appeared to be the same way with jaguars.

There were squawks behind him. Rock barely took time to acknowledge Heath and the other males. Instead, he flew over Kane and Jin, who were attacking both males now, with Beel assisting, diving and pecking from above.

Darla's teeth were bared, her lips curled back and her eyes mere slits of glimmering gold. She smelled outraged and determined to attack anyone who might get close enough to go for her deadly bite or swipe of her claws.

Heath's squawking was louder, as if he were making some kind of announcement. Everyone was fighting, making it difficult to pay attention, or even focus on just one of them. Owl, leopard and jaguar lunged, attacked, receded and lunged again. Movement was fast, deadly, one thing on each of their minds—kill or be killed.

All Rock focused on was Darla. He flew straight at her, watching when her gaze shifted from Kane and Jin to him. Her eyes opened farther and she lifted her head, focusing on him when he dove straight at her.

At the last minute she ducked, which caused her to roll to the side and fortunately closer to the truck. Rock hissed at her, opening his beak wide and sticking out his tongue.

They aren't after you, and Kane and Jin will be fine. He had no problem pissing his sweet leopard off as long as he could keep her from being harmed. Rock dove at her again. This time she sat, batted at him and curled her lip. But when he got too close, she ducked her head, glaring at him with eyes that were orbs of fire.

Rock rose into the air, turning and catching sight of Heath. For the first time he noticed how ruffled his brother's feathers were. He'd been in some serious battle. Rock would have noticed if any of the jaguars here grabbed him. A quick look at the other males confirmed what he immediately suspected. They'd taken out the two jaguars who were racing to join the three at the Lockham den. The two jaguars who'd been racing

from the direction of Banff were either dead or seriously injured so they weren't able to join in the fight. Either way they hadn't shown up yet.

Four of the owls dive-bombed both male jaguars. At the same time Kane roared, leapt at one and sent him flying into the other. Rock barely registered when the female jaguar retreated, racing around the backside of the house. He flew low, extending his talons and screaming as he dug into the smaller of the two males when he tried leaping in the air at Brad Jones. Beel was on the other side, both of them tearing into the male's hide and preventing him from jumping. Instead the male fell over, blood soaking his black, shiny coat.

Rock rose into the air, making distance so he wouldn't hit wings with either of his brothers or the other males with him. He focused on the male jaguars and Kane below them. Kane never looked up. Instead his head remained lowered, a handful of centimeters off the ground. His tail slashed through the air, swiping from one side of him to the other as his body rippled with tension. He fought with honor, waiting for the jaguars to regain their composure before attacking again.

Next to him, Jin held a similar pose, her lips curled and long, deadly white teeth glowing against her thick, white coat. Red highlights streaked through the white, blending in and providing decent camouflage if she wished to get lost in a thick snow bank.

Rock took a moment to look past them, turning his head toward the truck and Darla. The truck remained parked where it was. However, on the highway, which was less than a kilometer away at the end of the long, narrow drove, an SUV idled, not entering the drive but sitting on the highway. Whoever was in it watched the fight and had decided not to approach but instead to wait until they determined which side won. Rock didn't know the Lockham litter well, but he'd bet that was their SUV. Darla had mentioned watching the Lockham litter leave in a vehicle matching this one's description.

As quickly as he took in this new bit of information, Rock also realized Darla was nowhere in sight. He flew higher, leaving the fight scene, his only concern at the moment being Darla's safety. When he was over the roof, and able to see all sides of the den, it was apparent the female jaguar had disappeared. So had Darla.

An owl screamed and Rock flipped around, diving back into the fight. Darla would have to be safe. He prayed she hadn't done anything stupid. Rock barely managed to stop the larger male from biting off one of Heath's claws. He and his brother fluttered their wings, gaining altitude. One of Heath's wings appeared slightly damaged and he fluttered to the side, returning to the ground too quickly.

The other male jaguar, in spite of blood drenching his black coat, stretched his body and jumped from his hind quarters, his long, deadly teeth bared as he aimed for Heath. At the same time the larger male managed to avoid Kane and twisted around, also going onto his hind feet. The larger male didn't leave the ground though. He stood at his full height, on two legs, his body stretched and his front paws slicing through the air with menacing claws.

They were attacking Heath! Rock experienced a nerve-racking, gut-aching sensation. All of this was about getting Heath here and killing him. Neither jaguar seemed to care what Kane or Jin was doing right now. Instead they were leaping at Heath, thrashing at him with claws long enough to slice him in half.

Beel screeched, the bloodcurdling war cry filled with venomous anger as he lunged at the more injured, smaller jaguar. Rock did the same, reaching for the face of the larger jaguar and forcing him to retreat or lose at least one eye.

Orlando and Rome came at the large jaguar from the rear. Jin leapt out of the way as Orlando dug his claws into the male's lower back. The jaguar screamed, his mouth opening wide enough to show off enough teeth to rip an owl, or any of them, to shreds. He flipped around, sending Orlando tumbling off him. When he tried turning on Rome, he stumbled.

The large jaguar was fierce, determined and filled with rage when he roared and tried again, batting James Rome out of the air as if he were nothing but a stuffed animal. Rome slammed to the ground, rolling over several times before stopping and not moving. In the next minute he began changing into his human form. Rome was dead.

Rock screamed, releasing his rage over losing a good male. His brothers did the same. Their shrill, ear-piercing sound benefited them in battle since they were able to create a pitch most animals couldn't tolerate. Kane proved he could roar just as loud and bulldozed into the large male, knocking him off his feet. When the smaller male tried leaping on Kane, Jin leapt over all of them, landing on the smaller male. The two of them rolled, embraced, growling and sneering as they tried attacking each other while one was on top one second and underneath the other in the next moment.

If Rock weren't paying close attention to each move made, it would have been easy to get confused. So much happened so quickly. The large jaguar tumbled over his own front end, collapsing and not standing again. The smaller jaguar made one last effort to leap at Heath. He grabbed him with both paws. Rock and Cummings attacked at the same time. Rock landed on the male's shoulders, pecking at his head.

The moment he released Heath and collapsed, Cummings flew into the air. Rock used his wings to balance himself but ended up landing on the ground. He felt it shake underneath him when both jaguars fell. The larger one began resuming his human form but the smaller one lay on his side, panting heavily, but didn't change.

Was it over?

Kane roared, circling both males as he swatted his tail viciously from side to side. When Beel screeched, Rock, Orlando and Cummings flew that direction. Heath had also fallen to the ground, his feathers damp and sticky with blood. Rock stared into his brother's eyes, sensing the extent of his pain immediately and turned, determined to kill the one male jaguar who lay there panting.

Chapter Fourteen

Darla raced through the woods, leaping over rocks jutting up from the ground, and tearing around thick groves of trees. She flew through chilly shade and warm sunshine, indifferent to temperature change as she focused on the backside of the female jaguar running ahead of her.

As aggravated as she was with Rock, who, after informing her he wouldn't mate with her now, he now dared to bully her out of a fight. Let him try to tell her he was protecting her. She'd show him he would need some protection—from her. Darla had half a mind to rip him a new one the moment she saw him, and envisioning just how she'd do it fueled her fire and enabled her to run even faster.

At the same time Darla knew the jaguars were here to kill Heath. It would destroy Rock to lose anyone from his nest. She might be pissed as hell at him right now, but she'd be the one inflicting the pain on him. Darla would be damned if anyone else ever tried to hurt him or anyone in his nest. Let Rock try to stop her from taking on this female, this coward who thought she could escape a good fight.

Darla wasn't so sure about jaguars, but no full-blooded leopard in their right mind would ever turn down an honorable fight. Although part of her, in the far reaches of her brain, pointed out there was nothing honorable about what the jaguars were doing.

There was a steep incline ahead. Darla remembered it being part of the edge of the cliff, which deepened and was more rugged and steep in places, such as the place where the leopards chased the jaguar off last week. At the pace she was going, Darla would be able to clear it without any problem.

The female ahead of her didn't know about the cliff but didn't slow, and when it was there, leapt with fierceness and determination, landing easily on the other side. Darla did the same. It allowed her a gain on the female, and she could smell her a lot easier now. There was determination, an obvious scent, and anger. She didn't anticipate picking up on a thicker aroma, almost similar to sadness. There was something else too. Was it frustration? Neither were common scents to trail in a high-speed chase from a serious fight.

Darla shoved all thoughts from her brain. It was time to close in, end this before both of them were halfway up Canada. Pushing herself harder, Darla almost was in reach of the female. Her black coat rippled as lean muscles flexed and stretched underneath it. She was a beautiful creature, both in her human and jaguar form. None of that mattered though when someone sold their soul, gave up their honor and fought for unacceptable reasons.

Darla took advantage of a large rock in front of her, ran up it and flew off the ground, landing directly on her target. The two females rolled, the rough ground being

cruel to both of them. Darla eventually tumbled off the jaguar and managed to stand, feeling more than a bit dizzy. The female jaguar tumbled a few more meters then half her body disappeared off a ledge. She screamed.

Darla froze. She hadn't known the ground disappeared there. If she'd clung to the female a moment longer the two of them very easily might have gone off the edge. Darla stared at the female, only seeing the top half of her. Her black claws dug at the ground, scraping the earth as she fought to pull herself up. The ground crumbled from her efforts and the female began slipping. Her frantic howl tightened Darla's gut painfully before it began twisting. Already she smelled blood, fresh and strong. The female was hurt.

She edged closer, instinct advising wariness. When she was within a meter of the female, Darla saw blood soaking the lower half of her body, which hung over a pretty steep ledge. From where Darla paused she didn't see the ground below.

The female whined, staring up at Darla with wide, terrified yet captivating green eyes. Even as a jaguar, Darla bet this female lived a life of males tripping over themselves to be around her. That life might end in the next few minutes. As more ground fell free underneath her, the pathetic cry she released proved she was aware of that.

Darla remembered her vision and glanced around her. Not too far from where she stood was a large rock, quite possibly the one she'd sat on while trying to create something to stop the bleeding. If she were to pull the female back on to solid ground, and the female changed, she would more than likely be lying where Darla saw her in her vision. She hadn't felt apprehensive or even regretful during her vision. Maybe that was why she had it, to show her she wouldn't regret pulling the female from the ledge.

Unfortunately, her vision didn't advise on *how* to pull the female from the ledge. Changing wouldn't be to her advantage. She had a lot more muscle on her in her fur. Rock wasn't following her, so he couldn't help, which she'd found rather odd when he didn't tear after her, but for now there was only one matter to dwell on. Darla glanced around the wooded, rocky area. A large branch, more like part of a tree, lay on the ground not too far from the female jaguar.

Darla growled at her. I'll help you. Then, backing up so she wouldn't cause more earth to crumble and fall off the ledge, she made a half circle away from the female and came up behind the fallen tree branch.

It was easily three times her length, which would also, hopefully, make it strong enough for each of them to bite into an end of it and pull the female up. Darla took the end of it in her mouth, feeling its rough dryness scrape against her tongue. Her taste buds and palate might be different in her fur, but moist, moss-covered tree branches weren't part of her menu. She almost gagged as she gripped the end of the branch in her mouth and began dragging it closer to the female.

The female watched her, wary for only a moment before understanding crossed her face. Unfortunately, the many small twigs at the other end of the branch would do

better at shoving the female the rest of the way off the ledge than enable her to grab on with her mouth and be pulled on to safe ground.

Darla dropped the branch once she had it in position then endured being poked and scratched more than once as she ripped the small branches from the other end. Finally she had a good-size branch, relatively straight, and with thick, fairly equal ends.

Again, she damn near gagged herself when she stretched her jaw, grabbing the branch from the side and lifting it from the ground. She needed to be careful how she turned her head, so she wouldn't smack the female with the other end. Moving sideways, closer to the edge, and pushing the branch, Darla edged nearer until the other end was near the jaguar's mouth.

Darla watched, using mainly her peripheral vision, when she eagerly stretched for the other end. It took her more than one try, but finally she sank her teeth into the damp but thick branch. Darla let go of her end, finding the jaguar's expression almost humorous when she stared at her wide-eyed, her mouth open as far as it could go with the branch stuffed inside.

Hopefully the jaguar had enough sense to understand Darla sure as hell wasn't going to try to pull her weight from over the ledge stepping sideways with the branch in her mouth. Darla stepped over the branch, so it ran between her legs, grabbed the end with her mouth and began pulling, using her entire body to drag the female to safety.

When she looked between her legs a few minutes later, the female jaguar lay sideways on the ground, injured but safe, at least for the moment. Darla wondered if she were in fact doing the right thing, rescuing then taking time to stop the bleeding when the strong chance existed all the jaguars might be dead already or soon killed.

Darla pushed the branch to the side with her head, letting it roll a few times until it was out of the way, then approached the female. There wasn't much she could do now, other than lick her wounds to help her. Darla grumbled from her throat, not really caring if the jaguar understood her or not, then trotted off to the nearest clump of trees.

She heard the female whimpering, possibly wondering if the extent of help she would receive had now ended. Darla saw her through the thick foliage, but the female would have to crane her neck to see Darla, which she didn't do. At least her breathing came strong. Darla studied her silky black coat. She'd been able to see rosettes when the lighting hit the female just right. But that shiny, smooth black coat was beautiful, captivating with its smooth, silky, glistening appearance.

As the change burned her insides, concern and anxiousness sprouted to life inside her. In her human form, Darla saw the need instantly to help the female. She lay there suffering, and not from Darla's claws or teeth. Once it grew dark, temperatures would plummet, and if she left her there to bleed out, Darla would never be able to forgive herself. No matter if this species were bred simply to be killers, hired out and paid for services rendered, Darla wouldn't judge someone she didn't know. She might despise

the species but she didn't know anything about this female. Maybe the female also despised the life she lived.

Darla straightened on two legs, her skin and hair damp, and began shivering uncontrollably. When she finally appeared from behind her clump of trees and bushes, the female jaguar strained her head, growling fiercely in spite of her incapacitated position.

"I can hardly help you in my fur," Darla mumbled, doubting she looked that dangerous walking toward the female without a lick of clothing on. "It's Flora, right? Can you change?" Already Darla was absolutely freezing. She needed clothes or she'd freeze, but she wouldn't be any good to Flora and tending to that damaged leg if she'd remained in her fur.

The black jaguar rumbled something, the sound coming deep from her throat. She hobbled on three legs, nursing the damaged one, as she turned in a circle, as if looking for the perfect place to change from animal to human. Darla acknowledged the beautiful creature before her. Flora's coat glistened with black fur and her slender, firm body had a slinky motion to it, even with her bad leg, as she turned, swatting her long tail behind her. That was the only sign indicating the level of pain annoyed and possibly distracted Flora.

Darla thought of turning around and offering her privacy when the change began transforming her body. But if Flora stumbled when she straightened to two legs, Darla needed to be prepared to catch her. Darla knew she should question helping the female jaguar, especially when their entire reason for being here was to destroy Rock's nest by killing his brother. At the same time though, she didn't need to search too deep to know she wouldn't ever leave a creature alone, injured and incapable of helping themselves. She told herself it was best to keep Flora alive. They would learn more from her alive, then dead.

"Oh God." Flora balanced her weight on one leg, standing naked and bent slightly forward as her long, tangled black hair partially covered her. "It's cold."

"Hopefully we won't be naked long." She wouldn't focus on the chilled air. She had a job to do.

Darla approached her, the metallic smell of blood so strong it was sickening. Flesh was ripped open going down the female's shinbone. Darla stared at exposed cartilage then glanced around her, needing something to slow the bleeding so the jaguar didn't bleed out.

"At least your ankle seems to have mended." If there was a knowing look meant for Darla to see, Flora's expression appeared to be the same as it had been.

"Yup." Darla squatted on the side of Flora's leg and examined the gash running up the other side. The beautiful female might carry one hell of a grotesque-looking scar if this weren't treated properly soon. "The best I can do is tie off your leg so you don't bleed out. You'll have to wait for bandages or antiseptics but I can come up with something while we're here," she finished, looking at the growth and trees around them.

"Thank you." Flora was doing one hell of a good job controlling the pain she had to be in as she managed to move into a sitting position. Her expression remained relaxed although her voice sounded ragged and there was definitely an apprehensive smell about her.

"I'm not a doctor," Darla muttered, straightening, then headed for the trees.

She'd run with their doctor a few times over the years. Leopards didn't use human hospitals or their medicine. Darla imagined that jaguars probably had a similar metabolism to leopards, although Flora was exceptionally well trained not to show pain. Darla guessed maybe Flora was trained not to show too much emotion in the enemy's presence. Possibly she viewed herself as captured.

"I think we can use some of these vines to tie off your leg," Darla suggested, breaking off her line of thought as she glanced at the female leopard.

When Flora didn't look up but continued focusing on her leg, Darla started talking to herself as she searched the area for the right-sized leaves, the right-sized branches and thick-enough vines. "Hopefully this will work."

"It should for now," Flora muttered, her voice sounding tight and drained. The female's face seemed a bit more chalky than it had when Darla had seen her in the Lockham den, and she paid close attention as Darla used the sticks to keep the female's leg straight and the vines to tie the sticks to her leg. Leaves and moss, with a bit of claylike dirt, created a natural bandage when pressed to the open gash Darla managed to slow the bleeding until eventually it appeared to coagulate.

"You honor me, considering I know you think of me as an enemy."

Darla shot her a furtive glance. "I don't know what you know about leopards, but we aren't inclined to let anyone die unless their wounds were made after attacking us." She thought about what she just said and amended slightly. "I'm not sure I would do that much if I smelled some good in them."

"You smell good in me?" For the first time since sitting there, Flora almost smelled hopeful.

There wasn't time to consider the meaning behind what Darla smelled. Instead, she shifted her thinking, deciding it might be to her credit to have some information once they were found.

"How many jaguars are in our territory right now?" she asked. The two males had quite a few wounds on them when Darla had taken off after Flora.

"There were two more males in Banff. They were notified to come assist when we realized we'd probably been found out. It was the only explanation for Kane Masters questioning us so ruthlessly in the Lockham den."

"Trust me, that wasn't Kane being ruthless."

Flora nodded and brushed some of her tangled hair with her fingers. "You know, we aren't as bad as you think we are," she mumbled, glancing at Darla as she continued working her fingers through her hair.

"You came here to kill Heath Halk," Darla snapped, her tone fiercer than she intended. Although as she released her anger, it felt so good, she embraced her outrage. "You don't smell of honor and you say you aren't that bad?" she hissed, leaning forward and tilting her head slightly as she studied the female.

Flora's complexion was pale and her eyes weren't the same piercing green they had been earlier. Darla also noticed her breathing seemed ragged and wondered if her leg was her only injury.

"I can't begin to figure out why someone would do what you came here to do," Darla added, wishing Flora would say something to offer insight into her nature. "Why would you allow anyone to tell you who to kill?"

"Allow?" Flora snorted then began coughing. It was obvious racking her body as she wheezed hurt a lot. She covered her mouth and stared at Darla with large, wide eyes. "You have no idea what you're smelling," she whispered, lowering her hand slowly. "What makes no sense to me is why you would save someone's life when it's obvious you think they should die dishonorably."

"It sounds as if neither of us understands each other," Darla admitted, knowing her visions had guided her as long as she'd been alive and if it happened in her vision, it did for a reason. "Let's just say it doesn't smell honorable to me to allow anyone simply to bleed out if I can assist in some way."

"No matter who they are?"

Darla searched the female's face, noting deep lines from pain and possibly worry, if not fear. She was no match to Darla now. "Apparently," Darla muttered.

"You shouldn't think of jaguars not running with honor."

Darla laughed, not seeing any point in showing manners or respect to Flora's lineage. "I shouldn't?" she asked.

"Many of us are as honorable as you."

Another time Darla might have thanked her for the praise. Instead she ripped some of the vine, shredding it until she was able to twist it into a solid, thin rope. She released some aggression on her task, although certainly not enough. "Just not those who willingly allow others to pay them to kill someone?" she muttered, not caring how sarcastic she smelled. "Tell me, did the Lockham litter hire you to kill Heath Halk?"

"Not me." Flora didn't smell as if she were lying.

"Which of you were hired to kill him?" Darla knew how to ask more direct questions to force someone into the truth. Maybe jaguars ran by the same traditions binding them to always be honest, but they were probably as versed as leopards in knowing how to answer a question, not lie and not offer any of the truth either.

"Franc and Lor," Flora offered without hesitating. "The others were sent as scouts."

"How many jaguars are here now?"

"Right now there remain five of us." Flora focused on her leg. "Granted a couple of us were sent here for an attack, but we weren't given any kind of welcoming from leopards when we first arrived," Flora continued, her voice pinched from pain she was trying to control. "You're accusing me of running here to kill that male owl." Her gaze was hooded when she looked at Darla. "Leopards and owls are so close they fight for each other?"

Darla began twisting the rope vine around the end of a long stick, pulling it tight as she made sure the vine was tight and smooth. "We live together in peace."

Flora appeared to digest what Darla offered, more than likely trying to learn as much about Darla as she was Flora. Darla intended to maintain hold on her questions. This wasn't about an exchange of information.

"Why are you here?" Darla shoved her hair behind her shoulders then tied off the rope vine. She stared at her makeshift walking stick, rather proud of her work.

"I'm not supposed to be here."

Darla glanced at the female, catching the seriousness in her expression. "Use this stick to support yourself and stand," she instructed. "And what's that mean? Explain why you came here."

"I followed the jaguars up here who were hired for the job."

"Why?"

Flora ignored her. "I had discovered a way to leave without being detected. It was my one chance to arrive at the Lockham den and my presence there not be questioned. Jordan insisted I not run alone. Obviously very few jaguars knew my true feelings. But my littermates agreed to help me. The two males who ran up here with me came along only because they could be trusted, and I have smelled their honor all of my life."

Darla kept her emotions in check. If this female had to twist things around in her head so she believed she ran with honor, that was her problem. "Which leopard litter requested your kind be hired?"

Flora stared at her a moment longer before parting her dried lips. "The Lockham litter, as you guessed. But not all of them," she added, smelling defensive.

Darla frowned. "What does that mean?"

"Jordan Lockham didn't agree with the arrangement. He believed it dishonored their litter and argued there were better ways to see to their development."

"Their development? Do you mean they were willing to kill Heath simply because he prevented them from taking the only income many nests had?" Darla couldn't believe it. All of this over the desire to be more successful. "Talk about a leopard being wired wrong," she grunted, thoroughly disgusted by the truth.

"Jordan didn't believe that. He is incredibly honorable," Flora argued fiercely.

Darla stared at her, holding the additional vines in her hands. "How do you know anything about one of the Lockham litter?"

Flora licked her lips then dropped her gaze to her torn leg. "Jordan and I knew each other before he moved up here with his litter."

"Oh really? And so when they hired jaguars to kill Heath Halk, you thought it would give you an excuse to see your old lover?"

Flora began shaking her head. "I never had any plans to kill anyone. That wasn't how it was at all. I figured I'd be chosen to do the kill, and when I wasn't, Jordan and I both worried the colony had found us out. Jaguars don't breed outside their own kind. If they even thought I'd been with a leopard, I'd be put to death. So, I managed to run up here after the males who were sent." She continued staring at her leg and shaking her head. "Looks like I ran to my death anyway. And if Jordan is dead..." she muttered. "I know he was returning to his litter. If they showed up during the battle, they'd be attacked on sight."

"We should start walking. I'm not sure you'll make it down the mountain before it grows dark and very cold." Darla began to understand and feel an odd sort of compassion toward the female. In a twisted way, they were very much two females in the same predicament—both in love with males they were forbidden to have. For Flora, it had meant fleeing her den, willing to run into another country, to be by the male she wanted.

"It might not be worth trying to save me," Flora muttered as she obeyed and used the crutch to push herself to a standing position. "I wouldn't want to live without Jordan."

Darla hadn't intended to offer any information to the female. After all, she was here because her breed killed anyone at all if the price was right. Which was damn near the most despicable, most dishonorable thing Darla had ever heard of. Yet at the same time, she hadn't smelled a lie in any of Flora's words. The female was preoccupied with worry for her male leopard. It would hinder their process, unless Darla offered some reassurance.

"When I raced after you, the fighting had slowed and the Lockham litter remained in their vehicle. I don't think any of them were hurt."

Flora's expression transformed so much with that news. She stood taller, a slight glow appearing in her eyes, and truly looked as if Darla's words were enough to heal her.

The sudden, steady flapping of wings above them grabbed both their attention and ended the conversation. Darla tipped her head back, staring up through the trees as an owl circled around overhead. Rock had come for her.

"Is that your male?" Flora asked and gripped her walking stick, shifting some of her weight as she began trying to stand. "I can smell him on you," she added, whispering as if she understood it was a secret.

"I'm pretty sure," she admitted, not seeing any reason to comment on the latter. "Hopefully this means there will be a better way to bring you back to our side of the mountain."

"Do you think he might have brought clothes?"

Chapter Fifteen

Rock climbed onto the flat ledge and stared at Darla's naked ass as she climbed above him. Soft, mouthwatering curves rounded down to firm, slender legs. Her thigh muscles flexed, stretching, bulging slightly then relaxing. He imagined her beautiful legs clamped against his hips, Darla howling as her face flushed with her orgasm. When she lifted her foot, reaching the final rock, then stretched and pulled herself up to the ledge, Rock damn near fell backward. For that brief moment, as he gawked worse than a fledgling viewing pussy for the first time, he doubted he'd be able to move if he tried. If he had fallen, he sure as hell wouldn't have been able to change and fly. Hell, he'd be lucky after a view like that if he remembered how to fly.

Darla's legs were stretched just above his head, one leg straight and supporting her weight while the other was bent and hoisting her to the ledge. Her ass stretched, opening for him. Her bare pussy was completely exposed. It was the fine line of moisture covering her entrance that completely rattled him. Rock's cock was suddenly so damn hard he had to be careful climbing naked behind her. One wrong move and he'd get a scratch he wouldn't forget anytime soon.

She reached the flat, reclusive, hiding spot they'd used for so long to sit and talk. Pulling her legs up, she rolled over on the rock, momentarily disappearing from his view. "This is so perfect," she breathed.

He sure as hell wouldn't argue that one.

Rock reached the top, pulling himself onto the flat rock next to her. "Most definitely perfect," he said, staring at her until she let her head roll in his direction and shaded her eyes with her hand.

"You aren't so bad yourself." There was a cocky manner about her today. The glint in her eye she couldn't hide when she shaded them, flashed when she grinned.

A gentle breeze made her long blonde strands brush over her face. Rock moved them out of the way before she could, stroking her soft, warm skin as he did. "It's good to see you smiling again," he admitted, dragging his finger over her parted lips.

Darla opened her mouth, capturing his finger between her teeth, then sucked it into her mouth. There was the glint in her eye again, as if the sun reflected off her, making her green and gold eyes sparkle. After twirling her tongue around his finger, her attention shifted from his face to his dick. It jerked between his legs, instantly jealous of his finger.

"Little cat," he hissed, every inch of him turning to stone. "If you want to talk, then quit with the torture session. Otherwise, I promise, we're going to fuck until you don't have energy for a conversation."

Darla grinned broadly with his finger still in her mouth. She kicked it out with her tongue and started laughing. "We're going to talk and have sex then talk some more. You better be ready," she informed him, her grin wicked.

There were times when Rock needed to straighten his feathers and take a really good look at all he'd been blessed with. The first item on his list would definitely be Darla. Ever since returning to her litter after helping bring Flora Carducean to their leopard healer, she'd brooded quietly. Days had passed and they'd all worried Heath wouldn't make it. Rock wasn't the only one curious about the female jaguar. Kane had told him it would benefit all of them for her to regain her strength. Apparently she'd fled her colony in Colorado to be with her secret lover. Kane believed the falling out with her species would make her more open to discussing them. It would serve the owls and the leopards well to know all there was to know about this unpredictable and dangerous breed.

"It wouldn't hurt either one of us to have you smile every now and then." Darla rolled to her side, holding her head with her hand and looked at him through her thick lashes. "Especially now with your brother doing well. Flora is also starting to walk. We have so much to smile about."

She reached for him, tracing his face as he'd just done hers.

He stretched out on the flat rock, which was already warming from the midday sun, and eased his arm underneath her neck. She curled into him, draping her legs over his.

"It was good to see Heath out walking around," she said, pressing her hand over his bare chest and tilting her head to stare up at him.

She was glowing today. Rock ran his finger over one of her strands of hair along the side of her face. "I think his mate is even happier. According to the squawkings, she was about to fly into a wall with him making her crazy."

"Owls probably hate confinement just as badly as leopards," she purred, rubbing herself against his side.

She knew she was torturing the hell out of him. Darla's hand drifted closer to his hard cock but she paused just above his abdomen.

"I heard you went to see Flora," he said, grabbing her wrist before her fingers could reach his cock.

"Did you know Kane approved her mating with Jordan Lockham?"

"I'd heard something about that."

"Don't you see? If he approved that, he will come around and smell how much you and I mean to each other."

Rock wasn't sure he completely agreed, but he didn't want her smile fading. Instead of responding, he decided their conversation would wait, or if she insisted on talking, it would be while he was enjoying her naked body, stretched out next to him.

"What are you doing?" she complained when he scooped her off the ground and lifted her.

His agile little leopard was fierce in her fur, demanding in her flesh, but still lightweight and easy to convince when he set his mind to something. "What I've wanted to do all day," he informed her, placing her on top of him then pulling her face to his.

"But wait. Did you hear about the leopards coming forth and admitting to chasing the jaguar off the cliff?" she asked.

"Uh-huh." Rock grabbed her arms, pinning them to her side, then brought her breast to his mouth. He latched on, releasing her but moving his hands to her back when he sucked her hard nipple into his mouth.

"Oh damn! Rock," she purred, not appearing too upset when he didn't comment further about the leopards.

While Heath recuperated in his nest, Rock and Beel ran all affairs of parliament. Everything had gone smoothly but it kept him up-to-date on all howlings and squawkings going on in the territory. All of it seemed rather trivial now that it was over. What mattered was the sensual female draped over him.

"These breasts are perfect," he mumbled, switching from one nipple to the other.

"If you're going to do that," Darla said, her voice a rough whisper, "I'm going to do this."

Rock jumped when she grabbed his dick, wrapping her fingers around his shaft and stroking as she lifted herself off him. Her firm legs remained on either side of him and it appeared she lowered her body closer, pushing her breasts into his face.

He had no problem suffocating on perfection. Rock gripped both her breasts. He kneaded, suckled, nipped and licked, making himself even harder than he'd been before. Listening to Darla's heavy breaths turn into pants as she adjusted herself over him convinced Rock he'd found paradise.

He felt her heat before her pussy brushed over the tip of his cock. Rock jerked, moving his hands quickly and releasing her breasts. Her soft flesh bounced in front of his face when he cupped her ass, forcing her down on him.

"Hell yes!" she cried out, straightening and arching her back as she slid down on his dick.

"That's it, little cat." He ran his hands up her front, encouraging her to arch more as he stroked her breasts, ran his fingers down her belly then traced paths back to her nipples. "Ride me, my sweet leopard."

"Yes," she breathed.

Darla was aggressive, pushy, and knew how to get under his feathers better than anyone he'd ever met. There would be time to discuss the fight that occurred outside the Lockham den. He wouldn't survive if he didn't have Darla's word she wouldn't do anything rash, and would honor him by at least letting him know before she decided to

chase after someone she planned to attack. Rock knew Darla would argue that because things had worked out he should relax and trust her fighting skills. There would be other fights though. Both their species lived in a very violent world. If his precious leopard wanted him to live a long life, flying over her and loving her, she would need to agree to certain things so he wouldn't have a heart attack.

But that conversation would come soon enough. Rock stared up at Darla, watching her flushed face as she bit her lower lip, her eyes closed, and created a steady rhythm as she raised and lowered herself on his cock.

Her straight blonde hair fluttered down her back. Her nipples were still moist and her breasts jiggled slightly as she rode him. Rock cupped her hips, helping her ease herself up and relax back on him. Her pussy was so hot, so wet and tight, it fit him as if it were a nest made for one—for him.

"I love you, Darla." The words were out of his mouth before he could stop them. But he meant it and didn't know of any logical reason not to tell her. She begged for his thoughts, his emotions. Now she had them.

The way she looked down, her grin growing until her bright white teeth shown as strongly as her eyes did, was enough to show him she approved. "Oh Rock," she cried out, collapsing on top of him and wrapping her arms around his neck. "I love you too." When she lifted herself and stared into his eyes, her pussy contracted around him, damn near sucking all life out of him. "And if you tell me 'soon' again, owl, I swear you'll regret it."

"What?"

Her grin was gone. Not to mention, his confusion created a frown. Her sweet smell of happiness turned spicy and for whatever reason, she was suddenly angry. Rock doubted he'd ever be able to keep up with Darla's incredible ability to shift emotions faster than she could blink.

When she tried climbing off him, he grabbed her ass, forcing his cock even deeper inside her. In spite of herself, Darla gasped, her lashes fluttering over her eyes, which closed briefly.

"You will not be angry right now," he instructed.

"Then you'll agree to mate with me right now," she demanded through clenched teeth with her eyes still closed.

"Okay."

Darla blinked.

"What?" she gasped, staring at him, her green and gold eyes suddenly wide open.

"We shall be mated."

"Right now?"

"Right this second."

Neither leopards nor owls messed with celebrations over a union so incredibly private and intimate. If their sires and mothers had still been alive, Rock would have discussed the matter with Darla's sire, requesting his permission and being honored with her den's blessing. His parents would have been brought into the discussion as well. Since both their dens and nests consisted of leopards and owls close to them, in his case blood, but not in control of his life, Rock didn't need to use those channels in order to make their mating honorable. Her consent and his consent were all they needed.

"Rock!" she squealed, collapsing against him again and hugging him tight enough her breasts smashed against his chest. "I do love you, with all my heart. You are my owl and I'm your leopard."

"It's already been that way for a long time." Rock would listen to her praises later. Right now, honoring their fresh mating by consummating it seemed a lot more important.

He gripped her ass, holding her in place, and thrust deep inside her. Darla growled but didn't fight him as he continued making love to her, picking up the rhythm and fucking her perfect pussy until she came so hard they were both soaked before she quit panting.

Rock was right there with her, exploding inside her then wrapping his arms around her, feeling her heart pound against his chest until their beats matched each other. It wasn't until her breathing slowed he decided it was time to share his news.

He kept her in place on top of him, holding her warm body against his and began petting her silky blonde hair. "Late last night I attended the burning for James Rome."

Darla lifted her head, her expression turning serious as she searched his face. "He died with honor," she muttered.

Rock nodded. "His mate died last year in an accident south of here." He'd never learned all the details around her death and knew James still mourned the loss of his mate. At least now the two would fly together. "They have two fledglings who are now orphans."

Darla continued studying him but he noticed her breathing had stopped. Possibly she anticipated where he was going with this. "James' sire and mother still live. They are in Banff in a small home not too far from the Rome nest. Both of them are quite old. They don't fly too often anymore. The fledglings are healthy, full of life, and too young to understand they no longer have a sire and mother."

"What will happen to them?" she asked.

"I spoke with Jeremiah Rome last night. He isn't sure what to do about the fledglings but insisted his mate was too old to properly raise the two of them. They also have the James nest to deal with. It's a big, old roomy nest James built with his own hands close to the base of the mountain. Apparently he and his mate preferred a quieter life than living in Banff could offer."

"Where are you going with this, Rock?"

He didn't see any reason not to be to the point. "How about moving into their nest and raising a couple of fledglings?"

"A couple of fledglings?" she asked, her voice cracking. "Would they be ours and no one would take them away from us?"

He nodded. "We'd make it legal if you're willing to help raise them."

"Oh my God, Rock," she whispered, bringing her hand to her mouth and covering it. For a moment she just stared at him until her eyes moistened, making them glisten even more than they had previously. "Oh God," she repeated, and began slowly shaking her head. "I just don't believe it. I love you so much and knew being with you would mean we'd never have any cubs of our own. But this, are you sure? We can have them for real?"

"Yes, we can."

"Do the Romes know your mate is a leopard?"

If she ever knew how easily she almost made him smile with her questions, she'd push him even harder. "I'm pretty sure it is rather obvious to everyone," he told her, managing to keep his voice from wavering with amusement. "But yes, I did bring that up to them. Both said they would be honored if we would consider raising the fledglings."

"When can we go get them?" Darla almost leapt off him.

Rock couldn't help himself. He grinned, grabbed his delighted mate, and let his cock harden as he sank deep inside her.

"Rock, you smiled."

"You're making me very happy." His voice did crack that time. In order to maintain his honor, Rock pulled her to him, kissing her as he began making love to her again.

"I don't know how happy Kane and Jin will be about all of this," she said, staring into his eyes as she spoke.

"My nest won't be thrilled either." He breathed in her scent, their scent, and understood how things would be. "It will take time. While they learn to accept us, we will have our own nest, out of the way of your old den and my nest as they throw their fits. Once they're willing to accept us, they'll smell how strong our love for each other is."

Darla grinned, her entire face glowing. Nothing anyone around him would have to say him would convince him otherwise. Rock was definitely the luckiest owl on earth.

About the Author

All my life, I've wondered at how people fall into the routines of life. The paths we travel seem 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 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 <u>author bio page</u> at <u>www.ellorascave.com</u>.

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