



CRYSTAL
JORDAN

FORBIDDEN PASSIONS

STOLEN
PASSIONS

Samhain Publishing, Inc.

Enemy mine...

Forbidden Passions, Book 1

Lyra Marcus tries to avoid her werewolf family's political entanglements. Instead, she heals the wounds of the never-ending border skirmishes between lycans and wereleopards. It's a bitter irony that she's about to die in that war.

When she awakens after an attack, the horror of her situation dawns. She's a wounded werewolf in the middle of wereleopard territory. And standing over her is a son of its most powerful family, Zander Leonidas. Her fate may be a swift and bloody end, but she intends to go down fighting.

Zander has no plan to fight the little she-wolf who's landed at his Refuge Resort, a place where shifter species are free to be what they are—except wolves, of course. Yet Lyra fits him in a way she shouldn't, and the urge to mark her as his mate is irresistible. A match like theirs, though, would rock the foundations of their world.

He intends to find out who left Lyra for dead on Leonidas land. And keep her safe from whoever wants to finish the job—not to mention the werewolf alpha who wants his niece back at any cost...

Warning: Two sexy shifters on the opposite sides of a war doing naughty, forbidden things to each other. Forward, backward, in bed, out of bed, you get the idea. All while trying to escape an assassin. Then it really gets exciting...

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Samhain Publishing, Ltd.
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Stolen Passions
Copyright © 2010 by Crystal Jordan
ISBN: 978-1-60928-241-7
Edited by Bethany Morgan
Cover by Kanaxa

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First Samhain Publishing, Ltd. electronic publication: November 2010
www.samhainpublishing.com

Stolen Passions

Crystal Jordan

Dedication

For my partner in crime, Loribelle Hunt, without whom this series would never have come into being.

For my editor, Bethany Morgan, because she liked the series enough to give it a home.

For my best friend, the Mad Madam M, just for being her.

For my other partner in crime, the Professor Moriarty, because he actually codenamed himself after a villain. That's my kind of guy.

Chapter One

It was the heat that woke her.

Something rough rasped against her cheek, and sweat slid in slow beads down her face. It stung her eyes when she opened them to see the blazing sun overhead. Sand. It was sand scraping the skin on her face. From the smell of it, she was in the desert, no longer in the humid air of New Orleans. She was so hot, she felt as if her blood was boiling. Exhaustion sapped at her strength, willing her to return to oblivious slumber, but questions nagged at her, buzzing around like insistent gnats.

Where was she, and how had she gotten here? Why was she outside?

When she tried to lift her head to get a better look at her surroundings, every muscle in her body screamed in protest. Oh, God. She remembered now. She'd been attacked after she'd finished a late shift at the clinic in New Orleans—a clinic just for people like her. Shape-shifters. Wereanimals.

The last thing she remembered seeing was a gloved fist slamming into her jaw—and it packed the kind of strength behind it that a human couldn't manage. It had to be another shifter. The physician in her began cataloguing injuries even as the wolf wanted to rip someone's throat out for doing this to her. Multiple lacerations and contusions, possible fibular fracture and a serious case of dehydration. If she didn't get to water soon, she was so screwed.

The anger whipping through her made it easier to ignore the shrieking agony that threatened to make her collapse back to the sand. It didn't matter if it hurt—she was going to die if she stayed here. She wiped sweat and dried blood from her face, pushing her long black hair back over her shoulder.

Lifting her nose to the wind, she inhaled and tried to catch the scent of civilization...or water, whichever was closer. West. The faintest aroma of people came to her, so she turned in that direction. Her gait was a broken stagger, but she was moving. She stumbled again and again, crashing hard to the ground and scraping skin from her palms and elbows.

A hopeless sob was wrenched from her chest, but she forced herself to get up, to keep going. She didn't want to die. She didn't want to give the son of a bitch who'd done this to her the satisfaction. The wide expanse of rocky desert terrain stretched before her endlessly, broken only by stark mountains rising to the north. Sweat burned the cuts on her face. Gritting her teeth, she pushed on. If she gave in to the pain, she'd never get to see them punished. A grim smile pulled at her cracked lips. Revenge was a great motivator.

When her ankle twisted and gave out from under her, she tumbled down a short ravine, landing on her back. Squinting against the glare of the sun, she saw a large bird pass in front of it. Probably a buzzard coming to pick her bones when she died. Groaning, she braced her hands on the ground and tried to force herself up again, but her arms collapsed, and her head slammed down to the ground. Her ears rang with the force of the impact.

It was almost funny that she, Doctor Lyra Marcus, fastidious to a fault and niece of the most powerful werewolf Alpha in America, was filthy, bloodstained, lying in the dirt and couldn't do a damn thing about it. A giggle that bordered on hysteria bubbled from her throat. Well, at least she remembered her own name. That was something. She clamped a hand over her mouth to stifle the laughter.

Get a grip, Lyra.

Digging down deeper inside herself than she ever had before, she used the side of the ravine to pull herself upright, to stand, to lean against as she shuffled along again. The farther she walked, the more her thoughts grew fuzzy around the edges, and that wasn't good. No, not good at all. Eventually the ravine ended, and she staggered out into an arid wasteland. It wouldn't be much longer before she couldn't get up if she fell, couldn't go any further. And then the scavengers would have their turn at her. The thought didn't scare her as much as she knew it should, and time slid away as she put one foot in front of the other.

She lifted her head as she smelled something worse than death on the wind, and the horror of her predicament finally hit home.

Wereleopard.

The sworn enemy of her kind. She was in the desert, which meant that if she was still in the United States, she was deep into the western territory the cats claimed for their own. A place where no sane wolf would ever go.

She couldn't see it among the scraggly brush and broken rock, but she knew it was there. The way her wolf senses screeched danger was no lie. She picked up her pace, tried to run, tried to escape. To where, she didn't know, but she wasn't being taken in enemy territory without a fight.

And there it was, all tawny fur and dark spots—huge, sleek and undeniably male. His gaze locked on her as he pursued her at a ground-eating pace, hunting her. She snarled, more the wolf now than woman. Her fangs erupted from her gums, but she didn't have the energy left to shift into full wolf form. Too weak to defend herself.

Weak, and probably dead before the vultures ever got a piece of her. It was her last thought before she tripped over a sunken boulder, and the ground came rushing up to meet her.

The world went dark, and she knew her life was over.

Zander slowed to a lope to circle the unconscious woman. Confusion and anger had flooded him the moment the scent of werewolf had reached his nose. Someone was trespassing on his family's land, and

he'd needed to investigate. This wasn't what he'd expected to find. His claws dug into the loose sand as he paced around her, looking for a trap. The desert was eerily silent. He hadn't seen anyone else out here, couldn't smell anything but her on the wind. It was distracting, that smell. Titillating in a way that he shouldn't allow it to be. Still, it didn't answer the most important questions. What the fuck was going on here? Who was she, and how had she gotten here?

He nudged her shoulder with his muzzle, pushing her limp body over on to her back. Whoever she was, she was in bad shape. Blood caked her nostrils and the corners of her mouth. Ugly bruises mottled her creamy skin. Horror and rage fisted his belly as he saw distinct handprints on her flesh. Someone had done this to her deliberately—beaten this woman until she collapsed. He fought the urge to track down the bastard and return the favor. Every muscle in his body locked as he got a stranglehold on his temper. It was unlike him to react so violently, and he shook his head hard.

She sucked in a quick breath, her eyes flaring open for a moment. The unusual liquid silver color snared him, fascinating the cat within him. Her lips moved, but no sound emerged. She growled a warning at him, her fangs baring. But he read the fear and desperate helplessness under the fierceness in that gaze. He wanted to reassure her, let her know that she was safe, that he would never allow anyone to hurt her again. But then she was gone, her eyes closing and her body relaxing against the ground as she passed out.

Some emotion he couldn't name gripped his chest as he stared down at her. Whoever she was, she was his responsibility now. She was his now. A shudder of foreboding ran through him, but he pushed that aside the way he had his unexpected anger. He had more vital matters to deal with, like saving this woman from dehydration under the blazing sun.

He stretched, his body shifting from leopard to human form. The spotted fur retracted until he was left crouching naked beside her. He gingerly scooped her up and cradled her slim form to his chest. Protectiveness flooded him as he felt how delicate she was compared to him. He could get all his questions answered about her after he got her out of the desert heat. Sweat already slid in rivulets down his back and stuck his skin to hers.

After only a few steps, the hot sand managed to scorch and blister his very human feet. He bit back a curse as he started the long trek home.

Over twenty-four hours later, he sat by her bedside while she slept fitfully. Her silver eyes rolled back for a moment before she opened them fully to meet his.

"Welcome back." Zander dropped the financial report he was reading to the bedside table and leaned forward in his chair. It looked like his uninvited guest was finally awake.

Neither he nor his brothers had been able to figure out who she was or how she'd ended up on their land. He did know that if he hadn't had a meeting and needed to cut short his daily run around his family's extensive property, he never would have found her. If he hadn't taken that shortcut, she'd be dead.

And that would be a damn shame. A woman this lovely shouldn't have to die that way. Once he'd cleaned her up and the natural healing ability all shifters possessed kicked in, he could see the fine bone structure, the full lips, the lovely face framed by a pool of inky black hair against the white pillowcase. Those locks had trailed to her waist when she'd run from him. As beat up as she'd been, he had no idea how she'd managed to run at all. The way she'd bared her fangs showed a predator's nature. Her strength impressed the hell out of him, and his reaction to her on every level made her unlike any woman he'd ever known before, regardless of species. She'd been in and out of consciousness, and he'd forced liquids down her throat every time she came to.

His brothers had offered to take turns sitting with her, but he'd refused. The first moment Zander had seen those gray eyes focus on him, he'd been caught by something more powerful than he'd ever experienced before. It hadn't relaxed its grip on him since. The leopard in him wanted her, the animal as intrigued as the man. He couldn't walk away. So here he sat, alert to every breath she took as her body rapidly restored itself. She appeared to be completely healed, so he watched and waited for her to awaken and not just resurface briefly as she had before.

Her gaze was blank and glassy as she returned to awareness by degrees. "W-where am I?"

That low voice reminded him of chicory and hot, humid nights on the bayou.

"The infirmary at Refuge Resort." Leaning farther forward, he caught a lock of her silky hair between his fingers and slid it away from her face. Her scent came to him the way it had that first moment in the desert, sweet, rich and all woman. He sat back with a jerk, pushing away the errant thought.

"Refuge? That's in Arizona." She blinked hard, raising herself onto her elbows. Her movements made the narrow cot squeak. The thin sheet slipped down to bare a dusky nipple. His gaze dropped to it, to the slight, firm curves of her body, and his body reacted, cock going rock hard. She lifted a hand and covered herself without haste. Not a scrap of embarrassment shone on her face when he met her gaze. He arched a brow, and her mouth quirked at the corners. "Sorry, kitty cat. I'm not shy. I'm a doctor, so nudity doesn't bother me."

"Good to know." He let a lascivious smile curl his lips as his gaze swept over her body. The sexual response he had to her was outside of his control, but what he did with it wasn't. And he always kept the upper hand.

But...kitty cat? As if a leopard could be compared to a domestic house cat. He snorted. The woman was more than bold. It was too bad he liked that in his women. He shifted in his seat to adjust the fit of his khaki slacks—his hard-on hadn't let up and fire balled in his gut. Damn, he had to be desperate if he was getting this hot over a wolf. Even if she was well enough now to play, she was a werewolf. He'd smelled the wolf on her before he'd even seen her, and the way she'd bared her fangs when she'd seen him told him she was no stranger to the conflict between their species.

His older brothers would want to know she was awake, especially Nico, the resident security expert at the resort. Hell, the security expert for the vast empire of companies the family owned. The whole operation was based in a collection of offices here at the resort. If she'd been a man, Nico would have suggested putting her back out in the desert to rot, but harming a woman was one of the few lines even the half-feral Nico wasn't willing to cross. He had wanted to cuff her to the bed though, and Zander had flatly refused, which meant Nico was now in a thoroughly pissed off frame of mind.

The air conditioning kicked in, and the vent over her bed spewed cool air. She shivered, goose bumps rising on her skin. The sunset made her ebony hair shimmer as she jerked her chin at the fading daylight coming through the windows. "Why was it so hot outside? It's not even June yet."

He grinned, tried not to stare at the way her nipples hardened under the sheet, and stretched a leg out straight to give his straining erection some room. Jesus, what was it about this slip of a woman that had him so horny? He swallowed and reined in his thoughts—and hormones. "Never been to the desert, huh? We're getting near record highs, but Tucson can get over a hundred even in March and April. For about a week we've been hovering just under one-ten. It'll cool off a little when the monsoon season hits."

Where was the smooth tongue he was so famous for? There were a million things he needed to speak to this woman about, and the weather wasn't one of them.

That silver gaze swept over him, pinned him in place. "Which one are you?"

"Excuse me?" He arched a brow. Where had that question come from? Maybe she wasn't quite as awake as he'd assumed.

She sighed and sat all the way up, wrapping the sheet around her toga-style as she swung her long, shapely legs over the side of the small cot. "You're one of them. The Leonidas. You're not just a leopard."

He chuckled. No, she was definitely awake. And sharp. There was nothing sexier than a smart woman. He forced himself to derail his totally inappropriate lustful admiration and respond to her question. "Got it in one."

"There are four of you, aren't there?"

"Yes, but only three of us still live in Arizona." Since the airplane accident that had taken his father's and sister-in-law Celeste's lives. He didn't let himself finish the sentence. His eldest brother, Jason, had been gone for months, unable to remain and live with the daily reminders of his dead mate. That left Adrian, Nico and Zander to lead the leopard clan of this country. He swallowed and forced an easy smile to his face. "What gave me away?"

"Like every werekind, I've seen pictures of your father in the papers. The resemblance is there." One creamy shoulder lifted in a shrug, and a single ebony curl slipped down to curve around her breast. Lucky curl.

“Huh.” He rubbed a hand over the back of his neck, working out a kink from sitting beside her bed for so long. “Adrian was always the one who looked like our father.”

And Jason had been the odd one out. If it wasn’t their father singling Jason out and shoving him up on the dutiful pedestal reserved just for the Leonidas heir, it was the fact that he looked nothing like anyone else in the family.

As a melanistic leopard, Jason might have the same green eyes as his younger brothers, but his blue-black hair was a sharp contrast to their lighter brown. The difference was only accentuated in animal form when his dark coat and cream colored spots were the exact opposite of a traditional leopard’s. Melanism was a genetic anomaly known to big cats in the wild as well as shifters, where regular cubs were born in the same litter as a black cub.

Now the distance was physical as well as psychological. Zander sighed, suddenly weary. Their family had never been a peaceful one—especially since Jason’s one act of rebellion against their father had been to mate with the werewolf Alpha’s human stepdaughter. Hector had always regretted letting Celeste come to Refuge to do a story for one of the werewild newspapers. Even then, the Leonidas brothers had always had one another’s backs against all outsiders.

And Zander damn well missed his family.

The she-wolf tilted her head and answered his unvoiced thought. Her gaze softened with quiet sympathy. “You must miss him. I’m sorry your father died.”

“You know, I actually believe you.” And he did. The sincerity in her eyes and on her pretty face couldn’t be faked. His face felt as though it might crack as he forced another small smile to his lips. It had been harder and harder in the last few months to maintain the optimism that used to come so naturally to him.

He shook the moroseness away. It wouldn’t help, and his family was none of this woman’s business. For all intents and purposes, she was a trespasser on Leonidas land...and a member of an enemy shifter species. Just because she was beautiful didn’t mean she needed to know anything. He scooted forward in his chair, preparing to rise. It was time to let Nico and Adrian have a go at her.

She cleared her throat and seemed to grope for a more neutral topic. She waved a hand to encompass their surroundings. “If you have a clinic, where’s your medic?”

“Died in the same crash that killed my sister-in-law and father.” The smile was more a baring of teeth this time.

“Ah.” She swallowed audibly and glanced away.

There was one piece of information he’d get before he left. He braced his hands on his thighs and leaned into her space. “And who are you, Doctor Wolf?”

“Marcus.” Her gaze flashed to him again as their knees brushed. “Doctor Lyra Marcus.”

“Lyra.” He rolled the name on his tongue, savoring the sound. Lovely. It suited her. Then realization snapped through him as her last name connected to what he knew about the wolf clan. “Marcus...the werewolf Alpha’s—”

“Niece.” She finished the sentence for him.

“You’re Celeste’s cousin.”

“Yes. Though we were never close, and I haven’t been on wolf clan land since long before she died.” She crossed her arms over her chest and lifted her chin. “Is any of that a problem for you?”

Shit. How the hell hadn’t he made that connection already? Now that he viewed her objectively, he could see the resemblance in the high cheekbones and gray eyes. A knot of dread fisted in his belly. Michael Lykaeos was the werewolf Alpha, the wolf equivalent of Adrian, who led the leopard clan in the States. One of Lykaeos’s sisters had mated to a wolf named Marcus. Zander didn’t remember the man’s first name, but it didn’t matter. That the Alpha’s niece had been left for dead on leopard land made this situation a lot more complicated than it had been a few minutes before.

“No, it’s not a problem for me. Wolves only come to the resort with special permission, and they aren’t generally allowed west of the Mississippi.” He leaned back in his chair, folding his arms. “But a woman in your family would know all that. So, what are you doing on leopard land?”

“I don’t know. I’m a doctor at a werekind clinic in New Orleans.” She shook her head, confusion and anger flashing in her gaze. Staring at the floor, she seemed to concentrate on something only she could see. “All clinics are neutral territory, so I’m not sure what happened. I was the last one out and locked up the clinic that night, and I was attacked. I woke up in Arizona. Trust me, this little trip wasn’t my choice, but since I know you have a small charter airport here, if you’ll point me to a phone, I’ll make arrangements to get on the first plane out of here.”

“No.” The thought of her leaving was unacceptable. He arched a brow and shook his head when she looked startled. “Absolutely not.”

Her eyes narrowed to dangerous slits. “You can’t keep me here.”

“We don’t know who left you here, but we sure as hell know they want it to look like leopards had a part in what happened to get you here. You’re not leaving until I know this isn’t going to land back on my doorstep.” Not until he knew it was safe for her to be out of his sight. Protectiveness fiercer than he’d ever known for anyone outside of family members swamped him, but he didn’t fight it. For as long as she was on his resort, the woman was his responsibility. Hell, she was just his. It didn’t matter that the thought sounded insane even to him. It simply was. Some fundamental instinct inside him claimed it was so.

“Well...when you put it that way. Shit.” She sighed and rubbed a hand over her forehead. “You never told me which Leonidas brother you are. From what you’ve said, I can only guess you’re not Adrian.”

“I’m Zander.”

“The youngest.” Her breath caught when their legs slid against each other again, the same awareness he’d been fighting since she woke up flashing in her pale gray eyes.

“Yes.”

She licked her lips, staring at his until he wanted to grab her and shake her for tempting him. But if he touched her he wasn’t going to shake her. No, he had much more carnal things in mind for her. She inched forward until she sat on the very edge of the cot, until he could feel the heat from her slim body. “You run Refuge Resort.”

“Right again.” It was hardly a secret what his job was. Or that Nico took care of security, or Adrian was the Leonidas CEO. When your family ruled a species, everyone knew everything about you. Or thought they did.

She rose, and he stood with her, wrapping his fingers around her biceps to steady her in case she might fall. The feel of her satiny skin under his fingertips made his cock ache and turned the supportive action into something far more sexual than he intended. He couldn’t help but wonder what it would be like to have her long limbs and soft hair wrapped around his body as he drove himself inside her until this insane hunger was spent. He barely bit back a groan, his fangs sliding forward a bit as the leopard within him fought for feral supremacy.

She jerked back, tripping over the edge of the sheet in her haste to escape him. He snorted and caught her close to keep her upright. Her body pressed to his, and an audible gasp erupted from her. How the hell had he gotten himself into this? The instincts that kept him by her side when she was unconscious had only intensified since she’d awoken. The fierce intelligence and strength of character shone from her face, drew him in. Fire fisted tight in his belly as her curves molded to his harder body. She was tall for a woman, tall enough to fit him just right. Unusual. Intriguing. Far too tempting.

Her jaw jutted pugnaciously, a challenge filling her narrowed eyes. “I’m fine. You don’t have to coddle me. I’ve completely healed.”

“What’s the matter, little she-wolf? Are you scared?” He lowered his head until his breath ruffled the short hairs at her temple, and he felt how she shivered in response. His grip shifted on her arms to draw her closer when she tried to pull away. He’d never been able to resist a challenge. “If I wanted to hurt you or take advantage of you, I had all the opportunity in the world. I’ve touched all that pretty naked skin. We don’t have a doctor, so who do you think washed the dirt off you?”

“Oh, God.”

“What?” Grinning down at her, he rubbed his thumbs in slow circles on her arms. “I thought you weren’t shy, Doc. So it won’t shock you to hear I’ve been hard since the moment you opened those lovely gray eyes and looked at me. You won’t be surprised when I tell you the feel of you makes me wild, that I want to suck your pretty nipples into my mouth until you scream and claw my back.”

Her gaze burned incandescent with a desire that punched hard through him. His muscles shook with the need to rip the sheet away and stroke over her supple flesh again. Sucking in a breath, he caught the scent of her dampness. Nothing was ever as sweet as that lush fragrance, heady and provocative.

“I can smell how wet you are for me. All for me. Would you be hot and tight around me if I slid my cock into you right now?” He wanted to know. Desperately. Lust wound tight inside him, squeezing off his ability to breathe. She whimpered, lifting her hands to stroke across his chest. He damn near purred at the feel of her petting him.

“Zander.” His name was a breathless whisper on her lips, and he wanted nothing more than to plunge his tongue into her mouth, his cock into her hot, slick body.

He swallowed. “Are you seeing anyone, Lyra?”

The very idea was repugnant, made him want to hunt someone down and hammer his fists into them, but he had to ask. He’d be a fool not to know that this was going somewhere, and he didn’t share.

“No.” Her head fell back to expose her neck, her mouth opening on a low moan that exposed her elongated canines. He sensed the wolf within her clawing for freedom.

With the thought came a harsh slap of reality. What was he doing? Forcing some small distance between them, he pried his fingers off her arms one by one. It was madness. He shouldn’t touch her. She was a wolf. An enemy.

And he wanted her.

Chapter Two

Lyra reached for him. A tiny part of her mind wondered what the hell she was doing, but her hormones bitch-slapped those sensible thoughts into submission. His nearness, his scent, his naughty words were driving her mad with want, making her burn in a way she never had before. Every instinct within her sang, the wolf wanting to taste him. The leopard was a breed apart from the men she'd been with in the past. The predator was there, enticing the animal within her, but the man lured her in just as surely with his light, wicked smile. So different from the men in her clan. He was exotic, intoxicating. Hers, for the moment. If she took what she desired.

It was complete madness, and she didn't care. Her sex clenched as her nipples brushed against the hard muscled planes of his chest. His breath hissed out, and she smiled, loving the way he reacted to her touch. Good. At least she wasn't alone in this. Her breath raced out. Her heart pounded. No man had ever gotten to her this fast, made her so wet she ached, made her skin feel hot, flushed, and tingly—the way her body shrieked for more shocked her, but she couldn't stop it. And she didn't want to.

He backed away, toppling his chair in the process. She followed him, fisted her fingers in his navy T-shirt and pushed him against the wall next to the bedside table. The sheet fell away, slithering down her body and making her shiver. He cupped her hips as his back hit the wall. The pads of his fingers were rough with calluses, the friction making goose bumps ripple over her arms and legs. His grip bit into her flesh, stilling her movements when she rubbed herself against his hard length, the heavy muscles of his chest, the impressive erection between his thighs.

A harsh groan ripped from his throat. "This is a bad idea."

"Wouldn't be the first one I've acted on." Or the last, she was sure. She couldn't argue with him though, and her body wanted no part in logic. Cupping her fingers around his cock, she stroked him through his khaki pants.

He went rigid, his hips thrusting into her touch. A strained laugh rumbled in his chest. "You're my kind of woman."

"Prove it." Narrowing her gaze on his handsome face, she made it a challenge—to please her, to make her scream. She caught a flash of white teeth before he whipped her around and shoved her back against the wall. She gasped when his hands closed over her breasts. Shutting her eyes, she let the excitement twist within her when his hot mouth closed over her nipple.

Heat flowed through her veins like lava, making her back bow as she tried to get closer to that talented tongue. He flicked it against her nipple, teasing her. Then he switched to the other breast, and the damp skin cooled in the air-conditioned room. She shuddered at the contrast of heat and chill as he sucked her nipple deep into his mouth. When she felt the sharp points of his fangs and the rough texture of a cat's tongue on her sensitive flesh, she sobbed out a breath. She'd never experienced anything like it before. It was too much. Her breath exploded out in frantic gasps. His claws raked lightly against her hips as he held her still.

"Zander. Oh, my God."

Her nipple popped out of his mouth as he sank to his knees before her, stroking his fingertips down her body as his claws retracted. A flush of need ran under his tanned skin, and his chest heaved for breath. His voice was rough when he spoke, but a roguish grin curved the corners of his full lips. "You wanted me to prove it, didn't you? I never back down from a challenge."

"I—I'll keep that in mind." She smiled down at him, lifting her leg to hook it over his shoulder and open herself to him. "Since you're down there... Don't stop now."

"I won't." The teasing left his tone, and his green gaze burned into her flesh as he looked at her. He curled his hands over the top of her thigh, holding her in place. She shivered, her anticipation building the longer he waited. Tension ran through her muscles until she shook with it. Sliding her fingers into his thick, golden brown hair, she let her head fall back against the wall. A single finger trailed up the inside of her thigh until he stroked the slick lips of her pussy lightly.

She moaned, her hips arching to offer herself up for more. Perhaps it was how forbidden it was to let him touch her, but no one had ever excited her this way. Anticipation boiled in her veins, made her heart pound and her breathing speed until she panted. She tightened her fingers in his hair. "Now, Zander. No more playing."

Two fingers speared her, thrusting deep into her pussy. She screamed, her pelvis jerking forward. He spread her lips wide, leaning in to swipe his tongue in a long, slow lick. "So fierce, but eating your pussy tastes sweeter than sugar."

She rolled her head against the wall, and she clenched her jaw to keep from howling. Her fangs punched through her gums, and she wrestled to keep the wolf at bay as his lips settled over her clit, sucking and biting at the hard nub. Her sex clenched around his fingers as he built a slow, hard rhythm inside her. The feel of his tongue against her, the occasional rasp of a cat with the soft heat of a human man made her choke.

The muscles in her legs shook as she fought to stay upright. Beads of sweat broke out across her forehead and gathered between her breasts to slip down her skin. The combination of sensations was beyond erotic. His hands and mouth worked her faster and faster until she tugged on his hair insistently, demanding more. It was already more than she could handle, more than she'd ever had before, but still she

craved him. Every thought was wiped from her mind. All that was left was the drive toward orgasm. She could feel it rising like a tidal wave inside her, and she arched her hips away from the wall. His fingers slipped away from her as he pulled back.

She sobbed a denial, fisting her fingers in his hair with a wolf's superhuman strength—so tight it had to hurt. But he was bigger than she was, stronger.

Jerking to his feet, he towered over her. "Here. Taste how good it is."

His lips slammed down over hers, his tongue shoving into her mouth. And she did taste. Herself and him, mingling on his hot tongue. The flavor shocked her, but it also turned her on even more. Her pussy flexed on nothingness, craving the feel of his hard cock pounding inside her. She moaned when he pulled away for a moment. "You can't stop!"

"Are you fucking kidding me? I'm just getting undressed." And he suited action to words, stripping so fast she was surprised he didn't rip his clothes. Though with the fire burning inside her, she wished he would just hurry this up. She was dying here.

"Thank God." Wrapping her arms around his neck and her legs around his lean hips when he stepped forward again, she tried to get as close to him as humanly possible. They both groaned at the full skin-to-skin contact. The light furring on his chest rasped against her hardened nipples. His big hands gripped her ass, lifting her to rub the head of his cock against her pussy. He shoved himself deep, going to the hilt in one hard push. She bared her claws, digging into his shoulders as pleasure and pain rocketed through her system. He was so damn thick, the stretch of it hurt. And she liked it. Her body twisted to get closer, seeking a fuller penetration.

His breath rushed against the side of her neck, cooling the sweat there and making her shiver. "You're so hot, so tight. And the way you smell...wetness and woman. Do you know how good your pussy feels around my cock, Lyra?"

"Jesus," she breathed. Amazingly, she grew slicker at his words. She'd never been with a man who said the kinds of things he did to her. It was dirty and raw and so naughty it made her hotter for him.

He withdrew until just the head of his cock remained inside her, then he shoved back in. She pressed her hips forward to meet him, and the sound of their naked skin slapping together echoed in the wide room. The rhythm they set was desperate and almost punishing in its speed. She didn't want to think of anything outside of this moment with a man who made her burn.

Rolling his pelvis against hers, he changed the angle of his thrusts. "Do you like this, sugar?"

"Yes." The position was so fucking perfect, his cock hitting her just right as her walls clamped around him. He groaned, his fingers biting deeper into her ass as he pulled the cheeks apart. Flames danced inside her, heating her skin until they threatened to explode. She threw her head back. "Yes."

His chuckle vibrated against her chest, and he brushed his lips over the base of her throat. "Me, too."

"Make me come, Zander." She closed her eyes and smiled, remembering his warning. "If you can."

Drawing a hand back, he slapped the fleshy part of her thigh. She jolted at the shock of sensation, one more piling on top of those that already threatened to overwhelm her. Her pussy flexed around his thrusting cock, and she cried out as he smacked her again. Her eyes snapped open to meet his, and the green of them burned into her. She couldn't look away, caught by the intensity of what transpired between them.

She dug her fingers into his shoulders as they moved faster and faster, racing each other to orgasm. Heat swamped her system, and her sex began to pulse around his cock each time he filled her. She was close. So very close. He rotated his hips, changing his intense angle. Then it broke within her so hard and fast it left her sobbing. He hammered inside her, and aftershocks rocked through her, made her shudder as it went on and on in endless waves.

Then he froze, his big body ramming his cock inside her one last time as his heat flooded her. She growled low in her throat, the sound ripping out of her. He hissed, his fangs glistening in the last glimmer of sunlight streaming through the windows. "Lyra."

Her palms pressed to his sweaty back, slipping down his skin. His face buried in her throat as his muscles shook under her stroking fingertips. Reality returned slowly as her body stopped shaking, her heart stopped galloping, and her chest stopped heaving for breath. It was an ugly reality.

Her uncle would kill her—if her father didn't get to her first. Niece or not, the Alpha would not take this kind of behavior well, and she would be in a shitload of trouble. That would be quite a homecoming for her considering she hadn't seen or heard from either one of them for almost three years. Not since she left the clan in Tennessee and took the clinic job in New Orleans. Uncle Michael was beyond pissed and her father...well, the words they'd parted with were the kind that meant it was years before they would speak again. If ever.

It might have been safer if Zander had left her out in the desert. How the hell had he done this to her? She'd never even slept with a man on the first date, let alone the first twenty minutes. She never let anyone get this close this fast. Or at all. Her family had taught her very clearly that if she stepped out of line, or became a problem, they wouldn't stick by her. No one would ever want her, need her or love her enough for that. And she was one enormous problem for Zander Leonidas at this point.

Whoever had dumped her here in the first place hadn't finished what they started. She wasn't dead. Neither the desert nor the leopards had done it. But, why her? And why now? She wasn't close to her family, no matter how high ranking it was. What was the end game? Who benefited from her going missing? She didn't have any enemies—at least, she didn't think so. If her family wanted her dead, they'd had years to get it done.

It made no sense, and that's what scared her the most.

The wolf bitch was a loose end. Ramon Guerra didn't like loose ends. If he was hired to do a job, he did it. End of story. He was the best for a reason.

His client wasn't happy about this delay—about the fact that Lyra Marcus was still alive. And was fucking Zander Leonidas. Ramon eased away from the rear of the infirmary, fading into the desert landscape that surrounded the resort.

She had to die on leopard land. Why, Ramon didn't know, and he didn't want to know. He had a target, and that was all he needed. If it weren't for the werebird hunting in the desert who had interrupted Ramon while he was dumping the Marcus woman off, he'd have made certain she was dead before he'd left her. She'd gotten lucky once. It wouldn't happen again. Her life would be over in a matter of days. The wild cat inside of him purred in agreement—nothing assuaged the ocelot's feral nature like a fresh kill.

Though most species of shifter cats pledged loyalty to the Leonidas family, Ramon didn't give a damn about all that. He suspected his client had hired him specifically because he was a cat-shifter, but he didn't let himself dwell on the thought. Instead, he methodically went over the last forty-eight hours, cataloguing what had gone wrong and planning his next steps. He didn't like how complicated this operation had become.

He was bringing in reinforcements. That hadn't been his original plan, but plans changed. Every situation was fluid. Usually he liked to work alone, but the fact that the she-wolf was shacking up with a leopard was worrisome. He didn't like surprises, and the Leonidas family was one he didn't want to tangle with. His business depended on him keeping a low profile. Attracting the attention of the ruling leopards wouldn't do that for him.

Yeah, the bitch was a loose end he needed to tie up. Now.

Chapter Three

The next morning, Zander strode out of the building that housed the corporate offices for Leonidas Industries. It had taken him the better part of two hours and a whole lot of fast talking to get Adrian and Nico to agree to keep Lyra here until they figured out what was going on. All of them were going to start digging discreetly to see what new shifts in wolf politics were in the works. That Lyra had ended up on leopard land wasn't a coincidence. Someone had gone to a lot of trouble to get her here, wanted to start something, to make a statement, and they needed to know who and why.

Not knowing made frustration crawl through him. Whatever had happened spelled trouble for his family, and they'd had more than their share lately. He wanted it done. But there was nothing more he could do at this point. It was a waiting game. In the meantime, he had work to do for the resort. His assistant manager had handled everything while Zander played nursemaid, but the younger man couldn't do everything himself. Zander had a lot of catching up to do.

His gaze swept the resort grounds as he walked toward the main hotel that housed his office. Palm trees littered the premises, shading a sparkling blue pool and the creamy stucco and wood Spanish-style buildings. Mountains rose in the distance to one side of the resort while the desert opened in the other. His place. Under his leadership, it was more successful than it ever had been. At his insistence, Refuge was a neutral-territory resort exclusively for shifters, where they were free to be whom and what they were. Since wolves vacationed here as well, Nico was anal about maintaining tight security.

An hour later, Zander's intercom buzzed and his secretary's voice came through. "Sir, I found a guest who's the same size as your...new friend." There was a slight pause while the line crackled. "And you have a one o'clock appointment in Tucson today. You're going to need to leave soon."

"Right." Zander pulled in a deep breath, the scent of sand and a hundred different shifters reaching his nostrils. Including Lyra's. His pants grew uncomfortably tight as his cock stirred. He'd taken her to his house on the edge of the resort's main compound last night. He'd reached for her again and again before dawn broke, burying his cock in her tight, silky sheath. Shaking his head, he snorted. The most intense orgasms of his life and he should be half-dead, not horny again.

Something he didn't understand had happened between Lyra and him. It confused the hell out of him, and he didn't like it, but he wanted her. Now. Again. He'd never had a problem getting women, but there was something about her that made him react. Never in his life had he had to fight to keep from biting a

woman. But with her, his fangs had come out, and every instinct inside him had screeched for him to mark her, to make her his forever.

She wasn't staying, so he had no business going there. It didn't matter how pretty she was or how good a lay. He held back a wince at the crude thought—wolf or not, she didn't deserve it, but it was a good reminder to himself. She wasn't for him. Biology and destiny weren't things he could argue with or charm into his way of thinking. He could talk his brothers into keeping her until they knew what was going on, but it wasn't permanent.

He couldn't forget that even for a second.

He clenched his fists as frustration rocketed through him. What a fucking mess. Why did she have to be a wolf? Their world wouldn't survive a mating between their species. It was bad enough that Jason had mated with the Alpha wolf's human stepdaughter, but a leopard and a true wolf? It wouldn't happen. It couldn't happen.

Every shifter species could trace its existence to the blessing of a benevolent deity. For leopards, it went back to King Leonidas of Sparta. He'd become legend for his bravery in the face of an onslaught of Persian forces under the command of Xerxes. So impressed with Leonidas's courageous death, the hunter goddess Artemis had made his sons more than men. The god Zeus, jealous of his daughter's powerful creations, had made a wereanimal of his own. Wolves. King Lycaon of Arcadia had been the first, and his fifty sons had followed in his footsteps.

Wolves and leopards had scattered to the four corners of the globe, but their war for dominance had never abated, even centuries later. The peace between their two species was tenuous at the best of times. A kidnapped and battered wolf on leopard land wouldn't help with that, but every instinct demanded Zander keep Lyra safe...and near.

There were no other options.

"Thanks. I will." Setting the receiver in the cradle, Lyra hung up the phone and sighed. Her head throbbed, her body screaming with tension.

She hadn't told the hospital where she was—just that there'd been an emergency and she'd had to leave suddenly. Zander's suggestion. He said it wasn't safe. She knew he was right, but why had she trusted him? Why didn't she call her family? Her uncle and father would help her. She knew it. But...what if Zander was right? What if someone inside her family had done this to her? Clan politics could get nasty, and she wasn't involved in that world enough to know if someone was making a play for power. Had her family made any new enemies? She didn't know. That was the problem with all of this.

She didn't know.

She didn't know who would do this to her or why. Didn't know who she could turn to, who she could trust, who she could count on so that she didn't end up dead. What had happened to her wasn't an accident, but she didn't know why.

And whoever had done this...she wanted them to pay. She wanted them to hurt the way she had when she was crawling through the desert, knowing she wouldn't survive. She wanted them to feel that moment of absolute terror, of absolute certainty, that they were going to die, just like she had when Zander found her. Was that wrong of her? She didn't know. As a doctor, she'd taken an oath to do no harm, but the wolf within her didn't give a damn about oaths. It wanted revenge, painful and bloody. It wanted to hunt her attacker down and end this once and for all.

If she ever found out who they were.

Rubbing at her temples, she tried to ease the ache there. Nothing helped. Tears of frustration welled in her eyes, and she swiped them away. Crying wouldn't help her out of this mess she'd fallen into, wouldn't make it all better. Someone wanted her dead; that much was clear.

Whether it was wise or not, she was going to trust Zander to help her figure this out.

Some fundamental part of her knew he wouldn't hurt her. Ever. And he wouldn't allow anyone else to harm her either. She felt...safe. Protected. Was this how Celeste had felt when she'd gone against the clan Alpha and mated with Jason? When she'd heard about her cousin's mating, Lyra had thought Celeste insane. It could only cause more strife between the clans. Then again, Lyra was *persona non grata* in the wolf clan herself. So much so that her mother had made it clear she shouldn't come home for Celeste's funeral. Lyra wasn't welcome to share the family's grief. That still chafed. But Lyra now understood the pull of Leonidas men. While she wasn't a woman to cower behind a man, it was nice to have someone to watch her back. She hadn't known that kind of security since...ever. Not even when she lived on clan land.

It never occurred to her how much she might need it. Until Zander. But she also knew it couldn't last. For many, many reasons, including the fact that a relationship with her would cause him problems with his family. And hers. No, when this was all over, she'd never see him again. The thought made her heart ache and her throat close, but she shoved the feelings aside. Reality was what it was.

She pulled in a slow, deep breath and let herself look around. He'd brought her to his house last night. She hadn't wanted to stay by herself at the infirmary. A dart of terror went through her, made her heart seize. She clenched her jaw and rode out the fear that threatened to overwhelm her. It was easier to ignore now, in the daytime, but she'd have to get used to being on her own again. But, not yet. Not yet. For the moment, she'd let herself lean on someone else. Just until they got to the bottom of her kidnapping.

His home had obviously been professionally decorated in the same Southwestern style as the rest of the resort, but it was the personal touches that interested her. Unframed family photographs propped against a wooden mantle showed four tall green-eyed boys in various poses, some surrounding an unsmiling man. Hector Leonidas. It was odd to think of the leopard rulers as a family. The realization was unsettling.

They'd always been others. Enemies. Until she'd moved to New Orleans, she'd had very little exposure to leopards.

She stood to wander around, touching the heavy wooden furniture, the curved walls that never actually formed a corner as they led from one room to the next. Anything to distract herself from the danger that weighed so heavily on her chest. It was an oppressive cloud that refused to dissipate. She pulled a soda out of the fridge and leaned against the counter to drink it.

Zander drove up in a Jeep, parking in front of the bay window over the kitchen sink. If she lived here, she'd grow herbs in that window. She shook the thought away. Stupid. She was only here for a few days. No settling in. She had an apartment of her own to get back to in Louisiana.

He loped around the side of the Jeep toward the house. God, he was big. He had to be about six and a half feet tall. It was amazing. At five-eleven, she'd never been with a man who made her feel petite, but he did. He fit her in every way. And it was wrong. She knew it was. Wrong, stupid...and totally forbidden. Even thinking about marking him as hers was unbalanced, but she'd been more than ready when they'd had sex. Her instincts tore at her insides demanding she satisfy the bone-deep need to claim. If her father and uncle knew, they'd check her into the psych ward of the nearest werekind hospital.

Any way she looked at it, her time with Zander was limited.

No more Zander to whisper in her ear, to stroke his fingers down her skin, to make her scream with pleasure. It wasn't logical. It wasn't like anything she had ever known before. Everything with Zander was carnal. He drowned her in the sheer visceral reaction of a woman to a man.

She wanted more. And she couldn't have it. Why did it have to be him who did this to her? Why did it have to be now when she could least afford to be distracted by sex? She should be focused on finding out who kidnapped her, not worrying about having to leave Zander when she did. Knowing all that didn't seem to be stopping her. She sighed, too many emotions ricocheting through her. Rage, frustration, hopelessness, fear and something heart-stoppingly sweet when she focused on the leopard walking toward her.

A petite young woman got out of the other side of the vehicle and followed Zander to the front door. She had a bag in one hand and a cigarette poised in the other. Her hair was so pale a blonde it reminded Lyra of a moonbeam.

Lyra met them at the door, opening it to let them in. The way Zander's eyes lit and a wicked smile curled his lips when he saw her dissolved any jealousy that might have tried to rear its ugly head.

The blonde woman waved her cigarette around and indicated she'd stay outside. She handed Zander the bag, and he walked in with it. Lyra glanced from him to the girl. "What's going on?"

He handed the knapsack over. "Clothes for you. You looked to be about the same size."

"Except you're about a foot taller, so I put some skirts in there so it won't matter." The other woman's cheery, musical voice sailed in through the open door.

Lyra leaned around Zander to smile at her. "Thanks."

Walking into the bathroom, Lyra opened the sack to inspect the contents. She set it on the counter, slipped out of the cotton pajamas she'd stolen from Zander and tried on a few of the skirts until she found one that couldn't double as a belt on her. Considering she had no underwear, concealment was of the essence. She slid her feet into a pair of flip-flops that were also in the bag and pulled a dark polo shirt over her head, thanking God she didn't need to wear a bra.

When she stepped out, Zander was nowhere to be seen, so she went to give the extra clothes back to her guardian angel. After rounding the corner to the front door, she leaned against the jamb as the young woman took a deep drag on her cigarette.

"Thanks for the clothes."

"Oh, no problem. My parents got me a whole new wardrobe for my college graduation present, and they sent me to Refuge for a week to celebrate." She cocked her blonde head and gave a blinding smile. "Zander didn't tell me why you didn't have any clothes, but I hope it's kinky, because he's a hottie."

That startled a laugh out of Lyra. It was so incongruous to hear this Miss-America-contestant-looking girl say things like kinky while watching her suck on a cancer stick. "Those things will kill you, you know."

"I'm a shifter, so it's a lot harder to kill me than regular people." The blonde woman shrugged. "Besides, everyone deserves a vice, and chain-smoking is mine. I can't be too cute or I'd make even myself sick."

Arching her brows, Lyra chuckled. Well, she was pageant queen perky, but at least she was self-aware. "Okay, I give. What kind of shifter are you?"

A sheepish look crossed her face, but her lips curled into an adorable grin. "Swan."

Oh, that was just too perfect. It completed the uber-pretty and sweet package. Lyra struggled not to break into a fit of giggles. "What's your name?"

"Victoria Haida. Tori."

Offering her hand to shake, she said, "I'm Lyra."

Tori held the hand with the cigarette behind her and reached out with the other. "Nice to meetcha."

"Okay, it's about that time. Let's get going." Zander stepped out of the house and set his hand on Lyra's shoulder.

A shiver went down her spine at the light touch, and she gritted her teeth to keep a whimper of need in. "Where are you going?"

"We are going into Tucson for the day. As nice as Ms. Haida is to give up her wardrobe, you need clothes, and I need to meet with one of the local beverage distributors about deliveries to the resort's restaurant and lounge."

Since she obviously didn't have any money with her, he was going to have to foot the bill for her new clothes. Whether he liked it or not, as soon as she was out of this mess, she was paying him back. She didn't voice the thought out loud. She had a feeling he'd protest.

"And I'm going to hit the pool. I want to work on my tan." Tori lifted an already golden arm.

"Thanks again, Tori." Zander gave her a charming smile, cupped his big hand around Lyra's shoulder, and shut the front door behind them. It beeped as a security system engaged. Tori took off toward the rest of the resort while Lyra and Zander piled into the Jeep. The wind from the open top ruffled through her hair as they pulled away from the house and onto a two-lane road. She tilted her head back to let the bright sunshine bathe her face.

"Did you call the hospital?" Zander stroked his fingers down her arm.

"Yes. Before you ask, I didn't tell them where I was." She shoved her dark hair back, despising how helpless she was in all of this. She wasn't raised to be weak and hide from problems. It didn't sit well with her. But if her other option was ending up beaten and back in the desert—or dead—she was just going to have to deal with it. A sigh eased past her lips. "I'm going to lose my job over this."

He grunted, but made no other acknowledgment of her words.

"Gee, your concern is touching." Asshole. She didn't add that last word, but she was pretty sure he heard it by the way he chuckled.

Turning his head, he pierced her with an inscrutable glance. "We need a medic here."

She couldn't help the way her heart leapt, raced and then tripped at the very idea of staying with him. He wanted her to stay here. Stomping down on her momentary joy, she gave a derisive snort. "You're insane. If most of my family stopped speaking to me for leaving the clan to work in the borderlands, do you know what they would do to me if I worked for leopards?"

"Refuge is neutral territory."

"So are all werekind hospitals. That's not going to impress my uncle or my father. Or my cousins, my mother, my Great Aunt Hattie Jane."

"You have an aunt named Hattie Jane?" His white teeth flashed in a grin as he said it.

She rolled her eyes at him. "I'm from the south, of course I have an Aunt Hattie Jane."

"Do they call you by your middle name too?"

A growl slid from her throat. "Not if they want to live."

"What's your middle name?"

"Jane," she snarled. "It's a family name."

"That's pretty." He put a fake country twang in his voice. "Lyra Jane."

She fought a smile and lost, so she turned to look out the window and coughed into her fist to smother a laugh. "Only my mother calls me that. Just Lyra, thanks."

"Whatever you say, sugar."

Sugar. She winced. Not because she didn't like it, but because she did. She'd never been the pet-name type. Her world was sterile, clinical. Her patients relied on her to be calm, focused and impartial in her judgment of their injuries and ailments. None of that had ever led her to believe she was capable of the kind of caution-to-the-wind, wall-banging, screaming animalist orgasms Zander had dragged out of her all through the night.

And she wanted to do it again. The chemistry between them was beyond mind-blowing.

They'd gotten maybe five miles down the road when she caught Zander slanting her a glance. His eyes were a brilliant shade of green that danced when he gave her a wicked grin. "You're not wearing anything under that skirt, are you?"

"What do you think?" The muscles in her thighs tensed in anticipation. Wetness flooded her sex, and she wrapped her fingers tight around her seatbelt to keep from reaching for him. How had he done this to her? She'd gone years without sex before and never had a problem. It had only been a few hours since Zander had fucked her and she was dying for his touch.

His deep voice rumbled, almost a purr. "I think if I slid my hand up your leg I wouldn't just find you going commando. I'd find your pussy lips wet and hot, ready for me to finger-fuck."

Christ, he said dirty things. She swallowed hard, her body flashing hot with tingles. "Wh-why don't you find out, then?"

"I thought you'd never ask, sugar." He dropped one hand from the steering wheel and reached over to stroke her knee. He moved his hand slowly, making her squirm in mounting excitement. She wanted his fingers on her, in her, thrusting deep. The wind captured her soft whimper, blowing it away. She spread her thighs as wide as her skirt would allow. He pushed it up as he went. "Lift your ass."

She did, and he shoved her skirt up to her waist. The air caressed her damp flesh, and she shuddered. His fingertips brushed over her clit and skimmed her swollen lips before he dipped inside her soaking channel. His gaze flicked from the road to her and back again as he worked her flesh and controlled the vehicle with cool efficiency. The deep flush that raced under his skin gave him away—he wasn't as unaffected as he might appear.

"Zander, please." She raised her hips to meet him, and his movements were quick and forceful, catapulting her to the edge of orgasm. She arched her neck against the headrest, rolling her face toward him. "I don't want to come without you. I want you inside me."

He hissed, his fangs elongating as he looked over at her. Jerking the wheel, he pulled over to the side of the road, unclipped his seatbelt and reached between his legs to slide his seat back. That was all the encouragement she needed. She unsnapped her seatbelt, climbed over the center console and straddled his lap. He shoved her shirt up, yanking it over her head. And then his hands were on her bare breasts, her nipples in his mouth as he sucked her hard. Her back bowed, pressing her closer. His tongue flicked over

her tight, flushed skin until she sobbed for breath. It wasn't enough. She craved the way his cock filled her. She needed it. Him.

Tugging up his shirt, she ran her hands over the muscled planes of his stomach and chest. Her nails flicked over the flat discs of his nipples. They hardened under her touch. His mouth left her breasts so he could jerk his shirt off and toss it aside. "Touch me, Lyra. I love your hands on me."

Her heart hammered so loud she could hear it in her ears. She unbuttoned his jeans and shoved the zipper down. Reaching in, she pulled his cock free of his boxers and stroked it. "Is this what you had in mind?"

"Oh, yeah." After a few moments, he moved her hand away, gripped her hips, and pulled her forward. "Ride me, sugar."

"You don't have to tell me twice." She braced her hands on his broad shoulders for leverage, rubbing the head of his dick against her lips. A whimper broke from her throat at the heat that thrummed through her.

He gave her a lopsided grin, fire flickering in his green eyes. "This is my favorite position, you know?"

"You have a favorite?" She chuckled, and it brushed her nipples against the springy hair on his chest. "I would have thought any position that got you laid would do the trick."

"Oh, it does. But there's something about watching a woman pump herself on my cock, the feel of her pussy all slick and tight, knowing she wants me so much she'll drive herself crazy going faster and faster to try to get more. The look on a woman's face when she fills herself with me—goddamn, there's nothing hotter than that."

She bit her lip and sank down on him, knowing she was giving him exactly the look he'd just mentioned. The way the corner of his mouth kicked up confirmed it. His big hands bracketed her hips, his thumbs digging into her flesh just below her pelvic bones as he guided her descent. Molten heat slid over her skin, made her back arch. His cock stretched her wide, and she rolled her hips for sweet friction. Her eyes dropped to half-mast as her concentration focused on his flesh in hers as she moved.

"You're so fucking beautiful, Lyra." Something tender flashed in his gaze as he lifted one hand to cup her cheek.

"Zander." She leaned forward, laid her hands along his jaw, and pressed her lips to his. He groaned, thrusting his tongue into her mouth to the same rhythm that his dick moved inside her. She curled her finger into claws on his shoulders, digging into his flesh as their pelvises ground together. Sweat rolled down their bodies, sealing them together with each downward movement. The muscles in her thighs flexed as she lifted and lowered herself on his thick cock. Faster and faster, harder and harder until she threw back her head and screamed, the sound half-woman and half-wolf. Orgasm crashed through her, and her pussy milked his dick, fisting around him.

Zander froze beneath her for a long, protracted moment before his hips hammered into hers. His hands held her down, seating her fully on his cock. Then he came, his jaw clenched tight, and his eyes flickering with green fire. She slumped against him, her fingers relaxing their grip on his shoulders.

Meeting his eyes, she grinned and tried to slow her breathing down, stop her muscles from shaking. “You know, I’ve never made it in a car—not even when I was a teenager.”

An answering smile formed on his lips. “Everyone should try it at least once.”

Chapter Four

Lyra watched Zander's gaze sharpen suddenly, focusing on something beyond her shoulder. Before she could glance back to see what it was, his arms snapped around her to roll her away from his door and smash her between him and the center console. It was such a protective gesture that she had to swallow and clear her throat so she didn't get choked up. When was the last time someone had put themselves between her and danger? Not since she'd left home to study medicine. She pulled in a deep breath and realized what he'd seen. A bird.

The loud flap of wings told her it was a bird of prey before she'd even managed to wriggle enough to see. Zander tightened his arms around her when she shoved her shoulder against him. "You're crushing me."

He didn't move, just kept his steely gaze pinned to the bald eagle that spun in a precise circle to land beside the Jeep. A rustle of feathers and the enormous bird shifted into a naked woman. She had short, spiky platinum hair and the most amazing breasts Lyra had ever seen. She heaved a disgruntled sigh at the mere teaspoonfuls of cleavage she had received. If she caught Zander staring, she'd kick his spotted leopard ass.

The faded scars on the eagle-shifter's body made Lyra arch her brows. It took an incredible amount of damage to scar a were. Battle scars. She knew about the warrior existence of those enlisted in the Messenger Corps—the werebirds who delivered messages from one group of werewolf leaders to another—but she'd only met one or two of them in her life. None of them had ended up in her clinic.

"If you wouldn't mind stepping out of your vehicle for a moment. I'm here to deliver a message, and then I'll let you get back to your...business." Not a single expression crossed the wereeagle's face, but Lyra got the distinct impression the other woman was amused.

A warning growl vibrated through Zander's chest. "Who are you?"

"Alexandra Petros, Commander of the Messenger Corps. Call me Ajax."

Lyra swallowed. How important could the message be that they'd rated the Corps Commander to deliver it? Dread twisted through her, made the tips of her fingers tingle.

Zander tucked his cock back into his boxers, but didn't bother to zip his pants. He popped the door to the car, and Lyra stepped out after him. He shoved her back, so she was safely behind him and trapped by the open door. She sighed and wriggled to the side a bit so she could see, but wasn't dumb enough to try and go around him. He wouldn't let her and she knew it—no matter how capable a wolf was in defending

itself from harm. Usually. Her track record in that area hadn't been so wonderful lately. Then again, if it had, she might never have met Zander. She tried to ignore the pang that hit her chest at that thought.

"What's the message?" he barked out.

The eagle woman raised a brow at his rudeness. "The wolves want the daughter you kidnapped back. Felix Marcus has approached the Alpha for assistance in this. If she's not returned, it's war."

He shook his head, his brown hair flying. "I had no part in her kidnapping."

"It's true." Lyra put her hand on his arm and leaned to the side to speak to the messenger. "The Leonidas saved me and took me in."

Cool indifference flashed over the eagle's face. "I'm sure you believe that."

"They can't take her from me," he hissed. "She doesn't have to go back if she doesn't want to."

She held up her hand. "Birds are neutrals. We don't involve ourselves in your disputes. This isn't my problem."

Lyra's voice held more entreaty than she would have liked, but the idea of leaving Zander sent panic exploding through her. And that scared her more than anything else. "But couldn't you—"

"I deliver messages. That's all. Personal feelings don't enter into the equation." Ajax's gaze was hard and unrelenting.

Zander sliced his hand downward, ending the conversation. "Then tell the wolves what we've said here and that the leopard leader will be in touch."

"Done." With a great leap, she shifted mid-air and swooped away.

They stood together until she was no more than a fading speck on the horizon. Lyra turned her face into Zander's shoulder, pulling in a deep breath to savor his scent. "I have to go."

"No." That warning growl she'd come to expect when he was pushed to dangerous limits sounded, but it couldn't be helped.

"War, Zander. My uncle and my father rarely agree on anything." Except that she shouldn't have gone to New Orleans. Her lips formed a bitter twist at how often their agreements hurt her. She pulled Zander around so he faced her, so he could see how serious she was. "My father doesn't issue idle threats." No, he didn't. And he'd probably use this as the excuse he'd been looking for to drag her back to Tennessee from New Orleans. Living as a shifter in a border city was dangerous because that was where violence between the species was most likely to break out. Which was exactly why she was needed there.

It wasn't that she craved the adrenaline of the emergency room, but no one needed her back home—there were other doctors for those clinics. And there was no way in hell she was going home with her tail tucked between her legs because her father was scared of what might happen to her. They'd had this battle before, and she'd go toe to toe with him again if she had to. Lyra sighed and focused on Zander. "If my father's gone to the Alpha—"

"No, sugar. You are not leaving." His tone was implacable, his face set in stone.

She cupped his jaw in her hands, trying to make him understand. “Imagine what open war would do to our people. It wouldn’t just cost lives, but the secrecy that keeps all weres safe from humans. I have to go back. A phone call—even from your brother—isn’t going to cut it.”

“You don’t know who did this to you. How do you know it wasn’t someone your father and uncle trusts? How do you know this didn’t have something to do with wolf clan politics? How do you know you wouldn’t be walking right back into a trap?”

Shaking her head, she dropped her hands. “I don’t. I don’t have an answer to any of those questions. But I do know that my life isn’t worth war.”

“It is to me.”

“Zander, this is ridiculous.” Tears burned her eyes, but she blinked them back. She was the Alpha wolf’s niece. He was the leopard leader’s brother. Just because he made her feel in a way no other man ever had was irrelevant. The messenger’s arrival made it clear just how solid the lines were in their world, no matter how they’d begun to blur for Lyra and Zander. “I’m going back. Please take me to the resort so I can book a flight to Tennessee.”

“No! Damn it.” This time she didn’t even get the warning growl as he shoved his fingers into her hair, jerking her up against his chest and crushing her mouth under his.

His tongue thrust between her lips, and heat exploded through her. Backing her up against his seat, he lifted her so that she was half in the Jeep and half out. Her ribs slammed against the steering wheel, but she ignored the pain and clung to his shoulders as he shoved their clothes out of the way and slammed his cock deep inside her pussy. Crying out at the tight fit, she arched her hips and reveled in the excitement that twisted within her.

Fire and ice raced over her skin, tears blurring her vision as her movements became desperate, needing to be as close to him as possible. One last time. Her heart squeezed as pain and pleasure warred for dominance within her. He set a harsh, punishing rhythm, his fangs bared as the feral side of him, the leopard, came forward. His fingers tightened in her hair, pulling her head back. He pressed his lips to her exposed throat, his tongue flicking out to lick her. He rolled his hips against hers, changing the angle, but not the rough speed, of his thrusts. “Zander.”

“Mine.” He sank his fangs deep into her flesh. She screamed and came so hard starbursts of light exploded behind her lids. He licked and sucked at the bite mark until she sobbed for breath, her pussy flexing again and again around his cock. “You’re mine, Lyra. All mine, only mine. Forever. Mine.”

“Y-yours.” Tears streaked down her cheeks, and she buried her face in his neck. His hard cock continued to move within her, demanding her response. Heat built again, called to the most primitive part of herself, and she lifted her hips to meet his.

He angled his chin up, baring his throat for her. Her lips closed over his collarbone, sucking lightly at the salty flesh. His taste and scent filled her senses, drugging her with the unquenchable need he ripped

from her. Zander. What would she do without him now? His bite burned on her skin, branding her as his. Undeniably his. Yes. She wanted that unbreakable bond.

“Bite me, Lyra. Mark me.”

She obeyed without question, without thinking. God, yes. That was exactly what she craved. The wolf inside her howled as her fangs pierced his flesh. He jerked beneath her touch, coming in long, hot spurts within her. The coppery tang of his blood flooded her tongue as she licked the healing wound. It was carnal, possessive. He was hers, all hers. Forever, just as he’d said. Her Zander.

When it was over, he carried her around to her side of the car and tucked her into her seat. She heard him punching the buttons on his cell phone and the quiet conversation with one of his brothers as he related what had just happened with the messenger. And that they were now mated. She closed her eyes, fighting a low moan. What had she done? She’d mated on the side of a road in the middle of the desert. Contentment she’d never experienced before twisted with the practical understanding that this meant her life as a wolf was over. Done. She’d no longer have a family. Even if the Alpha forgave her, her father never would. Pain and loss rippled through her followed by sweetness and joy. She was so jumbled up inside, broken and scared.

Her eyes flared wide when his door squeaked open. He picked his shirt up off the floorboard, shook the wrinkles out, and put it back on before he got into the Jeep. A minute later, they’d pulled back out onto the road headed for Tucson. She blinked. “We’re still going?”

“I have a meeting.” He lifted his shoulder in a shrug. “It’s business.”

She snarled at him, not bothering to check the raging wolf inside her. How could he be so calm when her life was crumbling around her? “I’d heard your family were all ruthless assholes.”

“Sugar, I’m the nice one of the Leonidas brothers.”

“That’s comforting,” she muttered, snatching up her discarded shirt and shoving herself into it.

Curling into a ball against her door, she vacillated wildly between self-loathing and giddy delight the whole way to town. Zander was thankfully silent. Smart man. She wasn’t sure if she’d have ripped his head off or thrown herself at him again, but neither reaction would have been rational. His meeting passed in a blur, and she was grateful that she got to sit outside the glassed-in office where she wasn’t expected to make polite conversation.

The last thing she wanted was to shop, but she needed clothes, so she had to suck it up and do what she had to. But as Zander dragged her in and out of big department stores and small specialty boutiques in the mall, something nagged at her the whole way, made her skin prickle with unease. She couldn’t put her finger on what was wrong so she said nothing. This day had been so insane, she wouldn’t be surprised if she was losing her grip on reality. She stepped out of a shop to buy a drink from a concession stand, making sure to stay within Zander’s line of sight. His insistence, but she didn’t have the energy left to argue.

The hairs lifted on the back of her neck, rippling in chills down her arms. Her stomach flipped as her instincts lit up, shrieking danger. She tried to remain calm and casual, not make any sudden moves that might give her away, but the wolf in her had gone on alert and every sense intensified. Scents assaulted her, her eyes absorbed every detail around her, looking for the source. She saw nothing, but she didn't need to. Now she knew what was wrong.

She was being followed.

Ramon watched Benny tail the she-wolf through the mall. If Lyra managed to identify anyone, it would be Benny, because he was providing close cover while Ramon remained farther behind and across the wide walkway. No one would ever connect his face or scent to this operation. If Benny didn't understand that score—well, it wasn't Ramon's job to educate the hyena-shifter.

Surveillance like this was best conducted in pairs, so if she stopped, Benny didn't have to do something stupid that would only draw attention to himself, like bend over and tie his shoe, or pretend sudden interest in a perfume display. The hyena could walk right past and wait up ahead while Ramon watched her from a distance. All they needed was a few moments of her away from Zander and the crowd—a bathroom break, a trip down into a mostly empty store—and it was over. A simple snatch job, then lights out for the Marcus woman.

Ramon could collect his hefty fee, give Benny a small cut, and be on to the next assignment.

Until then, they had to be patient and watchful. Ramon had no problem with either, but Benny was a bit of a wildcard. The hyena wouldn't have been Ramon's first choice as a partner in this job, but he was the only one available on such short notice.

"*Mierda.*" He hissed the word in a voice too low to attract the notice of the humans around him when the leopard stepped out of a store to rejoin the woman.

He pulled back, slipping into the crowd and out of sight. Another delay. He didn't like it, but it wouldn't stop him from finishing the job.

Patience would reward him. The woman had to be alone some time. When she was, he'd be waiting.

Chapter Five

Killing rage pumped through Zander's system. He paced the length of Nico's office, rattling off questions, demands, observations from what he'd found at the mall. Lyra had come to him, claiming she was being followed. He'd pulled her into his arms and let his gaze scan the surrounding area as he'd hustled her and her shopping bags out to the Jeep. An odd scent had caught his attention. Not canine, exactly. But not feline, either. And there wasn't a real dog or cat anywhere in sight. No, this was a shifter. He just wasn't sure what kind. The scent had faded fast, but he hadn't wanted to leave Lyra alone to trace it. Frustration still curled in his gut. Fuck.

Every imaginable electronic gadget and three different computers were neatly arranged on desks that ringed Nico's large office. The big man dwarfed the space as he kicked back to read a sheaf of paper, occasionally glancing up to scan a wall of video monitors.

He ran a hand over his military-short hair, slanting a glance at Zander. "I think it's a professional."

Stopping, he rounded on his older brother. "What?"

"The tailing, the way they worked her over bad enough to leave her near dead, but not. It was too calculated, too good. We're assuming this is meant to start something between the wolves and leopards. I'm going one step beyond that and saying it isn't some disposable lackey doing it. Whoever wants to start this shit has hired an assassin to get the job done. Smart of them, bad for us."

"I agree. My contacts in the shifter community have pulled up dick. No one leaves a trail this clean without bringing in professional help." Adrian entered the room as Nico finished speaking, and leaned back against the door after he closed it, folding his arms. He leveled a cool stare at Zander. "To make matters even more complicated, you mated with the Alpha's niece. I could toss your ass out of Refuge so fast it would make your head spin for this, little brother."

"Are you really going to disown me for mating to a woman I love?" Love. The word came out of his mouth, and it felt right. He'd never used it in reference to a woman before, but this wasn't just any woman, this was Lyra. This was his woman. He wanted to tell her—she deserved to know. Emotions banded tight around his chest, too many to control. Love, need, and intense protective instincts for Lyra—rage, hate and the need to kill the person who wanted to hurt her.

"Love? You've known her about five seconds. Spare me. And a wolf? Jesus, Zander." Adrian rolled his eyes, glancing back at Nico. Both men wore looks of utter repugnance on their faces. "How the hell did we end up with such an open-minded brother?"

“Apparently, we didn't beat him enough when he was growing up.” Nico snorted, letting his feet drop to the floor. “If the kidnapping wasn't enough, then this mating is definitely going to start a shit storm in wolf-leopard politics. Celeste was a human, and she died before anything really got started because of Jason mating to her, but this? They're already threatening war. What happens when they find out you want to tie the bloodlines with a mating?”

“Maybe then we can work out this centuries-old bullshit. Do we even know why we hate them anymore? When have they ever done anything to us or us to them?” Zander crossed his arms and met their steely gazes head on. “From where my mate and I stand, that's the best news I've heard all day.”

“Not from a security standpoint.” Nico sucked his teeth in disgust, his emerald eyes narrowed.

Zander sniffed. “Killjoy.”

“Well, while you've been getting your rocks off, I've been dealing with a thoroughly pissed off werewolf Alpha. I may not be kicking you out of the family, but your mate's not going to be so lucky. With Celeste, Michael Lykaio has already had one woman in his family die after she mated to a Leonidas, so he's not going to be happy with this. And Felix Marcus? Talking to him was as fruitful as talking to a brick wall. Mating with her was stupid, Zander. It's going to cause nothing but problems. You'd have done better to just keep her as a lover and end it at that.” As usual, Adrian was uptight, relentless, and unforgiving. All of that combined with a smooth, unflappable control made Zander want to punch him.

Especially now when he spoke of Lyra as though she were a disposable plaything.

Zander drew in a deep breath. Beating his brother to death wouldn't help anything. “I don't know, Adrian. You seem a little tense—maybe you should give this whole getting-laid thing a try.”

Adrian's nostrils flared. “If I want your opinion on the matter, I'll give it to you, little brother.”

Rounding the end of his desk, Nico swept both of them with a dismissive glance. “Regardless of the politics going on here, it's a security issue. That makes it my concern. I want to question her further. Alone.”

“No. Not without me there.” The flat denial surprised Zander, but the dangerous looks on his brothers' faces said they were even less pleased by this new turn of events. Zander opened his mouth to take it back, but that wasn't what emerged. “Absolutely not.”

Adrian's icy pale green gaze sharpened, and he moved away from the door, his voice going deadly soft—a ruler displeased that his subject had turned traitor. “What do you mean, no? She can answer Nico's questions...unless she has something to hide.”

When Nico tried to step around him, Zander blocked his path. Nico's face hardened. “I can kill you, little brother.”

“Keep telling yourself that, little brother.” Zander made his voice light, but he didn't budge. Distract, deflect, diffuse. He forced a smile that was half-charming, half-mocking. Even though he was the youngest,

he was easily the tallest of his brothers. A fact he rubbed their noses in as often as possible. He would take every advantage he could claim. It was the way of brothers.

All of the Leonidas men stood over six feet tall, but the reminder that he'd always be shorter than Zander made Nico glower. Adrian just looked disdainful. "We have to question her, Zander, and we're hardly going to hurt her. This chivalrous streak of yours is getting a bit too wide to be reasonable. Jason lost his grip on reality over a woman too. Remember how well that turned out for him."

Reason. Harsh reality. Control. That was all Adrian was about now that Celeste and Hector were dead and Jason had gone to Florida to lick his wounds. Their whole family had been ripped apart with that crash. Zander still staggered under the loss. His other brothers hadn't fared any better, though they'd never admit it, even to themselves. Nico was obsessed with the idea that the airplane accident was no accident, but sabotage of some kind. Zander sighed. There was no reasoning with Nico, and there never had been. It was always best to give him room to run and let him work things out his own way. Including accepting the loss of their father.

Adrian, though. He'd become even more uptight than usual—focusing all his anger and grief at Jason for leaving his younger brother in charge of their businesses, family, and all the shifters who looked to the Leonidas for leadership and protection.

As second oldest, Adrian wasn't raised to rule, and he resented having it foisted on him when Jason abandoned the throne. On the one hand, Zander could understand Adrian's bitterness. On the other, meeting Lyra had given him a new perspective on what Jason must have gone through when his mate died a sudden and violent death. And Zander was going to make damn sure that didn't happen to him.

He offered both his brothers a cold, hard glare. "If you have something to ask my mate, then you can do it in front of me. I know you won't hurt her, but you're also not going to interrogate her. May I remind you that she's the one who was beaten and left for dead? I'm not letting you loose on her—either of you—without my supervision."

The cell phone clipped to Nico's belt chirped and vibrated. He pulled it free, punched a button with more force than necessary, pressed it to his ear and barked into the receiver. "Yes?"

Zander took that as his cue to get while the getting was good. He slid past Adrian on his way out the door; the older man gave Zander a narrow-eyed stare, but didn't try to stop him. He needed to track down Lyra. He had a few new revelations to share with her, preferably while burning off some of his frustration between the sheets. There was nothing wrong with a little multi-tasking. And they'd both be in a mellow frame of mind when his brothers got to asking their questions.

If they thought they'd try to force her to take their side in wolf-leopard politics, they were out of their minds. Bad enough that her family wouldn't take this well. He'd never ask her to betray her kind for him. He loved her just as she was. Strong, passionate, a little wild. He already knew she was a fighter, a survivor. He had a feeling those traits would be put to the test before this was all over.

A dry, desert breeze ruffled Zander's hair as he rounded the back corner of his house. He could see Lyra through the window pattering around the kitchen, and it stopped him in his tracks. He pulled in a deep breath, the emotion he'd experienced since the moment he laid eyes on her hammering through him. It was...good to have her here. It was right. He couldn't get over how perfect it was with her when he'd always shied away from commitment with women. They'd been a convenience to warm his bed for a night or two. That was all. Lyra was anything but convenient. He'd never expected to have anyone like her in his life, but she'd swept in and changed everything before he could run. He hadn't stood a chance.

She glanced up and gave him the kind of smile that sent fire shooting through his veins. Stepping out the back door, she reached for him, that intense, animalistic need he felt for her shining in those molten silver eyes. God, he loved her. She was made for him.

Then he smelled it. The same scent that had fouled the air at the mall. Lyra's stalker.

His heart seized as absolute terror gripped him, but he didn't stop to think, just launched himself forward and tackled her, wrapping his arms around her and bringing her to the ground as a low whistle pierced the air. The stucco on the side of his house exploded to shower down on them. His breathing and pulse raced, and he reacted on pure instinct to protect his woman. Tucking his forearm over her head, he covered her body with his and wedged her up against the rough wall.

"Someone's shooting at us." Lyra's voice was a harsh rasp. Rage vibrated through her slim form, but he could also smell her fear.

He tightened his grip when she tried to move. "Stay down."

Another bullet slapped into the wall over his head, and bits of stucco rained over them. Lyra coughed and sputtered, spitting out what had gotten in her mouth. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah." Darting a glance over his shoulder, he zeroed in on their attacker. There. On a hill overlooking the resort, one of the foothills that led up to the mountains. Too far to get a good look at a face, even with a cat's advanced vision, but Zander knew the man's scent and that was all it would take to track him down. And then kill him.

Sand and gravel sprayed against the side of the house as an electric blue classic car squealed around the corner and rocked to a stop between them and the shooter. Tori barked through the open passenger window, "Get in."

Zander jackknifed to his feet, keeping low to the ground to use the car as the best cover possible, and wrenched open the passenger door. "Get out. I'm borrowing your car."

"Fuck that. I'm driving." Hunching over the steering wheel to stay down, she snorted. "This is a '56 Chevy Bel Air. No one touches my baby but me."

"Shit." He didn't have time to argue, so he slid in.

The sound of two doors slamming had him turning in his seat to see Lyra climbing in behind him. The car jolted as Tori hit the gas and peeled out across the desert, sand and loose rocks shooting up behind them as they went. Lyra arched a brow at him. “That asshole is after me, and I’m not sitting around waiting to see what happens.”

He snarled but didn’t trust himself to speak. Had he ever thought he liked stubborn women? He’d been out of his mind. The noise of the engine rumbled through the car, far more powerful than anything that should be in this model. They were already cresting the hill the shooter had been on, and he turned to Tori to offer a grudging smile. “You souped it up.”

“Well, yeah. How else was I going to beat my brothers in a drag race?” The blonde woman gave a matter-of-fact shrug. “Look, I’m not a predator, so I can’t track for shit. You’ll have to tell me where we’re going.”

He dragged in a deep breath as the hot wind whipped through the vehicle, the scent of his prey filling his nostrils. “Take a left.”

Tori obeyed, then flicked a glance in the rearview mirror at Lyra. “So, you want to tell me why someone’s trying to kill you?”

Chapter Six

Fury boiled in Ramon's veins, but he controlled it with ruthless force. He and Benny had been scouting the resort when the hyena had opened fire with his sniper rifle. Attacking downwind of an enemy? Shooting at a Leonidas on the leopard's home ground? Reckless. Idiotic. Careless. Hiring Benny on had been a mistake, one Ramon would rectify the second the hyena showed his face. Another fucking loose end to tie up.

Ramon could have walked away from this job a long time ago, probably should have, but it rankled to leave it undone. He was the best at what he did. He balled his fingers into tight fists at his sides, fangs erupting from his gums. The wild cat inside him growled, and he had to rein in the ocelot.

At this point, he was so pissed about the woman getting away again that he'd kill her for free. His client didn't need to know that, but he'd be lucky if the client didn't hire another operative to take out Lyra *and* Ramon. A hiss slid from his throat.

He froze in place when he saw a dust-covered classic Chevy parked outside the deep, narrow cave he and Benny had been camping out in. They'd found him. Lifting his face to the wind, he caught both of their scents, Lyra and Zander. He let a feral grin peel back his lips. Nice of them to make it so easy for him by coming out into remote territory, where no one would hear the bullets. Or the screams.

There'd be questions about the Leonidas man's death, but that couldn't be helped. Collateral damage sometimes happened. Considering who his client was, it might be an added bonus for Zander to die. Anticipation hummed through Ramon as he set aside his rifle and drew the pistol out of the holster at the small of his back.

Finally, the break he needed to finish this.

Zander bared his fangs at Lyra and hissed. She folded her arms and stood her ground against the big leopard. He'd never hurt her, and they both knew it. Her belly trembled at the idea of how much trouble she'd caused him so far. Eventually, he'd decide she was more than he wanted to handle, just like her family had.

This mating thing was insane, and there was no way it could last. She wasn't worth the kind of trouble she'd already caused him and his family, let alone what would happen when her family found out they'd mated. It was only a matter of time. She wasn't sure which scared her the most. The thought that he could still get hurt because of her, or the thought of him leaving her when it was over. She swallowed and lifted

her chin when Zander hissed again. “We’ll stay here while you check out the rest of the cave, but we are not sitting in the car.”

Tori scooted closer to Lyra’s side and mimicked her pose, jutting her jaw for good measure. “Yeah. What she said.”

A growl vibrated his big body. “Don’t move so much as an inch from this spot.” Lyra opened her mouth to respond, but he cut her off. “Is. That. Clear?”

Nodding, Lyra said nothing as he spun on a heel to stalk away, rage broadcasting in his every movement. Oh, yeah. He was definitely going to get tired of the kind of headaches she would give him. She sighed.

A soft scrape of rocks rubbing together made her cock her head. Someone was outside the cave, walking with cat’s feet on the gravel. She could sense it. The hairs lifted on the back of her neck, gooseflesh rippling down her arms. Shooting a glance at Tori, she pushed the younger woman back into the deep shadows as a dark-haired man with cold, world-weary eyes entered.

He leveled a pistol on her, and she lifted her hands. Terror and rage made her fingers shake. She drew in a deep breath to calm herself, but recognition spun through her. Fury beat out the fear. “I know your scent. From that night. You assaulted me, and I don’t even know you.”

“You should be dead already.” His expression didn’t change for even a moment and the gun didn’t waver. Finally, he shook his head, his voice rough. “Stupid wolf. Estranging yourself from the clan is dangerous, made you an easy target. It took them days to even notice you were missing.”

Well, that answered the question of why she was chosen out of all the people in her extended family. She bared her teeth in a smile colder than his eyes. “I wasn’t as easy to kill as you were hoping though, was I?”

“Maybe. Doesn’t mean you won’t die now.” His finger tightened on the trigger, and she snarled, her fangs sliding forward. If she was going to die now, she was taking him with her. The vengeance she’d bottled up since he’d jumped her outside her clinic burst inside her. She exploded forward, tearing from her clothes as she shifted to wolf form midair. The deep roar of a leopard echoed as Zander shot from the recesses of the cave at a dead run, and the assassin’s gaze snapped to him. A bullet rang out, and she heard Tori scream, but she didn’t stop. Leaping forward, Lyra snapped her jaw around the assassin’s wrist, shaking it viciously until the gun went flying. The taste of his blood flooded her tongue as she sank her fangs deep into his flesh.

The wolf’s animal instincts were all that mattered now, kill or be killed. Zander plowed into the gunman, ripping him away from her, and the two men tumbled away until they slammed against the cave wall. She watched Zander rear back and slam his fist into the other man’s nose.

It was then she realized what happened to the one bullet their assailant had managed to squeeze off. Blood streaked down Zander’s ribs, staining his shirt a dark crimson. The assassin’s hand sliced through

the air to strike the wound, and all the color rushed out of Zander's face, a harsh noise bursting from his lips—the sound of a wounded animal.

Horror slammed into Lyra. Years spent in a werewolf clinic meant she knew exactly what a bullet wound like that could do to a man. Zander would die, and soon, if she didn't do something. Spinning on her haunches, she changed back to human form and ran for the gun. She was only a step ahead of Tori as they dropped to their knees and searched the dirt. Rocks dug into bare skin, but she ignored the pain. The light kept shifting as the struggling men moved in front of the cave entrance.

Her breath sobbed out as fear made cold tingles race over her flesh. Grunts and the sounds of fists connecting with bone and sinew echoed through the cave. She glanced back to see her mate get dragged to the ground. Oh, God. Not Zander. Please not Zander.

"Got it!" Tori held up the matte black handgun, and Lyra snatched it out of her hand. She leapt to her feet and strode over to where Zander had the gunman in a chokehold on the dirt floor. Both men wheezed for breath and her mate was ghostly pale, but his jaw was locked and fury burned in his eyes. She looked down at the man who had attacked her and left her for dead.

"Zander, back up." Her mate opened his mouth to say something. He spared her only a momentary glance until his gaze locked on the gun in her hands. He dropped the other man and leaned back only far enough to give her a clear shot. Not an ounce of remorse flowed through her as she aimed the pistol at his heart and fired twice.

Surprise flickered in the assassin's gaze as he lowered his head to look at his chest. "It wasn't...supposed to end like this."

"Who are you? Who hired you?" Zander pressed a hand to his ribs and got right down in the other man's face.

A breathless laugh ended in a cough as crimson oozed from the corners of his mouth and out his nose. "I'm...a ghost."

Zander balled his free hand in the assassin's shirt and shook him hard, determined rage stamped on his face. "Who hired you?"

Zander's voice was nothing more than a gasping rasp, and from the sucking noise coming from his chest, Lyra knew the bullet had struck his lung. Oh, Jesus. They were in the middle of nowhere, and she had no good way of treating a pneumothorax.

The dying man hacked up blood, the dark liquid gushing out of his mouth. His lips moved, forming words, but no sound came forth for a moment. "W—wolf."

"Wolf? Which wolf?" But there was no answer. The assassin was dead. Zander let him go and rolled away to collapse onto his back, coughing. His green eyes were glazed with pain and fatigue.

Lyra dropped the gun, raced forward, and ripped open his shirt, confirming her diagnosis. The bullet had penetrated his chest and punctured his lung, but there was no exit wound, so the bullet was still inside

him. Her own breath strangled out, matching his as she struggled not to panic. “I should have left. This never would have happened if I had.”

“I would have...followed you.”

She shook her head, checking the rest of him for any other serious wounds. “No. I’m s-so much trouble. Look what being near me did to you.”

“Worth it. My mate.” A wan smile crossed his handsome face. “You couldn’t cause enough trouble for me...not to keep you.”

Biting her lip, she forced her attention back to treating him. At least the chest wound was on the right side, so it was less likely the bullet had hit his heart or any other major blood vessels. Her hands shook. The doctor and woman inside her warred for dominance. She loved him. Oh, God. She couldn’t lose him. Please, God. She needed him so much. “Don’t leave me, don’t leave me, don’tleaveme.”

“I...won’t.” His big hand brushed lightly over her cheek, wiping away her tears before it dropped back to the floor.

She hadn’t even realized she’d been chanting it out loud until he said something. Or that she was crying. He hacked like a chain smoker, and hope exploded through Lyra. She looked up at the swan-shifter who stood staring down at the dead man. “Tori! Do you have your cigarettes?”

Shaking herself, Tori looked at Zander. She fumbled in her pockets. “Are you seriously going to start smoking right now? Ohmygod, he has a hole in his chest.”

“Just give me the fucking cigarettes.”

Tori thrust a crumpled pack into Lyra’s hand, and Lyra carefully pulled off the cellophane wrapper to slap it over the wound. Zander’s breath wheezed in a bit easier. Relief so powerful it left her weak slid through Lyra, and another tear leaked from the corner of her eye. She positioned the wrapper to form a makeshift flutter valve. Thank God. He just might make it. If they got him back to the clinic so she could dig the bullet out. She met his beautiful green eyes, and he tried to give her a reassuring smile. “Zander, I lo—”

A maniacal, whooping cackle sounded from the entrance of the cave. It made a shiver run down her spine, and her instincts screamed danger. She searched for where she’d dropped the gun as a hyena loped into the cave. He paused, his eyes reflecting eerie yellow points of light in the darkened cave as he took in the scene before him. He licked his lips, that chilling laughter bursting from him as he looked over Lyra’s nude body. Hunching protectively over her mate, she bared her fangs and gave a warning growl, the wolf inside her howling for freedom to attack, but the woman stayed in control and held down the cellophane on Zander’s wound.

“He’s from...the mall.” Zander struggled to rise, and Lyra planted a hand on his chest to keep him down, putting as much of her werewolf strength behind it as she dared.

The hyena shifted in the blink of an eye, snatching up the gun from the dirt and pointing it at her. She could see he sported an erection now that he was in his naked human form, and her stomach turned as her growls grew fiercer. Tori planted herself between the combatants. “Look, asshole—”

The report of gunfire cut across her words, but the bullet sliced through her clothes to embed itself in the cave wall behind Lyra. She watched in stunned silence as Tori’s clothing fell in a heap to the floor while the woman was nowhere to be seen. Then a large lump moved, and a swan emerged from the hem of the shirt to run hissing and flapping its wings at the hyena-shifter. His eyes popped wide in shock as he scrambled back for a moment before he seemed to realize he still held the pistol and raised it to fire.

A man who looked so much like Zander he had to be a Leonidas ghosted into the cave holding a huge, deadly looking handgun. He was the scariest man Lyra had ever seen, including her would-be assassins. He didn’t pause as he aimed it at the hyena. She shouted, “Don’t shoot, damn it. You might hit Tori!”

“Nico,” Zander gasped.

The hyena jerked his gaze away from Tori, and both he and Nico froze for a fraction of a second. Tori struck, stretching her long neck out to snap her hard beak around the hyena’s exposed balls. While he yowled with pain, dropping the gun to grab his injured privates, she shifted to human form, picked up a rock, and slammed it against his temple. The force of the blow caved in the side of the man’s skull, and his eyes rolled back before he sank to the floor. Dead.

Nico’s eyebrows rose as he looked at Tori. A grudging respect filled his gaze.

She grinned. “What? Just because I’m not a predator doesn’t mean I can’t kick a little ass.”

She said it so perkily it almost made Lyra laugh, but she had more important things to focus on. Her gaze locked on Nico, and she snapped out orders in her best emergency room physician’s voice. “We need to get Zander back to the infirmary. I need to get this bullet out of him and get him on a saline drip so he can start healing himself.”

“Painkillers would be...nice too.” Zander drew in a shuddering breath.

Nico’s gaze swept his brother, and he issued a sharp nod. “I called for back-up. They’ll be here soon.”

Lyra watched Tori stuff herself back into her tattered clothing before she addressed Nico again. “How did you find us?”

He prowled the confines of the cave restlessly, a predator thwarted from his kill. After a long moment, he grunted a terse response. “Saw you on the surveillance monitors at the resort and followed you.”

“Oh.” Lyra swallowed when he leveled those cold emerald eyes on her.

Everything about this man said predator, and barely leashed at that. Working in clinics as long as she had, she’d met shifters who were more animal than human, but he was something else. Just pure predator.

Well, she was a predator, too, and she forced herself to meet his gaze. A man like him wouldn’t respect anyone who showed even an ounce of cowardice in front of him, no matter how terrifying he was.

She had a feeling he knew exactly how terrifying he was and used it to his advantage. Lifting her chin, she held his gaze long enough for him to arch a brow...and smile. Almost.

She fought a shudder and inched just a bit closer to Zander. There was brave, and there was stupid. No need to go nearer the scary leopard than necessary. Zander hadn't been lying when he said he was the nicest Leonidas. "I believe you now," she whispered in his ear.

Startled, he glanced up at her and gave a breathless chuckle. He knew exactly what she was talking about. Weariness pulled at the skin around his eyes, bracketing them with pain. She checked the flutter valve again, but there was little she could do now until Nico's back-up arrived. She slid her fingers in Zander's hand and squeezed. "Hang in there, my mate. Don't leave me."

"Never." His lips formed the words, but no words emerged. He swallowed and closed his eyes, his thumb brushing over the back of her hand.

Reaction finally set in, and she began to shake in long racking shudders. She turned her head to wipe her cheek on her shoulder so the tears she couldn't stop didn't drip on him as she watched him rest. She wouldn't draw an easy breath again until he was healed, but with Nico here to guard them, she wasn't as worried about another attacker showing up.

No, she just had to figure out how to survive now that Zander had taken over the focus of her world in a matter of days. She, who had always stood on her own two feet, couldn't even imagine a life without him. She closed her eyes and sent a prayer of thanks up to every benevolent deity she knew of that he was still with her. Anything else. She could handle anything else but losing him.

Chapter Seven

Zander lay back against the pillows, his hands folded behind his head. He stared at the ceiling of his bedroom, listening to Lyra's approaching footsteps. It had been entertaining to watch Lyra duke it out with his brothers for her position in the family pecking order. Damn, but Zander loved the woman. Neither of his brothers was used to any woman speaking to them as though she was an equal. Considering her position in the wolf clan, Lyra was entitled. And it was nice to see a woman go toe to toe with a Leonidas. Celeste had always been softer than Zander expected Jason to want, so she'd never stood up to any of them. She'd been downright terrified of Nico. It would be interesting to see how Lyra fared.

Sighing, he shifted restlessly, the sheet slipping down to ride low on his hips. It had been two weeks since he'd been shot, and as a shifter, he was fully healed. Yet, things were still up in the air. Lyra had been emotionally withdrawn, treating him as she would any recovering patient. He clenched his jaw to bite back a growl.

Except for her tearful pleas for him not to leave her, he'd never have known she had any feelings for him at all. And that meant he didn't know if she would disappear from his life as suddenly as she had appeared. It was intolerable. He'd already lost half his family in the last year. He couldn't lose someone else he loved. He just...couldn't let that happen. And the very idea of hunting down his mate pissed him off. He wanted things settled, and it looked as if they were going to have to have it out in order for that to happen. Uncertainty wasn't an emotion he cared for, especially where it concerned his mate.

"I...spoke to my family." She stood in the doorway, her arms crossed defensively over her breasts. She blinked rapidly, but he caught a shimmer of tears in her eyes, and his anger died a swift death.

"And?"

"It's pretty much what I thought would happen. My father disowned me, and my uncle is seriously pissed off, but he's not kicking me out of the clan. So, my dad and uncle are on the outs. Again. Because of me." She sighed and tried for an ironic smile, but it wavered and broke before it had a chance to fully form.

"Come here." He patted the mattress beside his hip, and she hurried forward to curl up next to him. He hugged her close, her back to his front. It soothed him to have her near. He could so easily have lost her. He almost had while he'd lain in that cave, helpless to stop the hyena. If it hadn't been for Tori's quick thinking— He cut the thought off, brushed back the silky black hair at Lyra's temple, and kissed her cheek. "I'm sorry about your family, sugar. I know it hurts."

"Yeah." A waterlogged chuckle broke from her lips.

His chest tightened at her pain. He'd like to strangle her father, but it wouldn't help her now, so he focused on the most important thing in his life. Lyra. "I'd make it better if I could."

"I know you would." Sniffing, she twined her fingers with his and held on tight. "I'm glad I'm here with you."

"Lyra, I—"

She jerked her face to the side, and she used her free hand to swipe at her cheeks. "Let's talk about something else."

Resting his chin on the back of her head, he smiled at her prickly refusal to show weakness. Always the wolf. "Okay. What's on your mind?"

"Interspecies genetics."

He chuckled and decided to humor her. He didn't know much about the topic, but then, he wasn't a doctor. "When different species breed, one of them is always dominant."

"In theory, it's possible for a child with a throw-back recessive gene to be born and produce siblings of different species." Her long hair brushed over his chest as she settled deeper into his embrace. He bit back a groan and tried to pretend that even so simple a touch didn't have the power to make him hard. Interspecies genetics. Right. "While it's genetically impossible to have a hybrid child who can shift into both the mother's and father's animal species, that doesn't mean all children produced by one couple have to be all the father's species or all the mother's species, but a mix."

He swallowed and dug leopard's claws into his control. "I've never even heard of that happening."

"Like I said, this is all theory; it's never happened before that doctors know of." She stroked her fingers up and down his arm, her brow furrowed in thought. "For werewolf, it's a strange mixture of animal and human genetic anomalies, so it's best not to assume it will always stay this way—we're constantly evolving. Because of the unknown factors that makes us neither human nor animal, but a combination of both, with a mixed species coupling, it might even be possible for identical twin offspring to each shift into a different animal."

"Un-identical identical twins?" That caught his attention, but only for a moment as the soft globes of her ass brushed against his now-erect cock. Jesus, she was killing him.

"Theoretically, yes." Her nails drew lazy circles on his arm, and goose bumps followed in the wake of her touch.

Sweat broke out on his forehead, and he reminded himself that he was holding her to comfort her, not to roll her over and fuck her senseless. "Why the sudden fascination with genetics?"

She sighed and looked over her shoulder at him. Secrets glimmered in her gray eyes. "I'll probably be obsessing over it for the next nine months or so."

It took a moment for what she was implying to register; then his eyes went wide and he slipped his palm down to curve over her lower belly. Shock and joy rocked through him, and a grin burst across his face. “Holy shit.”

Her hand covered his, and a quiet smile curled her lips. “Yeah.”

When she leaned into him, he saw her eyes widen as she came into full contact with his rigid cock. If anything, the news that he’d gotten her pregnant only made him harder. He slid his tongue down a tooth, letting his grin turn feral. “We should celebrate.”

The same wrenching fear he’d seen in her eyes two weeks ago shone there again before she masked it behind the calm, collected physician. “Zander, I don’t think—”

He cut her off. He had a feeling if he let her fears close her off now, he might never draw her out again, and he needed the wildness in her as much as he thought she needed it, too. “It’s been weeks, sugar. That might not be long enough for a human to heal, but we both know I’m fine. Why are you stalling?”

She pressed her lips together, a troubled look flashed through her gaze, and a stubborn angle tilted her jaw. “I’m not stalling.”

Arching a brow, he said nothing. She was going to have to work this out herself, but he wasn’t going to let her slide by and not deal with it.

“All right, so maybe I am.” She looked away and closed her eyes. “I just—everything changed so fast, and we mated, and my family, and...then you got hurt.” Her voice caught. “Oh, God. I don’t think I could lose you, Zander.”

“Scary as hell, isn’t it?” He lifted the hands they had over her belly and kissed her fingers. He knew exactly what she meant. The idea of her being hurt was enough to kill him. He could only hope that she was never in that kind of danger again, but since they’d been unable to discover who had hired the assassin, he’d had Nico beef up security around the resort. Zander wasn’t taking any chances. She was too important to him.

Tears welled in her gray eyes when she opened them again. She swallowed audibly. “Yeah. Scary’s a good word for it.”

“I love you.” He spoke the words baldly, his gaze locked with hers. Cupping a hand around her chin, he tilted her face toward him. “Come here, sugar. I need you.”

Her gaze softened, and a sweet smile curved her lips. Twisting at the waist, she offered him her mouth. He took it, sliding his tongue along the seam of her lips before he pushed inside. He shoved away the sheet around his hips so that the only thing separating him from her was her clothing.

Sliding one arm under her torso, he reached up to flick his fingers over her nipples through her thin cotton shirt. He wanted her so badly his hands shook with it, and his cock ached. He had a feeling the need would never be quenched, and he didn’t want it to be. Her tongue twined with his, and she nipped at his lower lip. The sweet sting made him growl low in his throat.

Her breath hissed out as she broke her mouth from his, her fangs emerging. Sliding his hand down her midriff, he popped the button on her shorts and eased them along with her panties down her legs. She lifted her hips to help him and kicked them away. He bunched her shirt in his fist and ripped it to the waist. Her breasts spilled out, and he cupped his hands around them, her hard nipples stabbing into his palms.

He lifted his leg over hers, trapping her. He coasted one hand down to caress her taut buttocks. She whimpered and wriggled against him. "I can't...I can't move. I need to move."

"Not just yet." Pushing her forward slightly at the waist, he stroked her wet pussy from behind. God, he couldn't wait. He needed her. Grasping his rigid cock, he rubbed the head against her sex before he pushed in. Thrusting his hips, he worked himself into her one slow inch at a time until he was seated to the hilt. He rolled his hips and couldn't hold back a harsh groan. The way his thigh held her legs together made the fit incredibly tight.

"Oh, God, Zander," she breathed. Her claws slid out to rip into the sheets. "You're so deep."

"Yesss," he hissed, the leopard within him clawing for supremacy, demanding he take his mate hard and fast. His fangs elongated as he struggled to stay in control. "That's so fucking perfect. I love the feel of you. You're so tight around me, Lyra." He slipped his hand over the soft swell of her belly, dipping to stroke the dampness between her legs. He flicked her clit, making her thighs jerk. He grinned, loving her responsiveness. Pulling his hand free, he licked her wetness from his fingertips. "Mmm. Still sweet as sugar."

She choked, whimpering as she watched him over her shoulder. Her pupils dilated, and she panted, her eyes burning to molten silver.

"You're so beautiful." He smiled down at her, and let the endless desire he had for her show on his face. There was nothing he'd keep back from her, she could have it all. And he wanted everything she had to give. "I'm going to make you scream before I'm done with you, sugar."

She shivered. She fisted her fingers in his hair, her body writhing against him. "Stop talking and fuck me already."

"Oh, I will." He chuckled, thrusting his hips to drive himself inside her in slow, deep strokes, knowing it wouldn't push her as hard or as fast as she wanted.

She tried to twist, but he held her down, flexing his thigh over hers. He kept the rhythm at the measured pace he wanted, didn't allow her to speed him up. He wanted to draw this out as long as possible, to savor the feel of her in his arms. He wanted her to know to her bones that she could never be apart from him.

"Zander." She moaned his name, and he loved the sound of it on her lips. "Please. More. I need you."

A purr souged from his throat, and he closed his mouth over the mate mark on her neck. His. She was all his. Her breath caught when he licked the bite. He could feel her pulse pounding under her soft, soft skin. He arched his hips, matching his thrusts to the rhythm of his tongue. Faster and faster, giving her

exactly what she asked for. More. He rolled her nipples between his fingers, plucking at the hard tips. Wetness soaked his cock as she cried out, and the scent of her drove him wild.

“Mine.” He sank his fangs into her again, needing that connection. She would never leave him—he couldn’t live without her. Mates.

“Yes! Zander, Zander, Zander.” She screamed when he sucked on the bite. The slickness of her sheath, so tight around his cock, made his skull feel like it was going to explode.

“Tell me. I want to hear it.” Yes, he needed the same words he’d given her. That final, unbreakable bond.

A sob erupted from her as she bowed in his arms, her pussy flexing around his cock. She raked her nails up his arm, and she twisted helplessly in his embrace. “I love you. I love you so much, Zander.”

Some tightness he hadn’t even known was banding his chest snapped free. His orgasm slammed into him like a riptide, dragging him under. His body locked in hard shudders as he came. He didn’t know how it had happened so fast, but he was so grateful that he’d found her. She filled up a void inside him that he’d grown so used to he almost didn’t notice it anymore.

With her, he had hope for the future again, and a quiet joy that life could once more be as bright as it was before his family had shattered. He’d survived losing them, but he didn’t think he could ever survive losing her. He would make sure she knew it, too. Every day. He would never push her away as her family had done. She was...everything to him now. All the pretty words he’d ever used couldn’t capture how precious she was, but he did his best.

“I love you, Lyra.”

About the Author

Crystal Jordan began writing romance after she finished graduate school and needed something to fill the hours that used to be eaten away by homework. Currently, she serves as a librarian at a university in California, but has lived and worked all over the United States. She writes paranormal, futuristic and erotic romance.

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"I will always love you." Not just a figure of speech when you're undead.

Big Girls Don't Die

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In the Heat of the Night, Book Two

Six months ago, Andre St. James committed the ultimate one-night-stand party foul by turning Cynthiana into the spawn of Satan...also known as a vampire. He insisted he knew they were meant to be together forever and ever, so why wait for her to be on the same page with him to suck the life out of her?

What. Ever. The only thing the two of them share is chemistry that blasts off the charts. So she drop kicked him out of her life and told him to never come back. He listened. Until now.

Andre knows Cyn has trouble dealing with his take-no-prisoners approach to life, and that turning her against her will was a mistake. But he's got patience born of centuries of immortality, and he'll do whatever it takes to get back into her good graces and stay there forever. Including wait until she has no choice but to turn to him.

After all, no one understands forever like a vampire. He's loved her from the moment he saw her...and he always will.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Big Girls Don't Die:

My hands clenched on the steering wheel. I had to get to my cousin. That's all I could think. Please, please let Desi be okay. I loved that little girl so much. I was going crazy right now. Worry gnawed at me like a hungry werewolf. One quick look at the speedometer told me that I was about ten miles over the speed limit. They wouldn't pull me over for that, would they? I pushed my convertible Mini Cooper a little faster.

Flicking a glance down while I punched the speed-dial, I tried to get Misty on the phone for a progress report on Desi. It was a few hours to Las Vegas from Los Angeles, but if I hurried I could be inside the hospital before dawn. Something else to get pissed at Andre for. No reflection, no sunlight.

My stomach rumbled. Oh, yeah. Cravings for blood. Another lovely side effect. When was the last time I had fed? I meant to have something substantial before I went to Eclipse, but Andre had sort of interrupted that plan. I'd barely taken any blood from him, so my stomach felt as if it was digesting itself right now.

"Hi, this is Misty and Desiree, leave us a message—"

"Damn it." I huffed out a breath and tossed my cell phone on the passenger seat.

My gaze swept the barren landscape along I-15. There wasn't anything for as far as I could see except dirt and stars and a few ragged Joshua trees. When I glanced back at the road, a large white jackrabbit hopped in front of my car.

“*Shit.*” I jerked the wheel and swerved to miss it, but the crunch of bone sounded as it bounced against the underside of my car. “Oh, that is just nasty.”

And then my tire blew up. Rubber popped. The Mini Cooper’s back end spun out. My heart stuttered as my pretty little car made grinding noises when the metal of my tire rim hit pavement.

“Shit, piss, motherfucker. Oh God. Oh God.”

Skidding off onto the soft shoulder of the road, the car finally came to a stop. I sat there and panted while my heart rate galloped. My knuckles showed white on the wheel, and I had to force myself to relax my grip and reach down to shift into park. My hands shook on the door handle when I hauled myself out to go look at my tire. I walked around the car to the passenger side and kept an eye out for crazy-ass drivers who might be too blind or stupid to see the emergency flashers on my car and hit me. Oh, yeah. That was the flattest tire I’d ever seen. Little bits of rubber hung off it and flopped on the ground.

“Spare tire, Cyn. Put it on and get the hell to Vegas.” Popping my trunk, I—*What the hell?*—Where were the jack and tire iron? I had forgotten to check for them in this car when I bought it from the used car dealership last week. Now that I needed ’em, they were nowhere to be found. Fan-damn-tastic. Time to call in reinforcements.

I opened the passenger door and fished around for my cell phone. Please, please, please let me have cell phone service. I was in the middle of bumfuck nowhere. I squeezed my eyes shut for a moment, not daring to look. My breath whooshed out when I saw I had full bars. I pulled in a deep breath while I dialed my roadside assistance number. The number was programmed into my phone, just in case. You never knew when a Rambo-wannabe jackrabbit would hang on to your bumper and use his last breath to shred your tire. Fucking bunny.

I punched in all the appropriate numbers and listened to a recorded voice tell me to call 911 if it was a life threatening emergency. Well, duh. “Hello? I have a flat tire, and I need someone to come put on my spare—”

The woman dispatcher’s professionally concerned voice cut me off. “Okay, ma’am. Are you in a safe area?”

I looked around at the miles and miles of dirt. “I’m kind of in the middle of nowhere, but I guess I’m safe.”

“Good. Now where are you exactly?”

“I’m not sure. I’m eastbound on I-15 about a hundred miles west of Las Vegas. I don’t see a call box or any mile markers.”

“So, you’re east of Las Vegas—”

“No, I’m *west* of Vegas going east *toward* Vegas.” I rolled my eyes.

“What city did you just pass?”

Did I just speak English? I swear I'd told this woman I had no idea where I was. I was worried about Desi, not about where I might pop a tire. "I'm not sure. I know I'm about a hundred miles west of Vegas."

"All right, ma'am. We'll dispatch someone, and they should be there in about twenty to thirty minutes."

"Thank you!" I could be with Desi soon, then. I shivered as the cold desert night air hit my bare shoulders and legs. Hurrying back to the driver's side, I slid into my seat.

Twenty minutes later, my phone rang. Oh, good. Must be the tow truck driver.

"Hello?"

An older female voice responded, "Hi, Ms. Trent. I'm sorry, but we won't be able to dispatch anyone until we know your location. Can you tell me exactly where you are?"

I blinked. "Um. I already told the last lady I talked to."

"Can you tell me again?"

Okay, stay calm. I'd only been on the side of the road for about half an hour. Everything was fine. "Sure. I'm not one hundred percent sure of where I am, but I'm eastbound on I-15 about a hundred miles west of Las Vegas."

"Are there any mile makers nearby?"

"No." And I sure as hell wouldn't wander around in the frigid ass desert to look for one.

She was silent for a long moment. "Um. All right, ma'am. We'll dispatch someone, and they should be there in about twenty to thirty minutes."

"Sounds good." I sighed and dropped the phone on my lap.

Twenty minutes later, my phone rang.

"Hello?"

A pleasant male voice answered. "Hi, Ms. Trent. I'm sorry, but we won't be able to dispatch anyone until we know your location. Can you tell me exactly where you are?"

She ran straight into love's arms...and he isn't letting her go a second time.

Passions Recalled

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Forbidden Passions, Book 2

When his mate and his father died in a freak accident, Jason Leonidas left home and became a park ranger in the Florida Panhandle. The distance and solitude suit him. After all, the less he cares, the less he hurts.

As a hurricane bears down on the coast, he races to secure and evacuate the park before conditions worsen. Just as that point of no return passes he discovers an injured and unconscious visitor. Celeste Lykaios, his mate...who died over a year ago.

Truth has turned Celeste's world upside down. Not only did her family lie to Jason about her survival, they lied to her about his abandonment. And the new boyfriend she'd trusted is trying to kill her. Her only hope was to race into the teeth of the storm to find Jason. She almost made it.

As she and Jason unravel the betrayal that split them apart, the ragged strands reconnect, forming a fragile hope that their love can be salvaged. Out in the storm, the killer waits for a chance to make Celeste the stunning finale in a plan to overthrow the Lycan alpha...

Enjoy the following excerpt for Passions Recalled:

There were jackhammers in her head. Even moaning hurt. Funny, she didn't remember partying last night. She frowned, and it made the pain worse. Actually she didn't remember last night at all. Rolling over, she pressed her forehead into the pillow and was immediately swamped by Jason's smell. *Oh, God.* Where was she?

She couldn't think past the pounding behind her eyes, but when the room shook with a crack of thunder she jerked her head up, wincing for her trouble. She hated storms. There was one window, and outside it a palm tree whipped back and forth.

Definitely not in Kansas anymore. Or Atlanta. Whatever.

Rolling back over, she took stock. Her head hurt like hell, but everything else seemed fine. Only one way to know for sure. Gingerly, she pushed up on her elbows, cursing the pounding headache that spread over her face with the strain. She sat up, gasping, and looked around the room. To call it bare was generous. It contained the bed and a dresser. The walls were empty. There was nothing to identify its owner but the scent of the sheets on which she lay.

But that didn't make sense. She looked out the window again as another gust of wind buffeted the house. Rain tapped the roof, and she cocked her head, pressing her hand to the side that throbbed the most. The sound echoed loudly in the room, and her headache seemed to pick up the rhythm, pulsing in time to

the rain. It was familiar. Tin would be her guess, and that at least helped her narrow down her location to probably somewhere in the South where in recent years tin roofs had become all the rage. She wasn't sure if she was relieved or disappointed. Not the Southwest, so not Jason's home. She swung her legs over the side of the bed and set her feet firmly on the floor.

And why the hell was she wearing a bikini?

Only one way to find out, Celeste.

She had to venture out of the room, find out where she was and who else was here, if anyone. Her mind refused to accept it might be Jason, even if her body thrummed at the thought. She didn't dare wish it was so. She squeezed her eyes shut. Jason was over. Jason was the past.

She stood and took a step toward the door, but froze when a black leopard appeared and blocked the space. Her eyes filled with tears.

The first time she'd seen Jason in leopard form, she'd been very confused. His brothers looked like typical leopards in their were forms, tawny and gold with black spots. Jason was dark, his coat black, his spots brown to cream colored. He'd explained that sometimes nature threw a genetic anomaly out there, in the leopard *and* wereleopard worlds. Melanistic leopards were often born in litters with regularly colored siblings, probably an evolutionary advantage for jungle ranging leopards. All of the big cat species had melanistic or black versions. The same held true for werecats. Black was not a common color to see, but not rare either.

Looking at him now, she remembered the pain of that conversation. His pain. She'd felt his loneliness and had wanted to soothe it. He'd identified himself as the outsider in his family, but she'd seen how much they loved him, how much they needed and respected him. Although, none of that had really mattered to her. She'd thought he was beautiful. She'd loved him beyond reason. She should have known better, she thought bitterly with the benefit of hindsight, but the observation didn't make one damn bit of difference in her reaction.

He padded closer, stalking, and she clenched her fists. She would not reach out and bury her hands in that fur, would not give in to the tears threatening to fall. The big body pushed against her, his head butting and rubbing against her thigh in a show of affection, and she couldn't help the sigh that escaped. He pushed her until the backs of her knees hit the bed and she sat, giving in to the temptation and sinking her hands in his pelt.

Soft. Silky. So, so dark and lit with light at the same time, like the mysteries of the midnight sky. And definitely Jason.

She was afraid to speak, afraid to shatter the spell. It was the best damned dream she'd had in over a year.

He moved closer, sat on his haunches and rested his front legs along her thighs. Then he licked her, a long swipe of his tongue up the side of her face, over her old scars. The raspy stroke woke memories. This

tongue, this man. Months alone and lonely and heartbroken in a hospital bed. Yet she shuddered as her body responded to him, recalled the out of control feeling of being in his arms.

Memory shattered the dream.

Except it wasn't a dream, was it? She pushed against the cat and scrambled back on the bed. Shifting, the man followed, crawling up her body and pinning her under his weight. A growl rumbled deep in his chest.

"No," he ordered, refusing to allow her to retreat.

She tried to push him away, but he grabbed her wrists and held them next to her head, while forcing her thighs apart with his knees and settling between them. His erection pushed hard and throbbing against the juncture between her thighs. She grew slick, felt the swelling in her clit and saw by the way his nostrils flared he knew it too.

"So long," he muttered, before his lips descended on hers.

God help her, she couldn't resist. She opened her mouth to him, accepted the stroke of his tongue. His pelvis ground against hers in a matching rhythm, and she was positive the only thing keeping him from plunging into her was the thin fabric of the bikini. It wasn't much of a barrier, and she wished he'd throw it away. She'd toss it herself if he ever let her wrists go.

The kiss was all too short as he broke the contact and trailed his lips along her jaw, down her neck, and finally closed over the old mark on her shoulder. He nipped it lightly and her back arched, her pussy flooding with cream as an intense orgasm froze her. God, she couldn't respond to him like this, so quickly, after so many months absence. It was mortifying, and she strained against him. She needed a minute to collect herself, to attempt to build some kind of barrier around her heart. She feared she was too late. Maybe she'd never managed to do it in the first place.

He released her wrists, rolled onto his back and moved up the bed, pulling her across his chest with one arm around her waist. Somehow during the move he removed the bikini bottom. His cock insistently pressed against her center and with his eyes he begged for admittance, but he was leaving the choice to her. How could she resist? Her body had been dead for a year and now it screamed for the fulfillment only he could give her.

Refusing to acknowledge the niggling worry over where he'd been or where she was or even if it was real, she sat up on her knees and moved over his hips. She held her breath, closed her eyes and allowed the fantasy to take over as she took him inside her. Slow. So slowly. If this was a dream she didn't want to ever wake up.

She felt his hands behind her neck, over her back. Shivered at the sensation of fabric sliding free of her skin. He was finally seated all the way inside her, when his hands closed over her breasts. Her entire system threatened to melt down.

"Look at me," he demanded.

She agreed to everything but sex. She hadn't counted on his monstrous creativity...

My Fair Monster

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Monsters in Hollywood, Book Two

Since the day three incredibly hot men in disguise walk into her office and proved Monsters are real, intrepid screenwriter Jane Darby is obsessed with one task: to give the creatures a mythical makeover by writing a revolutionary, blockbuster screenplay. Now if only she can get over her own fear—and get the closed-mouth Michael to talk about his people.

Michael is fascinated by the demur and docile Jane, whose efforts to hold him at arm's length hide an untapped sexual passion—a beast within her waiting to be set free. There's only one way to get under her lovely skin: strike a bargain.

For one week, she agrees to let him do anything, anything, he wants. But Jane's got conditions. First, no actual sex. Second, she has to enjoy it.

Jane's not really worried. What can happen if he sticks to the bargain? After all, she's not really turned on by the idea of Michael tying her down. Or bending her over his knee. Or...

Gulp.

Enjoy the following excerpt for My Fair Monster:

"Oh my God you set me up on a blind date. Was there a roofie in that shot?"

"No, but that's a good idea for next time."

"Lena!"

"Oh calm down! I'm joking, besides, who needs GHB when there's a good DJ?"

"Quit distracting me. What'd you do?"

"Nothing."

"Fine, then I'm going to go dance with that guy."

Lena hesitated long enough for Jane's friends-with-stupid-plan detector to shoot into red, before Lena said, "Dance with him if you want. I just think you could do better."

Jane pulled her friend's face close until they were nose-to-nose. "I know where you sleep."

With that ominously vague threat, Jane left the bar, heading for the dance floor. She stopped on the edge, intending to search for coat guy, but a new song started up. It was rich, with a pulsing back beat. The dancers stopped their wild solo gyrations and came together, the music demanding skin-to-skin contact.

The tingling was back in her fingers, the music pressing into her skin, demanding her recognition, her service. Jane stepped onto the dance floor, and started to move.

Lifting her arms above her head, Jane slide one hand along the fabric casing her limb, wishing it were bare so she could feel the contact. She whirled, planting her feet on the downbeat and throwing her head back.

Something brushed against her back, breaking the rhythm of her dance, but when Jane opened her eyes there was no one close enough to touch her. Like her, the others on the dance floor were lost in the song, touched by music as well crafted as a symphony.

Jane halfheartedly glanced around for coat guy, but gave up when the next hard beat sounded. She bumped her hip to the side and slid her hands over her own breasts, down her belly, to the bare skin of her thighs. She bent, waiting, poised, for the beat to give her a signal. When the music spoke to her Jane snapped up.

Her back slapped into something. Someone.

Hands covered hers, urging her to retrace the path over her breasts to her belly, then hips. He pulled, forcing her ass back against him.

Then they moved as one. Rather than a crude thrusting back and forth—a pale imitation of missionary sex—their duel dancing was rhythmic and subtle, hips moving to the beat. Jane freed her hands from beneath his, needing more. Her fingertips brushed a face, and then his hands captured hers, fingers tight around her wrists, pulling her arms up and back, until they were trapped behind his neck. He held both her wrists in one large hand.

Jane gasped as the position stretched her up, until she danced on her toes. Her breasts lifted, and her partner took full advantage, cupping one breast through her dress. He touched her, fondled her, controlled her.

Jane shuddered and moaned. She turned to look at him, but her arms acted like blinders. She tried to speak but her mouth was dry.

“Just dance.”

She barely heard the words over the music and the rush of blood in her ears. Had she even heard it? Or was the baritone command a figment of her imagination?

His hand left her breast, which both relieved and disappointed her, until it dropped to her bare thigh and headed north, slipping beneath her short skirt to curl around her hip, fingertips brushing the fabric of her thong.

His touch made her aware of her own wetness, and in that moment she wanted nothing more than for him, whoever he was, to touch her, right now. She wanted his finger inside her, long and hard and thick, in one powerful thrust.

The music stopped.

Sound had not stopped pumping from the speakers, no DJ was that stupid, but the song had changed. This new offering was frenzied, with a screaming singer, and too much techno overlay.

Jane snapped from her dance-induced lust-haze. She jerked her arms free of his hold and the man's hot, rough hand slid away from her thigh.

"I knew you loved to...dance." The voice was low, rich and...familiar.



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