



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

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...

This book has been previously published and has been revised from its previous release.

Warning: This book contains smokin' makeup sex, a hot leopard shifter, a deadly hurricane, and one deranged killer.

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Passions Recalled

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Dedication

To all the great friends who help me with this journey called writing and especially Crystal Jordan, co-author extraordinaire and our marvelous editor, Bethany Morgan.

Chapter One

She pinched her nipples, squeezing her eyes against the image that insisted on popping into her mind to superimpose the nice, safe one she tried to cling to. With a repressed growl of frustration, she slapped the mattress with the flat of one palm. She just wanted to get off, needed to release weeks of built-up sexual tension. Was it too much to ask to get to do that and not be overwhelmed with memories? She opened her mind and stared at the ceiling. Would it matter if she came seeing his face? No one else would ever know about it, after all.

Sighing, she gave over to the need, to the desire she'd never admit to feeling to anyone but herself, and sensation shot straight to her core. Both hands returned to her breasts, cupping them, squeezing and plumping before reaching for the hard tips. She imagined Jason's face, tense with lust and longing, as she remembered his fingers. At once strong and gentle, coaxing and demanding.

Groaning, she released one nipple and reached for the vibrator. It was always like this. No matter who she met, no matter how much she willed it otherwise, her body only came alive for one man. A man who didn't want her, who'd rejected her. She gulped back a sob, but didn't stop. Couldn't stop the want roaring in her mind. To come. To feel something. To *live* again. It was a false little fantasy she'd created here in her lonely bed, but right now with the desire raging through her she didn't care. She'd save that for later. The self-recriminations, the fear that she'd never love or respond to any other man.

Enough, Celeste. Enough.

She flipped the switch to the on position, sighed as the toy slid easily into her pussy. It almost felt like he was there with her, stroking her, thrusting into her. Her cunt grew impossibly slick and her fingers closed convulsively around her nipple. She swiveled her hips upward, as if meeting him move for move, and then releasing her breast, reached for her clit.

Her first touch was soft, hesitant. She wanted to draw out the pleasure as long as possible, but even that gentle touch made her pant, the lust building. Jason would not be reluctant if he were there touching her. His fingers on her clit would be strong, insistent. Pressing harder, she slid her finger back and forth over the hard nub. She imagined him, *felt* him, leaning over her, his fingers guiding her to orgasm, his cock thrusting home.

She could have wept from all the emotions consuming her, but the orgasm tightening her body prevented it and took her over. She exploded, splintered apart. When her mind came back together, she

curled into a fetal position and cried herself to sleep only to be awakened by a shrilly ringing phone and the demands of her family.

Celeste Lykaiois drove as fast as she safely could in the pelting rain. Hurricane Iris may have been sweeping up the Gulf, but this, the remnants of Hurricane Helga held fast in the Tennessee mountains, unwilling or unable to release the fury of the warm Gulf waters. Irritable and leery of the harsh weather, she rubbed a wadded-up T-shirt against the fogging window. What was so important her stepfather insisted she drive from Atlanta to Chattanooga in what looked like Noah's flood revisited? She sighed. It didn't matter. Her fear of storms was irrelevant in the face of family obligation and need. When the werewolf clan Alpha called, everyone ran. Including their human sister, Celeste.

Thank God, she was close. She shuddered as small hail began to hit her window and wind rocked the car. How bad must it be down on the Gulf when these storms rolled onto shore? How did anyone stand to hang around and ride that out? She knew a lot of people did—they didn't call them hurricane parties for nothing. If a person could watch from a safe place she could see the appeal in it, had even had a taste of it herself. After all there were few forces on earth more massive, more awe inspiring, than a hurricane.

The streetlight illuminating the turn off to her parents' appeared in the gloom, and she sighed in relief, the knots in her stomach beginning to loosen. Almost there. Almost safe back in the arms of her family. If she felt some small twinge for something else, some wistful longing of things past, it was only normal with this storm raging around her, right? Her palms grew slick with remembered fear, her stomach once again heaving, betraying her terror of bad weather. Only a year ago a sudden summer storm just like this one took down the small jet she'd been a passenger on, and she'd barely survived the trip to the ground. All her naïve youthful hopes had crashed and burned with the plane. Life hadn't been the same since.

Right. Get over it already, Celeste. If wishes were fishes her mother would say, and she'd be right. All the wishes in the world hadn't done her any good then. She forced Jason from her mind, ignoring the tiny voice saying to give up the effort. No matter how she tried, he was never far from her thoughts, lingering like an unhappy poltergeist.

She turned down her street and watched for the house lights in the distance. When they appeared she released a pent up exhalation of tension, but it was quickly followed by anxiety. What was so important she had to come out now? Had to drive two hours in this nightmare?

Her gaze swept the driveway when she pulled in, mentally noting which car belonged to whom. Her half-brothers, her stepbrothers. The trucks, the SUVs, the odd little compact hybrid that would always stand out. No clan members. Whatever the big-ass hurry was, it really was family business.

She grumbled as she parked. They could have at least left her a spot near the door. Squinting through the rain, she considered trying to haul her purse and overnight bag out with her, but it didn't seem worth the

effort. Then she'd be soaked along with all her things, and she probably wouldn't sleep here anyway. The house was too crowded, the people in it overprotective to the point of coddling.

Derek, her friend and date if an occasion demanded one, didn't know she was in town, but she was sure he'd welcome her. She scowled at the rain that battered her windshield. She'd called to tell him she was coming up, but he hadn't answered the phone or returned her calls. With a mental shrug, she pulled the door handle. She'd catch up with him later.

The rain drenched her as soon as the door was open a crack. She lunged out, flinging it shut behind her and sprinting for the front door. Inside the foyer she slipped off her jacket, shook off the rain, and hurriedly used the towels her mom had left on the bench to clean the mess. She heard low, angry voices in the living room, her mother's and stepfather's, with the soft timbre of one of her brothers thrown in here and there. Straightening her spine and adopting the neutral mask she'd perfected after years of dealing with werewolves, she marched into the room.

As soon as she crossed the threshold, silence reigned. Not a good sign. She hoped she was wearing her objective journalist face as she approached and embraced her mother. They'd always been a united front, the two female humans in a house full of male werewolves. It took feminine solidarity to confront this much testosterone. Miranda hugged her to her side, not releasing her when Celeste would have stepped back, and gave her a tight smile. Something whooshed out of Celeste when she saw it. Some foreboding that she was really going to hate hearing whatever was coming.

The males in the room were tall, hulking. Brooding, which was so out of character she felt a real tinge of fear rise in her throat. Had someone died? Had the Wolf Council passed judgment and someone she knew was going to die? Derek immediately came to mind, and she shoved the thought away—down deep where it didn't worry. Surely not. Not her Derek, the friend who'd gotten her through Jason's betrayal, the only person who'd been brutally frank with her about the condition of her body, her face, in the hospital.

"What's going on?" she asked when, after several minutes of silence, it became clear no one was going to start. She turned to Michael, her stepfather, and met his gaze. A definite no-no when dealing with the clan Alpha. But he was also Dad, and she was human. No mating, no marriage that put her under anyone's control. She was an adult and technically no longer under the rule of clan law. Besides, she could feel her mother's agitation, and it made her less inclined to deal with the werewolf's archaic attitudes. Usually so much aggression on the part of a female would have raised his hackles. He was the acknowledged leader of clan and family. When he lowered his eyes and turned his head, she knew she was in real trouble. Her famous intuition was screaming. This night would change her life in ways she'd never imagined. Forever.

Tomas, one of her younger half-brothers and the family business heir apparent, stepped forward.

"Remember a few months ago when we were discussing the new timber mill?"

Arching an eyebrow, she crossed her arms over her chest. Of course she did. Her financial instinct was legendary in the clan. So much so she was always consulted on all business matters, and it had led her to endorse the new venture. She was sure the new mill would be a success and, if it went according to plan, it would also be environmentally responsible. Was her intuition wrong? It had only been wrong once, and majorly so then, but she pushed that thought away. She was positive the mill was a good investment—she'd helped research it herself.

“What about it?”

She had an urge to push her palms against her ears, certain the news was bad. Michael stepped into her line of sight. He took a deep breath, visibly steeling himself against his own words.

“We needed a loan for the project.” He paused. “I took out a mortgage on the land.”

Closing her eyes, she sucked in a deep breath. Held it until she saw spots behind her eyelids. Clan land. Family land. *Her* land. The only thing she had left of her human father bartered in a business deal?

“And?” she asked, knowing there was more. Knowing there was worse.

“There was a balloon payment due last week. We didn't make it.”

“Can't you negotiate an extension?”

He grimaced, blushed a little, and she arched her eyebrows again wondering what the hell was going on and if it was going to take her all night to drag it out of them.

“Normally we could,” Tomas said. “But Jason won't listen to reason.”

“Jason?”

All of the blood rushed from her head, and she swayed, throwing up a warning hand when her brothers rushed to her side. Her Jason?

No. Not my Jason. He didn't want me.

For him, for better or worse was only an issue when it was better. She bent over and gripped her knees, sucking in big gulps of air. How long had she lain in that hospital bed and waited for him to come? And he never had. It had been hell. While her family hovered and fretted, her body broken and bleeding, the man who was the center of her universe had suddenly become a figment of her imagination.

She looked at her mother, studied her face. She'd paled to an unnatural whiteness, her eyes pinched with anxiety, and something else occurred to Celeste, something worse. Jason was a wereleopard and her father *hated* leopards. The animosity between the leopards and wolves, the hatred went back so far no one even remembered how it had started. Nor did they care. It just was. Leopards and wolves, enemies forever. She couldn't believe they had taken money from Jason. Had gambled and lost her father's land. Anger poured through her as she slowly straightened.

“Why?” she ground out through clenched teeth. What would make Michael desperate enough to go to Jason for cash? “Why would you accept his money? Why would he refuse to negotiate?”

Fighting the tears that threatened to flow freely, she added in a harsh whisper, “My father's land...”

The spot on her shoulder where Jason had marked her a year ago burned, as if protesting her anguish. She rubbed it absently while she waited for an answer. Michael noticed the movement and moistened his lips.

“We lied,” he said baldly into the tomblike quiet of the room. “I lied.”

She frowned and waited for him to go on. When he didn’t, she asked, “About what?”

“I insisted you leave Refuge Resort because I thought you were getting too close to...that leopard.” His distaste was palpable. “I didn’t know he’d bonded with you until much later.”

So what? What did that have to do with Jason’s obvious dislike of her human frailties? She fisted her hands, trying not to remember how naïve she’d been. For years she’d been a freelance journalist, mostly for werewerekind publications, but occasionally she sold a piece to a human magazine. Last year her focus had been on the ancient rivalry between the wolves and leopards. They’d been created in opposition. To reward Leonidas of Sparta’s courage against the Persians, Artemis had granted all his descendants the ability to change into a leopard. Not to be outdone, Zeus had granted the same abilities but in a different form, wolf, to the descendants of King Lycoan.

It was her extensive writing credits which had convinced Hector Leonidas to let her go to the Refuge to research. Who could have predicted she’d meet his oldest son and lose her mind? Oh, but the things the man could do with his hands. And his mouth. Wow, was that mouth talented. Her fingernails dug into her palms. *Focus, damn it.* She wasn’t stupid. She may be human, but she’d grown up in the werewolf clan. She knew he’d mated her, and knew he didn’t give a damn about that. He’d found it so easy to walk away, she’d often wondered if he’d only done it to escalate the feud between the two species, if he’d done it purely to piss Michael off. Maybe that was why her father had taken Jason’s money. It didn’t have anything to do with her after all, she thought bitterly. She was just a pawn in the ongoing war between the wolves and leopards and so was her land.

“So?”

“When the plane crashed, we didn’t think you were going to live. We were afraid to hope and afraid to give up hope, baby doll.” There was a pleading quality in his voice, something that begged her forgiveness, and she clutched her stomach in response. How awful was this going to be? No one ever brought up the accident. “We told him you died.”

The shock of that audacious statement almost brought her to her knees. For the last year she’d lived with the belief that he’d forsaken her. And for the last year he’d believed she was dead? But no, wait. That couldn’t be possible. She wrote for the werewerekind newspaper.

“And you think this is why he won’t negotiate? Why?”

Michael threw his hands up in the air, a sign of his exasperation. “Revenge, girl. He blames us for taking you away from him, for putting you on that plane. He thinks we killed you.”

She shook her head. “But everyone knows I didn’t die.”

“No,” Tomas said. “Everyone doesn’t. You’re writing under a different pen name. You’ve never been back to the resort. You avoid everyone but our clan. And I’ve kept up with Jason. He left his family’s resort and took a park ranger job in Florida, down on the Gulf Coast. A place called St. Andrews. By all accounts, he’s completely cut himself off. I know for a fact he doesn’t get the paper, and *if* his brothers even know your new pen name, you can bet they wouldn’t tell him you’re still alive. You know how clan politics are. Leopards don’t like wolves any more than we like them.”

The room started to spin, and she grabbed the back of the couch to keep herself upright. Could this be true? He hadn’t come because he thought she was dead? She didn’t believe it, didn’t believe he wouldn’t have moved heaven and earth to get to her, to see for himself. If that was true, she had no choice but to face reality. He wasn’t here. He hadn’t come. She’d been nothing more than a means to an end, a game piece in the ongoing war between the two most powerful clans in North American. But why wait so long to go after them, after her land? Why now?

And why on earth was he in Florida? Everything west of the Mississippi belonged to the leopards. East of it was wolf land. Most of the Gulf Coast was dolphin land, however. Jason would have had to get their permission to move into their territory. She was pretty sure his park belonged to the dolphins. Panama City was far from the mighty river’s borderlands, those wild and untamed places most shifters chose not to live in, but where anyone strong enough could.

Lyra’s pretty face rose in her mind, accompanied with the usual worry. Her cousin had disappeared from her medical clinic in the borderlands a few months ago. Celeste had heard through the family grapevine the cats had had something to do with it, but no one could tell her *what* exactly and her oldest brother, Bastien, had warned her to stay out of it when she’d mentioned asking Lyra’s parents if they knew anything. Lyra’s father was reported to be in a state beyond rage, so Celeste had taken her brother’s advice without batting an eye. She wasn’t in a hurry to face her uncle’s infamous temper.

“You have to go to him,” Michael ordered, the bit of pleading in his eyes jerking her out of her thoughts. “Explain our position.”

She barked out a laugh. She didn’t understand their position; how could she explain it? Fury rose, swelling her chest to what felt like impossible proportions, making her head ache, her fingers itch with the urge to hit something.

“How would I do that exactly?” she asked sarcastically.

“We were taking care of you. We were protecting you.”

A glance around the room told her her brothers clearly hadn’t agreed with this approach, but they’d followed their Alpha. No wolf would have dared to defy him. Even her mother wouldn’t have stood up to Michael, her mate. Celeste’s heart hammered, a whispered voice buried deep in her mind railing against the betrayal. It was a bitter pill to swallow. Her brothers, her mother all had given into Michael’s demands, despite knowing how much it would tear her apart. Ever the loyal family and pack, willing to forgive

whatever stupid decisions he might make. Celeste, on the other hand, was not a werewolf or mated to one, and she was not so forgiving.

Her whole life had changed in that instant, and the person she'd needed there the most wasn't. Now it was happening again. It was too much to take, too much information at one time. She was angry, shocked and hurt. Confused. She couldn't stay another minute and quickly walked from the room. Digging her keys out of her pocket she ignored questions about where she was going. At the door, she didn't even pause, just gulped a deep breath, and sprinted into the rain to her car. She was inside and driving before she could string a coherent thought together.

What was she going to do? She didn't believe for one minute Jason didn't know she was alive. If he'd loaned Michael money, wouldn't he have checked the family out? The Jason she remembered was fun and light-hearted, but serious minded and thorough. She'd go to Derek. She'd known him for years, but he was much older than her, ran in a totally different crowd when they were young. They hadn't become friends until she returned from college...and not good friends until the accident. He'd got her through those first awful lonely months when she'd still had to fight her body's and mind's cravings for Jason every day.

She frowned. If Jason didn't know she was alive, she had to let him know. It wouldn't be fair not to, and she didn't think she could resist the urge to find him, to go to him. But how would her relationship with Derek change?

He'd been her only friend the last year, the only one who had tried to understand how empty she felt. How abandoned. And he wanted a lot more than friendship. She knew that. He'd asked her to marry him so many times she'd lost count, but he'd never pushed her, never made demands. Just smiled and said he could wait. For a man so insistent on marrying her, and a werewolf to boot, he was very physically distant. Not that she was complaining. She wasn't sure how she felt about sleeping with someone else, even Derek.

He didn't live far from her parents, but she was forced to drive slowly in the heavy rain. She tried calling again, but she'd lost her cell signal. *Probably the weather*, she grouched to herself. She turned off into his driveway and eyed the muddy slope. She doubted the car would make it up, and backed into the turnaround that was halfway up to park. She'd have to run for it in the rain and mud, but it couldn't be helped. Stuffing her keys in her pocket and leaving everything else, she once again stepped out into the weather and sprinted.

The driveway was slick and slippery, hard to navigate in the dark. The rain picked up as she approached the house and when she reached the yard, she took a minute under the arbor to catch her breath. Unfortunately, she chose that moment to look at Derek's front picture window.

Well, no wonder he hasn't tried to insist on anything with me.

He stood in the middle of his living room, his pants hanging around his thighs with an enormous erection jutting out. On the floor in front of him was a buxom blonde—Celeste knew, because she was getting a profile view—busily sucking on said erection. Celeste was so surprised she froze in place,

thankful they couldn't see her out in the gloom. When Derek threw back his head and gripped the woman's face in his palms, she knew he was coming. His face twisted with the orgasm, as if it hurt, and he looked down at blondie with an evil grin. Celeste only had a moment to wonder why she'd thought it was evil before Derek, whose hands had not left blondie's face, gave a vicious jerk, snapped her neck, and dropped the woman to the ground.

Celeste jumped back, completely unbelieving of what she'd seen but unable to deny it. She was grateful for the heavy rain and wind—it hid the noise she made as she ran back to her car. With a human she wouldn't have had to worry. But a werewolf with superior hearing and reflexes? That could have been a major problem. As it was, she made it safely to her car and, with shaking fingers, twisted the key in the ignition. It was at that moment the wind and rain lulled to a low murmur, and she knew Derek must have heard the car from the house. She jerked it out of park and sped into the night. The question was where was she going?

She got onto the highway and turned south. She didn't dare go back to her family. Derek was powerful in his own right, and she didn't want to put them in danger. She needed time to process what she'd heard and seen tonight. But could she trust Jason? Jason who'd abandoned her when her human frailty came to the forefront? Her analytic journalist's mind said she was nothing more than a chess piece, than a pawn being used between Michael and Jason. Her gut said to go to Jason, that he would keep her safe, but, wow, had it been wrong about Jason before. Did he *really* believe she was dead? The idea seemed crazy. But what her family had done, what she'd seen at Derek's was just as crazy.

She couldn't see any other choice. So she drove south.

Through rain and wind that ebbed and flowed, the remnants of Hurricane Helga raging across the state, she drove. By the time she reached Columbus, Georgia the sky cleared, and she fiddled with the radio, searching for news. She knew another hurricane was coming up the Gulf and was relieved to hear it was forecasted to hit far down the coast near Tampa. One model had it veering north into the Panhandle, but the experts were discounting it.

Iris was a category one storm, so they weren't even forcing evacuations, just recommending them for low-lying beach areas. She snorted. Wasn't all of the Tampa Bay area low lying? She hadn't made it down in a couple of years, but usually she spent time with friends there every summer, even sticking around for a tropical storm one year. She knew her Tampa friends wouldn't heed those warnings. They'd ridden out many storms over the years, and perhaps their blasé attitude was contagious because eight hours later, she paid her five dollars to enter St. Andrews State Park.

It was bright and sunny and clear, no sign of the turmoil brewing on the Gulf or the storm that had just blown through. It certainly didn't mirror the turmoil inside her. Unwilling to confront Jason quite yet, she drove to the public beach, parked and wandered into the gift shop. Her time would probably have been

better spent driving into Panama City and finding a hotel room, but she could never resist the Gulf. The rolling emerald water, the pristine white sand. She sighed. This was her idea of heaven.

She hadn't brought anything with her, obviously, and on a whim bought a bathing suit, sunscreen and a giant towel. After changing, she dropped her clothes in her car and headed to the sand. She had to think, had to decide what she was going to do about Jason and Derek and her family. If she had any sense she'd walk away from all of them. She was human and couldn't help but feel both sides were using her. What better place to make a decision than the perfect, pearly beaches of the Gulf of Mexico?

All right, healthy dose of avoidance and fear there too, Celeste, but way to rationalize.

She pushed the worry away, spread her towel on the ground and lay down, digging her toes into the warm gritty sand. She'd driven all night. It was still early morning. There were a couple of guys playing volleyball and a few sunbathers, but mostly she had the beach to herself. She wondered whether the hurricane's predicted landfall site had changed. Was that why the beach was so empty? Even if it had, it was only a category one, and she had plenty of time to drive inland. Safe enough she reasoned. Especially once she found Jason. He might be angry with her, might be indifferent to her, hell he might even hate her, but he'd never let harm come to her. When she'd settled on that conclusion she wasn't sure—sometime on the long drive down. Exhausted, she sighed as her mind swirled with all of the recent happenings. She drifted to sleep, warmed by the sun and sand, lulled by the pounding surf.

When she opened her eyes, the sky was dark and ugly, clouds churning as if stirred in a witch's caldron. The wind whipped her hair, and she felt a moment's unease. She hadn't meant to fall asleep or to sleep so long. Standing and dusting the sand off, she looked around. The beach was abandoned. She grabbed the towel and her car keys and sprinted for the parking lot. When she veered around the beach shop, she noticed it was closed up, shutters latched into place. Around the front in the parking lot, a few cars were pulling out onto the road and only two vehicles remained parked and empty. The second one froze her in place a minute. The F150 truck looked exactly like Derek's.

Ignoring the fear that bubbled to her throat, she hurried to her car. It was a common truck, and he couldn't know where she was. Why would she come to Florida in a hurricane after all? It had to be a coincidence.

She reached her door as thunder boomed over the ocean. The noise startled her so much she dropped the keys. The fine hairs on her arms rose and fear with it, as she bent to retrieve them. Where the hell was Jason when she needed him? She choked back an angry sob. If he hadn't been around when she needed him before, why did she suddenly expect him now?

Get a grip, Celeste, and get the hell out of here.

She'd kicked the keys under the car and had to crouch to her knees to grope the ground under the driver's side to retrieve them. She almost cheered when her fingers closed over the cold metal. She rocked back on her heels to stand. She never made it to her feet.

“Bitch. You aren’t going to ruin all my plans.”

She barely registered the menacing voice as Derek’s before something hard came down on her head, and the world went black.

Chapter Two

Anger pulsed through him. This was not the way he wanted things to go down, not part of the plan. Celeste's death should be just one more thorn to twist in Michael's side, but it should have been on his terms, not anyone else's. And not before he'd had the taste of her for which he'd waited so long. Ignoring the tire iron in his hand, Derek stood over her and glared at her prone body, then noticed the steady rise and fall of her chest.

No fucking way.

She should be dead, but it had always been as if the woman were protected from the weaknesses of mere mortals, as if she'd been touched by one of the Gods who'd created the world's shifters. A werewolf—a were of any kind—wouldn't have walked away from the plane crash last year and yet, she'd lived. And she survived a killing blow now. Pure ass luck or something else? He wasn't willing to seriously consider the implications.

Celeste had been the perfect opportunity for him. Abandoned by Jason and smothered by her family, Celeste had been ripe for the picking. He'd earned her trust and wormed his way into the Alpha's circle. The hardest part had been concealing his true nature. Not from Celeste—she thought he could do no wrong—but from her father. Michael was a suspicious son of a bitch. He'd wondered right from the start why a strong werewolf in his clan was willing to wait so long for his daughter to come around, but as the months stretched on, he relaxed, became complacent. He didn't consider Derek a threat.

Resting on the balls of his feet, he hunkered down next to Celeste, brushed a long tendril of blonde hair from her face, and tried to decide how to use these new developments to his advantage. No one knew he was here, and he bet no one knew she was either. He'd been lucky to find her, and it was due more to instinct than knowledge.

He'd been riding the high from Marie, that special feeling he got every time he brought another slut low. And they had to be sluts. Killing more circumspect women had never been a thrill for him. He'd given it a shot once or twice, but the excitement just couldn't compare. That's why Celeste had always been safe. She lived like a nun.

Lately the women he picked were with purpose, a means to an end as well as the special kick he craved. It was too soon for Marie, too soon after the last one. He'd known that but was so excited about the progression of his plan to bring Michael down, he'd seized the chance to celebrate a little. Who knew

Celeste would happen by? It was pure luck the storm had slowed at just the right time for him to hear the distinctive whine as her car's engine started.

By the time he'd rushed out she was gone and though he trembled with the need to rush after her, to protect himself, he'd made himself stop and think. First the body had to be dealt with then he'd figure out what to do. He'd known he had to act with haste. If she went to Michael, the Alpha would come after him fast and furious. Walking back into his house, he'd noticed the cell phone on a side table. It had rung a few times while he was playing, but he'd ignored it. He'd picked it up and scrolled through the missed calls—all Celeste—then listened to his voice mail. He'd grinned as he hung up, strolling over to gaze down at the corpse sprawled across his living room floor.

Michael had called Celeste for a late family meeting, about what she had no idea, but Derek was pretty sure she'd received the shocking news that Jason thought she was dead. Like the good little girl she was, she'd come straight to her good friend. Enraged, he'd broken out in a cold sweat. He'd had to find her before she fucked up everything.

He'd bet his fortune she wouldn't go to Michael. She'd already be in shock and the addition of witnessing a murder would have put her on overload. No. She'd go home. Or maybe even to Jason. Derek's money was on her Atlanta apartment. So he'd disposed of the body—making sure to dump it on Alpha land where it would surely be discovered soon—and driven to Atlanta. He'd been surprised to find she wasn't there, and he hated surprises.

He knew she hadn't gone to Michael's. His people were watching the Alpha's house. So, with only one other option, he'd driven south, despite the latest radio weather warnings that had Hurricane Iris turning toward his destination. He went straight to Jason's park, where he caught a lucky break. He found her car in the beach parking lot and, from a sand dune, he spotted her stretched out on the beach. Although not as crowded as it might've normally been, there were too many people around to approach her, so he checked out the park, looking for unused roads and paths, and found a place nearby to hide and observe. He'd narrowly avoided running into Jason who'd driven by in a work vehicle.

As the morning passed, the weather had grown progressively worse. When she'd finally stirred and hurried to her car, he'd seized his opportunity and made his move.

Now he had to decide what to do with her. Finish her off or keep her alive? The better to torment Michael with obviously.

The roar of an engine stopped him. The sound increased, and he cocked his head to the side. Definitely coming his way. It sounded like the vehicle he'd seen Jason in earlier. He made a split second decision and sprinted for his truck. Jason would probably have to be dealt with later too. The delay infuriated Derek, but he knew he'd need an advantage. The leopard was a fierce fighter, and he wasn't positive his wolf could take the cat down. Better to fight safe than stupid, a lesson he'd learned the hard way from his father's murder.

He made it to the truck and gave Celeste a last fulminating glare. Should have finished her off or taken her with him, but with Jason added to the equation, there were too many variables outside of his control. The other vehicle approached the parking lot, and he knew he was out of time. He started the truck, threw it in gear and peeled out of the parking lot, barely missing sideswiping the oncoming vehicle.

He'd wait and watch. And strike when they were at their weakest.

Jason Leonidas steered the park service vehicle into the beach parking lot and growled when an exiting truck almost ran him off the hardtop. The other driver's tires squealed as he took the turn. "Reckless," Jason muttered. He would have gone after the idiot and given him a ticket and a lecture, but he saw one car left in the lot. The storm was coming in bigger and faster than the weather center's models had predicted, and its course had completely changed, leaving Tampa safe but barreling straight for Panama City. His first priority was to make sure the park was empty. Then he'd go hole up somewhere safe.

He guided his vehicle into a space next to the Honda. Grabbing his binoculars, he stepped out. He'd just run up the dune and scan the beach for stragglers. He made it to the front bumper of the truck before he froze, assaulted by familiar smells.

Fear. Blood. Celeste.

Not fucking possible.

Celeste was gone, taken from him in the cruelest way—forever. He must have finally lost what was left of his mind.

Over the wail of the wind, he heard a low mewling sound, like a kitten in pain, and he lurched into movement, quickly circling the compact car. A small figure lay on the ground, a woman with long blonde hair matted red with blood.

Celeste's hair. Celeste's scent.

Celeste is dead you idiot. Get it together.

Fur ruffled under his skin as he approached her. The logical thinking man knew Celeste was gone. The wereleopard who lived on instinct insisted this was its mate, and someone had hurt her.

He growled, low and threatening, man and leopard beginning to merge in growing fury when he knelt and carefully rolled her over.

Celeste....alive.

His chest tightened when he brushed the hair off her face, but he pushed all conflicting emotions away. No time for that now—he had to get her to safety. What the hell was she doing here anyway?

He easily lifted her and carried her to his truck. The driver's side door was still open, and he maneuvered his way in while holding her against his chest. Squeezing his eyes shut, he took a deep breath, dragging her scent deep into his lungs. A feeling he could only describe as joy overwhelmed him, and he choked on a sob. In any other circumstances he would have laughed. Big, bad, Jason Leonidas crying like a

baby? But she was alive. How many times had he wished he could change the past? How many times had he wished he could go back and insist she not get on that damned plane?

Fury replaced the joy. Where the fuck had she been? She'd abandoned her mate. She'd let him think she was dead. The only thing that kept him from shaking her awake and demanding answers was her sudden moan of pain. He held her too tightly, knew she'd probably bear bruises later from his rough embrace. Gently, he laid her across the bench seat, resting her head on his lap.

He cranked the engine, put the truck in drive and headed for the ranger cabin where they would ride out the storm. He glanced down at her, ran a finger over his mark on her shoulder. *Together again. Together at last.*

She stirred, agitated, but remained unconscious, and he frowned. How long had she been out? Smoothing his hand over her hair, he murmured, "Shh, baby. Almost there."

His voice seemed to soothe her, and she settled. Within minutes, he'd stopped the truck and carried her into the small building he called home. He paused in the living room, wondering if he should lay her on the couch. Hell no. She was his mate—she belonged in his bed. A few steps down the hall and he was striding into his room. He pulled the blanket back, laid her down and stepped away.

He struggled to get his mind past the shock of her presence. He needed to have a look at the wound on her head, clean it up and see if he could wake her. Forcing himself to focus, he gritted his teeth and stared down at her. How had he missed the impossibly small bikini? Even that was too much concealment though, and he wanted it gone, wanted her uncovered and exposed to his hungry gaze. He remembered too well what the scraps of material covered. The small perfect breasts. The generously rounded hips and hot pussy that always welcomed him, no matter how he'd previously loved her. His cock sprang to hard, throbbing attention. She groaned again, rolling her head against the pillow and spurring him to action. First things first.

He got his emergency kit, a clean cloth and a bowl of cool water. Placing the items on the nightstand, he shifted her over enough that he could sit next to her and dipped the cloth in the water. The wound was on her right temple, and he cleaned it as gently as possible while still being thorough. She'd been hit with something, and the gash was long but not deep. The butterfly bandages in the kit would be fine to close it, but first he had to make sure there was no sand in the wound. His biggest concern was concussion, but that worry was alleviated as he worked. Her breathing was even and steady, and once her eyes fluttered open to focus on him for a few seconds. He was pleased to see no dilation in her pupils. She closed them with a sigh. It was her scent, however, that really eased his mind. He didn't catch one whiff of anything that would indicate an injury in her brain. It had been a glancing blow. It was probably a combination of the heat, surprise and the hit that had her sleeping so soundly. She'd be fine in a couple hours.

When he was sure the cut was cleaned, he disinfected the area, pressed the edges together, and sealed it shut. He exchanged the bloodied cloth for an unsoiled one and refilled the bowl with clean water. Sitting

next to her on the bed, his hip against hers, he hesitated. Cleaning the wound was one thing, cleaning the rest of her might be out of line. But fuck, it had been a long time, and he couldn't *not* touch her.

After dipping the washcloth, he bathed her face, the fine high cheekbones, the perky nose, the stubborn chin he'd loved beyond reason. He frowned when he saw the long scar up the side of her cheek. It hadn't been there before. His gaze raked her body, lingering over the flat smooth belly and the faded scars that crisscrossed the top of her bathing suit bottoms. There were more scars on her legs, and he gently wiped away crusted sand from her knees while he thought it over. She hadn't had any of these scars the last time he'd seen her, but it had been awhile since the plane crash. Her injuries had time to fade like these.

He searched his memory of that time and knew he paled under his deep tan. His father's death in the same crash hadn't registered for months. He'd been mad with grief and consumed by fury at Celeste's family when they told him she'd died in that crash, for refusing to let him see her body. He'd blamed them for her death, still did, despite the proof she was alive. As soon as they'd realized her infatuation with the wereleopard was a great deal more than just that, they'd been quick to pack her up and send her home. A leopard in the ruling wereleopard clan wasn't good enough apparently. But she'd never made it, the small plane left the private airstrip at the Refuge Resort in Arizona only to be taken down by a sudden storm in the Appalachian Mountains.

He hadn't believed them, had been sure he would feel it if she was dead. Since he was told to stay away from the funeral and threatened with execution if he entered wolf land without permission, he refused to believe it. Until his brothers forced him to view video of the crash site, forced him to see the wreckage. There was no way anyone could have survived that mangled wreck, so he'd begun to accept it.

Now he didn't know what to believe. If she'd been on the plane, how had she survived? And why the fuck had her family told him she was dead? He'd been living with a gaping hole in his heart for a year and for what? Werewolf snobbery? His cat side hissed in response, demanding release. It wanted to run off the rage, the hurt, the shock, the fear. The new questions. If Celeste had survived, what about his father? He needed to let his brothers know ASAP, but it was all too much to take at once and with no target at which to vent.

Jason finished bathing her and cleaned up the mess. He walked back to the living room and opened the front door. It was raining hard now. The wind blew it sideways, and it fell in sheets rather than drops, but the deep porch kept most of it outside. A few drops hit the floor at the open entryway, and he went to the hall closet for a towel, dropping it down to soak up the moisture. He knew from experience that the storm would go on for a couple of days, in fits and starts until Iris passed over the area. This round of rain and wind would probably stop soon, for a short time at least before picking up stronger when the next band reached them.

Glancing in the direction of his bedroom, he stripped. There was no help for it. Worry ate at him. Every emotion under the sun consumed him. A quick run would help sort out the jumble. Then hopefully

he'd be able to deal with Celeste, his need for her, and her betrayal. Because under the fury, was a bone deep hurt that twisted his insides into painful knots. He could have forgiven her for dying on him, but she hadn't. She'd left. She'd never given them the chance they deserved. It was the ultimate betrayal. He wasn't sure if he could ever forgive her for it. One thing was certain though, forgiveness or not, he wasn't letting her go again. They were mated. Whether she liked it or not.

Shifting to leopard form, he padded outside, leaving the door open behind him. He considered closing it, but dismissed the idea as quickly as it came. With the electricity out, the air conditioner didn't work. Right now that wasn't a problem, but the house would get unbearably hot and muggy very quickly once the rain died down. Plus he planned on staying near the house. Should she awaken or cry out while he was gone, he'd have a better chance of hearing her if the door was open. Decision made, he ran off into the surrounding brush.

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.

His thumbs flicked over her nipples. She opened her eyes in time to see his nostrils flare, to see him lean forward and flick his tongue over one hard point. He sucked it into his mouth, bit down. It was just this side of painful, and she grew wetter, felt her body rushing to accept him. She shuddered, then groaned. Didn’t even fight the orgasm she felt rising from the very center of her, the heart and soul. Nothing had ever equaled being possessed by Jason. Nothing ever would, she realized with sadness. As if he sensed her

slipping away he moved his hands around her ribcage, let her nipple fall free of his mouth, and squeezed a little.

“Slow and easy is not going to cut it right now.”

She nodded. She knew. Maybe later he’d let her pet him, stroke him. When the leopard was appeased. He rolled her over, reached to wrap her legs around his hips, and plunged into her. She grabbed his shoulders and hung on. He wasn’t slow or smooth or even gentle. He was wild. Out of control. His fingers bit into her hips, holding her still and she tried to shift a little, tried to at least meet his thrusts.

He growled a low warning, and she waited for the spike of fear. She’d always been a little afraid of his primitive side and he’d been careful not to scare her, not to push her too far too fast. The old alarm didn’t come. She’d learned to be strong after the crash, found that she liked that about her new self. She ran her hands down his shoulders, over his pecs. Paused a minute to flick her fingers over his nipples. He growled again, and she almost smiled. She wasn’t scared at all. She was really, really turned on.

“When did you get so brave?” he asked, voice guttural with lust.

About a year ago. The answer froze in her throat. His eyes had turned from their natural green to the narrow amber slits of his cat and she knew he was losing what little control he had. She liked it. Liked that she could push him to it. She didn’t answer, just shook her head, arrested by his expression, by the need and desire stamped across his face.

Not that he gave her a chance to frame a suitable reply. He reached between them and pressed his thumb against her clitoris. Every thought fled. Every worry. Everything but sensation. And sound. She heard herself screaming as she came, heard skin slapping against skin, heard him grunting as he came seconds later.

She didn’t know how much time passed, thought she’d probably dozed off. When she came back to her senses she was sprawled over Jason’s body, one arm around his neck, one leg thrown over his hips. She smiled at the familiar feeling, almost forgot a year had gone by since she’d seen him, but slowly came back to herself, became embarrassingly aware of the leopard beneath her.

She shifted a little, intending to move away, to gather herself but he held her still. One hand convulsed on her ass, the other caressed the nape of her neck. He was gentle, quiet, but his breath sawed from his lungs as if he’d just run a marathon. She struggled to remember how she’d ended up here, but the effort just brought the headache back.

“What am I doing here, Jason?” she whispered.

She had to figure this out.

He lifted his head to meet her gaze, eyebrow arched.

“You don’t know?”

She caught her bottom lip between her teeth, biting back the exasperated retort that hovered. She tried to pull away, but he wouldn’t release her. He moved her further over so she stretched from head to toe

across his body. His erection pressed against her belly and with a sigh, she spread her thighs to straddle him, felt him nudging the lips of her pussy seeking entrance. She tried hard to ignore the spark flaring to life inside her.

“Not a clue,” she grumbled. The wind howled outside. “Maybe we could start with where am I? And why does my head feel like someone beat on it?”

He scowled.

“Because someone did. I was hoping you would tell me who.”

She thought about it, and her temples throbbed. Shaking her head, she answered, trying to ignore the rising panic.

“Nothing. I don’t remember anything. Where are we?”

“Florida,” he said, then grunted.

She wasn’t sure if he was angry or as confused as she was, but a disturbing thought niggled. Florida seemed...familiar. She needed to remember something important. One thing clicked at least, and she looked at the window with alarm.

“Hurricane Iris?”

“So you remember something of the last few days at least.”

“Days?” she asked, alarmed. “Have I been here that long?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know. I found you a couple of hours ago in the beach parking lot. Laying on the ground and bleeding.” His voice turned menacing. “I need to know who hit you, Celeste.”

She was surprised at the quiet vehemence, as if he actually cared. She snorted.

“Why?”

He’d always moved fast, but she was still shocked when he reversed their positions and she found herself flat on her back and pressed under his weight again. His cock nestled against her pussy and unable to resist, she tilted her hips just enough to take the head inside her.

“Because no one attacks my mate and lives. No one.” He thrust deep.

She blinked. Surprised and seriously pissed. She found the strength to push him off of her, to push away the tears. His mate. Yeah, right.

“Your mate,” she whispered and then ground her molars against the angry words threatening to spill out.

One learned to be careful with words when one grew up in an Alpha werewolf’s household. She wanted to scream and pace, but tried to resist the urge. Well, to hell with that. He wasn’t a werewolf, and she owed him nothing.

“My mate,” she said, putting as much scorn as possible into the word. “My mate would not have left me alone for months in the hospital. My mate would not have left me alone when the doctors told me I’ll

never have children. My mate would have been there for the months of physical therapy and half a dozen surgeries to fix my face.”

She wrenched free and jumped off the bed, putting as much distance between herself and his seductive body as she could, pointing a shaky finger at him.

“Don’t talk to me about mates, Jason.”

He rose slowly, rounded the bed and paced toward her. He looked a little green under his tan. Probably didn’t like to be reminded of his failures in the mate department, or hers in the human. His cock jutted out before him, stiff and proud and damned near impossible to resist.

“Well, that explains that,” he whispered.

He kept advancing, and she retreated until her back hit the wall. She went to duck around him, but his hands slammed against the wall, his hips pushing into hers and pinning her, caging her between his body and the hard place at her back.

“What did they tell you, Celeste? That I didn’t want you? You want to know what they told me?” He waited until she met his eyes before continuing. “They told me you were dead.”

She gasped. At this range she could feel the heat, the fury, rolling off of him. She wanted to protest, but for some reason she was certain it was true. He slid his palms down the wall, gripped her hips and lifted her. He entered her roughly. No finesse. She didn’t need it, already impossibly wet, immediately convulsing around his cock.

“It won’t happen again, Celeste. They took you from me once and now that you’re back from the dead, I’ll never let you go again.”

Tears stung her eyes. It was so, *so* good, but as much as she wanted this fantasy, it wasn’t right. Not that that thought stopped her body from responding as he thrust into her, worked her into a frenzy of want and desire and another orgasm. When he slowed, when his movements inside her became as lazy as the tongue lapping at her breast, her brain reengaged. She started to worry again.

“There’s something I’m not remembering,” she whispered, more to herself than him. “What day is it?”

He looked surprised at the change of subject.

“Thursday.” His cock was still hard inside her. She closed her eyes and concentrated.

“Thursday...I remember Dad calling me Wednesday night and insisting I come home.” She blushed, remembering how she’d masturbated to Jason’s memory before that phone call. “So between yesterday afternoon and now I drove from Atlanta to Chattanooga to here. Where is here exactly?”

“St. Andrews Park. Outside Panama City Beach. Florida.”

She looked around the room. She couldn’t imagine him in Florida. Dolphin land.

“Why?” The question seemed to confuse him more, and he stepped back, giving her room to breathe. “Why are you in Florida? Why aren’t you living at the resort and helping your brothers run all the Leonidas businesses?”

“I left a long time ago. Everywhere I turned...I saw you. I couldn’t live with it.”

His voice was emotional, raw. She couldn’t say why but she believed him. She wanted to hate him, had half hated and loved him for the past year. Now he was back, screwing with her resolve to get on with her life, with her plans to meet someone else and get on with her life. Oh, shit. Derek! She was almost dating him and had just fucked the wrong man. Twice. How had she managed to forget that? She clapped a hand over her mouth, afraid she’d blurt it out and pretty sure Jason would go ballistic. He couldn’t miss her panic, damn the man. He released her slowly, let her slide down the wall until her feet hit the wooden plank floors, but kept his hands on her hips.

“What is it? You remembered something.”

She shook her head and tried to get free, to walk past him, but he wouldn’t let her.

“There’ve been too many secrets, baby,” he whispered. “What is it?”

His voice was soft, cajoling. But how long would that last? And why was she so relieved? Something about Derek... It just wasn’t there anymore. But he was her friend, the one who’d got her through Jason’s abandonment. Surely this awareness, this fear, was unfounded.

Jason moved his hands on her shoulders and held her still. “What is it, Celeste?”

“Didn’t you try to get on with your life? Find someone else?”

He grew very still, and she knew she was in trouble. She hated to hurt him and hated herself for caring, but what could she do? What should she have done differently? He’d disappeared from her life. Was it wrong for her to long for companionship? Just a little of what she’d lost?

And Derek... Well if that was a little too comfortable a relationship, so what? She’d had wild and passionate and look what it got her. But now she had to deal with Jason, and he grew more livid by the moment.

Grabbing her by the waist, he pulled her close and sniffed her. It was possessive and proprietary, and it pissed her off all over again. It was entirely too up close and personal for a casual werekind acquaintance. Despite just having had sex with him, could she call him anything more than that?

He didn’t smell anything but himself—couldn’t have—and relaxed marginally.

“Explain yourself, Celeste. Tell me what you’re holding back. Now. Or so help me, God, I’ll bend you over my knee, and it won’t be like old times. You won’t like it,” he threatened.

She met his gaze, hard and glittering green. He’d changed. She thought he probably meant just what he said. But she’d changed too. Was harder, tougher than he remembered. How to diffuse the situation? She shrugged.

“It’s been a year. It’s been a long time since I knew you wanted me.”

“So what? You’re fucking someone?” His voice got very, very cold. “Living with someone?”

“No,” she whispered, knowing with the possessive urges of a mate that he was going to explode even though the situation was innocent, trying like hell not to care. “Dating. A little.”

He released her as if she burned him, sudden and abrupt.

“Don’t leave this house,” he ordered, then shifted and ran from the room.

Chapter Three

As he ran, he decided to kill her father and spread pieces of him across the southern states. It was just possible—maybe—that Celeste didn't understand the full nature of a mate bond, but Michael sure as hell did. Michael knew it was very unlikely Jason would ever commit to another woman. To allow Celeste to become involved with someone else when he knew Jason was unaware she lived—it was infuriating. Jason had never experienced such rage, so he had to escape the house. He didn't want to take it out on Celeste.

But Michael. Michael had a lot to answer for.

And who was she dating? She hadn't mentioned his name. Was he human? A werewolf? Was she fucking him? Jason stopped and dug his claws into the ground. He cut off the thought and started running again...getting overwhelmed with rage wouldn't help him or her. He couldn't afford that; he had to deal with the mystery of why she had shown up *now*. But maybe it wasn't such a mystery.

Several months ago a werewolf approached him. He had a plan to take over Michael's clan and a small role for Jason to play in it. To Jason the role wasn't so insignificant though.

When Celeste died Jason had been in the process of branching out. He'd dreamed of having werewolf-safe resorts like Refuge around the world and so began his career in real estate speculation. None of his plans had come to fruition—she'd died, and he'd taken off. But he found the risk of land development too addictive to give up. He'd just switched gears away from hotels.

So when the werewolf—Derek—came to him with a plan to ruin Michael, part of which was to take his prime piece of land, Jason had jumped on it. He couldn't care less about the rest of Derek's scheme and hadn't asked. That land was Celeste's, the only thing left of her, and he wanted it. He hadn't believed Derek when he insisted Michael would contact him to mortgage the land, but he'd jumped on it when it happened, skipping the in-depth background checks he usually went through. If he'd done them, he might have discovered Celeste was alive. Then she sure as hell would've been here already instead of showing up now injured and unable to remember most of the last twenty-four hours.

The rain let up, and he slowed to a loose-limbed lope while he worked it through. Michael had accepted insane terms for the mortgage, terms no rational person would take. He either had the money in reserve for the first balloon payment, was certain he would or just didn't care about losing the land. Since he was using it for his new business venture, that couldn't be it. If he had the cash, he wouldn't have needed the loan, which left being certain he'd have the money. So, why didn't he? Normally before Jason decided to hand out so much money, he demanded business plans, financial records and made personal

background checks. Normally he made people jump through hoops. In his haste to get the last piece of Celeste, he'd skipped all of that. But he bet Derek hadn't, and that made Jason nervous. What was Derek's motivation for going after Michael? Simple greed for power or something else?

A familiar scent came to him on a sudden gust of wind, and he lifted his head to search it out. Wolf and, since there were no wolves indigenous to this park, it had to be werewolf. Stopping still in his tracks, he looked around but didn't see anything other than storm debris and rain. Taking a deep breath, he didn't smell anything other than salt water either. It was either his imagination or the werewolf was gone.

When the unfamiliar feeling of dread inched its way up his spine, he turned, running full out for home. He wasn't sure how he knew, but Celeste was in danger.

Celeste stood frozen in place when Jason made his hasty exit. She felt rejected, confused and angry. The confusion she understood, but the other two? She'd accepted his rejection a long time ago and the new rejection, the new anger over something she should expect, fucked with her mind as well as the peace she'd carved out for herself.

To hell with this.

Curling her fingers into fists, she redressed quickly, took a final look around the room and walked out. He was off running in his other form, so it was the perfect time to get out of here. Listening to the howling wind and driving rain, she walked down the hall—he'd left the front door open—and onto the porch where she winced, her stomach clutching in dread. Wind blew the trees flat, and the relentless rain collected in pools around the yard. There was no way she was driving in that, and she couldn't believe he'd gone out in it.

Fear for him was bad enough, but this new emotion was more like terror—at the realization she wasn't going anywhere. She'd have to stay until this storm blew over and if she couldn't avoid him, she was afraid she'd fall in love with him all over again. Snorting, she walked back inside.

Like I ever really stopped?

She had to figure out why she was here. She squeezed her eyes shut, willing the memory to come. Nothing did.

Pushing the door mostly closed, but not catching the latch in case Jason returned in wereleopard form, she walked back into the small living room. The wind blew the door open behind her, and it banged into the wall. She flinched and whirled around. Why was she so jumpy—because of the storm or something else? She walked over and slammed the door shut. He could just shift and use the knob like normal people when he returned.

Standing in the small living room, she sighed. Now what? She needed a phone, needed to call her mom and see what she knew. Frowning, she looked around. Where was her purse? Her phone? Where was Jason's phone for that matter? She hadn't seen one yet. She peered through the doorway on her left and saw

a refrigerator, but when she entered and found a phone it was dead. She slammed it down in frustration and went to search the house. There had to be a cell phone. Maybe it would work.

She started with the nightstand in his bedroom and got the shock of her life when she pulled the drawer open. It couldn't be the same box, but she knew as she reached for it with trembling hands that it was. Lifting it out, she set it on one open palm and frowned. Her chest expanded, shrank and swelled again. It took a moment for the sobs to register, and she gulped them down. He hadn't kept the ring, had he? The ring she'd left with him when she'd flown home to explain things to her family. It was like watching a train wreck, her train wreck, as she flipped the lid open, saw the blazing red ruby circled by diamonds. She bit her lip and pulled the ring from the box. She held it a moment before sliding it on and holding it up to the light. He'd kept her ring. What did that mean? What else had he kept?

She set the box on the bed and stood. Hands on her hips, she looked around, wondering where to start. Afraid she'd find something else as disturbing in the dresser, she headed for the closet and opened the doors. She quickly flipped through everything in front and pushed them out of the way when she came to the items hidden in the back—the clothes she'd left in his quarters at the resort. Had he kept everything? She shrugged off the curiosity. Did it matter?

At least she could get out of this bikini now. She tugged a tank top and then a pair of jeans off hangars and carried them into the bathroom. Setting them on top of the closed toilet, she pulled the shower curtain back wondering if her shampoo and conditioner would be there, too. Thankfully, they weren't. That just would be too creepy.

Turning the water as hot as it would go, she got in and soaped up, careful to avoid the bandage on her temple. With the electricity out she figured she didn't have a long time before the water turned cold and hurried through the process. She squeezed some shampoo in the palm of her hand and fingered it through her hair. After she rinsed it, she stepped out of the shower, wrapped a towel around her hair and one around her body. She eyed her clothes and tried to remember if she'd left underwear in his bungalow a year ago. If she had, did he still have them? Not sure if she wanted the answer to that she decided to go commando and pulled on the jeans and shirt.

The material rasped over her sensitized skin. Her pussy grew wet against the hard crotch of the jeans and her nipples pebbled when the shirt brushed over them. She groaned. Would even her clothes conspire against her to keep her ready and willing for Jason?

She wanted him again already, with that deep craving she'd hoped to defeat. Turned out she'd only partially managed to numb herself to her body's demands. Now that it was fully reawakened she didn't think she could turn it off. Wasn't sure if she even wanted to. It was a problem she wasn't ready to deal with quite yet. She was stuck with him until the storm passed, might as well enjoy him while she could. She just had to keep her heart out of it so that when the inevitable happened, when he left her, it wouldn't hurt as bad as before. He may have thought she was dead, but she didn't have that excuse. She hadn't insisted

on speaking to him herself. She'd withdrawn in hurt and anger. Eventually he'd probably see her failure to contact him as a betrayal, or worse, cowardice. She couldn't really argue he was wrong, either.

Sighing, she pulled the towel off her head and let the length of her hair fall down her back. A quick search of the bathroom drawers gave up a single comb but no brush. She decided to let her hair air dry while she searched the rest of the house.

She came up empty except for the romance novel she'd left in Jason's bungalow at the resort. No phones. No computer. No outside communication. Grumbling, she went to the kitchen. Her stomach rumbled as she entered, and she wondered how long it had been since she'd eaten. Not that it mattered, since she was hungry now.

The electricity was out. The stove was electric, but there was a camp stove pushed to one corner of the kitchen counter next to a case of water. Jason had obviously prepared for the storm. She cleared a space for the camp stove and fiddled with the knobs, trying to remember how they worked. One of the burners lit. Satisfied she could get something warmed, she turned it off to search the pantry. It was almost bare, and she wondered what Jason lived on. He was leaner, but by no means small. He had to be feeding his bulk, but damned if she could tell how. She found more cases of water, a box of MREs and the odd can of veggies and soup.

She pulled out a couple of cans of beef stew and bread and then retrieved cheese and mustard from the refrigerator before she rummaged for a saucepan. She dug a handheld can opener from a drawer and used it on the can before she poured the stew into the pot. Then she placed it on the burner and relit the camp stove. She was making cheese sandwiches when the front door banged open.

She winced at the sound and heard Jason walk into the small room but, instead of acknowledging him at first, she finished covering the bread with slices of cheese and started squirting circles of mustard on the opposite slices.

She felt his gaze on her. Desire rushed through her, heating her skin and accelerating her heartbeat into a wild staccato rhythm. Knowing he could hear it, she turned to face him.

"Found some clothes, I see," Jason said when she finally lifted her face to meet his gaze.

He stood in the doorway, rain dripping off his body. He seemed tense, twitchy and he looked around the room before his gaze finally settled on her. He was naked, all rippling muscle, not an ounce of fat, and his cock was hard. He made no effort to hide it, and she couldn't avert her eyes. Moistening her lips, afraid of the crushing urge to approach, drop to her knees and take him in her mouth, she crossed her arms over her chest and tucked her hands under them, leaning back against the counter.

He stalked to her and tugged her arms loose, lifting up her left hand. She'd forgotten about the ring—it had felt so natural to leave it on—and jerked free. Pulling it off, she held it out to him.

"Sorry. I found it when I was looking for a phone."

She wondered if he'd fly off the handle at her snooping, but he just smiled and caught her hand again. He slipped the ring back on her finger and pulled her close, one hand flat on her ass to hold her still.

"It's your ring. I don't expect to see it off your finger again."

The stew started to bubble and pop. He reached over and turned off the burner, moving the pot to the cold side. Then he pulled her back into his embrace and kissed her. Hungry, raw, demanding. His tongue stroked hers while his thumb rubbed over the small scar on her shoulder. His hips pushed against hers, and he maneuvered her until her back was to the counter. His erection pressed against her belly and pussy grew slick with need. His grin was wicked.

"I know what you want, baby." He took several steps back, took his cock in his hand and slowly stroked up and down. She nibbled at her bottom lip, watching, wanting to take him up on the invitation, but unsteady, unsure.

"Celeste." There was command and temptation in the growl that she couldn't resist. Moving forward, she knelt. She placed her hands on the back of his knees and slowly drew them up, over his thighs, to his ass. His skin was smooth, his muscles hard and flexing under her touch. She breathed deep, taking in the masculine, outdoorsy scent that was only Jason's—that drove her crazy. Leaning forward, she traced the contours of his cock with her tongue, ran it down the top of his length, then the bottom, before taking him between her lips. They groaned together when he slid past her teeth, into the warmth of her mouth to bump the back of her throat.

She pulled back, sucking as she withdrew, until only the head was left. She suckled it, running her tongue over the weeping slit. He hissed out a breath and his fingers gripped her head, urging her forward, urging her to take him deep again. She did, but only repeated her earlier actions. She was too caught up in his taste, in teasing him to give into his subtle demands and after too brief an exploration he took over, holding her still so he could thrust in her mouth, until she was certain he was going to come and she moaned her anticipation. Then he stopped, pulled free and yanked her to her feet, crushing her lips with his.

When he broke the kiss she almost protested, but before she could form the words, his mouth closed over her nipple. She gasped, pushing against him, grabbing the counter at her back for support. He sucked at the swollen tip of her breast, suction then gentle bites, alternating until she thought she would go mad with desire. He broke the contact abruptly and jerked the tank top over her head.

"What was wrong with the bikini," he mumbled before his lips closed over the opposite nipple.

Her eyelids slid shut, and her body started to shake. She knew the orgasm would overtake her soon, would leave her weak and still needy, because she hadn't felt him thrusting inside her, yet. Suddenly she needed that more than her next breath. Releasing her grip on the counter, she reached for his cock. Warm and wet from her mouth, it jumped in her hand, and she tried to see around Jason's head, to see her hand gripping him. He released her nipple with a pop, and she groaned in protest.

"You're playing with fire, baby." His voice was gruff, and she knew he was on the edge too.

“I like fire,” she whispered, walking her fingers to the head of his cock.

Collecting the pre-cum there, she rubbed it in, then down the length and resumed her grip, beginning a slow up and down stroke. He released a long hissing breath and stripped off her jeans. Unwrapping her fingers from his length, he stepped away and grinned. He looked her over, a lascivious, possessive gleam in his eyes.

“Two can play that game,” he replied, then lifted her to the counter.

He set his hands on the inside of her knees and slowly caressed upwards. As he did, he spread her thighs wide and sank to his knees. When he reached the apex, he draped her legs over his shoulders and tugged her forward until her butt rested right on the edge. The first swipe of his tongue over her pussy made her grit her teeth to hold in the scream. If she started screaming now she’d be hoarse by the time she came, and she knew from experience he’d keep her on the edge forever if he was enjoying her cries too much. She didn’t think she could take that after a year of celibacy.

He lifted his head. “Stay with me, baby.” His smile was slow and knowing. “No holding back.”

He bent back down, and his lips found her clit. He sucked it, applying just the right amount of teeth, and she moaned. It sounded impossibly loud to her, and she wondered what insanity had made her think she could control her reaction to him. As if to reward her vocalizing, he suckled harder, adding an extra bite of teeth and a finger thrusting into her pussy. She clamped around him, felt the shudders of an orgasm begin, and he moved his head, biting the inside of her thigh, the sharp pain reminding her who was in charge.

“Too soon,” he said.

She wanted to sob. How could it be too soon? That first time, a little while ago in his room, had been the first time in months and it wasn’t nearly enough to take the edge off.

He worked another finger inside her, then another, stretching her cunt to accommodate his girth. His fingers hooked to rub against her G-spot, and she arched against him, again biting back a scream. He laughed softly.

“What is it, baby? If you’re ready to come, all you have to do ask.”

He stopped stroking with his fingers, keeping them still and in place. She tried to move her hips, get the action going again, but he held her still. It was maddening—she was right on the edge.

“Oh God,” she moaned.

She rolled her head against the cabinet behind her. He wanted her to beg, and she was going to end up doing it eventually. Might as well stop fighting it. Her body was so tight with need it wouldn’t take much.

“What’s it going to be, Celeste?”

There was a little bite in his tone and a lot of enjoyment. He was enjoying taunting her, enjoying the control he had over her body and, unless she missed her guess, he thought of it as a small punishment for

thinking she was dead. His tongue trailed lazily up her inner thigh, explored the outside of her pussy with the same lazy disregard while avoiding her clit. She wanted him to make better use of it.

“Jason. Please. Let me come.”

“Hmm, maybe in a minute, baby.”

His fingers straightened away from her G-spot and began a slow gentle glide in and out of her. The fire that burned in her veins increased and when his teeth nibbled on her clit, she didn’t hold back the scream. She panted with the need to come.

“Jason, quit teasing and fuck me already,” she yelled.

He lurched to his feet, murmured, “I thought you’d never ask,” and claimed her mouth and pussy at the same time. A thrust of his tongue in her mouth and the stroke of his cock in her cunt were all it took, and she came apart. Her body shook with the force while her mind shattered. She was aware of him moving inside her, faster and harder, until he too cried out.

They stayed still for several minutes, spent and breathing hard. When he lifted his head and pushed her hair from her face, his finger lightly rubbed over the old scar.

“Dinner?” he asked.

She shrugged. “Sandwiches and stew. I was hungry.”

He stepped back and grinned, helping to set her on her feet and steady her. He bent and handed her her clothes.

“Almost like old times.” He kissed her on the forehead. “I’m going to grab some pants. Then we’ll eat.”

He strode from the room, leaving her breathless. She turned and stared at the stove. Yes, it was like old times. Jason leaving in the morning, and her having dinner ready when he returned. A little sex to heat things up first. Shaking her head, she searched the cabinets for plates and set two out, doling out the sandwiches before turning the search to bowls, which she set next to the plates on the small kitchen table. Then she hurried from the room to get cleaned up. She used the small half-bath off the living room and returned just before Jason reentered the kitchen.

She leaned her hip against the counter and studied him when he entered. She didn’t know what to make of his mood. He seemed calm, unaffected, as if she didn’t just have a mind blowing orgasm and had every right to do so in his kitchen. As if he expected her to be there, or she’d never left. If only she could remember how she’d ended up here.

“Are we eating?” he asked and arched an eyebrow when she shrugged instead of answering.

He reached for the handle of the pot and carried it to the table, while she skipped out of his path, watching. Silently, he ladled stew into two bowls and set the empty pan back on the stove before pulling out a chair.

She just stood and watched, wondering where the angry man from earlier was. Were they pretending the last year hadn't happened?

"Sit down and eat, baby. We'll talk about it after dinner."

No longer hungry, she sat and reluctantly picked up a spoon, swirled it around without lifting a bite. She refused to meet his gaze. The situation was too surreal to be believed. She was afraid if she blinked she'd wake up back home in her bed. Alone.

"So we're just going to pretend like we've been doing this every day for the last year? No big deal?"

He smiled and took a bite of the stew. "Yep."

"Why?"

Jason set the spoon down. She noticed he was almost finished anyway, as he leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms across his chest. In anyone else, it might have looked like a defensive posture. She only saw the bulk of his arms, the expanse of his shoulders. Jerking her gaze up, she met his and caught his smile before he hid it. She frowned. Being so transparent in her appreciation was only going to hurt in the end. He let her watch him for several seconds before he answered.

"It's a fantasy." He shrugged. "Do you have any idea how many times I dreamed you were with me? That you didn't die in that crash? It never occurred to me after I saw pictures of the wreckage that you could be alive. One of our kind wouldn't have survived. Hell, my father didn't. Why should you have?"

"I must have a stronger will to live than you imagined then," she whispered. She wanted him to understand where that will had come from. She lifted her chin and added in a louder voice that wobbled at the end, "I kept expecting you to come. Even weeks later."

He concealed the hurt that flared in his eyes so quickly she almost missed it, and she regretted her words. Nothing could change the past. There was no point in dwelling on it, hammering it home over and over again. Even if he were human, he would be dominant and protective. His nature, his character wouldn't allow someone he cared for to suffer without aid or friendship at the least.

The question was, was there a future for them? And if so, what would it be? After Jason filled his family in on her family's deceit they would never accept her, and hers had never accepted him. She wanted to curl into a ball and cry, wanted to shove the returning memories into a dark hole where they couldn't hurt her. She'd loved Jason, been happy and excited at the possibility of a future with him. Then there'd been nothing but pain, physical and emotional. She couldn't go back to that, but she couldn't see a way around it. After the year of lies, she didn't believe he could want her for anything other than sex anyway and that wasn't enough. Not for her.

He stood and circled the table, pulling her out of the chair.

"You're overthinking things."

"No. I don't think I am." Lifting her hand, she caressed his face, ran her thumb lightly up and down his cheekbone. "I'm sorry. I should have realized."

His hands on her shoulders, he shook her a little.

“You will not blame yourself for something Michael did, Celeste,” he ordered.

She nodded her head in agreement but felt tears fill her eyes. She couldn’t believe she was so emotional. She seemed to be zinging all over the place. Maybe it was the way he’d come in and taken her in the kitchen. So familiar, so like old times.

He lifted her and carried her down the hall, had her stripped in one minute and screaming with desire in the next. Her last thought before she succumbed to the lure of sleep was she could never go back.

Chapter Four

Derek hunkered down in his truck. He was on a road that looked unused as near as he dared to get to the cabin where Jason had taken Celeste. It was time for a little recon. He'd have to be cautious to avoid Jason's detection. When a lull came in the storm, he jumped out, stripped and shifted. Euphoria rushed through him—the game was on.

The wolf wanted to run, to hunt down its prey. Its instincts were primitive and bloody, and Derek had to fight with his other half for control. As much as the idea of ripping out the throats of his victims appealed, he knew the cat would never give in easily. Derek grinned. No, the cat would make one hell of an opponent. He'd make Derek work for victory. The wolf growled its willingness and lifted its muzzle. Derek barely restrained the howl of challenge welling in its throat and set off at an easy lope through the underbrush.

He studied the ground while keeping his nose alert for Jason. The last thing he wanted was to get caught before he had a chance to plan. The terrain had promise. It was marshy, the ground vegetation not as thick as it had been before the last hurricane blew through but more than enough to hide a couple of bodies. There was a sudden splash to his left, and he jerked his head around in time to see an alligator swimming away in the pond he skirted. If the wolf could have arched its eyebrows, it would have. Could this set-up get more perfect? Ready-made body disposal. He could use a gator back home.

He started to catch scents of the wereleopard the closer he got to Jason's cabin, so he slowed his approach. It didn't smell fresh, as if he had been here, but was now gone...out prowling the grounds. Derek's relief was immediate. He'd come too close to getting caught on one of his earlier forays.

Derek could see a clearing up ahead through the trees and crouched low to the ground, taking his time to inch forward, careful to stay upwind and as quiet as he could manage. The wind aided him. While there was currently a break in the rain, the wind never seemed to slow. In fact, it seemed to be picking up.

He reached the line of trees at the front of the house and looked around for a hiding place. He found a small depression under the exposed roots of a cypress tree and worked his way under it, twisting and contorting his body until he found a comfortable position. He had a good view of the house but they wouldn't be able to see him, or smell him as long as the wind direction didn't change. It was foolish to get this close, but he'd always liked living on the edge. Making an enemy of the wereleopard was definitely one way to do that.

Jason's scent was strong here, and he took a good look at his surroundings, noting the long scratch marks on the trees next to him. Did the cat mark its territory or was it simply to sharpen its claws? Derek couldn't ignore the unease that thought invoked. His plan to ruin Michael had come too far to blow it all to hell by getting himself killed here. But he couldn't let Celeste live after what she'd seen and now that Jason was involved, he had to die too. That was a cryin' shame. Jason had been useful and rash, not asking the questions he should have, not behaving in the calculated manner he did with his other business ventures. When Derek approached him, the wereleopard had only been concerned with revenge.

The wolf snarled with contempt and disdain. While it understood the need for vengeance, the lengths males would go to over women were a mystery to it. Women were for sex, for breeding. Too many of them didn't know their place in the natural order. They had been allowed too much freedom under Michael's rule. No doubt due to Michael's infatuation with his human mate. Things were going to change when Derek took over.

His rage rose again over the disruption of his plans. He'd wanted Jason to take the land from Michael. Losing such prime real estate would put the Alpha in a position to be challenged. Throw in the recent spurt of murders of women connected to the clan, and he was practically begging to be challenged. Derek had waited years for this time to come. His claws dug into the mud, a low growl welling up from his throat. Everything would have gone perfectly if Celeste hadn't found out Jason didn't know she was alive. Hadn't seen him kill the blonde woman.

He'd been able to piece together some of what happened. Rumors flew quickly in the clan. Celeste had been called home and hadn't been told her mate thought she was dead. Derek had stumbled on that knowledge accidentally a year ago and kept it to himself, saved for some time in the future when he might be able to use it. And it had worked, making it possible to maneuver both Jason and Michael into the land deal. No one seemed to know why Celeste was given that information after so long, and he'd kept his speculations to himself. He still couldn't believe Michael told her. Derek had badly miscalculated, certain the werewolf would stand by and watch the land go before he confessed his deceit to his only daughter.

A new scent came to him on the wind, and he lifted his muzzle to take it in. Celeste, mixed with Jason and the heady, musky smell of sex. He growled. She'd have to pay for that. It hadn't taken her long to forget him, had it? Derek had never bedded her. He wanted to. Wanted to possess her, own her, but he'd held back waiting for the right time. Forcing Michael to watch his rough treatment of her after he was removed as Alpha and unable to come to his daughter's aid would only add to the other wolf's humiliation. Derek had been looking forward to that humiliation, dreaming of it for years. All those plans were now shot to hell. He had to salvage whatever he could.

Jason and Celeste had to die. Here. Tonight. No one would be able to pin the murders on him, and his little side hobby would return to be a more secret, safer pastime. In a few days he'd approach one of Jason's brothers about buying the land from them. He would at least still be able to challenge Michael,

demoralize and ruin him. Then maybe he could finally put his father's spirit to rest. But for now, he had to figure out how to take out Jason.

He'd seen the wereleopard fight once, and he was formidable. In a fair contest, Derek knew he couldn't take him. Good thing he didn't care about fighting fair. He kept a hunting rifle in his truck, the better to fit in with his human yokel neighbors. Maybe he'd use it to kill Jason, quick and easy, then he could take his time with Celeste. He couldn't let her faithlessness slide with no punishment. He wished he could keep her alive a little while, take her home and use her the way he used other women, but he doubted even the trauma of seeing her mate murdered would keep her in line for long. No, eventually she'd rebel, and he'd have to kill her anyway. Too risky. It would be much easier to dispose of the bodies here.

The rain started up again, and he wiggled his way up from under the shelter of the tree. He stared at the house a minute, allowing his excitement to rise. It would all be over soon. Turning, he let the wolf loose and ran back to the truck. It was time to put his plan into action.

When he was sure she was asleep, Jason rolled out of bed. He stood and watched her a few minutes, grinning like a fool. A woman so well pleased she passed out was a beautiful thing.

My woman.

Leaning over, he pushed a strand of hair out of her face and brushed a kiss over her lips. Then he walked out to his truck.

The only way to keep her safe was to get information. Celeste was so upset over dealing with her family's betrayal that he was afraid to push her for the reason for her sudden appearance. But the storm was roaring closer to land, and he needed answers quick. The phone in the house was dead. He hoped to God the satellite phone would still work.

He retrieved it from the glove box of his truck, ran back inside through the pouring rain and turned the phone on. It had a dial tone. He exhaled a gusty sigh of relief he hadn't been aware he was holding and punched in Michael's number. Tomas, the brother he remembered as Celeste's favorite, answered and quickly handed the phone off to his father.

"Is Celeste with you?" he demanded gruffly. Did he actually think Jason was going to let him control the conversation? He snorted. Not in this lifetime.

"Now that was a stupid question," he drawled. "The smart question is why you sent her to me after all this time and in a fucking hurricane."

"She didn't tell you? It's about the land, of course—getting an extension on the balloon payment. Why else would I send her?" Michael's tone was all arrogant bravado and all Alpha. It made Jason's teeth itch. The werewolf needed Jason's help but still couldn't bring himself to tone down the attitude. Like most of the old school werewolf leaders, Michael was autocratic. Abrasive. Was certain he knew what was best for everyone. Look what he'd done to Celeste.

Fury rolled through Jason at Michael for sending her into danger during a hurricane, and at Celeste for agreeing to it—for coming to him over her precious land. Jason's thoughts bounced back and forth, and he stood poised on the balls of his feet, ready to pounce at an enemy he couldn't see before reason started to return. Celeste could not have changed so much. Whatever had sent her running to Florida—to him—it wasn't the land. Michael's explanation didn't fit with the evidence of her attack, her amnesia, but he was certain Michael knew a hell of a lot more than he was saying.

"Why else would you send her? That's a very good question, isn't it?" He let the silence drag a moment. "Because she didn't get to me before someone attacked her, and now she doesn't remember anything that's happened over the past twenty-four hours or so."

He heard a muffled gasp in the background on Michael's end and knew her mother was listening in. He felt a brief pang of sympathy for her and wondered what the fuck Michael was up to.

"She's fine by the way," he said sarcastically when the other man didn't respond. "I take care of my own. And let's get that clear right from the start, Michael. She's *mine*. You won't take her from me again."

Michael huffed, and Jason could imagine his grip on the phone turning white knuckled. He grinned. He could really learn to love one-upping Michael.

"So why don't you tell me what's really going on? You sent her here. Why? To protect her or because you need help? And don't give me some bull about the land."

Michael's growl turned into a groan, and Jason muttered, "Shit."

"We could have easily made that payment." Michael sighed. "Except things kept going wrong. Broken equipment, late deliveries, personnel problems."

"Sabotage?"

Michael's laugh was short and harsh. "We didn't think so at first, but then Celeste got close to someone who helped her recover. Emotionally started to rebound, I mean, and he—Derek—started offering to help us out of the mess. With a hefty percentage of the business going to him, of course. Even that didn't make me really suspicious. Not at first."

Jason gripped the phone so hard the plastic casing cracked in his hand. Derek was the mysterious boyfriend? Like hell that was just a coincidence.

"It was the women," Michael said.

What the fuck was he going on about now?

"Come again?"

"A suspicious number of women have gone missing recently. There wasn't any kind of pattern, no connections between them—except they were all humans from this area."

"Until?"

"The last three have all been connected to my family in some way."

Fuck, and Celeste had almost been the fourth. How close had it been? How had she escaped? He remembered the truck that had almost run him off the road at the beach.

“Do you know anyone who drives a white F150?”

He heard movement in the hallway and turned to meet Celeste’s gaze. She was pale and shaking, and he immediately stepped toward her. She and Michael answered his question at the same time, Michael by swearing and Celeste with a shiver.

“Derek,” she whispered. “It’s Derek’s truck. I saw him kill someone.”

Jason set the phone on an end table and pulled her into his arms.

“It’s okay, baby. You’re safe here.”

She pressed her head against his chest and shook it.

“I’m not. He’ll keep coming. He’s relentless in everything else he does, and what choice does he have now?”

Jason’s chest rumbled in response. “Let him come. I protect my own. You have to trust me to take care of you, Celeste.”

She leaned back, tilting her head to smile up at him.

“For some crazy reason I do.”

They heard yelling through the phone receiver, Michael trying to get his attention. Releasing her, he stretched an arm out and picked the phone up. *My dad?* she mouthed. He smiled in response.

“What else, Michael? I can see him wanting to cover up what he’s doing, but why target women important to your family? Why the business arrangement?”

Wind gusted against the house, banging debris against an outside wall, and Michael’s answer was garbled. The phone lost its signal before Jason could ask him to repeat himself. Frustrated, he turned it off and tossed it to the couch where it fell between the back and a cushion.

“Fuck,” Jason muttered.

Celeste had backed away and huddled in the entry to the hallway, instinctively going for the interior walls when the wind picked up. She bit her lower lip and tried to hurry her mind through the last few minutes’ revelations. First, there was the dream recounting her family’s deceit and Derek killing the blonde woman, and now what little she’d overheard of the phone conversation.

“What women?” she finally asked.

She felt a sense of urgency, knew they needed to work it all out quickly. Celeste felt watched, stalked. Goose bumps broke out across her arms, and the back of her neck tingled. They couldn’t hear much over the wind and rain, but she knew Derek was out there somewhere. Watching. Waiting.

Jason didn’t answer right away. With one hand on his hip, he bent his head forward and massaged the back of his neck with the other hand. He retrieved the phone and put it in the hall closet. When he returned his gaze to her, there was a feral gleam in his eyes.

“You *were* involved with Derek?”

She almost smiled at his emphasis on the past tense and nodded. His expression hardened, and he approached her slowly with the stealth of a big cat. A predatory, pissed-off cat. Her heart skipped a beat. She glanced down the hall behind her and considered making a run for the bedroom.

“I wouldn’t if I were you.”

“Wouldn’t what?” she whispered.

“Run.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it.”

Like hell she wouldn’t. He was within arm’s reach when she took a nervous step back. It was reflex more than desire to get away, but if he realized that he didn’t care.

Jason pounced before she could retreat any farther, taking them both to the floor with a thud. His hand swept under her head, protecting her from the fall as well as pinning her under him. He ground his hips against her belly, and she opened her legs to accommodate him, groaning when he readjusted himself and his erection pressed against her pussy.

He shoved her shirt up above her breasts and took one nipple into his mouth while his hand fisted in her hair and tugged so she arched her back, pushing her chest up to him. Both stung a little more than was good, coming down more on the pain side of her pain/pleasure comfort zone than pleasure. She yelped a protest, Jason released the pressure on her hair, his teeth abandoned her breast to be replaced by soft kisses, gentle licks. When he lifted his head and met her gaze, she trailed her fingers down the side of his face.

“It was always you. Only you.”

“Damn right,” he growled. “And it’ll always be me.”

The door banged open, and Celeste’s alarm spiked. She craned her head, trying to see around Jason’s body, to see what was coming. Storm or monster?

Derek strolled in, a rifle propped on his shoulder and an insane look in his eye that made her shudder in terror.

“Well, isn’t this sweet. Lovers reunited. Too bad for you, it’ll be so short lived.”

Jason jerked the shirt down over her chest and leapt to his feet, dragging her with him and shoving her behind him.

“Derek,” he greeted him coldly. “What brings you to the neighborhood?”

“Just a quick visit.” Derek looked at her and sneered. “I’m so disappointed in your lack of fidelity, sweetheart.” He returned his gaze to Jason. “My girl here is a liability. I was delayed in coming after her. Small matter of disposing of another body, you understand. Come to think of it, you’re a liability too.”

Jason growled low in his throat, and she clutched his wrist, afraid he’d attack and get himself shot.

“She’s not yours. Never was and never will be.”

Derek chuckled. “No, I’ll give you that—she really wasn’t. But she made good bait, didn’t she?”

She tried to peer around Jason, to see Derek, this man she'd thought she knew and was obviously clueless about, but Jason held her immobile behind him, his strength easily overpowering hers.

"Let's see her, Jason. I want to watch her face when I kill you. Then she and I have some unfinished business to tend to."

She gritted her teeth against the scream welling inside her, the anger building in her. He was crazy. Insane. Certifiable. She wasn't ready to die, yet, especially now that she'd found Jason again.

"She's just fine where she is," Jason answered.

"No, I don't think so. Come out, come out, Celeste. Or I'll just shoot your mate while he tries to guard you. Fair trade don't you think?"

His voice had a singsong, loony quality to it and, knowing he meant what he said, she wrenched free from Jason's grip and stepped into the living room where she could at least see what was going on.

"Ah, there you are, love."

She sensed more than saw Jason bristle at the endearment. Arching an eyebrow she addressed Derek, hanging on to her cool by a thread.

"I never was your love though, was I?"

His laugh was more a cackle, and it grated on her nerves, making them raw and alert. How could they get out of here alive? She was determined to live. Watching Jason in her peripheral vision, she was certain he felt the same way.

An eerie quiet descended outside. She was so used to wind screaming and rain pelting that it threw her for a loop. *What the hell?* The sudden calm was unnerving. She looked at Jason, and he was looking up.

"We're in the eye," he said.

In the eye of the storm? That couldn't be good, even if it was a *small* hurricane. The highest winds were on the back side of a hurricane. If it passed directly over them, they'd get the worst of it, regardless of the psychopath in the living room with a gun. And here she'd thought her luck might be changing. Not.

Jason met her gaze, then reached out and took her hand, squeezing it gently. There was a hard look on his face when he turned back to Derek, and she hoped it meant he had a plan to get them out of this in one piece. Releasing her hand, he shrugged, somehow combining it with a smooth step closer to Derek that the other man didn't seem to notice.

"If you're going to kill us, we might as well know why."

"Why not? Celeste may not even know the story. Michael's always spent too much energy protecting his human daughter." Derek's grin was pure malice and the way he sneered *human* made her skin crawl.

"Once upon a time, there was an Alpha who was challenged by his Beta, and the Beta killed him." He frowned theatrically. "Sound familiar yet, Celeste?"

"My father. Your father." She shrugged and tried to look nonchalant. She hadn't had a clue he held a grudge about that. No one had. "That was what? Fifteen years ago? Isn't that old news?"

“Old news.” He sneered. “For y’all maybe. Michael killed my father and stole my clan. I’ve watched and worked and waited for years to get it back. Destroying his family in the process is just an added bonus.”

“Well, I don’t have a problem with that on general principal you understand,” Jason drawled, and she glared at him. This was helping? “But Celeste is my family, not Michael’s, so she’s hardly a target for your revenge.”

Derek shook his head in mock sorrow. “I might have let her go, but she saw something she shouldn’t have. It’s better if she dies here really. It’ll be quick, Jason. And it’ll destroy Michael. One more woman he’s responsible for that he couldn’t protect.”

“About the women.” Jason stood calmly with his arms crossed over his chest as if it was perfectly normal to stand in his living room in the middle of a hurricane and hold a conversation with a madman, as if it was simply curiosity that made him inquire. “I get going after his business. I was ready to take the land. But how do the women fit into the plan?”

“Ah, you spoke to Michael. He told you about the women.” Derek’s eyes were wild and he gave her a smile she could only describe as creepy. She wished Jason would hurry the hell up and get them out of this. She tried not to watch as he took another step toward Derek, tried not to give the movement away. Derek waved a dismissive hand in the air. “They were only human. Well, except the first one.”

She sucked in a deep breath as realization hit her. She remembered the whispered conversations.

“Michael challenged your father because he thought Darren killed his youngest sister. But it was you, wasn’t it?”

Derek grinned at her. It made her skin crawl, and she tried to edge closer to Jason, but he’d managed to put too much distance between them.

“So you do remember. Irresponsible of me to kill one of our kind though. I didn’t make that mistake again.”

“So you target human women,” Jason said, admiration in his voice, part of side-up-to-the-crazed-killer-to-take-him-out act. She hoped like hell he knew what he was doing.

“I knew you would understand, Jason.”

“Oh, I get it all right.”

The wind and rain picked up again outside, and Jason lunged at Derek. Before he could take aim, the rifle flew from Derek’s hands and skittered across the floor. She grabbed it as they fell in a tangle. Both men lurched apart and shifted as the eye passed over the house and the wind built to a roar. It was as loud as the tornado that ripped through her neighborhood a few months ago, and she tried to get a look out the window. She couldn’t see anything but knew tornado or not that much wind was very dangerous. They needed to find shelter *fast*.

A growl made the hair on the back of her neck stand on end, and she spun her attention back to Jason and Derek, both now in their animal forms. They circled each other, the gray wolf huge and growling, the black leopard quiet and stealthy. His complete focus on Derek was chilling. She got the impression the wolf was trying to induce fear and found it laughable—he wasn't nearly as scary as Jason.

She lifted the rifle to her shoulder and found Derek in the sights, but jerked her finger away from the trigger when he leapt at Jason. Jason twisted out of the way with feline grace, a smooth efficient movement. But he wasn't quick enough, and she held her breath when she saw blood dripping down his side as they separated.

The blood agitated the wolf. He snarled, the sides of his lips peeling back to reveal rows of sharp teeth. Jason stayed between them, and she was afraid to take a shot, afraid with the way her hands were shaking she'd miss her target. Before she could steady herself again a burst of wind hit the roof, pulling back one corner that flew away into the storm. She eyed what was left warily. It didn't look like it would take much to bring the rest down on top of them.

"Hurry, Jason," she muttered, knowing she shouldn't distract him but afraid they were out of time.

The wolf and leopard circled each other again, each taking swipes at the other and missing. She got the impression they were testing each other, their respective reach, speed and strength, and she grew more frustrated. Neither ever stopped moving, and her hands didn't stop shaking. Another huge gust of wind swept through and, amid the constant roar of the rain, there was a loud boom somewhere outside. Everyone's reaction to the sound was different. She jumped. Derek froze. And Jason attacked.

He leapt across the space between them and clamped down on the wolf's neck, hitting his jugular. Flesh tore, blood spurted and the leopard straightened, giving Derek a vicious shake before dropping him. Jason didn't waste any time over the body but returned to Celeste's side. She dropped the rifle, and he lifted his muzzle, gripping her wrist and dragging her down the hall to the bathroom where he pushed her into the tub. He shifted and climbed in with her, wrapping his arms around her and protecting her with his body.

She didn't have a chance to wonder what had happened to Derek. The wind hit the roof, peeling the rest of it and the hall wall off. She watched from under Jason's shoulder as the side of the house where Derek's body lay was blown away, Derek along with it. Even if by some miracle he'd survived the damage to his neck, not even a werewolf could survive getting swept away in hurricane force winds. That part of the nightmare was over at least.

The storm raged for several more hours. After the worst passed, Jason had gone out to his truck and found a blue tarp for them to huddle under. They moved into the bedroom. The ceiling was gone but at least they weren't cramped in a tub. The tarp helped keep most of the wind and rain off, but they were still soaked through by the time morning dawned. The sun came out by late morning, and they left the ruin of the house to stand in the ruin of the yard.

She was amazed to see the truck still in place and all in one piece. Even more shocking was the calm, pretty day in the midst of so much destruction. She stood in her bare feet on what was left of the front porch and tried to take it in. It was overwhelming. How could he live in such a place? How would she? Assuming of course, he was serious about them being together. She didn't have the guts to bring that up yet.

"I thought category ones weren't that bad," she said instead, sticking to a safe topic.

"They aren't," he answered. "When it changed course yesterday it stayed on open water longer, warmer water. It made it a stronger storm. It hit land as a cat three."

She arched an eyebrow. How did he know that?

"I got the radio to work for a few minutes this morning while you were asleep."

"I see. Now what?" she asked.

Standing next to her, he took her hand and lifted it to his lips, pressing a soft kiss against her palm. "Now you go home while I clean up the mess."

She jerked free. So much for working things out.

"Tomas is on his way now. I spoke to him this morning. He was already on his way down."

He'd been on the phone for hours before the sun came up, when the storm had begun to abate. She hadn't had any idea he was making arrangements to send her away, though, and tried to hide how deeply it cut. It had been a nice fantasy, but it was over now, and she wasn't going to make it worse by crying or screaming or begging. She bit her lip against the urge to do just that and turned her back on him.

"Hey." His footfalls were heavy as he followed her, and she tensed when his hands landed on her shoulders, pulling her back against him. "It's just for a couple of weeks, sweetheart."

"Right," she whispered, fighting the moisture gathering in her eyes. Her fingers twisted together, and she looked down as a tear escaped and landed on the ruby glittering on her hand. Her voice broke. "Just a couple of weeks."

"Celeste." He growled and spun her around. "You can't stay here right now. There's no power or water or, hell, even a house."

"Of course."

No there were none of those things. But there was Jason, and she'd been under the foolish assumption he wasn't letting her go again. She clenched her jaw and ignored the ache in her chest. She'd survive—she always had. Inside the satellite phone rang, and he left her to answer it. She heard him return, but didn't turn to face him.

"Tomas is here. He's waiting for us at the gate."

"Fine," she said, moving toward the truck, but before she reached the door an eagle flew into the clearing, huge and majestic. It shifted into a tall, gorgeous woman with short, spiky white hair. She inclined her head slightly at Celeste and Jason stepped in front of her, blocking her view of the woman.

She had to be a Messenger. Celeste knew a few of them—she grew up in werewolf land and the birds territory was right smack in the middle—but she didn't know this one.

"I'm Ajax Petros," the woman said. Frowning, Celeste poked Jason in the back until he let her step out. Why was the Messenger Commander coming to Jason? He didn't respond to her, just waited her out in silence. The woman smiled just a little and Celeste caught a flash of amusement cross her face. Celeste got the impression, and she'd heard enough over the years, to know Ajax Petros was not a woman who could be intimidated. The birds she knew spoke of the eagle with a reverence reserved only for God.

"Do you have a message?" Celeste asked, curiosity getting the better of her.

Ajax turned that measuring glance on *her*. Celeste had to force herself to be still, to be calm. To stare the other woman down. If she'd learned one thing after the crash it was that she was a hell of a lot stronger than she'd ever given herself credit for. Or anyone else for that matter. She lifted her chin and met the wereeagle's gaze. Ajax grinned.

"Spine. Good." Then she turned to Jason. "I have a message for the Leonidas brothers from Tonina Guerra."

She didn't know the name, but Jason did. His reaction was subtle but immediate. He gently nudged her behind him, his muscles tensing as if to leap forward and grab the Messenger by throat. It alarmed her and she stroked his back, murmured soft encouragement and the tension eased a little from his body. Messengers were neutral. Messengers were off limits.

"What's the message?" he asked.

"She apologizes for the assassination attempt on your brother's mate and hopes you understand she knew nothing of it."

Jason nodded.

"She also thought you'd like to know who paid her mate for it," Ajax continued, pausing for effect.

Jason shrugged, but the bond between them pulsed. She knew he was desperate to know who had paid for the attack on his sister-in-law, who she'd discovered through the long night was her cousin, Lyra, mated to his younger brother, Zander. "Of course."

Her gaze shifted to Celeste, softened. It was clear the woman knew more about Celeste than she knew about her.

"A werewolf named Derek. She doesn't know his last name."

Celeste was numb with shock. She couldn't imagine why Derek would want to kill her cousin, but she was no longer surprised. Not by anything. The bird was waiting expectantly and Jason finally nodded.

"We won't hold her mate's actions against her."

Ajax nodded. "I'll let her know." And with those words she shifted back to her bird form and took flight. Celeste held her breath until the bald eagle was gone from sight.

Jason didn't move, didn't look at her. She knew he was struggling with his leopard side for dominance and waited him out.

"How many Dereks are there?" he asked.

She shook her head. "I have no idea. But...it has to be him. Why, Jason? Me, I can understand, but why would he go after Lyra? She ran away from the clan years ago."

"I don't know, baby, but we'll find out." He finally hugged her, pulled her close.

"How?" she whispered.

"Nico. I'll call Nico. This is the kind of thing he does."

But he was estranged from his brothers. They hadn't spoken of it, but she knew. He squeezed her shoulders.

"Don't worry, this is family. And speaking of family. Tomas is waiting for us."

That's right, he was pushing her out of his life. Everything else seemed to pale in comparison. There was no point in delaying, so she got in the truck, quietly latching the seatbelt. The quick drive was made in an uncomfortable silence. She shuddered when they passed the empty beach lot and wondered where her car was, but the dismay was wiped away when they reached the entrance of the park a few minutes later and she saw Tomas waiting, leaning against the hood of his car. She reached for the door handle before they'd even come to a complete stop and launched herself from the cab. She didn't make the gate before Jason stopped her, dragging her into his arms with a crushing kiss.

Sighing into him, she gripped his shirt in her fists and tried to take it over, tried to soften it. She'd miss him. She'd recover, but it would be hard and as goodbye kisses went, this was not what she had in mind. He didn't let her have control though. His lips were bruising, his tongue demanding. If his intent was possession it was a rousing success. He let her go abruptly, and she staggered back, one hand coming up to cover her mouth as if she could hold the feel of him there.

"Two weeks, Celeste," he said, breathing hard.

"I understand." She said it softly, sadly. She understood she wouldn't see him again. Why couldn't he just say goodbye? He pulled her back into his arms, and this time the kiss was easy and slow. Lifting his head, he picked her up and put her down on the other side of the gate.

"You don't understand shit. This is not an end."

He met Tomas's gaze.

"Take care of my mate, wolf."

Then he spun around and strode back to the truck. She watched until he was out of sight and jumped when Tomas spoke.

"You look like hell, babe. What happened here? All Jason said was Derek is dead and y'all made it through the storm."

Sighing, she walked to the car and got in. He joined her and cranked the engine before she answered.

“It’s a long story.”

He grinned. “We have a long drive.”

“Atlanta’s not that far.”

Would the drive fly by or drag? And how long would it take to slip back into her calm, ordered life?

Tomas snorted. “I don’t think so. I’m taking you *home*.”

She glared at him. She wasn’t ready to face Michael yet, didn’t trust herself not to lose it when she saw him.

“Hey, Jason insisted. Said something about it being the last time we’d get to see you in a good long time. He’s seriously pissed at us.”

“I don’t blame him. I’m seriously pissed at y’all.” She sighed. “But you don’t have to worry about it. I doubt any of us will be seeing him again.”

He frowned at her. “You’re crazy if you believe that.”

She just shrugged and stared out the window. Maybe he would come but so much had happened. Too many lies, too much hurt. She wouldn’t blame him for disappearing. The ring was heavy on her finger, and she considered taking it off but couldn’t quite make herself do it. She’d cling to the fantasy for just a while longer.

It was a long drive, and the last couple of days had taken their toll, finally catching up to her. She slept most of the way, jerking awake when the hum of the car was silenced. She blinked at the front of her parents’ house, not sure she wanted to enter. It was the lure of a hot shower that got her moving in that direction.

The whole family was waiting when she walked in, but she just shook her head when one of her brothers opened his mouth to speak.

“Not now,” she said and went to her old room.

Jason watched her leave, watched until the car disappeared around a curve in the road, and still stood rooted in place. She thought he was letting her go and nothing other than his coming for her would convince her otherwise. Fine. He’d just work double-time. But first...

First he had to deal with family issues. The fact that the ocelot who’d tried to kill his sister-in-law, his baby brother’s mate and *his* mate’s cousin, was hired by Derek complicated the shit out of things. Maybe it was nothing more than Derek trying to weaken Michael’s position in the clan. Or maybe his brother Nico was right. Maybe something was seriously off in the shifter world and it started with the crash that was supposed to have taken the life not only of his mate, but also his father. The leopard clan leader.

He pulled out his cell phone as he turned to the truck, cranked it as he scrolled to the recorded address book. Pushed *send* as he put it in drive. Nico answered on the first ring.

“Jason. Make it through the storm okay?”

“Fine. Celeste is alive.”

There was a brief pause. “If Celeste is...”

Nico didn’t have to say anything more. If Celeste was alive, Hector’s, their father, chances had just improved. Jason filled Nico in on the bird visit and message, then hung up and got to work. He had a mate to claim.

The next week passed slowly. Eventually she spoke to everyone, listened to their apologies and justifications. Told her father about the message from the werebird. But Celeste wasn’t sure if she’d ever be able to really forgive them, and an uneasy kind of peace fell over the household. She prowled the house in silence, going stir crazy and ready to bolt at any minute. Jason didn’t call—a fact she was positive of since she jumped every time the phone rang and refused to let anyone else answer it.

The more time passed, the angrier she became. He really was willing to let her go a second time. Fine. But she’d be damned if he got away unscathed. He’d made her love him again, had reawakened her body and made her hope. Damned if he was going to do that and just walk away.

She began to plot her escape. She couldn’t get beyond the porches without someone following her, and no one was willing to hand over their car keys even if she could. Of course they had to sleep sometime, and she decided she wasn’t above liberating a car from one of them in the middle of the night. She considered it small repayment for the lies they’d fed her. The best part by far though was planning what she would say to Jason. She was torn up with hurt and anger, and she wanted, needed, him to feel as badly as she did.

It was a warm breezy summer day, and she’d put on what she often joked was her flower child outfit, a long flowing skirt and tank top. She was lying in her favorite place, in the hammock on the back porch, in the middle of planning her tirade when she heard a vehicle pull into the drive. Pushing her foot against the porch rail, she set the hammock lightly swaying and idly wondered who the new arrival was. Another clan member coming to gawk under the guise of worry for her no doubt. She closed her eyes and pretended to sleep as footsteps came down the back hall. She just wasn’t up to being the center of attention today.

The door creaked. She ignored it but jerked when a light stroke glided down her jaw to her neck. Of all the presumptuous nerve. Her eyes flew wide open, and she opened her mouth to give whoever it was a piece of her mind, but the words froze in her throat.

Jason loomed over her in tight jeans and a tighter shirt. Her mouth watered at the sight, and her brain finally reengaged. She was beyond mad at him. She swung out of the hammock and shoved past him. When she felt as if she had enough distance, she spun around.

“What are you doing here?”

He arched an eyebrow. “Not quite the reception I had in mind.”

She narrowed her eyes. “You sent me away, remember?”

“And I told you it would only be for a couple of weeks. I didn’t have anywhere for you to stay.”

She huffed. “Oh, please. I made it through a hurricane and a madman. I don’t think the lack of four walls and roof was that big a deal in retrospect.”

His eyes gleamed at the sarcasm, and he took a step toward her. She retreated with one of her own, but not out of fear. She felt gloriously alive for the first time in days.

“Well, I did. Next time you can stay and sleep in the bed of the truck with me. I’m sure we can find a better use for your smart mouth there.”

She gasped, glaring at him and ignoring the tingle of lust that strummed through her at the crude suggestion. He rubbed a hand over his face and sighed.

“I’m sorry. That was rude and uncalled for.”

The apology surprised her, and she nodded agreement.

“Yeah, it was.”

He grinned. “Not that the idea doesn’t have appeal, you understand.”

Her body was keyed up, ready. Desperate. But she wanted to vent her anger and frustration before giving into the craving for him. She smiled sweetly. “Not in this lifetime.”

Laughing, he shook his head. “I can see that. Why are you so pissed? I told you I’d come, and I’m here. A week early.”

“I...”

She let the answer trail off into nothing. Why was she pissed? She hadn’t believed he still wanted her and had spent a week getting good and angry over that, but he was here now. He knew when he sent her off she believed that, too, and didn’t try to contact her during the last week to convince her otherwise.

“You could have called,” she grumbled.

He grunted. “I would have if I hadn’t been working twenty hours a day. So I could bring you home sooner.”

When he put it that way, she felt a little bitchy. Not too much though. Surely he could have managed a phone call somewhere.

“I don’t think this is really anger here,” he said gesturing between the two of them. “I think it’s fear.”

“Fear? No way.”

He smiled and sauntered closer to her, smoothly, easily as if he knew she’d run at any minute. He cupped her face in his palms and looked into her eyes. She felt as if he could see into her soul, see all of her deepest secrets, and she realized why he thought her anger was born of fear. *He may even be right.* She saw it all reflected in his gaze.

“I’m scared, too, baby. I lost you a year ago, and I’m terrified of going through that again.” He kissed her, a quick featherlike brush against her lips. “But I love you, and we’re going to make this work. Hell, I’ll even learn to live with your family.”

Cheers erupted from the open doorway behind them. They turned to look, and Celeste wished she could sink into the floor. The whole family crowded in the small space.

Michael grinned at Jason and offered him a jaunty salute. “We heard that, and we’ll be holding you to it.”

Jason groaned and dropped his forehead to rest on top of hers. “Great. What have I done?” he complained.

Laughter bubbled from her throat, and she shook her head in mock sadness.

“You invited a wolf—no a family of wolves—into your home. So much for that old leopard-wolf rivalry, eh? ”

He straightened, turning serious. “They won’t visit unless you’re there.”

“Guess you’ll have to get used to them then, huh?”

He released a gusty sigh. “You didn’t have to make me sweat so long.”

She shrugged. “You made me sweat for a week.”

“And she made us suffer for it.”

The family was still gathered in the doorway, Tomas leaning on the frame and grinning at her. She made a shooing motion with her hands.

“Go. Away.”

Reluctantly, everyone backed away but Michael.

“You’ll take care of her,” he said, more demand than question.

“Of course I will.”

Michael nodded curtly. “See that you do.” Then he disappeared into the house with the others, pulling the door shut behind him.

Jason tugged her back to the hammock and lay down, pulling her with him. She shoved a foot against the ground to get them swinging and stared out into the yard. This was one of her favorite pastimes for lazy summer days, though usually she had a book.

“Nice skirt.”

He reached down to her ankle and slowly slid his hand up her leg under the skirt. Her breath quickened then stopped altogether when he reached her pussy.

“No underwear?” he whispered in her ear, his breath tickling her, arousing her. He pushed his cock against her ass. She avoided the question as his fingers began to stroke her.

“I need a hammock in Florida.”

He nuzzled her neck and murmured. “I’ll get you a dozen.”

He rubbed her clit and pushed one finger slowly inside her. She clutched around it, moving her hips back, grinding against the hard body behind her.

“Good.”

He chuckled. "Which part? This part?" He moved a second finger inside her, set up a steady in and out rhythm, and gave her clit the lightest pinch. She trembled and bit her lip, afraid she'd cry out. Right on the edge of coming.

"My whole family is inside, Jason."

"Hmm. I don't care." He nibbled on her neck. "I always was the bad boy in my family, you know."

She grew slicker, hotter when she felt his teeth scrape over her pulse. She was so close, but she didn't want to come like this. She needed him inside her, filling her. Unable to turn around, she reached one hand behind her and rubbed it over the hard bulge in his jeans. He groaned.

"Playing with fire again," he said.

She grinned, fought down a giggle. Suddenly, sex in broad daylight on her parents' back porch sounded pretty damned good. She wondered if they dared get naked? As if he could read her mind, he moved her hand and unsnapped his jeans. The zipper sounded impossibly loud in the quiet afternoon, and he lowered it so slowly she'd thought she'd go mad. Then she felt him free, pressed up against her ass. He bit down on her neck, a little hard, an attention getter.

"Last time to say no."

"Not on your life. Now, Jason."

He pulled the skirt up to her waist, lifted her thigh over his and thrust into her in one smooth movement. Then he rearranged the length of the skirt so it covered their actions and started moving in short shallow strokes that left her unfulfilled and drove her mad. He wrapped his arms around her, one hand lightly plumping her tight nipples while the other pressed flat against her abdomen holding her still and in place for his thrusts. He kept his face buried in her neck, kissing, biting or sucking the tender skin there. All his movements were slow and measured, designed to keep her on the edge and wanting. She knew exactly what he was doing, felt his resolve, and she smiled. It was a claiming, body and soul. But as much as he owned hers, she knew she also owned his, and she relaxed against him, releasing that last bit of her resistance.

He sighed when she went pliant and deepened his thrusts, quickened his pace. The bites came harder, the fingers closed on her nipples tighter. She panted, wrapped her fingers through the mesh of the hammock and held on. They swayed, rocking in an increasingly fast rhythm until she had to clamp down on her bottom lip or scream out and alert those inside the house. They came together, and he bit down hard on the sensitive skin between her shoulder and neck. She knew she'd bear two marks from him now. She grinned. Doubly claimed.

After he withdrew from her and put their clothes to rights, they fell silent, just enjoying the aftermath and being in each other's arms, when she thought about the destroyed house and the odd visit from the Messenger.

"What was Derek up to? Trying to cause a further rift between the leopards and wolves or what?"

Jason's arms tightened around her body. "I don't know. Nico's looking into it."

She couldn't repress a shudder. Nico was scary under the best of circumstances. She decided to change the subject.

"Where *are* we living by the way? Not the back of your truck," she said with alarm. She was just a little too girly for that.

He laughed and teased her. "But, honey, I thought you said, implied at least, you'd live with me anywhere?"

She craned her neck back to look at him over her shoulder. "Don't joke, Jason."

He grinned. "A borrowed RV. A very small borrowed RV, but it's in that little tourist park right outside the gate so it's close to work. And it has electricity and running water."

She smiled. "Ah well, it's perfect then, isn't it?"

"Long as you're in it with me."

"Oh you had your chance to get rid of me. Now you're stuck."

She laid her head back against his chest and kicked the floor again.

"I am waiting to hear one thing from you, you know."

She smiled and closed her eyes, breathing his scent deep into her lungs. She knew exactly what he wanted.

"I love you, too, Jason."

About the Author

Loribelle is like the South she calls home. Hot and sultry. Languid and sexy. Magnolias and gardenias scent her silk-lined boudoir, and men and children alike bow to her magnificence...

Okay, maybe it isn't quite that glamorous. She does have two smart and lovely daughters who give her a run for her money and a son that will one day be someone's model of a romance hero. (She promises.) Her husband is a real life hero, and Loribelle just tries to keep up with the demands of military life. In between, she writes a book or two.

She's had every job under the sun, but haven't most writers? That Army military police, bookstore manager, waitress, wedding photographer, website designer experience has to come in useful sometimes. As they say in the South, it all washes out in the end.

She can be found at www.loribellehunt.com.

Can Shane convince Jessie he's the only man for her before her stalker attempts to end both their lives?

Fireworks

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Jessalyn Banks is a respected gallery owner in a small coastal Florida town. She isn't looking to make any major changes in her life, but events collide in a way that takes that option away from her. A stalker enters her life, and she has no choice but to notify the town's police chief, Shane Moore.

Shane has been trying to maneuver his way into Jessie's life for a year. Getting added to her Fourth of July planning committee is a brilliant move. Convincing her they belong together is much harder to accomplish. When her mysterious stalker escalates his activities and another woman is badly injured, events spin out of his control. Does Shane have the time to convince Jessie he's the only man for her before the stalker makes his move?

Enjoy the following excerpt for Fireworks:

"Let me up," she said, her voice low and subdued.

He did, reluctant to give up the feeling of her pressed close to his chest or to leave her with the illusion, however brief, that he was letting her go. She moved across the room and lifted her chin.

"I'm sorry." She waved a hand through the air. "I don't ever do that. I don't know what came over me."

He shrugged, hoping to ease her back into relaxing with him. "You've had a hard day."

"Not nearly as bad as Nancy."

A lone tear tracked down her cheek. He was across the room in a second, and pulling her close, he rocked a little back and forth. Ah, baby, can't you just let me in a little? He wasn't sure when the comforting embrace turned sexual, but suddenly her hands were up his shirt, her mouth moving up his neck, and he had a raging hard-on. As much as he wanted her, he wasn't going to let her turn this into another excuse to push him out of her life. He stepped back and ran a hand through his hair. Deep breaths, Shane.

She edged closer, holding one hand out to him and licking her lips. Those full pouty lips drove him wild.

"Shane. I need..."

She trailed off, meeting his gaze. He wasn't sure what he saw there, but he didn't have it in him to deny her. For now he'd delude himself into thinking she realized how much she needed him and not just any warm body. He growled, taking her hand and yanking her to him. His mouth covered hers, starving, taking, drunk on her taste and feel. Tongue pushing past her lips, he groaned. She was sweet and silky and most important, his. It made him weak-kneed. In any other circumstances, he might have laughed. Big bad

Shane Moore brought down by the straight-laced Jessalyn Banks. Who was definitely not being prim, her hands tugging his shirt up his body. More than willing to accommodate, he stopped the kiss and ripped it over his head, which may have been a mistake. Her tongue flicked his nipple and then her teeth closed over it. The contact threatened to blow his little head off.

Heart hammering, he drew back. Not like this. He wanted to enjoy her, wanted to take his time and drive her wild with desire. And if he drove away a few of her demons at the same time, well, more power to him. But first things first.

“I need a bed this time, Jessie.”

Taking a deep breath that shoved her breasts up and made his dick bob in appreciation, she nodded and walked into the hall.

“Upstairs. Last door on the left,” she murmured.

He caught her at the bottom of the stairs, tossed her over his shoulder in a classic fireman’s carry and took the steps two at a time. After setting her down across the threshold and toeing the door shut behind them, he took a good look around. He’d expected frilly and was glad to be proved wrong. Her furniture was old, a deep walnut color with rolled tops and rounded carved corners. An intricate rug covered the pine floors and an unmade modern four-poster took up center stage. He walked to the bed and sat to take off his boots, glad he’d thought to leave his gun belt in the car before he entered the hospital. When the boots were pushed to the side, he sat back and looked her over.

She stood in front of the dresser, her expression wary and hungry at the same time, playing with a button on her fancy blouse. He felt a slow smile spring from his heart.

“Take off your clothes, Jessie. Nice and slow. I want to see you.”

Enemy mine...

Stolen Passions

© 2010 Crystal Jordan

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...

Enjoy the following excerpt for Stolen Passions:

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.

What will happen when the hunter becomes the hunted...

Tempt Not the Cat

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A woman whose chances for love were destroyed...

After surviving a brutal kidnapping, Erihn Spencer has spent the past eighteen years living in the shadows. Scarred both physically and mentally, she spends her days writing romance novels dealing with the type of relationship she's avoided. The night before heading into the mountains to start her new novel, a stranger approaches and shakes her world with one perfect kiss.

A man who could be her savior...

From the moment Fayne kisses her, the desire to possess this shy beauty is irresistible. Thrown together in a secluded house in the mountains, he's torn between his need for her and the secrets that are destined to force them apart. As Erihn struggles to break free from years of self-imposed isolation, he finds he is the one who is now trapped by his desires, his dark self.

Their worlds collide and old secrets lead a bitter enemy to their door.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Tempt Not the Cat:

She moved like a cat, dainty, her feet barely touching the floor.

Fayne leaned against the bar, his pint of Scottish ale forgotten. Through the wide arch leading into the coffeehouse, his gaze followed her as she wove her way through the tables filled with chatting patrons.

Her hair was long and loose, ending just below her backside. To most people, it would appear to be brown but his preternatural eyesight detected glints of red and gold in the long strands. Unbound, it obscured her profile reminding him of Cousin It from *The Munsters*. Okay, not exactly flattering but the resemblance was undeniable.

Dressed in a long skirt the color of dirt and an enveloping cream-colored shirt, she was as diametrically opposed to the other women in their barely-there summer dresses as chalk was to cheese. Covered from head to toe with her modest, slightly oversized clothes and long, shaggy hair, she looked as if she were trying to hide from something.

Maybe everything?

His chest tightened. He loved puzzles. Curiosity had certainly almost killed this cat a time or two, but that didn't stop him from his favored pastime. Puzzles drove him mad and women were his favorite riddle. He reveled in their femininity, their scent and their innate sensuality. Basked in the hidden mysteries of their shapely limbs and secretive eyes. Overdosed on their voices and wrapped himself in their beauty while rejoicing in their strength.

In short, he loved women.

His eyes narrowed when the stranger stepped onto the stage. Reaching up to adjust the microphone, her slender fingers curled around the base as she raised it to the correct height. With one slim hand she pushed back her hair, allowing him a glimpse of her profile. Dark brows, a lovely cheekbone and a slightly snubbed nose, her skin was creamy pale and her mouth was lush.

He licked his lips.

The woman glanced to her left and smiled at her friends as they jostled for better viewing positions on the low-slung couch and chairs. A shy smile curved her mouth and a gentle blush swept her skin. She ducked her head as if embarrassed.

Even from here he could sense her nervousness. For some of the preternaturals, emotions could be detected by either taste or scent. With the room crowded with people, for most it would be difficult to pick up on any one person. But not him. Her scent was unique and it had already imprinted itself in his brain, becoming part of him.

Lemon.

Paper.

Flowers. Blue Lady roses to be exact.

And a healthy dose of warm feminine flesh.

Something dark stirred in him, gently nudging the leash of his willpower. The moon was waxing, and the urge to mate was growing stronger. It'd been over ten months since he'd last taken a woman, and the demands of the approaching full moon were taking a toll on his restraint.

After the debacle with the vampire Mikhail during winter solstice last year, Fayne's pleasure-seeking life had been derailed by the unexpected inclusion of a six-year-old mortal child. He smiled at the thought of the boy he called son, Max. Few things were more important to a were-cat than physical gratification and their own creature comforts, but his son was his top priority. Max came first with him.

Period.

End of story.

Even though he loved Max and would sacrifice anything for his welfare, for the next few weeks Fayne was free to do as he pleased. Max was off with his friend Bliss in South America on an archeological dig and having the time of his life.

Certain that his son was well taken care of, Fayne had other pressing matters to attend to. With only a few more days until the full moon, time was growing short and he had to act fast. He glanced at the women sitting with Shai and Jennifer.

To Shai's right sat a stunning brunette with dark red claws. She was lovely, but there was something brittle about her. Across from her sat Melanie Reynolds, the movie actress. She wore a barely-there pink leather dress, and her breasts were in danger of escaping. Too overblown and very married—two things he avoided.

There was something to be said about subtlety. As he'd prowled through the years, Fayne realized that he appreciated the subtle woman. The one who lightly dabbed perfume on the back of her knees rather than bathing in it. She wore high-collared shirts and demure lace bras rather than crotchless panties and garter belts. A confident woman didn't need to proclaim her femininity to everyone around her, it simply was what it was. The women most men would overlook intrigued him the most. The shy ones who didn't command center stage and constantly play the 'me me' game. Women who glanced away rather than returning his gaze boldly. Of course they always looked back again, just in case they were mistaken and he hadn't been looking at them. The subtle shyness, the faint blush of color on their cheeks when they realized it was them who held his attention. They all had their stories to tell—their darkness and their light.

He lived to ferret out their secrets.

Turning, his gaze landed on the woman standing on the stage. This beautiful little wren wasn't so much understating her sexuality as being completely unaware of it. She'd buried her feminine curves beneath layers of ill-fitting clothing and long, heavy hair so that most men would overlook her.

But not him.

What did she look like with no clothing on? Did she prefer serviceable white cotton lingerie or was she the kind of woman who dressed like a schoolteacher on the outside while wearing miniscule thong panties?

His groin tightened.

Either worked for him as lingerie had a tendency to get torn off women's bodies when he was around. Be it cotton or silk, the only thing he wanted to see it on was the floor.

Glancing over at Shai's friends, he smiled. No, he'd found his mate. He smiled as he turned his attentions back to the woman on the stage. She'd do perfectly.

It was time for the cat to prowl.



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