



No one can outfly the speed of fate.

Forbidden Passions, Book 4

As a member of the elite Messenger Corps, werebird Alexandra “Ajax” Petros is in her element. Under the protection of her people’s steadfast political neutrality, the only thing she can’t outfly are the secrets of her past—and her birthright as destined queen.

Which is exactly what she’s trying to do when she lands, literally, in the arms of a man with claws—and cold, methodical wits—as razor sharp as her own eagle talons.

For Nicodemus Leonidas, information is power. The journey into werebird territory to find out what happened to his father is a calculated risk, but nothing is more dangerous than his and Ajax’s instant, explosive chemistry. In the heat of the moment, he senses the stubbornly independent woman is his mate...and that she’s hiding something.

Evasive maneuvers do Ajax no good. Inexorably, Nico peels away her layers until he holds her very soul in his hands. And when she uncovers a plot to steal her throne, he is the one man with the power to force her to make the one choice she never wanted to face...

Warning: This book contains sex. A lot of it. In a kitchen, up against a wall, bent over a sofa, tied up and not tied up. Also, a family betrayal, a fight to the death, a reluctant queen and a very kinky leopard with control issues.

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Renegade Passions

Loribelle Hunt

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

Nicodemus Leonidas stopped the rental car, turning off the engine while he studied the house's long front porch. He hadn't warned Jason he was coming. His brother lifted his head but didn't move from his position wrapped around the human woman in a slightly swaying hammock. He couldn't make out his brother's expression, and it was a good thing Jason couldn't see his in return.

His lip curled in derision. His scorn wasn't even at taking up with a human associated with the werewolves. That was bad enough. Hell, his youngest brother had gone further and mated a werewolf. No, it was because Jason was completely whipped. It was one thing to shack up with a woman. His practiced eye looked her over, and she was one hell of a woman, but mating? Mating made you weak. Mating made you stupid. He'd seen it over and over again the last few months as each of his brothers fell. Definitely not for him.

Calling on his experience as the family's security expert, he schooled his expression into one of disinterest and got out of the car. The north Florida humidity hit him like a blow. Dolphin territory. Even in early winter it was warm and balmy. How could anyone live here? The leopard clan claimed everything west of the Mississippi, and he'd be glad to get back to his own land and more specifically home, to the family's resort, Refuge, in the Arizona desert. At least they had seasons.

Scanning the area as he walked, he strode through the yard. Scrub and small trees. There was nothing appealing in it and its proximity to the wolves just made it worse. The Gulf Coast may belong to the dolphins, but almost everything east of the Mississippi was wolf land. Jason had escaped here after Celeste's alleged death and other than finding her alive hadn't had much luck with the place. This was the area where Jason had fought a werewolf and a hurricane. The need to take action also ruffled his fur.

As he approached, the couple moved. Jason came to meet him at the porch's edge while Celeste remained seated on the hammock. She watched him warily, suspicion and unease clear on her face. Nico tried to force some of the predator that lived in him farther below the surface. He needed answers from the woman. Scaring her silly was unlikely to get them.

"Brother." Jason stood with his feet braced apart and his arms crossed over his chest. "What brings you here?"

It was like that, was it? Could be he had the cool reception coming. He hadn't been very diplomatic the last time they spoke, but his focus was single-minded. He cocked an eyebrow.

"You know why I'm here."

He and his brother both looked at Celeste. She shifted under the double scrutiny, and Nico was shocked to see her expression and body language change. Gone was the timid mouse, replaced by someone harder, someone bolder. A she-wolf readying to protect her own. He wondered why that image popped into his mind. Her family may be wolves, descendants of King Lycoan and his one hundred sons granted the ability to shift into wolves by Zeus, but she was human. That must be it.

She stood, and he approached, forcing his features to relax, hoping his smile wasn't a grimace. When he'd first met her over a year ago, she would have shrunk back from his advance regardless. Now she stood her ground, eyes stony. Jason joined her, and she took his hand. Nico noticed it was shaking a little. Not as brave as she pretended to be. But there was no smell of fear from her, no sign of retreat. He had to admire her backbone.

"Celeste. It's good to see you well."

She nodded. Curtly. Once. "Thank you."

He sighed. This was going to be more difficult than he'd anticipated. He turned to his brother, forcing his voice to be free of censure. "I had to come. Dad wouldn't have given up on any of us."

Instantly, he knew it was the wrong thing to say. Jason stiffened, his eyes growing glacial and a low growl welling in his throat. Nico's statement hadn't only accused his brother of giving their father up for dead but also his mate. He was relieved when Celeste slid her hand up the inside of Jason's arm and calmed the beast lurking inside him. She turned cold, angry eyes on him.

"I do have one thing that may help you." She held up a hand to hold off the questions rushing through his mind. "Inside."

He followed them to a small kitchen and sat at the table she pointed out. Jason sat across from him and glowered. Nico was on thin ice here in the warm southern winter. Celeste poured three cups of coffee and placed a bowl of sugar on the center of the table. When she would have taken her own seat, Jason pulled her into his lap. She sat there easily, and Nico ignored the twist in his gut. He didn't want that. The easy companionship. The warm willing woman who would always be his responsibility.

He stirred sugar into his cup and waited for her to speak. The silence stretched, and when he looked up again she had a faraway look on her face. He cleared his throat, and she jerked. Jason's arms tightened around her waist, and he glared at Nico. Celeste rubbed circles on his arm and whispered in his ear. He relaxed, but only marginally. Nico almost sighed again. He didn't like this armed truce that had developed between him and his brothers. Celeste twisted and looked him in the eye.

"I don't remember anything. That hasn't changed. No amount of badgering me is going to change that either."

That was irritation not awkwardness that made him want to fidget. There was no way being dressed down by this human slip of a woman embarrassed him. He forced himself to sit still. He needed her information too badly to go cat on her right now. She was the sole—and surprise—survivor of the plane

crash that had taken his father's life. But if the human had lived in secrecy, why not the wereleopard leader?

"I don't remember," she emphasized again. Did he imagine the apology in her voice? "But my dad finally told me that it was the birds who found me. The plane...went down in their territory. It was a Messenger—Ajax Petros—who found me and notified my family."

He shut his eyes and took a deep breath. The birds who made up the Messenger Corps were reputed to all be trained fighters and they zealously protected the neutrality of the group. This Messenger though, this Ajax Petros, kept popping up, kept feeding his family pieces of information. Now it appeared she had another connection to them, a more tangible connection. He was the only Leonidas brother not to meet her yet, and he was damned curious. He'd been on his way to see her when he'd decided to visit Jason first. Now he was glad he did—it provided the perfect excuse to enter bird territory.

It was a start. It was something to go on. He knew the crash was on bird land, of course, but other than a video they'd sent only after he badgered them into it, he knew almost nothing about it. Now he had a name to go by at least.

"Thank you, Celeste," he said gently. Looking at the tense lines around her eyes, he had an idea how much it cost her to try to remember that time. He stayed only long enough to be polite. Determined to find answers. Determined to find the truth.

Nico stomped through the woods wanting to howl his frustration. After two futile days of searching for Ajax Petros he was beginning to think the woman didn't exist. Not only that, but everyone refused to speak of the crash. Someone had finally taken him to the site but after a year there was nothing left to be found.

Two days on the werebirds' land wasn't going to be nearly enough time. They owned several hundred acres in the middle of wolf land in the Tennessee Smoky Mountains, but there was no central town or city in which to track people. Instead there were small enclaves dotting the mountainsides, and they were difficult to spot. Mostly high up in trees, always concealed as part of the landscape. If he weren't in the middle of a mission he'd find it fascinating. The leopard in him was naturally curious about the aeries.

There were no roads. He'd had to hike in, which turned out to be a problem. It had gradually grown cold over the days. A biting, bitter wind blew in from the west and brought black, ugly cloud cover with it. If the temperature continued to drop he knew those clouds could mean snow, and he didn't want to get caught out in the open in an early season blizzard, so he was making his way down.

It pissed him off.

He wasn't getting anywhere with his search and now he was being forced to put it on hold until the weather improved. In a normal situation, he'd just find local lodging. But to his extreme annoyance there

was none to be had. Not that it was full, just that there *wasn't* any. No hotels. No inns. No rooms for hire. He'd been sleeping outside, but that wouldn't be possible tonight.

He came around a bend in the path, cursing when in his distraction his foot caught on a concealed stone. Pausing, he shook out the twist in his ankle, reaching for the water bottle clipped to his belt. Before he could take a swig, he heard a flutter of wings and looked up. A huge bald eagle was flying straight for him. He forced himself to remain still, not to flinch, as the deadly talons grew closer.

He watched the flight with an awe he'd never admit to. The bird circled his head, then landed a few feet before him and shifted in an explosion of color. A woman stood before him, tall, proud, and gloriously naked. Athletic. Incredible boobs. Each shifter species could trace their beginnings to one deity. Marathon, the greatest of message bearers may have inspired Hermes to give the gift of flight to his descendents, but he wouldn't be surprised if her fierce beauty was from Aphrodite herself.

She cocked her head to one side and twisted to look down the trail behind her. Exceptional ass. Her hair was short, white-blonde and spiky. His leopard lifted its nose to take in her sweet, womanly scent. She turned back to gaze at him. Her glowing blue eyes froze his tongue.

"Like what you see?" she asked.

Hell, yeah. If he didn't have other pressing obligations, he'd be happy to spend a week showing her just how much. Before he could frame a response that wouldn't get him decked another bird flew into the small clearing. It landed and shifted into a tall, heavily muscled man. Ignoring Nico, he turned to the woman.

He had to fight a low growl welling up from his throat. He'd never been possessive of women and shifters weren't prudish about nudity, but the idea of any man looking at her naked body awoke jealous instincts in his leopard. If they were aware of it, the two strangers ignored his struggle.

"Storm's coming in fast," the man said. The woman nodded. It was a regal, dismissive motion. He finally seemed to notice Nico and hesitated. "I'll see you later?"

Nico took an antagonistic step forward, but her expression never changed. "Perhaps." A cold wind gusted through the clearing. "You better go."

The man bowed slightly at the waist before stepping away, shifting and taking flight. She turned to Nico, and he noticed she was shivering. He shrugged out of his jacket and circled her, letting his hands linger just a moment on her shoulders. He wanted to touch, to stroke, to pet. She turned around, breaking the contact to face him.

"Thank you." Cool. Contained. He wanted to break her reserve, snap her control. He shook his head. This wasn't like him. The sooner he got away from her, the better. His cat growled at the thought of leaving her.

"I understand you've been looking for me," she said. She'd pushed her arms into the coat's sleeves and held a hand out. "Ajax Petros."

He didn't like surprises. Someone should have warned him. Shifter women came in all shapes and sizes and looks, from ugly to plain to drop dead gorgeous. Ajax Petros was on the heart attack inducing end of the spectrum. He'd never seen a more beautiful woman, shifter *or* human. She wasn't at all what he'd expected. Not from a Messenger and not with a name like Ajax.

"Isn't Ajax a man's name?"

Her hand fell to her side. "Do I look like a man?"

Hell no. His gaze swept down her body, head to toe and back up again, pausing to linger over the white thatch of hair between her legs before lifting to look into her eyes.

"Is Ajax short for something?"

"Alexandra." Now that fit. A beautiful name for this exquisite woman. What was the story behind the nickname? Never mind. He'd get to that later.

Edging closer, he reached out for the aborted handshake. She set her palm in his and the skin-to-skin contact was electrifying. He didn't release her until she pulled free. Pissed at being kept from touching the woman, the cat within him started to pace. He gritted his teeth and resisted to urge to pounce. "Nico Leonidas."

The wind blew again, and goose bumps rose on her exposed skin. He edged closer, not bothering to fight the need raging in him to keep her warm. "Is there someplace we can talk? You need to get out the weather."

Her eyes narrowed. "I've been taking care of myself a long time."

"Badly if this is typical behavior."

Her eyes seemed to flash blue fire. She clenched her jaw. Her body language screamed aggression and command. He was reminded that bald eagles were predators, but even those masters of the sky were no match for a full-grown male leopard. He wondered if the rumors were true. Were Messenger birds all trained to be elite soldiers? If he showed her some of the cat would she run? Or would she submit?

He moved forward until his chest brushed against hers. He could feel her breasts through his thin jacket, felt the shudders in her body she fought to control. Probably from cold, but in that moment he determined they would be for him. Every hard, edgy line of her body broadcasted her role in the bird pecking order—right at the top. Too bad. He wanted her—he was going to have her. Awareness lit her eyes, as if she could read his intentions, but she didn't back down. He smiled. He looked forward to tangling with her. She shrugged off the jacket and handed it back to him.

Pointing into the woods and underbrush on his right, she spoke, "There's a path on the other side of those bushes. Go one hundred yards up. I'll meet you there."

Then she shifted and flew in the direction she'd pointed out. He set off into the underbrush. After a few feet he came to several intersecting paths and went down the one that led the right way, the one where her scent was strongest. He'd lost sight of Ajax and ran to catch up.

The trail climbed up the side of the mountain. He began to think he was going in the wrong direction when it ended in a small clearing. There was no sign of the woman.

“Up here.”

He looked up and saw the house. He’d seen many of these houses in the last two days. Werebirds seemed to prefer being high even in their human forms. But this one was different. This one was huge. Ajax leaned against a porch railing wrapped in a long robe and grinned down at him. It was the first non-neutral expression he’d seen on her face, and it damned near stopped his heart. He searched for a way up and found switchback stairs around the trunk of a huge tree.

At the top he looked around. It wasn’t all one building after all. A rope bridge in front of him led to a separate space, and he could see others leading in other directions like the spokes of a one-sided wheel.

He turned away from them, his senses opening up, tracking her by scent and sound. He found the railing she’d leaned on and trailed his fingers over it, imagined he could feel her warmth lingering in the wood. Her scent was stronger here. Jasmine, vanilla and something unique he couldn’t name. He followed it around the curving deck and through a set of double glass doors.

She had her back to him, pouring water into a coffee maker. He watched silently. Studied her. She removed the filter cup, rinsed it in the sink and measured grounds into it. Her movements were smooth and efficient. Her head tilted to one side a little as she worked. He found himself fascinated by the line of her neck. It was elegant. Graceful. Kissable. He could see her pulse hammering there and wanted to nibble. He didn’t resist the impulse. Using his cat’s stealth, he padded forward on silent feet. She jumped when he set his hands on her hips, held her breath when his tongue swiped the alluring spot on her nape.

“What are you doing?” she asked breathlessly.

“Tasting,” he murmured before setting his teeth to the tantalizing skin. She let her head fall back against his chest, giving him better access and groaning. God, he loved that sound. It almost undid him. And it snapped him back to reality. What the hell was going on here? He dropped his hands like they’d been burned.

Chapter Two

When the leopard set his hands on her hips, she had to grip the counter for support and bite her lower lip to keep from begging for more. His lips brushed her skin, and her blood rushed. Then his teeth scraped over her pulse. She groaned, and he released her abruptly as if he was burned by the heat rising in her body. She felt the same way.

Slowly, she turned to face him, study him. She'd just arrived home a few hours ago and everywhere she went had been told a leopard was in their mountains asking for her. Nico Leonidas. One of the leopard king's brothers and the only one she hadn't met until today. Considering everything that had been going on with the leopards recently, she'd decided it would be better if she found him first.

She'd expected him to seek her out sooner, had been informed by her source inside Refuge Resort that he was investigating the plane accident his father had died in. She had her own suspicions about that crash, suspected one of her own was behind it. She would be forced to move against him soon. The man's arrogance, his greed threatened the balance of power in the shifter world and the bird's place in it. She wouldn't allow that, but she couldn't strike without some kind of proof. Such rashness would shake the foundations of her clan.

So she'd done the unthinkable, broken the bonds of neutrality by sharing her suspicions with Adrian Leonidas. She couldn't explain that compulsion to share the information with the leopard family, but it wouldn't happen again. Her duty was to *her* people. She'd been waiting for the Leonidas' arrival, had been sure she could deal with him and send him off quickly.

Now that he was here, she knew that belief for the mistake it was. As the leader of the Messenger Corps, she came into contact with many different werewolf species. She'd often dealt with wereleopards. This one's domestication was a thin veneer. Not a problem in and of itself. She'd known a few predator weres over the years that were barely human. But this one. This one was *hers*. And not at all happy about it if his expression was anything to judge by. To tell the truth, she wasn't either, but his rejection still stung.

"Don't like what you see that much after all, huh? Don't worry. I don't either."

His eyes narrowed to angry slits as she brushed by him. It took every ounce of control she had not to reach up, soothe his brow and apologize for her angry response. She didn't have time for a mate. If she had any sense at all, she'd shift and get out. Fly far away and wait to return until he'd left. Her body refused her mind's orders to do so immediately. The sense of self-preservation apparently didn't trump the lust. She was in real trouble.

She avoided looking at him as she opened the freezer and rummaged around. Her mother usually stocked it with casseroles while she was gone, and she pulled something out that might be lasagna. It was in a glass pan with a foil lid, and she put it in the oven. Turning the knob to three hundred and fifty degrees, she looked over her shoulder.

“Hungry?”

Another mistake. Nostrils flared, he stood very still and stared at her. His hands clenched and unclenched at his sides. For the first time she wondered if she might be in danger and felt a spike of fear. He reacted like she’d thrown cold water on him, jerking and prowling around the room. He stopped by the doors, didn’t turn around when he spoke.

“There’s no need to fear me. I won’t harm you.”

Was that hurt she heard in his voice? With his back turned she allowed herself the opportunity to really look at him. She could see his reflection in the glass and caught her breath.

He was a magnificent specimen of masculinity. Not much taller than average height, maybe a little over six feet tall, with defined muscles she itched to touch. His hair was very short, dark, almost black, as if to match the darkness she sensed in him. But his eyes were bright, grassy green. He met her gaze in the glass and held her snared. She suddenly wished she’d taken time to put more on than just a robe. As if he heard her thoughts, he let his gaze trail over the reflection of her body in the doors.

“I think I preferred you without the robe.”

His voice was low, husky with arousal. She held her breath, wondering if he’d tell her to remove it, wondering if she’d comply. The problem with being raised as the heir to a throne was you never met a man who could really take charge, who you wanted to give over control to. It could only be in bed, but it was a kind of freedom she secretly yearned for. Except his earlier rejection still rankled. It was clear from the bulge in his jeans he wanted her, so what was that about? She didn’t know what to think and fell back on cool disdain.

“I can find some clothes. No point in walking around without them. I try not to fly around inside.”

His smile was slow, a little cruel and all dominant male. “I’d just have to remove them.”

Her heart hammered, and her sex clenched in response. Her mouth was too dry to respond. He approached her, stopped close enough she could feel his chest rise and fall against hers. She stood frozen in place as he lifted his knuckles to stroke her cheek, down her neck and over her collarbone.

“How long before dinner?” he whispered.

“Um.” She gulped. Impossible to think while he stood so near. While he petted her. “An hour maybe.”

“Good.” The heat in his eyes faded a little. “Ground rules. You agree or you don’t agree. If you don’t, nothing happens between us. Understood?”

She nodded, still aroused but bemused by the sudden change in tone and conversation.

“Just two things really,” he said going back to stroking her neck. She tilted her head to give him better access and waited to hear his rules. “One, I’m in charge.”

His lips touched her skin and she gasped as he suckled it. “Whatever I say, whenever I say it.”

She didn’t know if she could go for that, but she was intrigued enough to let him go on. “And two, while I’m here, you’re mine. I don’t share.” The last ended on a growl. That was fine with her. She knew she wasn’t ever going to be able to look at another man. What gave her pause was the implication he’d go on to other women, but she forced the savage jealousy away. She didn’t want a mate after all. She had enough problems.

“Oh...” His teeth nipped at the vein pulsing in her neck. “Okay.”

Hands moving to grip her hips, he straightened to his full height, looked down into her upturned face. He nodded, but he didn’t smile as he reached for the tie on her robe, face hard and possessive. Her heart skittered. Maybe this was a mistake, but it was too late to change her mind. She didn’t deny the need in her. Couldn’t even if she wanted to. Her nipples were hard, her pussy wet.

He spread the lapels of the robe open, let it slide slowly off her shoulders. It dropped to the floor, and his hands circled her wrists like manacles and pulled them behind her back where he held them in one hand. He backed her up till her butt hit the counter, and then he just stared down at her. The gaze was so hot, so carnal and full of need her legs shook. He leaned forward slowly, and she closed her eyes when his mouth was just an inch from her nipple. Anticipation rushed through her. She wanted his mouth, his teeth, his cock. The need consumed her. Overwhelmed the protesting voice in her head. She waited and nothing happened. Opening her eyes, she saw him standing tall again, frowning down at her. He released her and reached for her robe on the floor, pulling the belt free of the loops. He jerked his head towards the table.

“Lay down.”

She almost protested, but remembered his rules. She chafed under them, but wanted him too much to refuse. Walking over, she sat down and lay back watching as he prowled the kitchen and found a knife. He held the belt so the ends were equal then sliced it with the knife. She gasped and went to sit up. *Damn it.* That was her favorite robe. One look at his face held her in place though. He wasn’t going to brook any kind of defiance.

It was a small table, round and made only for two. Her torso barely fit on it and her ass was dangerously close to the edge. He stalked closer, the ends of the robe tie held in one hand as he trailed his fingertips from one hipbone to her shoulder. He traced them over her face, lightly, the touch sensuous and promising, before taking one wrist gently in his and pulling it down towards the floor. He tied it to the table leg then repeated the action with the other arm. She was breathing hard by the time he finished. She’d never been tied down. She felt her wings struggling for freedom while she fought for calm. He stood back and watched her a moment before ripping his shirt over his head.

“You’re unaccustomed to being restrained.”

She nodded, more a jerk, and focused on the muscles rippling across his torso. He spoke softly, but there was no denying the menace under his tone.

“Answer me, Ajax.”

She lifted her gaze to his face, felt a measure of relief at the stark control stamped across his features. “Yes. I am.”

He unsnapped and unzipped his jeans. Pushed them down over his hips. He wasn't wearing underwear and his cock sprang free, erect and long and hard. She took a long deep breath, licked dry lips. He stepped closer and ran a hand through her hair.

“I won't hurt you,” he whispered. “I'd never hurt you.”

He wrapped his hand around his erection, stroked it slowly up and down while she watched. She wanted to taste him, wanted to know if he tasted as good as he smelled. All masculine and woody. Primitive and tempting. He was the ultimate bad boy. Hers if she was willing to take him.

He stepped closer to her, a bare inch from her mouth and she darted her tongue out. Caressed the tip before he groaned and moved closer, letting her take some of him into her mouth. She suckled, moaning at the salty tang of him, at the width and steel in him. He rotated his hips, lodged himself deeper and deeper, faster and faster until he hit the back of her throat. She felt his control slipping and reveled in it. Then he pulled back, popping free of her mouth. He glared at her, and she glared back. The look said she'd done something wrong. What the hell could that be? She was tied to the damn table. She pulled at the bonds, suddenly sick of the game and wanting to be free. He moved to the other end of the table, gripped her hips and held her still as he knelt down.

“Oh no, baby. You agreed.”

The table was so small her ass was right at the edge. He slid his hands down and in, traced the creases between her thighs and sex as he did. His touch was gentle, undemanding as he moved inwards, spreading the lips of her pussy to his gaze. She groaned, embarrassed and turned on at the wanton sight she knew she made.

When he leaned forward and licked her, the groan became something else. He took his time, avoiding her clit as he explored her, tasted her. He pushed his tongue into her pussy, and she bucked against him. Her temperature spiked impossibly high, her heart pounded as if she'd run a marathon. Frustration and lust raged through her. She was so wound up it would take nothing to make her come, yet he held her back.

Nico had no idea where his control was coming from. Her taste was perfect. Ambrosia. She drugged his senses. He felt the lust and need coming off of her in waves, wanted to fuck her until she forgot her name, until it didn't occur to her to do anything but to submit to his every whim. But the leopard in him wanted something else. It wanted to possess, to own her heart and mind, body and soul. Wanted to cherish. Wanted to protect. It wasn't like him at all, but he couldn't fight the dual urges.

Knowing he couldn't wait much longer, he found her clit with his tongue. Flicked it and enjoyed her loud moans, enjoyed her pleasure before inserting one finger into her cunt. Then two. His reward was immediate. She cried out as she came, thrusting hard against his hand, her cream sweet and wet and warm on his tongue. He stood on unsteady feet and moved between her legs, gripping her knees and holding them high as he thrust into her.

Dear God, she was going to kill him. She was tight and almost blistering hot, convulsing around him in orgasm as she came again. It felt too damned good not to make it last. He slowed and gentled his thrusts, leaned forward to suck one pert nipple between his lips. As soon as he tasted her, his incisors lengthened and he had to fight the leopard from biting, from claiming and marking her. He forced the sharp points to retract, forced instinct under control. Recognizing the danger they were both in, he lifted his lips, increased the depth and speed of his thrusts and let the orgasm rush through him.

As it broke over him, he couldn't fight the animal in him. His fangs broke free, found the gentle slope of her breast and pierced her tender skin. The taste of her blood exploded over his tongue and something shifted inside him. Something primitive, primal. She was *his*. Irrevocably and forever. He'd known it and hadn't wanted to admit it when he'd seen her on the trail, but now it was a fact neither of them could escape.

He collapsed over her, sucking in deep breaths. Taking in her scent, their combined scents and sex. Trying to reconcile what he'd just done with what he'd always promised himself he wouldn't do. Reminding himself he'd come here to find out what happened to his father not get wrapped up with a woman.

When he regained some semblance of control he rose on his elbows and studied her. She was still breathing fast and deeply, her eyes closed with a small smile on her face. He lifted his fingers to the side of her face, tracing the high cheekbones. She opened her eyes and met his gaze. Calm and reserved again. It pissed him off. What right did she have to control when he was in so much turmoil? Her expression changed under his glare. Softened, soothed.

"Will you let me up now?"

It was a softly spoken request, but he didn't miss the command underlying her tone. She was used to being obeyed. He cocked an eyebrow as he stood. She wasn't going to get a pliable mate in him. He moved around the table. Leaned over to flick his tongue over one nipple. It pebbled with the contact.

"I think I prefer you like this. At my mercy."

He sucked the nipple into his mouth, biting a little. She moaned and arched up into the caress of his mouth. His eyes closed. So responsive. So perfect. So *his*. He let the hard nub pop free from his lips and studied her straining body. He hadn't put her in the most comfortable position, but she hadn't complained. He knew her arms had to be sore by now. Reluctantly he released her, rubbing each shoulder as he did.

He'd make it up to her later. She lifted her arms and sat up slowly, watching him as her hand rose to his bite on her breast. She sighed.

"The last thing I need right now is a mate."

It was like a slap in the face, never mind he'd been thinking something similar. It had never occurred to him he'd be rejected by his mate. The two sides of his nature warred over a response. The human half agreed wholeheartedly, but the animal half, the leopard, was furious in a way only cats seemed capable of. It paced just under his skin while Nico struggled for control. It wasn't until he smelled the slight tang of blood in the air that he realized his claws had burst from his fingertips and cut his palms. Ajax took a step away from him, her fear suddenly a cloying, heavy smell between them, finally causing the leopard to settle down.

Nico knew it was only temporary, but he heaved a sigh of relief at the reprieve. His leopard side was always close to the surface and damned near impossible to fight. He usually saw no reason to, usually didn't bother, but her fear was like claws raking across his chest. It hurt like nothing he'd ever experienced. And it was an insult. He may be barely tame, but he'd never hurt his mate. His growl was low, just this side of audible but she heard it.

"Your fear is fucking offensive."

She took a deep breath and the scent receded. "You'll have to forgive me. I'm new to this."

Reaching down, she picked up the robe and pulled it on then leaned back against the counter with her arms crossed over her chest. The posture was defensive, but her expression was that same earlier mask he'd seen. Calm. Remote. He might prefer her being afraid to hiding behind this composed woman. He had to move before he did something drastic to effect that change. She cocked an eyebrow and watched him as he paced around the open kitchen and living room.

After a moment she straightened and disappeared down a hall. He heard water running shortly after and ground his teeth against the sudden need that surged through his body as he imagined her standing under it, imagined it caressing all her lush curves and secret places. Lucky water. He wanted to go to her, but held himself back. Held the leopard back with the promise of a run, with the reminder they should make sure the area was secure. Still nude, he opened the doors he'd come in through and pulled them tightly shut behind him. Then he shifted, letting his cat side take over, and took to the trees.

Deep inside the cat, the man looked around in wonder, knew this was his natural habitat. Leopards were meant to live high above the ground, to live in jungle and forest, not desert despite how long his family had been in Arizona or how much he liked it. The land didn't sing to him the way this place did.

It didn't hurt that her scent was everywhere. When it started to fade, he turned and hunted until it was strong again. Naturally, he stayed near her home until he discovered the paths. Her scent was strong on two of them, leading in opposite directions. He followed one to its destination, another house a few hundred yards away. She obviously spent a lot of time in the house, and the leopard growled its disapproval. No one

had the right to compete with it for her attention. But then another smell came to him, and he lifted his nostrils, edged closer down the length of the branch it rested on, tested the scent, the familiarity. Family. Whoever lived in the house was a relative, and female, judging by the sweet benign flavor that coated his tongue. He turned away, knowing the woman in there probably wasn't a threat to his mate.

He continued his perimeter circuit and came to another path, another place where her scent didn't lessen but just kept moving on. He followed the trail for a while from above until it became clear he wouldn't soon come to her destination. Many other scents joined hers on the trail and there was a noticeable drop in temperature from just an hour ago. Eventually he turned back, loath to leave her alone and unprotected. The man knew she'd been alone a long time—there was no scent but hers in her home—and had probably taken care of herself for some while. She'd told him as much, hadn't she? But neither the man nor the beast was willing to risk her now that she belonged to them.

She was dressed when he stepped back into the house, once again facing away from him and towards the counter. He growled his displeasure when he stepped up behind her, but this time she didn't flinch and no fear wafted through the air. Good. She was learning. Still the clothes had to go. He was already hard and heavy. He hadn't put on his clothes upon his return, and he pushed his hips into her buttocks, nuzzled her neck. He was rewarded with a rush of sensation. His own body's response. Hers. Her pulse kicked under his lips, and her arousal was a heady scent in the air.

"Dinner," she whispered as she rocked back into him, grinding her ass against his erection. His teeth closed over the soft shell of her ear and bit. She yelped, and he stepped back, allowing her to turn around with two plates in her hands. She stepped around him, walked the short distance to the table and set them down. He sighed. She was all the nourishment his body craved, but for once the cat lifting his nose to air disagreed. She grabbed two forks from a utensil drawer, and he followed her to the table. The cat might be right. The lasagna did smell incredible, but she'd forgotten something.

"Drinks?"

She started to stand. "I forgot."

He waved her back down. "Sit. Eat."

He opened the refrigerator and found a bottle of wine. After a brief search of the cabinets he returned to the table with it and two glasses. He poured for them both and waited till she raised her glass.

"To newfound mates," he said softly.

She gulped, but her eyes didn't say anything about not wanting him. She nodded. "Mates."

She sipped and set the glass aside, concentrating instead on her dinner. He watched her silently from the corners of his eyes, careful not to put her on her guard, to let her relax. They had to discuss the situation, had to make plans for her to move to the resort with him. He suspected she would balk at that order. Mentally, he shrugged. *Oh, well. She'd get over it.*

Finishing her meal, she pushed the plate forward and picked up her wine glass. She leaned back in the chair. The refrigerator hummed in the background, the only thing breaking the silence and piquing his curiosity.

“No power lines.”

“Underground.” She took a sip of the wine. Her expression was bitter and he wondered why. It wasn’t from the sweet white wine. “Cost the royal treasury a pretty penny.”

For some reason, he was certain her bitterness was not about the money, but he’d save that question for later. The lights flickered and her lips twisted in a rueful grin. “Not that it helps much. Everything down slope from us is above ground.”

“And the sewer systems?”

“Septic. Pipes run through the concrete supports.”

Ah, he’d noticed them but hadn’t given them any thought.

“You never said why you were looking for me,” she asked, changing the subject.

A piercing shaft of guilt. *Fuck*. He’d actually forgotten his search for his father while he was distracted by her. It made him angry. He didn’t even know the woman and already she was intruding on his well-ordered, disciplined life. It wouldn’t do at all. He focused.

“The plane crash last year. I understand you found Celeste Leonidas and brought her out.”

All expression left her face, and his every instinct screamed at him.

“Yeah. So?”

“Were there any other survivors?”

She blinked. Not the question she’d expected. What the hell was going on here?

“No, there weren’t.”

Something wasn’t right. There was a ring of uncertainty in her reply.

“You’re sure?”

Her chin went up stubbornly. “Of course. I would have been informed if there had been.”

She stood and carried their plates to the sink. He couldn’t see her expression with her back turned to him, but he could smell her response to the questions. Fear again. And deceit. The leopard clawed for release.

“Why?”

“I’m the Messenger Corps Commander. I’m privy to all bird business, to everything that affects the clans.”

An incomplete answer. The bitter smell of her dishonesty lay heavy between them. He rose and moved so quietly she couldn’t have heard his approach, yet she didn’t flinch when he placed his palms flat on the counter caging her in.

“I can smell a lie, Ajax.” She stiffened. “Don’t lie to me.”

Her spine went straight as a rod, and she shoved against him. He stepped back, allowing her the illusion she was in control, but his cat paced the confines of its cage in his mind. It was enraged. So was the man. A mate didn't have the right to keep secrets, to lie and deceive. The animal in him wanted to spring. To lick and taste and demand answers. Nico had never had to fight his leopard so much in the span of one evening before. It was infuriating, but also invigorating. He loved women. What male didn't? But he'd always preferred them submissive and biddable. This one was anything but.

Chapter Three

It was only years of court training that allowed Ajax to regain control. She used old breathing techniques to get her pulse and lungs functioning normally. Old lessons learned at her father's knee to school her expression into one of casual interest. Nothing more. Could he really smell a lie? Her panic threatened to return and with lessons taught by brutal experience she forced it down, forced it into a small corner of her mind to observe while she watched the predator stalking her home. Stalking her heart and body and threatening to take over. Already she craved him with a fierceness that terrified her. This was a strong man. A dominant man. A leopard at the top of the food chain. What would he say? How would he react when he realized his mate was meant to be Queen? An involuntary shudder shook her. He'd never submit to anyone, much less a bird. Even less a mate.

Her sight was keener than any other predator in the world. She was quick and agile. Her talons would, and had, rend the flesh from the most dangerous of enemies. But none of those things protected her heart from the leopard who'd already managed to worm his way in. It would destroy her if he turned away from her, if he left her. So she buried her secret, her deceit, deep in her mind. It wasn't like she was in a big rush to rule anyway. She'd been avoiding the duty for years, letting her cousin rule as Regent in her stead.

She ground her molars against the frown gathering in her thoughts and on her face. That was a problem. Mathew was consolidating. Reaching. Soon his power would eclipse hers. It wasn't because of arrogance that that rankled. Already he was doing things, making decisions that she disagreed with. They'd fought over and over again, loudly and bitterly, over his actions. He only responded if it was such an issue for her she was welcome to take over. He knew she didn't want to rule so it was an easy thing for him to suggest. As long as she didn't take the power for herself, it was his to do with as he wished.

She sighed. The time for holding back was fading fast. Her cousin's actions left her no choice. She would have to take the Eagle Throne, like it or not. She cast a longing look under her lashes, watching her newfound mate prowl the large room. Would she lose him when she did so? Likely. She'd never wanted to be in this position. Never wanted to lead or be queen. Certainly never wanted to be mated. She'd seen how much being queen had isolated her mother and watched her steady decline since the death of her mate until the point that she'd stepped down and made Ajax make decisions about the throne. Matterng that much to one person, depending that much on one person, petrified her. Yet here she was mated and contemplating her next move in the werebird world. Consolidating and calling on her power. Taking her throne. Taking

responsibility for every werebird in North America. She just hoped like hell she didn't end up like her father.

She knew Nico's questions were about his father, had watched the entire world tremble with the news of Hector Leonidas's death. Her heart ached for him. For a very personal loss she knew all too well. If her suspicions were right, that plane crash had been no accident. Would he react to the murder of a father the same way she had? She peeked at him from under lowered lashes. Of course he would. The memory rose sharp and sudden. It caught her in its teeth and wouldn't let go. She felt Nico stalk closer as her eyes slid shut, as her heart thudded at the recall of what had been done and what she'd done in retaliation.

Knuckles gently traced the curve of her cheek. The touch soothed her as nothing else could. "What is it, Ajax?"

She shook her head. "Remembering."

"The crash?"

She smiled a little. He was completely focused. "No. My father."

He moved his body closer to her, sharing his heat, and she realized she'd started to shiver. "Tell me," he ordered.

She scowled. She didn't take orders from anyone, but against her better judgment she started to speak. She told herself it was because he needed to know where she'd come from. That her independence and strength had been forged in blood.

"I was thirteen when he died. We went for a morning flying lesson." She didn't mention he'd been teaching her battle tactics, didn't mention part of the household Guard had been with them. "We were attacked by a group of rebel vultures."

She turned her face into his chest and rubbed her nose over his breastbone as he stroked her back. Nico ached for the girl she'd been. No child should have to see her father murdered. How had she survived? And who had punished the vultures? He got control of his protective rage, reasoned with the cat. If someone hadn't already done it, he would. Later. Now he needed to take her to bed and spend hours loving her body. He started to nudge her in that direction but she backed away.

"I'm not done." She sighed. "All of my kind knows this story, but no one speaks of it. I'm not sure why I'm telling you now."

He did. He'd accused her of keeping secrets. For some reason, she didn't want to speak about the crash so she was giving him this instead. The box around his heart cracked.

"I was too young to do anything about it at the time. Too weak." She shrugged one shoulder. A nervous gesture he hadn't seen yet. Afraid of how he'd react to whatever she was about to tell him? She fisted her hands.

"I waited five years. Then I gathered...some friends." Why that hesitation? His cat sniffed the air and raged. More deceit. "We tracked the vultures down."

She stared at her hands. Spread her fingers wide. Her voice when she continued was fierce, unapologetic. “I killed four of them myself.”

Man and cat went still. This was more than a secret in exchange for one she wasn’t willing to give over. This was the story of how a girl had become the woman standing before him.

His emotions were mixed. Rage that no one had kept her safe. Terror for what one wrong move during that operation could have cost them both. And pride. Sharp, bright satisfaction that she’d made those who’d hurt her pay. Both man and leopard agreed. An eye for an eye. Life for life. It was fitting that she’d killed the vultures. He would have done the same in her situation. It was the natural order in their worlds.

Twisting her fingers together, she turned her back to him and stared out the doors. The snow had begun and wind howled, battering the glass and shaking the house.

“You’re stuck here for a few days,” she whispered.

She was afraid again, but this time the fear didn’t seem to be of him. Her body was stiff and even though she saw him coming in the reflection on the door she winced a little when he rested his hands on her shoulders.

“Why the fear, little bird?”

She tensed, pulled free of his embrace, and turned to face him. Eyes narrow and cold, she set her hands on her hips. Her voice was glacial. “I know you didn’t just call me little bird.”

“Don’t like that huh?”

There was no scent of fear from her now, only extreme irritation. As endearments went, little bird was definitely out. Fighting a grin, he held his hands up in mock surrender.

“How would you like me to call you kitten?”

“I wouldn’t try it if I were you,” he managed to say through clenched teeth, the very idea of it appalling. He sucked in a deep breath. She’d made her point—time to change the subject.

“Why Ajax for Alexandra?”

The tension left her shoulders, and he knew he was on safer ground with the question.

“My father started it. He always joked Alexandra was too much of a mouthful and besides Ajax sounded tougher.”

She smiled a little as she answered, obviously caught in memory. Returning to the doors, she resumed watching the snow, growing quiet and thoughtful. He was drawn to her again, unable to resist moving closer and leaning down to nuzzle her neck. Would it always be like this? Would he always feel like he had to be touching her to breathe?

“The crash was pretty spread out.” The subject change surprised him enough he bit harder than he’d intended, hard enough to sting. Instead of a protest, she softened against him the scent of arousal on her skin growing. He licked, soothed the ache and waited for her to go on. “There are two enclaves near the

area. One on each end. I was visiting one. We checked out our end. Celeste *was* the only survivor there. If the storm passes, I'll take you to the other one tomorrow. Maybe you'll find the answers you need there."

He murmured agreement, ignoring a twinge of guilt. The crash and his father's fate were not the center of his attention at the moment. His brothers would probably cheer this new development. And rub it in his face. Ignoring that for now, but well aware he owed several apologies, he picked her up and carried her down the hallway he knew led to her bedroom. She felt fragile in his arms and didn't protest the move.

Her fingers curled around the nape of his neck, brushing over the shorn hair there. She didn't let go when he lowered her to the bed, tugging him down on top of her. Her eyes glowed in the dark room, but not with the confidence he expected to see. They were questioning, a little shy, sad. Lifting her head from the pillow, she kissed him. He didn't like his women aggressive in bed, but her actions spoke less of trying to gain control and more of a need to be held. In that he was willing and able to oblige her, desperate to eradicate the wounded feeling he glimpsed in her eyes.

He took her mouth in a slow kiss not bothering to reign in his possessive instincts. He wanted her body and soul. *Needed* her body and soul. More than that, he needed her to recognize it, to see it and submit to him, let him take care of her. It was selfish, but he didn't care. He couldn't change his nature.

He withdrew from the seduction of her mouth and sat up on the side of the bed. She lay back and watched. Silent but not withdrawn. No longer the closed-in, reserved woman he'd met only hours ago. That shell was broken, at least for now. He undressed her. Taking his time, watching her carefully as he went, he removed first her shirt and bra, then her pants and underwear.

Her skin was creamy white. He set his palm flat on her stomach and enjoyed the contrast of his dark hand against her paleness, purred with satisfaction at the way her belly spasmed under his touch. He slid his hand up, slow, wanting to map every inch of her body. He felt the ridges of old scars and eyed the faded areas.

"What happened here?" he asked, lingering over a long obviously old scratch that stretched across her ribcage.

She met his gaze with a small smile on her face. "Some birds are just as dangerous as wolves and leopards, you know. That one was from training. My own fault. Wasn't fast enough."

His growl was low and menacing. It took a lot to scar a wereleopard. He knew the same was likely true for a wereeagle. That someone had permanently marred her flesh infuriated him. He knew she felt his anger, but she didn't flinch when he bent to trail kisses over the old hurt. Breathing deep, she lifted a hand to his head. His hair was almost military short, but she ran her fingers through it, massaging his scalp with her long nails. The growl became a purr. The cat liked being petted, stroked. So did the man.

He continued kissing his way up her body. She tensed, her anticipation a thrilling taste on his tongue, when he reached the underside of her breast. He flicked his tongue over her nipple, used the leopard's superior night vision to watch it harden into a tight nub of sensation as he repeated the action. Her

breathing became a pant, and her hands clutched at his head as she thrust the breast up. He took her nipple between his teeth. Bit. Suckled.

Rolling off her, he propped himself on one elbow at her side and switched to the neglected breast. With his free hand, he skimmed her body from shoulder to hip. Learning her curves and skin, claiming what was his. He explored the downy white curls at the apex between her thighs, reveled in her low moans when his thumb flicked over her clitoris. Slowly he pressed his index finger into her waiting pussy. She mewled like a kitten. He added a second finger to her warm heat, thrust them slowly in and out. The orgasm came over her so quickly he hadn't anticipated it, hadn't been able to hold her back. She convulsed around him, her entire body stiff yet shaking.

His cat side was done waiting, done playing, and Nico let it take over. Still stroking his thumb over her clit, he rolled over, covering her body with his. She reached between them, took his cock in her tight little grip and guided him to her entrance. He froze for moment, resisting the urge to shackle her wrists over her head and show her who was in charge. She leaned forward, found his nipple with her tongue and a satisfied purr of her own.

"Nico. Now. Please," she whispered, breath feathering over his skin in carnal invitation.

"Greedy, Alexandra?" He used her full name, liked the feel of it rolling off his tongue.

A brief frown marred her forehead. "Only for you."

The cat preened its pleasure. Only for him. And she'd only ever be for him from now on. On that thought he could no longer resist and entered her in an unhurried, measured glide. He wanted to keep it slow, wanted to draw out the pleasure for both of them, but she wrapped her legs around his waist, dug her heels into the small of his back and gave him a look of such yearning he couldn't refuse her. It was impossible.

Still inside her, he sat up and grabbed a pillow. Placing it under her ass, sitting back on his heels, he was unbelievably deep. He gripped her hips and set a steady, even pace. He had to be careful. It would be so easy to lose control in this position, so easy to hurt her accidentally. The leopard was already desperate, wanting to rut. To fuck. To claim. Would that feeling, that urge, ever go away? Would his animal half ever be appeased? Ever accept there was no alternative for either of them—she was theirs. He'd had a hard time accepting it. Maybe when she accepted it, the leopard would calm. But right now it growled, hating being shackled, held back. It would prove to the woman some things were irrevocable. She must have seen or felt his struggle. Lifting her hands, she stroked his face. Petted his shoulders and back.

"What's wrong?" she whispered.

"Nothing," he grunted, increasing the speed of his strokes. She shouldn't be able to think with his cock buried in her. He met her gaze. Saw her confusion. "There's no going back, Ajax."

She actually grinned and tightened her grip on his shoulders. "No. I don't suppose there is. So are you going to fuck me like you want to? Like I want you to?"

The cat caged in his mind snarled for release. “Careful what you wish for, baby. I’m no tame house cat.”

“And I’m not a sweet, fragile swan that needs coddling.”

He wondered if she’d ever met his brother’s secretary. The swan’s cheerfulness irritated the shit out of him, but she sure wasn’t weak. That bird had a backbone of steel.

And, he realized, so did his mate. He should let her see him now. At his most dominant, his most possessive. There was no way to temper those traits. No way to ease her into his life. Not that he’d been doing that. So he fucked her. Hard and fast. Until her cunt clenched tightly around him and she screamed her release like an eagle’s battle cry. Seconds later he roared his own release.

He sensed her withdrawal almost immediately. Rolling over, he pulled her across his chest, anchoring her to him the best way he knew how. She wasn’t hiding. She wasn’t running. He refused to allow it. She was his.

Chapter Four

Ajax woke to weak daylight reflecting off the window, the cloud cover hadn't abated during the night, and languid sensual heat. The big cat who'd invaded her life and home was pushed close, his chest against her back, one thigh between hers and an insistent erection against her ass. Her head was pillowed on one thick biceps. His other arm was wrapped tightly around her waist.

His breathing was deep and even with sleep, but she didn't dare move, didn't try to exit the bed. She told herself it was because she knew any movement on her part would rouse him, but a secret needy part of her mind recognized the lie. She liked being held in his embrace. She hadn't felt so safe, so protected, in years.

An unfamiliar ring tone jarred her from the disturbing direction of her thoughts. His cell phone was on her nightstand and she reached for it, hoping to answer before the shrill tone woke him. He got to it first.

"Yes?" he barked.

She bit her bottom lip against a smile while rolling to her back. Clearly, her big cat didn't like having his sleep disturbed. He leaned over her, and she traced the stubble on his chin. The man on the other end of the line said his name and Nico jumped up, pacing to the other side of the room. He kept his back to her, one hand on his hip and stared out the window. Part of her mind registered that the snow had stopped, but she was so distracted by his scrumptious ass she missed the first part of the conversation.

Wereeagle ears were sharp and even standing several feet away and murmuring she heard the relevant parts. No wonder he thought his father was still alive. The conversation ended quickly, and he turned to face her, body rigid and eyes flinty.

"You heard?"

"Some of it."

"If he's alive, there's a reason he's not contacting us."

She knew anger made her eyes the angry slits of her bird. "Surely you're not suggesting my people are keeping him captive."

She barely restrained herself from emphasizing my people, reminding herself just in time he didn't know he was accusing the royal heir of holding his father hostage, but even she heard the edge of doubt in her voice. She only knew one person gutsy enough to make that kind of move without her approval. Her cousin was already on her shit list. She was almost positive he'd hired the ocelot assassin Ramon Guerra to kill Lyra Leonidas, formerly Lyra Marcus and incidentally the niece of Michael Lycaon, the werewolf

Alpha, and pretty certain he bankrolled a werewolf named Derek's attempt to oust Michael and install himself as Alpha. But if he were behind the disappearance of the wereleopard leader even being family wouldn't save him. She'd rip his throat out herself. She took a deep breath and forced herself to calm down, to think. She had her own concerns about that crash. Concerns she'd have to share soon.

Rising from the bed, she reached for the robe tossed across a chair and pulled it on. When he opened his mouth to speak, no doubt to protest the covering, she held a hand up for silence. She was amazed when he complied. Out of shock more than anything else probably.

"I'm not rushing to any judgments. After breakfast we'll go to the other enclave and see what they know."

She exited the room and walked down the long hall, sensing him following close on her heels. In the kitchen she got out bacon and eggs.

"You could fill me in," she suggested while cracking and beating eggs in a large bowl. Silent and broody, he started the bacon sizzling in a cast iron pan and glared at her.

"You heard."

Exasperation finally won. She threw her hands up in the air and paced. "That's my fault? You were in the same room. You know my hearing's as sharp as yours. I don't have the background knowledge to go with what I heard."

While she moved, the robe's makeshift tie loosened. She scowled at him, remembering what he'd done to the other one, but wasn't quick enough to prevent the lapels from falling open. She knew she should pull them closed, but was arrested by Nico's sharp inhalation and the heat that flared in his eyes. So much better than cold anger.

"Hector, my father, had a private bank account no one knew about. I only discovered it a couple of months ago."

He approached her with feline grace. Smooth. Silent. His hands settled on her hips and, leaning over, he nipped at the sensitive skin under her ear. Gasping, she let her head fall back. He took full advantage of the increased access and bit his way down her neck to her collarbone then licked his way back up. His rasping tongue set her blood on fire.

"Someone's been transferring money out of that account," he murmured between nips of his sharp teeth. "We finally traced it to a local bank. A bank owned by a bird conglomerate."

"Oh," she moaned, not sure if it was a response to his words or the fingers that teased her nipple into hardness.

His lips continued their southward track, and he sank to his knees to suck her other nipple between his teeth. She grabbed onto his shoulders, holding on for dear life as sensation flooded her. He paused a moment and looked up into her face.

"Aren't you going to share now?"

"I thought I was," she teased. He bit her in response, but she doubted it had the effect he wanted. She groaned and hung onto him harder. He growled when her fingernails dug into his skin, but it was a sound of pleasure not protest.

"We carry messages in bird form as you know and also own the werekind airline."

"Mmm hmm," he murmured while his tongue swirled around her navel. He licked a straight line down her belly to the curls hiding her pussy. Spreading the lips, he found the hard nub pulsing there. Licked. Bit. She groaned. God, he was going to kill her. His voice, mouth pressed so close, hummed straight to her core. "You were saying?"

"The crash was ruled an accident, but one of my mechanics doesn't believe it."

The change was so abrupt it was like flicking a light switch. He stood, all sensual play gone, gripping her hips so hard she knew he'd leave bruises. His normally green eyes became narrowed amber slits. Totally cat. She realized the leopard had taken over too late to get out of the way.

"Why weren't we informed?" The demand was harsh, guttural.

She made her body go soft, non-aggressive, and her voice coaxing. "I don't know who to trust, Nico. Until I know something for sure, my people will continue to investigate quietly."

His eyes still glittered severely, angrily at her. Lifting her hand, she stroked the side of his face. Tried to soothe, tried to placate. Instinct told her she wasn't out of danger yet.

"The last year...it almost looks like someone's instigating a war between the leopards and wolves. My Messengers have been dragged into the middle of that. It threatens our neutrality."

She continued petting him and breathed a sigh of relief when his eyes returned to normal. He was still furious, but he was in control. He let go of her hips, but before she could move away grabbed her shoulders with a small shake.

"You should have told me," he growled.

"I can't trust anyone with this. Not until I have answers."

The whisper was a harsh reminder that they may be mated, but they didn't know each other. He let go of her like he'd been scalded and stalked off, paced around the connecting areas of the living quarters.

"Is there anything else you've neglected to tell me?"

His voice was coldly furious, and he kept his back to her. She ached to go to him, to rub against him, offer what meager comfort she could. Viciously, she forced the urge down. Too many secrets left to go, and surely he'd turn against her when he learned them all.

She was beginning to get a sense of him, of how black and white his world was. Of how fierce his pride was. When he learned who she truly was he'd reject her. Maybe not because of her position, but because she'd kept it from him. She opened her mouth, but then snapped it shut. She wasn't ready to lose him yet.

Turning away, she walked to the counter and finished breakfast. He joined her when it was ready. Silent. His mood dark. She didn't break the silence, quietly cleaned up when they were done, steeling herself against what was still to come.

"The enclave we're going to is like a...military outpost."

He cocked an eyebrow and waited for her to go on.

"Our clans are broken down by species, but we're all ruled by one queen. There's a lot of inter-clan bickering and the queen is always an eagle. The eagles are the only ones who can really keep everyone else in line and cooperating." She shook her head. Some of the other breeds were ridiculously childish, their issues with each other stupid and petty. The others were...dangerous, covetous. And she was supposed to be the referee. It could really suck being at the top of the food chain. "Right now, we have a Regent. One of her cousins." She should have said one of *my* cousins, but still shied away from the inevitable.

"I knew this already."

"Right." Of course he did. "Anyway, this particular enclave belongs to several members of the Royal Guard. They live there. Train there. I haven't been there in years. I'm not sure what we'll find." Hopefully they wouldn't give her away but she wasn't holding her breath. "You have to be careful there. Let me do the talking." She frowned. "And we'll have to go in were form. It's too difficult to get to in human form. You'll need clothes."

He scowled. "What about you? You won't need clothes?"

"They'll have something for me," she replied. She could see the question in his eyes, but he didn't ask why. After a few seconds he nodded.

"I can handle the clothes."

He disappeared down the hall and came back a moment later with the backpack he'd been carrying when they met. He pulled jeans, a sweatshirt and a small bag out. Rolling the garments up, he stuffed them inside and zipped it shut. He held the bag up. It was half the size of his backpack and had two straps.

"You'll have to put it on after I shift."

He showed her how the straps would wrap under his shoulders to snap into place, then he stepped back and changed. She held her breath as she watched. She'd seen leopards before. They were big, powerful cats. Beautiful. She'd never felt such awe at seeing one. But this was different. He was hers. He butted his head against her thigh until she knelt and dug her fingers through his fur. He purred, let her explore a few minutes before stepping back and picking the pack up between his teeth. He dropped it at her feet and, sighing, she strapped it on him.

She wished she could delay this meeting and enjoy her cat for a while, but she could read the impatience in his gaze. She removed her own clothes and stepped out onto the deck, shutting the door behind them once he followed. He jumped onto a tree branch, then a lower one and another until he waited

on the ground below her. He grunted, and she realized she'd been staring. It was hard to rip her gaze away and concentrate on her shift. He was stunning.

Once she'd embraced the change, became the bald eagle her other half was, she quit thinking of Nico. Quit worrying about his leaving or clan business. Since he didn't know where they were going she stayed under the canopy, following the trail as far as it would take them. She let the exhilaration take her over, wind rushing under her wings as she flew dangerously fast just feet above the ground. He was forced to run to keep up but it was no hardship. His lope was strong, ground eating fast, and she felt an inexplicable pride in him. Her mate.

Too soon she had to slow her crazy flight to turn off the trail. There was only a narrow path going up the steep incline on the side of the mountain to the Guard's enclave. Normally she'd go above the treetops, but she wouldn't be able to lead Nico if she did.

The higher they went, the more she had to pull in her wings and slow her flight. He scrambled up the rocky mountainside easily, and in moments, they were standing on the huge ledge that led into the enclave. As soon as they came into sight, a sentry whistled, and she shifted, knowing news of her presence would spread quickly.

She bent to unbuckle the snaps holding Nico's pack on. He was standing and dressed when someone rushed out to meet her with clothes. She hurried to get into them before a crowd gathered. Patrick was first on the scene, and she inwardly groaned.

Nico recognized the man as the one who'd spoken to Ajax the previous afternoon. His every step was aggressive, territorial. He glowered at Nico. Nico wasn't sure if that was because of his presence in a place few were allowed or because of the woman at his side. Maybe the stranger thought he had rights to her. When he reached for Ajax, Nico growled and shifted his position to stand in front of her. He didn't know what the hell was going on here but no one was laying a hand on his mate. She shoved at his back and tried to step around him. He simply moved with her.

"Oh, good God. Nico. You're making me look bad," she hissed. Sharp talons scratched his back. He got the feeling if anyone else had dared block her she would've attacked. It pleased the cat that she held back with him. "Move."

Reluctantly, he stepped aside, closing his hand around her forearm. He didn't know what was going here, felt unexplained undercurrents, high tension, and growing anger. It seemed directed more at him than her, but he wasn't taking any chances.

She stood straight and tall next to him, glaring at the gathering crowd. Proud. And very, very angry. The scent rolled off her in waves. But other than that she showed no outward sign of any emotion. He almost growled. He was sick of seeing this façade of remote control. Then the other man moved and her control broke. She wrenched free of Nico's grasp and stepped forward. His heart literally stopped beating.

Toe to toe. Nose to nose. With a man much bigger than her. Probably faster. No doubt stronger. He was planning a counterattack when her voice rang through the clearing.

“Back off, Patrick. *Now.*”

The other man cocked an eyebrow. “You don’t have the right to order me around, Ajax.”

There seemed to be a collective gasp from the crowd and then it waited, breath baited for her response. Nico frowned. What was he missing?

Ajax crossed her arms over her chest and smiled. It was the coldest, most chilling thing Nico had ever seen, and he had a damned hard time reconciling this woman with his mate.

“Is that right?” Her gaze swept the crowd. “Need I remind you, all of you, that oaths were sworn? Blood oaths.”

Patrick tilted his head to one side. “Conceded. But you haven’t lived up to your side of those oaths either.”

She took a deep breath, and he had to force himself to focus on her face and not the way the action lifted her breasts. “That time has passed.”

A ripple rushed through the crowd. He smelled their exhilaration. Their approval.

“We need to speak. Privately.”

The man, Patrick, inclined his head. “Of course, Majesty. This way.”

He turned and walked towards a building carved out of the mountain. Three others peeled out of the crowd and followed before Ajax took a step forward. Nico stopped her with a tight grip on her elbow, but forced himself to release her and follow. He wanted to throttle her. To yell and rail at her. She’d had plenty of time to tell him that she was the queen. Right on the heels of anger was confusion. Why was a Regent ruling in her place? Why had she led him into this blind? What else was she keeping from him? His cat prowled the confines of his mind. It wanted answers *now*, and following four strange men into a building to talk was not likely to get them.

He was the last inside and pushed the door closed behind him with a little too much force. The sound echoed. Ajax wasn’t able to repress a wince. Good. She should understand how pissed off he was, how dangerous it was to anger a predator cat—and her mate—so much. He watched her move through slitted eyes and though her back was ramrod straight, her attitude screaming for a fight, he knew this wasn’t the time. He took a calming breath and looked around.

It was a large room with a long meeting table in the center. He’d expected it to be dim as closed in as it appeared to be, but huge skylights carved into the ceiling filled the place with light.

The four men sat at one end of the table and Ajax joined them. Nico prowled, too restless, too furious, to sit still.

“Nico,” she said softly, the slightest edge of command under the tone. He turned to glare at her.

“Don’t push your luck, Alexandra.”

She raised both eyebrows and sat back, again crossing her arms over her chest. This time he recognized it as a calculated move, something meant to convey ease, but he smelled the exact opposite. She was nervous. Anxious. Why? He concentrated. No fear so why the worry? Unless she thought this news would make him reject her. He snorted. That was impossible. Even if his father's fate didn't hang in the balance, she was his mate. Leaving would be like cutting off his right arm.

"Careful, Ajax," one of the other men said softly.

She turned to look at him, waited for him to go on.

"Cat. Bird." He shrugged. "Might want to watch how far you push him."

"I thought you had more spine, Jack."

They exchanged a long look, a look filled with history. "I have plenty of spine," he said quietly.

"Point taken. I apologize."

Nico had his suspicions. He caught Ajax's gaze, jerked his head to man. "He was with you?"

A look could communicate a lot. She knew he wanted to know if this man had been with her when she'd gone after the vultures who murdered her father. She nodded. Once. Slowly. Precisely. As if that time was too much for her to remember, and the pieces started to fall into place.

He stopped pacing, pulled the seat out beside hers and took her hand, lacing his fingers through hers. Some of the tension went out of her body.

"We'll talk about it later," he said. "For now..." He let the rest trail off. She knew what needed to be dealt with now. He watched the change come over her features and squeezed her hand.

"Don't do that."

Startled, she met his gaze. "What?"

"That change you do. That woman you become."

Across from him Patrick arched an eyebrow and grinned. "That's the queen."

"I don't like it," Nico snapped back.

She laughed softly, turned her head into his shoulder and bit. Her free hand moved to his waist. Stroking. Petting. Her touch soothed the cat, soothed the still present anger. Lifting her head, she nipped at his lower lip before turning to face the room, but it was Ajax that did so, not the remote shell.

"Start with the crash," she prompted. Steel in her voice, eyes clashing with Patrick's. Nico felt a pride he acknowledged he probably hadn't earned. He may not have the control over her he'd like, but *no one* was pushing his mate around. She would never allow it.

Patrick reached for the laptop at his elbow and spun it around. "Definitely sabotage."

He and Ajax both leaned in to study the screen. One half was filled with schematics, the other with a photograph.

"What am I looking at, Patrick?" she asked.

Patrick stood and leaned over. "This line?"

“Yeah.”

“Here it is on the schematic. It’s part of the hydraulics.”

“And?”

“We combed that site. Picked up everything. That’s why it took so long and I can’t be sure, Ajax. Some of the pieces were too damaged to be of any use. You understand?”

“I do. Go on.”

“Okay.” He clicked one of the pictures, a long hose. “See this hole?” He waited until she nodded before continuing. “It’s too precise.”

“Tool made,” Nico said, and Patrick nodded.

“Yeah.”

“Okay,” she said, leaning back and absently rubbing his thigh like she felt his turmoil. “Then the questions are, who did it and who was the target?”

Nico scowled. “First question is the target. That’ll point us to the other questions. But there’s another question to be addressed even before that. Where is my father?”

“Told you he was smart, Patrick. That he’d figure it out.”

The voice came out of his dreams, and he turned slowly, drawing the anticipation out, to see the face that went with it.

“Dad.”

Chapter Five

“Well that answers that question.”

Ajax repressed a wince of sympathy at the cold fury in Nico’s voice even as her own rose to match it and turned, slowly rising to meet this man, this *dead* man, who was her mate’s father. He moved with the feline grace she’d come to expect from the Leonidas males, but that’s where the similarity began and ended.

Hector was shorter, bulkier, somehow *harder* than his sons. He let his hair flow to his shoulders, and his eyes were dark, bitter chocolate. She presumed the brothers’ green eyes were a legacy of their mother. And she suddenly wondered why she’d never heard anything about the woman. She concentrated on the scene unfolding before her. That was a mystery for another time.

Nico strode forward and embraced his father with a quick squeeze. When he turned to face her, she forced herself to stand still and tall even though the accusation in his eyes cut her to the bone. She wouldn’t defend herself or her lack of knowledge. This was her fault. If she’d been willing to step forward and take her place before, she would have been in this enclave often. Would have known Hector was there. She ground her teeth together. The hell with that. She wasn’t taking all the blame. Patrick should have informed her. She’d make him answer for that later. First she had to deal with Nico, which meant regaining some of the emotional reserve he hated so much.

“Don’t,” Nico growled in warning, holding his hand out to her. He was tense, radiating rage, and it scared her a little. Was he trying to assert his dominance or responding to something else, the tension in the room, the secrets that kept getting revealed one after the other? “Don’t push me right now, Ajax. Come. Here.”

Hector raised an eyebrow, and she knew what he was wondering. Was the werebird queen going to bow to the demands of a leopard? Of his son? In front of her most senior advisors no less. Biting her lower lip, a nervous gesture she couldn’t seem to break, she met Nico’s gaze, watched as his softened a little. He kept his arm extended. Waiting for her to move.

“Ajax.” A definite warning in his voice this time, one everyone in the room heard. She sensed her lieutenants tensing for a fight and knew she had to diffuse the situation fast.

She wasn’t sure who would be the victor in a battle of wills between she and Nico, and if she tried he would try to make her pay for it later. She shivered in anticipation, remembering the ground rules he’d started off with. Submitting to him in private bedroom games was exhilarating, freeing, but it wasn’t going

to happen anywhere else. Looked like she needed to establish her own rules. How did you tame a cat? The thought of the fights to come sent a spike of adrenaline through her system.

She grinned. "I do like to live dangerously."

"If you don't move your ass, I'm going to give you dangerous."

Laughing, she shook her head. "You shouldn't assume that you're the most dangerous predator in the room. I realize that west of the Mississippi everyone probably follows your lead. Here they follow mine." She lowered her voice, "You're going to have to find a way to accept that, Nico, or this isn't going to work."

He cocked an eyebrow, incredulity stamped across his features. "You expect me to submit? Not fucking likely, baby."

Submit? Probably not. But he had to at least defer to her when there were others around, had to stop expecting her to submit to him in everything. Her stomach rolled and she took a steadying breath, knowing what had to be said, knowing it was going to hurt like hell to watch it happen.

"Then you should take your father and return to your lands."

He growled. "That's not happening either. Someone has to stick around to protect you from yourself."

God, the man was infuriating. She stepped close enough to poke him in the chest with her finger. "I don't need a protector, cat. I've been doing it myself for a long time. Why are we having this conversation again?"

"Because you aren't any good at it?"

Outrage coursed through her. Of all the gall. Hands fisted, her talons thrust through her fingertips and bloodied her palms while she struggled against the instinct to attack. If anyone else had dared speak to her like that, dared make that suggestion, she wouldn't have held back. She reminded herself, repeating it like a mantra, that he'd never seen her fight, this was the first time he was seeing her outside of her home.

Someone snickered behind her.

"Quick. Put him on the payroll. Anyone who can rein in the adrenaline junkie is worth any amount of money," Patrick drawled. He knew her well enough to know she was fighting the urge to attack, knew her body was keyed up for the excitement of a good match.

She spun around and glared at him. "How would you like to have your eyes gouged out?"

He smiled, slow and just this side of taunting. "Try it."

A hand closed around her wrist, and Nico yanked her back against his chest. "I don't think so," he said coolly, but he was speaking to Patrick not her.

Patrick shrugged, but he was smiling. "Another time, then. Better to get the business part finished first anyway."

Nico's arm was a tight band around her waist, and she stroked her hand slowly up and down its length. "Let's get this over with," she murmured before stepping forward. He let her go, and this time when

she returned to the table, she sat at its head. He took the chair on one side of her and Patrick the other. Hector sat next to his son. She met his gaze levelly, forcing any sentiment she might feel towards her mate's father to the back of her mind.

"Start at the beginning," she ordered. He may be the leopard king, but she was queen here.

Nico reached for her hand absently as if he didn't realize he'd sought comfort from someone else. He laced their fingers together, held their entwined digits against his thigh and lightly traced her knuckles while he focused on his father.

"How did you end up here? Why haven't you contacted us?" Nico asked. She didn't think anyone else heard the hurt in his voice, but Hector's eyes flashed with understanding.

"It was too dangerous. I was very badly injured. I'm amazed Celeste survived. I almost didn't. We agreed—" he jerked his head to include the other birds in the room, "—to keep my survival secret until I was stronger."

She narrowed her eyes, furious over the deception, and looked him over. "That's obviously been a while." Then she turned to Patrick. "You should have told me."

Nico's fingers clenched around hers. A warning? Comfort? Patrick met her gaze steadily.

"You weren't ready to take over, and I promised your father we wouldn't force it on you. Under the circumstances it was safer for you."

She forced her jaw to unclench. "I've never picked safer."

He smiled and this time it was with warmth. Respect and remembrance. "No. You have your father's strength."

She ignored the implication that her mother *didn't* have any. Her father's death had broken her mother. Everyone knew that. It was no wonder to anyone that she'd spent the fifteen years since her father's death avoiding personal relationships and the throne. She studied Patrick. But maybe they'd resented her refusal more than she realized.

"What do we know?"

"It had to be someone with access to the plane at Refuge," Hector said. She shivered at the calculating rage in his voice. She'd hate to be the one responsible when the leopard tracked him down.

"We'd need a complete list of everyone who was at the resort at the time."

Even as she stated the obvious she had a knowing, a foreboding. She knew who was behind this, behind everything the last few months, even if she couldn't prove it. She didn't have to as it turned out.

The door slammed open, and Mathew walked in with enough arrogance in his swagger to make her gums hurt from grinding her teeth. She watched him approach, watched his gaze sweep the room and take in the presence of the two leopards and realization of the older's identity dawn. His eyes finally settled on her, and she rose to face him.

“Another survivor,” he drawled. “I obviously need to come up here more often. How many others are you hiding, Ajax?”

She smiled coldly. “Just the two.”

Leaning against the opposite end of the table, he seemed to consider her words, accept them before moving on to something else. “It’s true then,” he said.

She wondered what he meant. It was obvious she’d taken a mate and that meant Mathew’s position was in jeopardy. It was almost unheard of for a mated heir not to take the throne. If a Regent was necessary it was almost always a mate. Nico would have the right to demand her cousin hand over control of the clan if she didn’t take it for herself, if he were a bird. She struggled to remember their history—certain at some point in the distant past there had been a non-bird Regent. Only an eagle could sit on the throne, but there wasn’t actually anything in law barring other species from holding the Regent’s position. That was simply tradition. But maybe he was only reiterating Hector’s obviously very alive presence to himself. If her suspicions were true and her cousin had tried to kill the cat, then his life was forfeit.

“What?” she asked.

“It doesn’t matter.” A slight shake of his head. “Challenge.”

Her jaw dropped. A challenge could be issued by anyone in the clan. With just cause. It rarely happened if leaders were strong, and she was strong. She also had the right to have a representative fight in her stead. She’d never exercised that right before, always had chosen to fight her own battles. As queen, they probably wouldn’t let her. In the past it would have gone to Patrick, but now Nico would have first choice. She wasn’t about to put him in that position. She moved away from the table, out in the open of the room where she could maneuver if necessary. Nico shadowed her.

“Grounds?”

She didn’t ask what she really wanted to know, didn’t want him to realize how suspicious she’d been of him and his actions for months. Not until she was ready, until she had more information. But she wondered, why now? Why wait till this moment to challenge her? There was a slim possibility it might remove his only obstacle to total rule over the birds—her—but what did that have to do with all his machinations with the leopards and wolves?

“Supremacy. Purity,” he said with a glare at Nico.

“Ah. That old argument.” She hadn’t realized Mathew was part of the small minority that believed there shouldn’t be any interspecies mating. It didn’t ring true as the reason for his challenge though.

She shook her head. “I don’t think so. What are you really up to?”

His grin made her skin crawl. “You’ll see soon enough, cousin.”

Damn it, she should take him out now. Forcing herself to stand still, she pressed her lips together. A challenge had been issued. She couldn’t make a move against him before morning. Honor and the rules demanded that much.

“How does this challenge thing work?” Nico asked Patrick who’d moved between them at Mathew’s entry.

“He issues his challenge. She has until morning to meet him. Or her representative has until morning to meet him.” The smile he turned on her cousin was feral. “You know we aren’t going to let you fight her. You aren’t worthy of that battle. You haven’t earned it.”

The protest died on her lips, hearing his words and seeing the reflection of his feelings in the other eagles’ faces around the room. It was a part of their command structure she’d never liked. She could fight her own battles, was encouraged to, until she accepted the title. Then she was expected to give her defense over to someone else. She hated that. Chafed under those cultural rules. And Mathew knew it. His gaze was mocking when he met hers. He expected her to overrule her advisors, and it made her even more suspicious. Contrary. She nodded at Patrick.

“Make the arrangements.”

She pivoted on her heel, but Nico caught her wrist before she could leave. “Wait.”

She faced him and raised an eyebrow. She was shaking and struggling to conceal it, a combination of adrenaline and excitement and fear threatening to overrun her system.

“This representative. Who has first choice at that?”

Her heart pounded. She didn’t want to drag him into this, but she’d already spent too much time not telling him important things, things he needed to know. She tried for nonchalance. Shrugged. “Mates have first dibs. Then senior advisors. Patrick most likely.”

Looking over, she met his gaze and he bowed deeply. “Of course, Ajax. I’m at your service.”

Nico moved to her side, the movement breaking her concentration on Patrick. They stared at each other for several long seconds.

“So it’s my right, correct?” Nico asked Patrick not her. She held her breath. She didn’t want this. Did she?

“It is.”

“Fine.” He glanced at Mathew standing near the door then back to Patrick. “Make it happen.”

“No problem,” Patrick murmured while ushering Mathew out the door. The other three werebirds followed them. She was left alone with two leopards, one of them really pissed off. Hector chuckled, but there was an undercurrent, a glee to it that made her suspicious.

“Think I’ll leave you two alone. Ajax, dear, your rooms are always kept ready, you know.”

What the hell was Hector up to? Charm seemed so out of character. Then again, she wasn’t likely to be catching him at his best.

“Thanks.” She nodded and chanced a look at Nico. His expression was inscrutable.

“Lead the way,” was all he said.

The enclave was carved into the side of the mountain. Meeting spaces were on the bottom level where they were now and living spaces higher up. All of the enclaves had guest rooms, but this one had quarters specifically for the royal family, for her. She went through the door Hector had come in that was tucked into the back of the room and walked down a short corridor. They followed a set of wide steps up a level where it branched into a long balcony before breaking up into two new staircases. She took the one on the left, hugging the inside of the mountain. Huge window seats were carved out but she didn't take time to enjoy the view with the cat prowling at her back.

Finally they came to the end of the long climb and turned left into a corridor leading through the mountain. Every few yards they passed closed doors until stopping at the end of the hall before the last door. Twisting the knob, she paused and sucked in a deep breath. The last time she'd been here was the morning her father died.

Entering was like stepping into a time warp. She forgot Nico was with her as she wandered around the living area. She swore she could still scent her father—hear her mother's soft teasing laughter.

The place was laid out like a human apartment with a small kitchen and living area in the center flanked by two master bedrooms. She walked to the French doors and threw them open. Stepped onto the stone ledge and spread her arms to feel the wind ruffling her feathers. At this height there was always wind.

She was brought back to the present when Nico wrapped an arm around her waist and pulled her back inside, firmly shutting the doors behind them. Ready to face the music, she turned to face him. He was scowling out the glass panes.

"There's no rail on the porch. Do you have any idea how high up we are?"

She couldn't help it. She laughed. His expression just grew darker, and she moved closer, lifting a hand to caress the side of his face.

"I'm an eagle remember? We like heights and falling isn't exactly a problem."

"It's a problem for cubs," he muttered still glaring outside.

A vice squeezed around her heart. He was speaking of children. *Their* future children. In mixed were matings one parents' DNA always reigned supreme. Would it be his or hers? That could be a problem. A cat couldn't rule the werebirds obviously. She shook her head once.

"Impossible."

He broke away, and her gaze followed him as he moved around. Her leopard was a pacer.

"My genes will be dominant, of course," he said stroking the back of a leather couch. She shook her head at his confidence, biting back a laugh. Like he could just issue a command and there you go. Cub instead of eaglet. She considered arguing with him over it, but didn't think it would be worth it. Her father had taught her to pick her battles and it would be a minimum of several months before they could know the outcome of this one. Besides, neither one of them had any control over how the genetics would work out.

She was confident it would be in her favor and it would be oh so fun to watch that dominant streak bite him the ass. He looked up, and his gaze was sharp, eyes steely.

“There are more important things to deal with right now though.” He came around the couch on soft feet. Eerily quiet. She knew she was being hunted by one of the world’s most dangerous big cats, and she retreated until her back hit the stone wall. He lifted his hand, grazed her cheek with his knuckles. “You are in so much trouble, Ajax.”

The protest lodged in her throat. She wouldn’t make excuses. She should have told him everything from the beginning. She knew that. But that wasn’t why she held her tongue. It was the heat coming off his body, the erection pressed against her belly, the pure male scent of his skin.

Excitement gripped her with hard teeth. This was a man who would never let her rule him, who would give as good as he got and make her melt while he did. She loved him for it. A crazy thing to be thinking so soon after meeting him, but it felt right. Felt true. She wanted to mark him, bite him with teeth made beak hard and complete the mating he’d started.

Nico felt the change, the shift in her and knew she’d accepted him as her mate. He watched her tongue trace over little sharp teeth and held in a groan while his leopard roared for release. It wanted to lick, to bite, to assert its dominance, but he held the beast in a strong grasp. Once he started, he’d hold her at his mercy, and there was something she needed to do first. He lifted his hand to cup the back of her head and nudged her forward.

“Do it before I lose control, Ajax,” he rasped.

Teeth. Hard biting teeth. He clenched his jaw hard enough to break and threw his head back with a growl. When he realized there was no getting control of his impulses, no holding back, he let his claws burst through his fingertips and shredded her T-shirt. It floated to the floor in a tattered ruin, but he ignored it, caught and held instead by round breasts, by nipples made into rigid points of arousal. He took one in his palm. Explored. Shaped. Releasing it, he grabbed her hips and slid her up the wall so her breasts were at his eye level. Then he pressed forward and sucked her nipple between his teeth. She wrapped her legs around his body and cried out.

He let go and admired the moisture he’d left, the shocking redness. He wasn’t worried he’d hurt her. He could feel wetness through her jeans as she ground her pelvis into him, soaked in her moans and whispered words of encouragement. She was driving him crazy, and that need mixed with the deep fury he still felt at her deception had him riding a lethal edge.

He reached behind him and unhooked her ankles. Set her on the ground and stepped back. She met his gaze with lust filled eyes. He tore his shirt over his head and reached for the snap on his jeans.

“Get your jeans off,” he ordered. Her eyes followed his movements as he carefully tugged his zipper down. She stood frozen in place. “Now,” he growled shoving his jeans over his hips and down his legs. He kicked them off as she finally started to remove hers.

Too damned slow. She was struggling with her zipper when he took over. He wasn't gentle. He didn't have any gentleness left in him. The offending jeans were yanked off, gone in seconds, and she was left exposed to him. He spun her around and placed her palms flat against the wall high over her head. He growled a warning close to her ear when she tried to lower her arms. She froze, but he was pleased when he smelled no fear only excitement on her skin.

He took a steadying breath, fought with his cat's enthusiastic approval of her current position—fought its need to take over. Instead he gave into the urge to explore, to stroke and pet, assuaging the leopard's tactile need for touch. Her skin was pale and clear. Unblemished except for the few scars he'd already discovered. Soft. So soft.

He trailed his hands over her shoulders. Down her back. Stepped closer when he shaped the rounded globes of her ass. She groaned when he spread her and rubbed his thumb against the tiny puckered hole there. He nudged her thighs apart with his knee and let his cock slip between her legs, groaning at the heat and cream that escaped her pussy. She rolled her hips. The friction was exquisite. Tempted him to rush when he was determined to go slow. He slapped her ass hard enough to leave a rosy print.

"Stop that."

She whimpered but held still as he went back to his exploration. He used his thumb to press a slow steady rhythm against her asshole, but he didn't seek entrance. Instead he read her reaction. Her heart beat faster, the sweet scent of her arousal grew stronger.

She turned her head to the side, one cheek pressed against the hard wall. She was flushed, a pink tint to her skin. He slid his fingers lower, thrusting them between the folds hiding her slit. Groaning, she jerked against him, and he bit her nape in warning. When she was still again, he dipped a finger into her cunt. Just rimming the entrance, he tortured her. Tormented her. A fine tremor had taken over her body, and he knew she was struggling not to come, fighting an orgasm she knew he wasn't ready for her to have yet.

Her submission, her compliance, satisfied the cat like nothing else could. He edged his fingers a little farther into her channel while reaching around her torso, the wall scraping his knuckles as he made just enough room for his hand, palming one breast. Her breath hitched when he took her nipple between his fingers and squeezed. At the same time, he thrust his fingers all the way into her.

"Come now, Ajax," he growled against her throat, exulting at the way she clenched around him and screamed her release.

He didn't give her any time to come down. Removing his fingers from her, he repositioned himself pushing his cock slowly up. Deep. He rolled his hips, loved the way she convulsed around him. No protest. No resistance. Even though he held her pinned against the wall and, as he was learning, she was just as dominant in personality as he was, she gave him complete and total power. One day, soon probably, she'd want to try reversing that, want to take the sexually dominant role. The idea had never appealed to him

before, but he was intrigued. He could give it a shot with Ajax, give her that kind of control. That kind of trust. But not now. For now he was in charge.

She trembled, and he knew she was going to come again. Knew he could hold her off or make her respond over and over all night long if he wanted to. But he didn't have that kind of control in him right now. He wrapped his arms around her waist and lifted her. He stayed lodged inside her as he carried her to the back of the couch. Gritted his teeth against the seductive friction as he positioned her leaning forward over it.

He ran a hand up and down her spine. Goose bumps rose in its wake, and he explored them a moment, fascinated by this new sign of her stimulation. They couldn't hold his interest long though, and he started to move in slow but hard strokes designed to push them both beyond reason, beyond thinking. He leaned over, covering her body with his and dropping small kisses up her back until he reached the nape of her neck.

Following instinct, allowing the leopard to rule his actions, he clamped down, holding her still with his teeth. He felt a fresh wave of her cream drench his cock and shuddered, clenched his jaw, fighting the orgasm that was coming on too soon. He couldn't hold off long so he reached between them and found her clit. One rough rub and she shook, her entire body caught as she exploded again. It was all he needed to break his bonds and he pounded into her, holding her in the submissive pose until he also screamed in release.

Dismayed, he realized he smelled blood and found he'd pierced the skin on her throat when he'd lost control. Lapping at it, he groaned and stood, but he only released her long enough to turn her around to face him. A tremor wracked her body, and she looked a little shell-shocked. A wave of remorse and tenderness threatened to undo him.

He should apologize, but he couldn't promise it wouldn't happen again. He could show her more easily than express the words anyway. Picking her up, he moved to the front of the sofa and lay down with her. She curled up against him, head pillowed on his chest, hand clenched over his belly. He petted, soothed, felt her relax enough to mold herself against him and drift off to sleep. He held her like that a long time, then reluctantly rose and carried her to one of the bedrooms, tucking her in and murmuring soothing words when even in sleep she protested being left alone.

He was in the living room pulling on his jeans as the knock came at the door. His fur rose in menace, the cat pissed at the intrusion, but it settled when he picked up his father's scent. He opened the door and stepped out of the way when Hector and Patrick walked in. He would have bristled at the other man's presence but it was clear from his scowl he could smell what had happened in the room earlier.

The wereeagle stalked in and glared at Nico. The look focused on his neck and he refused to lift a hand, to touch the mark Ajax had left. She was his. He was hers. His annoyance lifted to be replaced with a sense of rightness. Of belonging. It was an odd feeling for a loner leopard.

"Where's the queen?"

Nico raised an eyebrow at the demand in the tone. "Sleeping."

"She should hear the arrangements." Patrick was trying to exert rights over his queen. Not on Nico's watch.

He smiled, letting his expression go cold and feral. It had little effect on the bird, just a slight shift in his eyes of knowledge. Nico spread his feet into a fighting stance and crossed his arms over his chest.

"The way I figure it it's her job to rule all the birds and yours to advise her. Right?"

Patrick nodded clearly suspicious.

"And who protects her from you all? Who shields her from the petty demands of an entire race?"

Patrick's fists clenched. "This isn't exactly petty."

"No." Nico shook his head. "But we might as well start the way we're going to continue."

"With you as go between?" Patrick asked derisively.

"No. With me as protector." Everything settled inside him at the statement. The turmoil. The questions he hadn't been able to address yet. "Her safety is my responsibility."

"You're staying?" Hector asked.

"Of course I'm staying." Had there really been a question about that? "Where else would I would go?"

A gasp behind him. A sense of relief. He fought the urge to whirl around and face her, let her approach on her own. He'd been so focused on dealing with her advisor he hadn't heard her rise from bed or scented her presence as she approached.

She stopped beside him, a little behind. He could easily step in front of her if she was attacked and he realized that's why she'd positioned herself as she had. Not that she couldn't defend herself, but because she knew he wouldn't let her. Her fingers curled around his shoulder and squeezed. A sign of solidarity, of support from one mate to the other.

Chapter Six

“You have news?” Ajax asked. She slid her hand down Nico’s arm and linked her fingers with his as she stepped forward. He tensed but kept his protest to himself. She smiled inwardly. Her cat was learning.

Patrick inclined his head just enough to be polite. “Tomorrow at dawn.” She could feel Hector watching her with interest but ignored him as Patrick paced around the room. He met her gaze and jerked his head at Nico. “You want to explain the rules or should I?”

Hell, no. She wanted to enjoy the rest of the day and not fear for what morning might bring. Nico stepped behind her and wrapped his arm around her shoulders, tugged until she leaned back into the embrace. “Tell me, Patrick.”

Patrick looked him over. “I hope you’re as good as you think you are.”

A growl welled up in Nico’s chest, and she set her palm flat on his thigh. His muscle spasmed at the touch, but he quieted. “I am.”

The other wereeagle nodded. “You’ll need to be. Mathew’s one of us, a Guard. He’s only been Regent the last few years since Ajax’s mother stepped down as queen, but he’s kept in fighting shape.”

“Why was he Regent and Ajax not queen?”

Patrick shook his head. “That’s for her to tell.”

“I refused,” she said softly for Nico’s benefit and pleaded with her eyes for Patrick to understand. To forgive. They’d been good friends once. Comrades. “The throne killed my father and destroyed my mother. You can’t blame me for...resenting that.”

Patrick held her gaze a long time and finally nodded. “There’s a lot to do now.”

Acceptance. She couldn’t fight her relief, and Nico hugged her tight in support.

“Let’s deal with this first. Mathew’s behind it all, isn’t he?”

It was hard to concentrate with Nico pressed against her back, but at least it saved her from being overwhelmed by the *what ifs*. What if she’d taken the throne when she was eighteen? What if she’d become suspicious of Mathew sooner? How many people had died in the last year because of her inaction?

“No guilt,” Nico whispered in her ear. “You can’t change the past.”

Tears pricked her eyes, and she hurriedly blinked them away. She’d been taught to show no emotion, had spent years pretending she didn’t feel remorse, and in two days, he’d blown that control to hell. She had an urge to turn around and hide her face in his shirt. Yesterday it would have freaked her out, but it no longer worried her.

She shifted a little so she could put her arm around his waist, but he kept her close, tucked up under his shoulder. For the first time in years she felt like she belonged. She felt whole.

He'd said he was staying. Her first terror dealt with. The second wasn't so easy.

"The rules," she reminded Patrick.

He tilted his head to one side and studied her before answering. "I expected more protest from you actually."

She snorted and looked up at the wereleopard standing so close. "Wouldn't have done me any good. Seemed like a waste of words."

Patrick grinned but his gaze was assessing. "True. You were always quiet for a girl."

She smirked. "Watch it, buddy. I can still kick your ass."

"You could try."

"You're on."

"I hate to interrupt old home week," Nico drawled, "but could we get back on target?"

They sobered and Nico spoke to Patrick. "Why would she protest?"

The male wereeagle looked back in forth between the two of them and she shook her head slightly. She knew Nico would just get pissed off again. Patrick ignored her. He shrugged.

"It's not like she hasn't been challenged before. Happens all the time, and she deals with it. But traditionally, once an heir accepts her rule, she can't fight her challenges herself anymore. Queens are too valuable. Besides, it's rarely done. The heir has usually more than proven herself by this point."

"What happens if her representative loses?"

Patrick narrowed his eyes. "Would it be better if I do it?"

Nico snarled, and she turned her head pressing a kiss against his bare chest before biting down. His hand stroked the back of her head, and the snarl stopped. God, he was touchy.

"It was a logical enough question to ask," he said, voice cold with anger.

"Then the Council convenes and chooses another female from the ruling family to take the throne." He paused. "That's never happened before."

"Okay. What are the rules?"

"There's really only two. You can fight clawed, but since you're different species, not in a full shift. And it's to the death."

And *that* was the part that made her blood run cold. It didn't even give Nico pause.

"I wouldn't expect anything less."

There was a knock on the door. Patrick went to open it pausing at Nico's sharp, "*Who is it?*"

"I took the liberty of having lunch sent up. And a few other things your father thought you might find useful."

Nico nodded a go ahead and the door was opened. Two women from the large enclave staff pushed in two rolling carts. The first contained food. It was pushed into the kitchen where the top was unloaded onto the island and the hidden compartments on the side into the cabinets and refrigerator.

She arched an eyebrow at the second. Nico took the rolling desk from the woman pushing it and placed it on the wall between the front door and the bedroom then pulled one of the armchairs over. The food cart and employees disappeared while he unwound the various cords that went with two laptops and a couple of phones.

He had a happy distracted look on his face. Like a kid in a candy shop. The three of them gave him space. She ate one of the sandwiches at the counter and grabbed a bottle of water from the fridge watching while he plugged in various wires and booted up the computers.

“Bring me one of those, baby,” he said while focusing on a screen and typing commands, his tone distracted.

She sighed. Of course she’d end up with a mate fascinated by modern technology. The stuff made *her* head hurt. After handing him the sandwich, she stood at his shoulder and stared at the screens trying to figure out what was so absorbing. She didn’t have a clue.

“What are you doing?”

“Checking the resort records to see if your cousin was around the week or two before the flight.” She knew what that was. Refuge’s logo was clear on one of the screens. Frowning, she leaned in closer to look at the other one. “This one?”

He leaned back with a satisfied gleam in his eyes when the Messenger airline’s database opened. She scowled. He shouldn’t be able to access that.

“Hacking your airline.” He grinned up at her. Patrick and Hector both crowded close at his words.

“Anything interesting?” Hector asked.

“Mathew was at Refuge. Arrived a few days before you and Celeste left and departed two days later.”

“So that puts him there,” Patrick said softly. “He’s a pilot. Most of us are, so I’m sure he could pull it off. The question is, why?”

“Power,” she said, ignoring the churning in her gut. She understood this kind of greed, but she couldn’t relate to it. Nico absently took her hand and rubbed her knuckles while watching his screen scroll. The unconscious offer of support soothed her, but Patrick watched her, waited for her to go on. “We’re the wealthiest clan in North America, but not really powerful. Neutrality has always been at the core of what we are. The two don’t really go hand in hand.”

Nico looked up at her. “That’s just a different kind of power, baby.”

She smiled a little. She knew. But it obviously wasn’t enough for her cousin. She went to the refrigerator for another bottle of water twisting the lid off as she slowly walked back over.

“Here it is,” Nico growled while reaching for the phone.

“What?”

He gave her a startled look like he’d forgotten she was even in the room. She rolled her eyes. The man had to work on his communication skills.

“The list of mechanics on duty the week before the crash.”

She noticed the cats tense a split second before she heard the voice, didn’t realize until later that their sense of smell must be much keener than hers.

“Oh, I don’t think that’ll be necessary.”

She whirled around to face that voice but it was too late. He must have come in through the balcony doors, an easy enough feat for an eagle. Mathew grabbed her, arm around her throat, talons sharply poking her neck. She felt a trickle of blood and knew that if he moved a fraction of an inch he’d pierce her jugular. Not even a shifter could survive that. She was amazed that Nico didn’t roar his rage. It was there in the murderous gleam in his eyes, the edgy lines of his body. He wanted to act yet couldn’t. His hands were effectively tied. She needed to buy some time and she *wanted* all the answers.

“Why, Mathew? Why fuck with the other clans like you did or come after me like this? You know I’ll fight you. You could have challenged me months ago.”

His talons dug deeper into her throat at that last reminder, and she felt the blood flow trickling down her throat increase.

“I didn’t need to challenge you before. I was in charge. Then you had to go mate this cat and take the throne.”

She struggled to breathe as his hand convulsed around her neck and it pissed her off. She should never have got herself into this position. She was a better warrior than this.

“The clans,” he went on and she felt his chest shift against her back, knew he shrugged. “The weaker, the lesser organized they are, the stronger we are. And if I can get rid of the Leonidas and Lycoan families I can replace them with someone I control.”

“Power,” she whispered. “It’s all about power.”

She looked at the other three men in the room. “They won’t let you leave here alive.”

He leaned closer, his hot breath blowing over her skin. “Maybe not. But they’ve destroyed my plans. My dream. So now I’m going to destroy the most important thing to them. Two of them at least. How do you think your cat and advisor will feel forced to stand there and watch you bleed out?”

Patrick moved, rolled to the balls of his feet. She could see his struggle, knew he wanted to lunge and dared not.

“Oh, I wouldn’t if I were you, Patrick,” Mathew drawled. “She’ll just die faster.”

His talons dug deeper and she knew if she survived this, she’d have a new scar to add to her list. Had Mathew always been this sadistic and she’d never noticed? It didn’t matter. She had to act, someone had to act, or she would die here soon. She wanted to know what it would be like to live, to rule, with Nico at her

side. To know whose DNA would turn out to be the most dominant one. Watching him closely, she hoped he knew that, hoped it saw it in her eyes.

Rage couldn't even begin to describe the emotion that consumed Nico. He'd felt rage before. This was much more violent than any urge he'd ever experienced. If Mathew harmed her, the leopard would tear his throat out. Already it demanded retribution because the man dared lay hands on its mate, for the trail of blood flowing down her neck. His fury matched the cat's, merged and became something terrifying. The man would die. Hard and brutal, but not fast. Fast was for those deserving mercy, and this one didn't.

Appeased, the leopard crouched, prepared itself for the hunt. Nico would give it free reign once Ajax was clear of those talons. He circled them, thinking, planning.

"Ajax," he spoke softly, not wanting to spook the eagle holding her into doing more damage than he already had. "Remember the last thing we did before we left your house?"

She cocked an eyebrow. He would have thought she was entirely too blasé about the situation if not for the scared look in her eyes. He railed silently. What kind of security expert was he that he couldn't even protect his own mate? After a moment her eyes cleared and she smiled, her expression softening. Shit. He hoped she wasn't thinking about when he'd fucked her. Not yet anyway. He needed her to shift, fast, and get the hell out of the way.

Her nod was so slight he almost missed it. And then in a quick flash of movement she became her eagle, slashing her talons in a downward sweep as she dove out of the way. Blood welled across Mathew's face and chest, and he turned, screaming his outrage. Before he could lunge after her, though, the leopard crushed his throat then jerked the body until the neck snapped loudly in the silence.

Nico was lost deep in the leopard's fury. It had wanted to toy with the man, drag out his suffering. The death was too quick. Too easy. It was only the petting hands, the soothing voice of its mate that got it to unclamp its jaws, to release the carcass. She wrapped her arms around his neck and tugged him back. He gave the body one last vicious swipe before complying, stepping away and shifting.

Patrick and Hector hefted the body. "We'll dispose of the trash."

Ajax followed them to the door and turned the lock then did the same with the glass doors. He hadn't even noticed when they'd been opened, and it had almost cost him everything. The rage, the bloodlust was still riding him hard as he looked her over, examining her body from a distance for other signs of injury. It wasn't enough. He needed his hands on her, his cock in her. The desire swept over him with the force of a tornado. He knew it was a bad idea in his current state but he couldn't help himself.

"Come here," he demanded. She hesitated. "Now, Ajax."

She sauntered over, smile slow and sultry. He knew that little extra swing in her hips was for him and suddenly everything in him calmed, centered. She stopped in front of him, and he set his hands on her waist. Slowly moved them around to mold her butt and yanked her closer. He leaned his forehead against hers and breathed in her scent, convinced himself she was alive and well.

“If you ever scare me like that again, I’ll spank your ass.”

She laughed and leaned back, looked him straight in the eyes. “I love you too, Nico.”

A vice clamped around his heart, and he exhaled a gusty sigh of relief as he crushed her to him.

“‘Bout damned time you admitted it. I love you, baby.”

He kissed her. Inhaled her. Sucked in her essence, her soul. Then gave all of himself to her. Irrevocably.

Forever never felt so good.

Epilogue

Hector stood off to the side, holding the kind of glass his mate had always liked—delicate and fragile—incongruent in his big beefy hands. He flexed one fist, watching the movement, wondering what she would have thought of this gathering.

He looked around. She would have loved it.

All their sons, all their *mated* sons, were here to celebrate Adrian's wedding to Cleo, a werelioness. Interesting woman, Cleo. A fine match for Adrian.

He counted the rest of them.

Celeste and Jason, finally come home. He stood tall and relaxed, though he never let her move from the shelter of his arm.

There were Ajax and Nico. The werebird queen and his third son, more besotted than he ever expected to see *any* of his sons.

And finally Lyra and Zander. The wolf. The hugely pregnant wolf. She approached him, Zander's gaze following her closely even while holding a conversation with Adrian.

"Having a good time?" she asked, sipping a glass of water.

From the corner of his eye, he watched Ajax excuse herself and leave Nico with Adrian and Zander. She stepped forward with that regal, smooth glide he was growing accustomed to, linking her arm through Lyra's.

The women faced him together. A united front. The two predators, by more than virtue of species, mated to his sons. Neither of these two women were ever going to be controlled, be handled. He admired their gumption if nothing else and grinned, not caring if it was just this side of feral. They could deal with the sometimes murky politics of a predator shifter's family.

Both narrowed their eyes at the look, both did that little subtle shifting of stance that warriors did when preparing for battle. Oh, yes. Worthy women. And if the future brought what he suspected it would for *all* shifter species, if that dark cloud looming on the horizon came to pass, they would need to be. But he wouldn't dwell on that today. Today he'd enjoy being in the presence of his family, ignoring the ever-present pang of grief and guilt caused by the one who refused to be with them. Another secret he'd kept from his sons, another lie he'd told. For their own good, or for his? He didn't know anymore. He shook his head. There would be time enough for that later.

He saluted Lyra with his glass. "To the next generation of Leonidas leopards."

She cocked an eyebrow and took a drink from her glass. "What makes you so sure they'll be leopards?"

He choked on his wine, and Ajax hit him just a little too hard on the back while he coughed. He knew by the look in her eyes she was aware of what she was doing and took enjoyment in it. Ignoring her, he focused on his youngest son's mate.

"Of course they'll be cats. Dominant DNA and all that."

He waved a hand through the air knowing he shouldn't have to explain it to a doctor. At least he thought not. Ajax and Lyra exchanged a long, knowing look and both burst out laughing. He glared. They'd probably both refuse to have leopards just to spite him.

The others approached. Celeste with her gentle smile, Cleo trying not to show her hyper-awareness of all the strangers in her house. His boys. Tall, strong. Good. With everyone gathered around it was time to get down to business.

He looked at his oldest, Jason. His pride and joy, the one who'd broken when he thought his mate had died. This was his chance at redemption. "Have you decided?"

Jason pulled Celeste to him, wrapped his arms around her waist. Slowly he nodded while holding Hector's gaze. "I'll come home and take my place as CEO again. And look after security since Nico's taking up with the birds."

There was an audible sigh of relief through the group, but it seemed to be most heartfelt from Adrian. The boy had taken on an unusually hard task when Jason had left. One he hadn't been trained or prepared for, but he'd done well. Hector allowed himself a small bit of pride. He'd been hard on his boys, but they'd grown up strong, smart.

There was one other matter to settle and he kept close watch on Ajax with gleeful anticipation when he delivered it. They'd been butting heads for weeks, he and his newest daughter-in-law. He knew she'd flown to Arizona expecting to leave him behind when she returned home. Little did she know.

"Adrian, I don't care how you and Jason work it out, but you two are in charge. I'm retiring officially and going back to Tennessee with Nico and Ajax."

Ajax was speechless for only a moment. "Absolutely not!"

"I'm afraid my mind is made up, dear."

She narrowed her eyes to dangerous slits. "Listen, cat, I've had enough of you. It's someone else's turn."

His other daughters-in-law were all quick to jump in to support his choice. If he didn't find the whole thing so amusing, he would have been insulted. The boys, he noticed, were all suspiciously quiet. That was fine too. He was happy just to see them together, everyone speaking to each other. Life was good again.

Smiling, he slipped away, leaving all his children to squabble amongst themselves, to find a quiet place to watch the sun set.

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.

Look for these titles by Loribelle Hunt

Now Available:

Fireworks
Passions Recalled

Enemy mine...

Stolen Passions

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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.

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

Passions Recalled

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Forbidden Passions, Book 2

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

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

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

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

Enjoy the following excerpt for Passions Recalled:

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

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

Definitely not in Kansas anymore. Or Atlanta. Whatever.

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

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

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

And why the hell was she wearing a bikini?

Only one way to find out, Celeste.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Memory shattered the dream.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Look at me," he demanded.

A Shifter, A Vampire and A Demon walk into a bar...

My Shifter Showmance

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Shifting Reality, Book 1

Thomas Lyons is your average cat shifter. Cool, seductive...and bored out of his mind. With the new popularity of all things paranormal, he doesn't see why he should hide anymore. When his half-demon technophile roommate hooks him up with a computer, Thomas starts a blog announcing to the world who and what he is. Oddly enough, the more he shares, the less he's believed. In fact, people begin thinking it's a new online series with fantastic effects.

Margo Sheffield doesn't dance on tables anymore, not since her reckless naïveté cost her so much. These days, her only guilty pleasures are dark chocolate, shoes—and a certain website with a man whose purring voice sends shivers down her spine. When the show, *Shifting Reality*, offers a week in a haunted Scottish castle with the stars, it seems a far-off dream. But when that dream becomes reality, her boss's insistence that she mix business with pleasure—or else—is more like a nightmare.

Thomas's focus on the show is blown by the luscious, camera-shy handful. And Margo can barely think about contracts when she's surrounded by newlywed ghost hunters, a matchmaking demon and a man whose addictive touch makes her head spin. A showmance is the last thing she needs, but with a sexy cat like Thomas on the prowl...she just can't resist.

Enjoy the following excerpt for My Shifter Showmance:

"None of that, now, Margo. Not between you and I."

That was all the warning she got before she was spun around and lifted in the air to settle, breathless, straddling his lap. "Mr. Lyons, I think we should talk about—"

"Hush." Thomas curled his fingers into her hair, pulling her down to meet his searching lips before she could get another word out. Margo's last thought was, *Oh hell*, before the kiss scrambled her brain.

He growled, the pressure of his lips opening hers as he sought entrance. God, his taste. And the way he was kissing her, exactly the way she'd always imagined he would. Greedily, hungrily...perfectly.

Her sex pressed against his thickening erection, and through their clothes she could feel the heat of him. He was blazing. She slid her tongue across his fangs. His body jerked in reaction, and she did it again, loving the fact that she could make him respond to her. Make him as crazy as he was making her from one simple kiss. Who was she trying to fool? She'd been crazy for him since the moment she'd seen the first video. Her fingers dug into the muscles of his arms, wishing she could touch his bare skin, desperate for more contact. *Closer. Harder. More.*

“Margo, baby...” He’d pulled away. Why had he pulled away? She looked at the agonized need tightening his expression, her brows lowering in confusion when he shook his head. “I never in all my years imagined saying this, but we should stop. We shouldn’t do this here. And if you keep grinding against me, I won’t be able to stop myself from tossing you on this table and taking you right now, in full view of our online audience.”

Audience. The cameras. Hell. Chi and Liam were gone, but Margo knew each room had its own grouping of stationary cameras. She’d been *grinding*? Mortification stung her cheeks. She imagined the people online watching her behavior, maybe even her coworkers, and she tried to pull away, but he wouldn’t let her.

He stood, holding her struggling body easily in his arms and strode swiftly to the kitchen, nodding at the Goth servants before heading into the large pantry room and closing the door.

The lock turned with a click of finality, and Margo bit her lip. Would Darcy fire her for her inappropriate behavior? She huffed out a dark laugh. Her boss would no doubt wholeheartedly approve. As long as it got her those *Shifting Reality* rights.

He swept his hand out, drawing her gaze to the deep pantry filled with dry goods and empty jars. It was nearly the size of her bedroom in the insanely expensive cubbyhole she called an apartment. And the ceiling was so high, stocked to the rafters, that they actually had a sliding ladder leaning against one of the shelves.

Thomas caressed her jaw with his thumb, bringing her attention back to him. “There’s no sound equipment, no cameras here. Just you and I. Talk to me, Margo, please.” He ran his fingers through his hair, looking frustrated. “If I were Saint or Mac, I’d have a way to know what you’re thinking. Know why you look like you regret what just happened.”

“If you were Saint or Mac, I wouldn’t be in this pantry.” She spoke without thinking, flinched as she saw his pleased expression. Shit. Why didn’t she just tell him she only regretted he’d stopped? That she’d wanted to smother herself in chocolate and whipped cream and be his dessert? She sighed. “What I mean is— Hell, I don’t know what I mean. I think we should go to bed. Separately. To separate beds. Alone. We can talk about the reason we both know I’m here in the morning.”

Work, keep saying it, this is for work. Contract not coitus. Contract not coitus.

“I smell you.”

She crossed her arms defensively and looked at him askance. “I’m sorry?”

Thomas shook his head, his eyes going dark as he took a deep, lung filling breath. “Just, now that there’s no distraction, I can really *smell* you. It’s rich. Spicy and sweet. Like pumpkin mousse or, well, I’ve never smelled anyone quite like you.”

Pumpkin? “You smell nice too. I’m assuming we both shower. What’s your point?” She was being belligerent, but she couldn’t seem to help it. She was having a hard time accepting how easily she’d lost

control. The old Margo would no doubt have thrown caution to the wind, damned the cameras and danced for him on the table, perhaps torn off his buttons with her teeth. Which was one of the reasons she'd been buried beneath mountains of to do lists and restrained hairdos for the better part of a decade. The old Margo was nothing but trouble.

So was Thomas Lyons. His pupils had dilated, his strong features had sharpened and his cheeks looked flushed. He looked...feral. Wild. Like he was ready to pick up where they'd just left off, whether she liked it or not. Her slender thread of control began to fray once more. She should leave now. The pantry. The castle. The country.

Thomas blocked her way to the door. Did his fangs look longer? More intimidating? He towered over her, backing her up until her shoulders hit the ladder. He took her wrists in his hands and lifted her arms over her head. She gripped the rungs of the ladder, clinging instinctively, fascinated by the predatory look in his eyes.

"My point," his voice was rough, needy, "is that you aren't going anywhere, kitten. Regardless of what your mind is telling you to regret or run from, your body is speaking loud and clear. And it wants what I want."

"What?"

Thomas leaned into her, his lips lightly caressing her neck as he whispered, "More."



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