

ELLORA'S CAVE TWILIGHT



BONDED  
BY *Need*  
NINA PIERCE

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Bonded by Need

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# *BONDED BY NEED*

**Nina Pierce**

## *Dedication*

To JM—for reasons that are too numerous to count.

## *Acknowledgment*

Writing is often a solo journey, but if we're very lucky some special people come along to help smooth the path. I would be remiss if I didn't mention Shirley Kilpatrick and Red Garnier, whose help and encouragement made this story a joy to write. Thanks, ladies!

## Chapter One

She raced through the shadows, her claws digging deep in the damp forest floor. Lush ferns of summer slapped at her muzzle but didn't slow her speed. The scent of rabbit rode on the night air laced with the honeyed aroma of silky lupine. Jayda Kynslan tamped down the urge to hunt. Time had become her enemy. Her attention needed to stay focused on more important quarry.

Breaking through the tree line, she stepped onto the edge of the field. The Montana mountain breeze ruffled through her thick pelt of black and Jayda wanted to throw her head back and let instinct loose. But a wolf howl would only give away her position and this night was about secrecy and speed. The protective darkness would soon give way to a blue wash of light. The full moon peeked over the treetops, its face a crimson fire. *A blood moon.* A superstitious person would read death in its orange glow. Jayda only saw her chance at stealth slipping away. Soon it would sit high in the sky and smile down upon the earth, stealing away the shadows.

Three full moons had passed since that fateful night when Cole Takoda, leader of the wolf shifter council, had held her tight and shown her the magic that was shifting. That night, pain and anger had filled her even as her body had sought equilibrium in its first shift into animal form. Since then, muscle, bone and tissue had learned to morph without agony. The only pain now was the ache in her heart knowing she would never regain the decades her body had held tight to its furtive gift. Allowing herself the freedom to shift had released her from the pent-up frustration that had manifested itself in years of nightmares.

There was no time to mourn the loss.

With caution, Jayda left the darkened secrecy of the forest and ventured into the tall river grass. The song of the wind soughing through the ponderosa pines was joined by

the steady rush of the river just ahead of her. Though its banks overflowed with the swell of the recent rains, the current here at the foot of Coppertip Mountain had slowed to a lazy pace. Intent on swimming its expanse, this would be her first venture into the water as a wolf. The thought both thrilled and terrified. Perhaps she hadn't chosen the best route, but she hoped it would deliver her to her destination ahead of her foe.

The soft carpet of bitterroot beneath her pads swallowed her approach. Scanning the riverbank, Jayda glimpsed a shadow shift just below a rocky outcropping on the other side, not thirty feet from her. Dropping to her belly, she let the grass close around her. Jayda had no intention of being found.

Her ears shot forward and her nose scented the air. Keen eyes focused on the lithe figure materializing at the water's edge. A cougar – female by the scent.

Jayda watched in fascination as the animal padded to the river's edge, crouched and drank greedily. The moon had risen. Its orange hue now washed to an alabaster glow that danced in shimmering facets along the rolling water. As the cat's tongue shot in and out of her mouth, her sides heaved like bellows, working much harder than seemed necessary. Perhaps the cougar had just finished a long run through the summer night.

The cougar lifted her head momentarily and scented the air. She was beautiful. Even in the moonlight, Jayda could see the unusual black fur around her nose. Though cougars had their own markings, this one's uncharacteristically wide line of black fur running up the bridge of her nose to spread and separate over her eyes made this female even more unique, and Jayda was too spellbound by her beauty to move away.

A quiet mewling followed the cougar and two kits bounded out of the shadows. They rolled and tumbled over each other with pitiful growls that barely rose over the sound of rushing water. Jayda couldn't take her eyes off them.

Their mother drank greedily as if there weren't enough water in the river to slake her thirst. Tiring of each other, the kits pounced on her swishing tail. She swung it out

of their path only to have them follow and bat at it again. But nothing slowed her tongue as it dipped again and again into the cool liquid.

Something deep within Jayda stirred. She'd barely learned what it meant to be a wolf shifter. Acknowledging that a cougar also slept within her was just too overwhelming. Being a polymorphic shifter was unknown to everyone, especially Cole.

In the past three months, Jayda had learned about shifting. With Cole's help she'd come to understand and celebrate her wolf persona. As head of the wolf shifter council, Cole couldn't ignore the cougar shifter population who shared Coppertip Mountain, but it had become painfully obvious her lover had an aversion to the big cats. That knowledge had made it difficult for Jayda to acknowledge the third of her that currently rumbled.

They both understood it existed within her. Cole admitted he'd seen evidence of her cougar appear when she was lost in their lovemaking. A hint of a cat tail, the roll of a rounded muzzle, the brush of black fur that wasn't wolf, all would shift and sway over her body as she reached orgasm. That had lasted only a month or so until she'd learned how to control the shift. Despite its appearances, Cole believed her cougar was dormant and wouldn't ever completely surface. He believed she'd chosen her wolf form when she'd first shifted at the blue moon months ago.

She wasn't so sure.

Jayda wanted nothing more in this world than to find someone who could love and understand *all* of her. Loving Cole was right. She just didn't know if it was enough. Both of them ignored her cougar, thinking that perhaps not recognizing it, the animal would never require anything more. From the hollow feeling in her chest, Jayda had come to believe that might not be the case.

The kits growled at each other again and Jayda's empty womb constricted. The whole scene was becoming a sensory overload for her. She closed her eyes and brought herself back in harmony with the world around her.

Clouds skittered over the moon and the wind shifted, carrying her scent upstream. The female cougar stood, eyes and ears alert. Wanting to avoid a potential fight, Jayda slinked deeper into the grass. A wolf howled on the ridge behind her. The cougar turned, gathered her kits and retreated back into the shadows.

Now she was caught. Crossing the river here could bring her in direct contact with the cougar. Chasing a female with kits would inevitably lead to a confrontation and that was best avoided. But staying here, bathed in the soft glow of the moon, wasn't a viable option either. Surely the wolf on the ridge would catch her scent. There would be no escape from a pack of lusty males.

Instinct took over and Jayda ran headlong through the grass. Running east, she followed the river, hoping to find another narrow channel to cross. Once on the other side, reaching the rock ledge above the lake would be a straight shot through the thick woods. Safety would be hers. The grass opened up to a sandy beach where the water rolled at a lazy pace. Even she should be able to swim the short distance to the other side.

Without care for her safety, Jayda plunged into the icy waters. The sandy bottom melted away and she was left suspended in the frigid waters. Kicking with her back feet and paddling with her front paws, Jayda tried to stay afloat. But swimming as a wolf proved to be more difficult than she'd imagined. The current that appeared sluggish and without strength, now surged, grabbing and pulling her into its icy depths, covering her nose and eyes, filling her mouth. She swallowed great gulps of water before popping up briefly and being sucked under again.

*Stupid.* Jayda struggled to turn and find the shore, but the rush of the river disoriented her. The water pummeled her, twisting her in all directions until she no longer knew which direction to find land.

Her wolf legs paddled at a feverish pace. Jayda tried to shift, thinking she could fight the rush of water in human form, but her body wouldn't respond. Her heart pounded against her ribs, lungs burning without air. Exhaustion quivered over her



muscles. As the river pulled her under again, giving in to the strength of the current seemed like such an easy decision. Through the silvery film of the surface Jayda saw the rippling wink of the moon, the only witness to her demise.

*No.* This night would *not* end with her death.

With one last Herculean effort of kicking, her head broke the surface, and Jayda yelped, her mouth filling with more water and choking her. She managed another strangled cry. Could he hear her?

Her body slammed into a rock and pain seared through her ribs. Jayda had no idea how long she could continue to fight. Rolling away from the boulder, her body twisted and turned in the current, pulling her into its depths again.

When a muzzle came up under her belly, she knew immediately he had found her. He pushed at her body, and when Jayda's head broke the surface, she gulped in the sweet night air, filling her lungs, waiting for the water to envelope her once again. But it didn't. Her feet paddled furiously and she tried desperately not to kick him. But her limbs seemed to have a mind of their own. Her back claws raked his skull and Jayda prayed she wouldn't drown them both.

The large wolf abandoned that idea and came up beside her. His muscular body pressed to hers, lifting her from the moving water. His powerful shoulder muscles bunched as he swam, redirecting her flailing body toward the shore. Briefly, Jayda slipped below the surface. His muzzle came up under hers, lifting her nose from the water. She churned her paws at twice the speed of his more effective pulls. Her breath whistled with her efforts.

When her paws bumped a rock, Jayda wanted to weep with relief. The marshy grass of the shore swayed placidly in the gentle breeze. It had never looked sweeter. Not until all four feet found purchase on the sandy bottom did the wolf beside her relax. She dragged herself to the grass and lay whimpering. The soft fronds cushioned her belly and Jayda took a moment to enjoy the sturdy feel of the earth beneath her.

Her lungs screamed in agony as Jayda worked to fill them. Relaxing, she willed her body to shift. Muscles rippled and bones warped. Her wolf gave way to her human form. Fur receded, leaving the damp satin of her skin. As her muzzle shortened and she became fully human, she rolled onto her back, trying to find him.

The wolf strode over to her, fury sparking in his narrowed eyes. Anger rippled over his lips curled back in a snarl. Moonlight flashed off hungry fangs just above her face. Though his breathing was labored, his chest heaving with the effort, he managed a low growl that rumbled through Jayda's heart. Fear and relief warred inside her, rendering her unable to apologize.

With ease borne of years of shifting, the wolf before her rippled and shuddered until it too became human. The man towered over her, his fists planted firmly on his narrow hips. The wild mane of dark hair framed the scowl on his face and stuck to his wide shoulders. She couldn't stop her eyes from traveling down his furred chest and lower still over his flat belly to his sex. A primal need pulled at her womb. Even angry, this man, her lover, was a powerful aphrodisiac.

The lump in her throat became an acute throb of lust that nearly swallowed her voice. "Cole, I'm—"

Without warning he pulled her to her feet, wrapped his arms around her and covered her mouth with a fierce kiss. His tongue swept her lips and she opened for him, tasting the familiar flavor. The heat of him exploded in her mouth. His hands wound into her damp hair as he changed the angle and deepened the kiss until she was breathless from the assault.

Cole pulled from her, his gaze raking her face. "Christ, Jayda, what the hell were you thinking?" His hands cupped her face, his thumbs skimming her jaw.

She read the anger in the deep lines of his face, but it was fear riding on his words.

"I couldn't find you. All that black fur in the river," he said, pulling her tight to him again, his heart thumping loudly against her cheek. "Don't do that again. Winning isn't that important."

She laughed. He was right of course. Their little race through the woods had nearly turned deadly because of her competitive streak. She had only wanted to beat him to the ridge, not nearly drown them both. "I assumed swimming as an animal was instinctual." Jayda looked up at him, his features softening.

"Only one thing's instinctual, Jayda," he whispered.

Cole's mouth came down on hers again and she relaxed against him. He lowered them to the grass, his heated skin molded to her from shoulder to hip. He slid his leg up hers, his knee parting her thighs, sending a frisson of desire straight up her core. His erection, trapped between their bodies, communicated his own need. This is how their night runs always ended, though the adrenaline still pumping through her body from the fight with the raging river added a dimension of hunger to this night.

"I thought I was going to lose you." His lips nipped at her face, Cole's warm breath feathering over her skin. "I saw you go under and I nearly lost my mind."

"I'm sorry. I didn't—"

He captured her mouth, his tongue sweeping in and tangling with hers. Cole's hand slid up her rounded belly, cupping one full breast. His palm reshaped the fleshy mound as his thumb and forefinger plucked her aching nipple. The delectable pain shot currents of bliss straight to her pussy. He released her mouth, kissing and nipping a heated path down her neck.

"Don't scare me like that again," he said, scraping his teeth along the sensitive flesh of her neck. He laved and nipped a path to her chest, his mouth replacing his hands on her heaving breasts. "You're so beautiful, Jayda. So beautiful." He buried his face in her chest.

Her fingers fisted in his hair, pulling him tight to her body. Despite her voluptuous curves, Jayda always felt alluring in Cole's arms. With his sizeable erection grinding against her thigh, she felt heady with power. Their lovemaking was not always tender and slow like tonight, but it never ceased to thrill her.

“I can’t ever get enough of you.” Cole’s teeth scraped along one tender nipple before he sucked it deep into his mouth, soothing the ache with his tongue. His hand teased the other steeped peak, rolling it sensually between his thumb and finger. Each jolt of pleasure elicited hiccupping gasps from her. The sensation shot down Jayda’s core, settling heavily between her thighs. Her pussy ached and liquid desire joined the water on her thighs.

As if reading her thoughts, Cole’s hand slid over her tummy and raked through her small line of pubic hair. He pulled and teased the hair until she was writhing under the assault, begging him to delve into her folds.

When his palm skated over her mound and his finger dipped into her cleft, Jayda spread her legs wide, inviting him to touch all of her. He flirted with her pussy lips, tracing a tantalizing path around her vulva. He spread her honeyed cream up and down her slit, purposefully avoiding her clitoris. And though she lifted her hips and squirmed, his talented fingers refused to touch the spot begging for attention.

Her nails dug into the tight bands of muscle at his shoulder as she anchored her body against his solid planes. She rubbed her thigh against the hard length of his cock, trying to persuade him to fill her. “Cole, please. Please don’t tease me,” she begged. “Touch me.”

“Jayda, patience. We have all night.” He bit the tight bud of her nipple with his teeth and sucked it into his mouth, loving the whimper that escaped her lips. Over the last three months he’d learned exactly how to touch her to make her squirm in ecstasy. Her writhing body empowered him, heated his blood, and added to his own pleasure. She was his in every sense of the word, except one. Despite what she thought, he hadn’t officially claimed her as his wolf mate—she still wasn’t ready. Every union afforded him the opportunity, but he withheld the full ritual. No one from the pack would dare challenge his claim, but Cole understood something elemental was missing in their relationship even if Jayda didn’t.

“More. Really, Cole. Please.” Her trembling plea came out on gasps.

“Anything for you, Jayda.” His lips trailed down her rounded belly as her muscles clenched and quivered beneath the heat of his mouth. Unlike other women he’d dated in the past, Jayda had the full figure of a woman, not the underdeveloped shape of a girl. He loved the heavy set of her breasts and the sensual curve of her hips. Cole shifted and settled between her legs, his stomach flat on the dewy grass. His cock throbbed, but he would hold off his own need until Jayda was satisfied.

His palms slid up the creamy softness of her inner thighs, leaving gooseflesh in their wake. He inhaled deeply, filling his nose with the sexy scent of her essence. With gentle caresses, his thumbs grazed over the velvet skin of her labia. Though Cole had never minded the natural hair of a woman, Jayda’s naked flesh, wet and swollen with her desire for him, drove him nearly mad with lust.

Cole blew air up her slit and she jolted. The moon shone on the liquid pouring from her slick channel. With gentle fingers, he lifted the silken hood and teased the tight knot of her clitoris with his tongue. She nearly came undone at the contact. Jayda tangled her fingers in his hair and pulled him closer, a low moan vibrating through her.

He speared his tongue into her hot pussy, her salty flavor bursting in his mouth. He could drink her sweet honey every day and never tire of it filling his mouth. Laying his tongue flat, Cole dragged it up her slit and sucked in the pearl nubbin. He slid first one then two fingers into her cunt and flicked his middle finger with a come-hither motion that had Jayda’s nails digging into the flesh of his shoulders.

Her internal muscles quivered around his fingers and he added a third, fucking her in and out with his hand while his lips and teeth played over her clitoris. With her hips bucking and her muscles pulsing in time with her gasps of pleasure, Cole knew Jayda teetered on the precipice of release. He also knew exactly what his lover needed to send her careening into the throes of ecstasy.

He gathered her slick moisture with his other hand and dragged it down the crease of her ass, the flesh soft and pliant around his fingers. His slick thumb circled the tight muscles of her anus and she gasped as he added pressure to his exploration but didn’t

break the barrier. He'd never been with a woman who enjoyed anal play as much as he enjoyed giving it.

Jayda's breath caught and held, her back bowed, her chin lifted to the sky in anticipation of the next jolt of pleasure. Cole's finger pushed into her ass. She yelled his name, her muscles quaking as he finger-fucked her slick channels. He suckled her clitoris. Jayda's feral cries of bliss lifted on the night air. Her orgasm rolled through her and she squirmed against his assault, not really wanting to pull from him but unable to control the spasms of her muscles.

"Cole! Yes! Oh! Cole...yes!" Words fell from her mouth in quick succession and she shattered beneath him.

He kept his mouth on her, slowing his fingers and tongue until the orgasm became small aftershocks of ecstasy. With ever widening circles, his tongue soothed the swollen flesh of her pussy. Jayda melted beneath him and Cole kissed his way up her torso, her small sighs of sated desire spearing straight to his heart.

"I love you, Jayda." He dipped his head and kissed her nose.

"I love you too." She brought a limp hand to his face and brushed the hair from his cheek. "That is so unfair how you manage to do that to me." Jayda squeezed her thighs, surrounding his hips.

His cock pressed against the wet heat of her cleft. He wanted to bury himself in her cream, but he had more intriguing plans for their coupling. "Complaining?"

Jayda laughed. "Right. I always complain about my nerves singing like that. What girl wouldn't? But I can *suffer* through it if you'd like to do it again." She smiled and canted her hips, trying to bury Cole's erection in her pussy, but he pulled away from her.

"In that case, why don't you roll over and I'll see what I can do to repeat the fun and games?"

Her smile grew wider. Her hand feathered across his cheek. "What do you have in mind, Takoda?"

“Something I intend for you to enjoy.” Cole winked. He’d been thinking about this for weeks. What better time with a soft summer breeze caressing their heated skin and the full moon peering down on them, to offer Jayda a fantasy in the flesh? “Now roll over on your hands and knees.” Gently he urged her to change positions.

She looked doubtful as she acquiesced. “But I—”

He spanked the rounded cheek of her plump ass so abruptly that it halted her speech. “That’s a spanking for trying to argue with me.” He slapped her again and she squealed in delight. “And that’s for nearly drowning and scaring the living shit out of me.” One more time his hand came down on her ass, this time his palm brushed her swollen pussy lips. “And that’s just because I think you like it.”

Bending, Cole licked up her slit, savoring her creamy tang. Jayda moaned and spread her legs wider, exposing her trembling pussy to him. He’d taken her from behind before, but he intended something more intimate this night. Repeating the caresses, his tongue drove into her channel and then he licked up her slit and circled the rosebud of her anus. Gently he pushed into her ass with one finger. Jayda pushed back, burying him up to the knuckle. He added a second as he continued to tease her clit with his tongue.

“Oh Cole, that makes me so hot. Fuck me please.”

“I intend to bring you sweet pleasure.” Cole had no doubt she would enjoy this as much as he, and his cock swelled at the thought of how he wanted to make love to her.

His fingers opened in a scissoring motion, relaxing and expanding the tight ring of muscle. Cole kissed his way up her back and pulled her in close to his chest, one hand still working her anus, the other caressing her breast and toying with the nipple.

“Jayda, I want to make love to your ass tonight.” He whispered the words in her ear, pulling the fleshy lobe through his teeth.

“Cole, I... ” She pushed back on his fingers and he added a third to the relaxing channel of her ass. The scent of her arousal filled the air and mixed with the elemental

odors of the night. Her damp hair cooled the heat searing on his cheeks. His nerves tingled with the need flowing through his veins.

“Only if you want me to.” His cock nestled between her quivering thighs. Cole wanted only what Jayda wanted, but he had to admit—he wanted it soon.

“I don’t... ” She panted out the words and his fingers continued their assault on both her breast and her ass. “I don’t want it gentle, Cole. Fuck me. Please just fuck me now. Everything. Hard. Now.”

It was all he needed to hear. He pulled his fingers from her ass and spit in his hand, rubbing the slick saliva generously on his throbbing cock. He guided the tip to her anus and pressed gently.

“Yes.” The word hissed through her lips and Jayda pushed back, her ass swallowing his cock in its satin heat. He hadn’t expecting the ring of muscle to be so tight or her channel to be so welcoming. Like a velvet fist, Jayda’s body surrounded him with heat and Cole bit back an oath as pleasure zinged along his shaft and straight to his balls.

“Fuck me, Cole.” Jayda swayed forward and slammed back, her flesh slapping against his. “Damn, it feels so good. Fill me.”

“Hot. You are so fucking hot.”

Bringing his hand around Jayda’s stomach, Cole buried his fingers in her moist heat until he found the hard nub of her clitoris. With practiced strokes, he teased the knot as he pounded into her. This was not gentle lovemaking by any stretch of the imagination. This was animalistic rutting in its purest form. Cole dug his fingers into her hips, pulling her harder and faster onto his throbbing cock. Her cries of bliss lifted with his own guttural moans. Christ, he hadn’t expected this to feel so fucking incredible. Shocks of pleasure rippled through his cock and tingled in his low back. He felt Jayda tense below him, her body going rigid with the imminent release that bowed her body.

Cole’s cock throbbed and his balls snugged tight to his body. He only had to hold his release a moment before Jayda’s orgasm quaked her body. Spasming muscles



massaged his cock, driving him toward the ultimate bliss. He pistoned his hips, pulling himself nearly out before thrusting back and filling her again. The pressure built in his balls until ecstasy rocketed up his cock and cum filled her channel. Throwing back his head, he released a feral growl with each hot jet of cum. Skin slapped skin as her body milked him, ecstasy shimmying through his body.

Jayda's legs and arms gave way and she slumped to the ground. He laid heavily on her back, his cock still filling the tight channel of her ass. Her heart pounded between her shoulder blades, beating in synchronized rhythm with his.

"I love you, Cole." Jayda's words were muffled by the soft grass surrounding them.

Gently he separated from her and rolled to his side. She twisted to face him, snuggling into the comfort of his arms.

"I never expected being part of a pack would feel so fulfilling, you've taught me so much." Her finger lazily traced the pack tattoo circling his biceps. "Becoming your lover has been the easiest decision I've ever made, Cole. I don't know how I survived all these years burying my inner wolf."

He didn't want to remind her that she hadn't yet discovered the cougar hiding within.

## Chapter Two

Jayda whistled happily as she entered the veterinary clinic through the staff entrance in the back. Lady, her yellow lab trotted in behind her. The comforting smell of animals and disinfectant filled her nose. Twelve weeks had passed since her introduction into the shifter community, eight weeks since she'd quit her job at the clinic in Blackfish Springs and four weeks since she'd opened the doors to Kynslan Veterinary Clinic here in Lonesome Fork.

The Montana spring season had grudgingly given itself to summer with its heat and pesky black flies, but Jayda wouldn't trade the life she'd found here for the bustle of New York City she'd known as a child. *Happy* didn't come close to describing how she felt.

"Hey, Oscar. How you feeling today?" Jayda pulled a ferret from his cage and checked the wound where she'd removed a fatty tumor at the base of his tail. An easy chirp vibrated his throat, a strange mix between a cat's purr and an angry growl. He bounded up her arm and sat contentedly on her shoulder. She hadn't understood until recently that her love of animals and their easy manner with her had to do with her animals within. Becoming a vet had seemed like a natural path for her. In her twenty-seven years it had been the easiest decision she'd ever made. Well, that and falling in love with Cole.

Tingling with the memories of what he'd done to her last night, Jayda couldn't keep the foolish smile from squeezing her cheeks. Never in her most lustful fantasies would she have thought anal sex was so undeniably exciting. Sure, she was a little sore today, but the secret twinge of pain made her think of Cole and kept her nerves humming with desire.

Of course that was how she always felt around Cole. The man had stolen her heart months ago. There was no denying it. Jayda pushed the niggling feeling in her gut aside. She'd agreed to be Cole's lifemate and the ceremony was scheduled for early August, less than two months away. Plenty of time to come to terms with whatever was warring inside her.

"Why can't I just stop worrying about it, Oscar?" She retrieved the ferret from her shoulder and rubbed her nose against his before putting him back in the kennel.

Cole was hers. Jayda didn't doubt that fact, but why wasn't he enough to fill her heart? The man adored her and she him. Checking on the two neutered cats and the elderly terrier with adrenal failure, Jayda didn't want to contemplate what she suspected to be the case—the cougar within her was unsatisfied. Her encounter with the wild female and her kits last night had confirmed the suspicions that had been eluding her for a month.

There were no other polymorphic shifters in the area. None in the whole state of Montana as a matter of fact. Cole had quietly inquired among the cougar and wolf shifter clans. She was a walking legend and there was no one to help her understand the loneliness and confusion of her multiple animal and human sides. What if she never figured it out? Well, it didn't matter. Brooding over rhetorical questions was like treading water—lots of energy expended, no forward progress.

Jayda didn't want to think about it, not when the glorious day ahead would be filled with farm animals in need of her care. She washed her hands and filled Lady's food dish before pushing through the swinging door to the waiting room.

"Marissa, would you check..."

Her veterinary assistant Marissa Devlin stepped away from the man in uniform, her pixie features brushed with a rose hue. Jayda wondered if she'd caught them flirting.

"Jayda, this is Zane Brodan," Marissa said, coming around the main reception desk, her blonde ponytail swaying with the brisk movement. "He's a game warden." Marissa sidled up next to her and leaned in, dropping her voice to a whisper. "And new leader

of the cougar council." Marissa turned back to him and batted her lashes. "I told you she'd be right along."

Jayda shot a look from Marissa to the game warden, intrigued by her assistant's nervousness. When Jayda had arrived in Lonesome Fork in early spring, the councils had been at war over ownership of lands on Coppertip Mountain. One man, the former head of the cougar council, was now behind bars, charged with several murders of wolf shifters. Both clans were still uneasy about the bad blood between them.

Though the tension had eased, both councils were working with their shifter clans to continue to bring peace to all populations on the mountain, shifter and human alike. Hiring Marissa, a cougar shifter, had been Jayda's way of helping to bridge the two clans. And though Jayda had never formally met Zane Brodan, the new head of the cougar pride, Cole liked him well enough—for a cougar.

"Mr. Brodan, I'm Jayda Kynslan." She extended her hand.

Shifting the forest green cowboy hat to his left hand, Zane's right engulfed hers. "Nice to finally meet you, Dr. Kynslan. I've heard a lot about you."

"I'm pleased to finally meet you. Cole speaks highly of you and your efforts to merge the councils. And please call me Jayda."

He held both her hand and her gaze captive a beat longer than courtesy dictated and something deep within her stirred.

"Please call me Zane." The shy smile he flashed held no animosity, but it felt predatory nonetheless. Perhaps it was the way his brow arched over the jade eyes twinkling mischievously or the deep intake of breath that strained the tan uniform across his chest. Whatever it was, it made her stomach go cold.

Sliding her hand from his grasp and clenching her fingers, Jayda forced herself not to wipe her tingling palm down her jeans. "If you're looking for my *boyfriend* Cole..." She couldn't stop herself from emphasizing her relationship with Lonesome Fork's chief of police. "He's not here. I think he said he'd be out on patrol this morning." She

checked her watch, barely seven o'clock. "Though it's still early, you might find him at the police station."

"Actually, I was looking for you." Zane's fingers plowed through the blond curls and his cheeks puffed. "A cougar's been found dead."

Marissa gasped and covered her mouth. Jayda shot her a warning glare. Animals died all the time of natural causes, there was no reason to believe this was part of the mending shifter feud.

"Well, if it's been shot, I don't understand how that involves me. I think that's between your department and Cole's. If laws have been broken—"

He shook his hand between them, cutting her off. "No, there are no visible wounds. Doesn't appear at first glance to be anything foul, but we can't rule it out. It's only been a few months since..." Zane blushed. "Well, since the problems with the murders. I don't think we should discount this as possible retaliation for the deaths of the wolves and shifters last winter. I think it's imperative someone do a necropsy to find out exactly what killed her."

Jayda and the jailed former pride leader had been lovers. It was that relationship that had originally brought her from the concrete jungle of New York City to the open mountains of Montana. But Cole had saved her from that malignant affair. Now, as promised mate to the wolf council leader, Jayda didn't think it was prudent to become involved with an animal death, *especially* a cougar.

"There are other vets you could take the cat to," she argued. Her voice upset the dog and Lady came around the counter, leaning against her thigh. Jayda pet her head to comfort them both.

"I think it should be you, Jayda. Your position within the shifter population will lend credibility to the findings."

"And it's that same position, betrothed mate to the wolf council leader, that will make my findings suspect regardless of the outcome." Jayda shook her head and Lady whined. "It's just not a good idea. We need to talk to Cole."

“Talk to Cole about what?” Cole asked as he strode into the clinic, his elbows brushing the service belt of his police uniform. His gaze shot to Zane, his face contorting to a jealous scowl. “Brodan.”

“Takoda,” Zane said.

“You haven’t dropped off the cat?”

“She’s still in the back of the truck.” Zane absently curved his thumb over his shoulder. “But Jayda doesn’t think she should be the one to do the necropsy for all the same reasons we agree she should.”

“Since I’m here, I’ll help you unload her and you can be on your way,” Cole said tightly.

Both men moved toward the door.

“Now wait just one goddamn minute.” Jayda fisted her hands on her hips. Lady barked. She loved that the dog was always on her side. “I’m pretty sure I have a right to an opinion in this whole matter and I don’t think this is a good idea. Dr. Jacobsen is just on the other side of the mountain. He’s as qualified as I am to do the necropsy.” Jayda crossed her arms over her chest, pleased with her assertiveness. “Don’t bother unloading the cat here. I won’t do it. You can take the animal right over to his clinic.”

Cole stared at her quizzically. “Jayda, you’re being foolish.” Then turning back to Zane, he added, “Why don’t you drive the truck around to the other side of the building and we’ll bring the cougar in through the back entrance.”

“I’ll go with you, show you which door.” Marissa slipped around Jayda and disappeared out the door with the warden.

Cole stepped to her and smiled, his hands running up her stiff arms. Lady nuzzled him for attention and he absently ruffled the scruff of her neck. *Traitor.*

“Jayda, think about it. You’re the only one I can trust right now. It’s probably nothing, but I can’t take the chance someone’s trying to stop the councils from moving forward with the consolidation of the board. I’d hate to think one of my own clan is

behind this killing, but I won't bury my head in the sand and go ahead without the facts." He kissed her forehead and pulled her into a tight embrace that had her molding to him. Lady's nails *tick, tick, ticked* their way back to her bed behind the counter.

"Brodan's the one who mentioned you because of your..." Cole searched for the words. "Your unique *abilities*." He leaned back and bent to search her face. "And as much as I hate to admit a cougar is right, I think he has a point."

"I guess I hadn't thought about the whole poly-shifting angle." Jayda nipped at his mouth before turning away. "But don't think I'll let you win all arguments this easily."

Cole playfully slapped her sashaying bottom. "Wouldn't be any fun if you did."

Winking over her shoulder, Jayda pushed through the door to the back room. "If I put off the Willoughby cows until this afternoon there won't be a problem doing the necropsy this morning." She checked her watch as Marissa opened the back door.

Cole stepped past her to join Zane at his truck. Sunshine spilled in through the open door and the sudden blast of summer heat washed over Jayda, making her stomach swim. She pressed her hand to her midsection, wondering if perhaps doing a necropsy on a cougar hit a little too close to home.

With Zane crawling in and holding the haunches, Cole maneuvered the head and shoulders out of the truck. Slowly he backed into the clinic. Though it was part of being a vet, necropsies never thrilled her.

"The operating room's around the corner. You can take her—" The words stuck in Jayda's throat. "Zane, where'd they find this cat?" Her fingers traced the black line of the muzzle and followed it over the cougar's eyes.

"Up on the ridge just past the bridge. Why?"

"Any other cougars around?" she asked.

"Hikers found her and reported it. They didn't mention any other cats and I found her by herself. Why?"

"Jayda, she's heavy." Cole looked at her expectantly and she stepped out of his way.

"Oh right, sorry," she said quietly. "On second thought, put her in the freezer for now." She walked to the large commercial freezer in the operating room and opened the door. "This'll keep her for a couple of hours."

Cole and Zane set the cougar on the floor of the walk-in. Cole strode from the freezer, catching her by the arm. "Not so fast. What's going on, Jayda?"

"She's got kits. Two of them. I saw them last night on my run. They're too young to make it on their own. I need to find them." Turning to Marissa, she said, "I won't be long. Call the Willoughbys—"

Cole's grip tightened on her biceps. "We don't know how this cat died. I don't want you going up there alone." Concern rode on his words.

"Then come with me. But we need to go *now*. Those kits won't last long without food and water. They're too young to provide for themselves."

"Not gonna happen this morning, I've got to be in court at eight."

"I can go with her," Zane said.

Cole didn't turn, his gaze holding hers. Jayda's mouth lifted in a tremulous smile.

"She'll be safe with me, Takoda. Besides, I know where the cougar was. You'd both be going in blind without me." Zane lifted a shoulder.

Cole's eyes narrowed. She could see he didn't want to give in to this man. But if Cole couldn't trust the new head of the cougar council now, how would he ever trust Zane to stand at his side and lead the shifter population of Lonesome Fork?

"Let Brodan deal with them then, Jayda." Cole's grip relaxed, his fingers sliding down her arm to thread in hers. "You don't need to go."

Love sparked in his eyes and she reached up to cup his cheek in her palm. "They could be sick or hurt. Minutes can mean the difference for them." She kissed him gently. "I'll be safe with Zane. Nothing's going to happen. I promise."



\* \* \* \* \*

Jayda hadn't really thought this all the way through. The kits had been her only priority. But sitting in Zane's work truck with her medical bag in her lap, fingers nervously playing with the leather handle, the cab seemed much too small for both of them. His presence filled the small space and crowded her with awareness.

The forest green pants of his uniform were meant to be worn loose, but Zane's muscular thighs stretched the fabric. She wondered if the cowboy boots working the gas pedal and clutch were meant to go with the uniform or if Zane had a penchant for the West.

"I'm sorry the air conditioning's broken." Zane shot her an apologetic smile, all white teeth and full lips. "State trucks require work orders in triplicate, a motion by Congress and a special dispensation from the governor before any piece of machinery goes to a mechanic."

"It's not too bad," she lied. Heat surrounded her and filled her, making Jayda all too aware of the sweat trickling down between her breasts. The hot morning air rushing through the open windows and swirling around them only added to her claustrophobic feeling. She felt very much like a trapped fly in the spider web. Any motion, no matter how slight, would attract the attention of her captor. As if proving her point, she swiped at the moisture on her upper lip and Zane looked over at her, his brow arching.

"You been a—"

"Is it true—"

They spoke at the same time.

"You first," they said together.

Jayda put up her hand. "Mine's not important. Really, you first."

Zane looked over. His gaze searched her face before turning back to the mountain road. Embarrassment colored his tan features to a deep mahogany. "I was wondering if what they say about you is true." Though one wrist lay relaxed over the steering wheel, his back stiffened.

Jayda looked straight ahead. "You mean the polymorphic thing?"

"Yeah," he said quietly.

"According to Cole it is. He saw something the first few time we..." She looked over at Zane, heat burning in her cheeks. That had never slipped out before. Cole had certainly taught her everything important about the shifting world, true love—and sex. But talking with Zane about her relationship with Cole certainly pushed them out of the bounds of professionalism. "Anyway, I have no problem shifting to wolf. But my fur is black. Different." Jayda hated that she stood apart from the rest of the pack when they gathered, but she had no doubt Zane didn't really care about her feelings of isolation. "But the cougar thing...well, let's just say I haven't proven myself in that area. And if legends are correct, I won't know that part of me until the next blue moon."

He frowned. "What have your parents told you?"

"I'm an orphan. I don't know anything about my birth parents."

The truck bumped over the bridge and Zane turned up a rutted dirt road used by mountain bikers and hikers.

"Have you talked to your parents about your adoption?"

"Right." Jayda dragged the word out long and slow. "They didn't even mention I was adopted until I was ten and had to see a therapist for my vivid nightmares about killing animals. I'm not sure they would have told me otherwise." She snorted out a very unladylike laugh. "Of course I could always bring it up over a cup of tea at my mother's bridge club. 'Mom, did the adoption agency happen to mention if my birth parents grew fur? Because I'm a wolf in my off hours.'" She laughed again. "Yeah, that would go over really big."

He shoved the truck into park and shifted in his seat to stare at her. "It's an uneven ground we tread, Jayda." He laid his hand over hers and held tight. "No one really knows how to fit into the world. Achieving balance between our human and animal halves is a never-ending battle." His fingers grazed her cheek as he brushed a loose

strand of hair behind her ear. "The best we can hope for is to find the right people to love us and support us when the road is the rockiest."

\* \* \* \* \*

What the hell had he been thinking coming up here with Dr. Jayda Kynslan? The last forty minutes had netted Zane nothing but a sunburn, scratched arms and a raging hard-on. And now the woman tormenting his libido was head first in a small rock outcropping, her full, luscious ass wiggling as she backed out of yet another empty den.

"I just don't know what she could have done with them," Jayda said, blowing at the hair that fell across her flushed cheeks. "They've got to be around her somewhere."

Oh, how he'd like to undo the rest of that braid and let all that silky black hair cascade over his arms, maybe across his thighs. Blood throbbed to his crotch and he turned as if searching the riverbank below, hoping she wouldn't detect his inappropriate response to a shifter who was obviously in a committed relationship. "We've searched everywhere, Jayda. I think—"

"No. Don't say it."

Turning back to her, he watched her straighten and angrily wipe the dirt from her the front of her flimsy cotton t-shirt, her full breasts bouncing with the motion.

"Don't even think it, Zane." Jayda poked her finger into his chest. "Nothing happened to them. We're going to find those kits and they'll be fine." Tears glistened in the amber pools of her eyes.

He looked down at her, the fear and frustration marring her beautiful face. Without thought to the consequences, his hand rested on her shoulder and his thumb wiped at dirt smudged across her cheek. "I wasn't going to suggest giving up. I was going to suggest that you continue searching up here along the ridge while I shift and search down along the riverbank. We'll cover more ground."

Color flagged her cheeks. "Yeah, that would be a good idea. The kits might respond to another cougar."

“I’ve got whistles in my rucksack.” He pulled off the small hiking pack on his back and handed it to her. “And there’s plenty of water. If you find them, just signal and I’ll find you.” His fingers quickly undid the buttons on his shirt. “If I find them, I’ll just corral them back up here to you and we’ll put them in the carrier. Shouldn’t be too difficult.” He pulled the tails from his pants, slid the shirt off his shoulders and dropped it on the rock ledge, reaching for his belt. “If you’re not here, I’ll shift and whistle for...” His voice trailed off as Jayda’s mouth dropped open and her cheeks flushed a deeper red. He followed her line of sight down to his hands. His palms rested on his hips and his fingers were spread under the waistband of his khakis. Curls of pubic hair peeked out of the pants. His cock warmed to her inspection. “Oh sorry.” He pulled the zipper up quickly and gathered his shirt from the ground, holding it over his growing erection. “I guess I’ll leave my clothes in the brush over there.”

He stalked up the ridge, embarrassment burning his cheeks. Undressing in front of Jayda had seemed as natural as being with a lover. *Stupid*. Even shifters had some modicum of modesty. Zane walked into the nearby bushes, wondering what it was about Jayda that was scrambling his normally ordered thoughts.

## Chapter Three

Jayda searched another small opening in the scrub brush on the ridge. She felt like an absolute cretin. She'd stared at Zane as if she'd never seen a naked man. Of course she'd never seen a man with nipple piercings, but the little silver hoops on his chest hadn't been what had caught her attention. She'd been both mortified and curious about his—*physique*, but she'd gone all schoolmarm shocked before he'd completely undressed. It wasn't as if she hadn't had intimate relationships while she was in college. At twenty-seven, watching a man undress before he shifted shouldn't have turned her into a gawking teenager. Granted, the few times Jayda had run with the wolf pack, she and Cole had slipped off alone before shifting, but perhaps the cougars were less modest.

"You're such an idiot," she said to herself as she leaned back and sat her butt on her calves. Shading her eyes, Jayda looked at the sun. It sat hot and burning well over the tree line. Its heat prickled over her back and burned her cheeks and shoulders. Sweat had soaked through the white t-shirt an hour ago and dirt stuck to the wet fabric clinging to her torso.

Standing, she arched her back and pressed her knuckles into the cramping muscles. Jayda was parched and after nearly two hours of searching, wasn't any closer to those kits than she'd been back at the clinic. She unzipped the rucksack and pulled out the bottled water and whistle. Downing the last half of the water, she wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. She hated to give up, but perhaps this whole search was futile. Zane's cougars could do a more thorough search later. No sense spinning her wheels here. Not when the female cougar still needed to be examined.

Jayda blew the whistle, startling a flock of mountain chickadees from a small stand of black spruce. Jayda walked cautiously to the crest of the ridge overlooking the river.

Its swollen banks were much less intimidating from this angle. Her body shuddered at the memory of how it had sucked her under last night. Swimming was definitely another skill she needed to master in wolf form, but perhaps the quiet lake behind the house would be a better place to start.

She blew the whistle again and Zane appeared in cougar form far down the riverbank. He was deceptive in his miniature form, but even from this distance she could appreciate his powerful muscles and lithe form. Zane was beautiful as a cougar.

Jayda had watched him emerge from the brush, strong muscles bunched and shuddering, the power hidden beneath the calm exterior of his cougar. The deep jade of his eyes had shown brighter surrounded by the soft beige of his fur. She'd stared in wonder as he'd headed down the mountain, surefooted paws maneuvering over the ridge with little problem.

Skulking out of the marsh grass now, he looked up at her. She lifted her arm and stepped higher, waving at him, not sure what he could see from his vantage point. The next seconds happened in rapid succession, tumbling over themselves with no way for Jayda to change the outcome.

The earth beneath her feet crumbled below her hiking boots in a slow-motion dream that had her screaming Zane's name. Her arms pinwheeled, her fingers grasping at air. Her body fell back even as her feet sought purchase on the loose rocks. Emptiness surrounded her. Conscious of falling, Jayda scrambled to change the outcome, but her efforts went unanswered. Her shoulder hit first, pain spiking up her neck. Jayda's limp body came to a jarring stop, her head thudding on a rock. Cougar kits floated in her bleary vision a moment before her world went black.

\* \* \* \* \*

Zane's exploration of the riverbank had turned up nothing. There were human tracks along the soft bank of the river and the heavy scent of shifter, but he suspected that had to do with Jayda's and Cole's run last night. Envy twisted in his gut. His

reaction to the thought of Cole with Jayda surprised him. Zane had nothing to be jealous over. Cole had claimed Jayda. It was a done deal.

He heard the happy shrills of a whistle and lumbered into a clearing. Jayda stood high on the ridge in the distance, the sun shining off her black swath of hair, her luscious body outlined by the blue sky. From the sound of the energetic blasts, he hoped she'd found the kits. Her arm lifted in a quick wave of greeting and just as rapidly—she disappeared. At first he thought she'd just bent down, but when her scream reached him, he took off at a dead run.

Powerful legs carried him up the rocky slope, sure-footed paws eating the distance between him and Jayda. Mere minutes passed since she'd fallen, but when he looked over the ridge at her still form, he worried he hadn't been quick enough.

Jayda lay on her side on a small ledge, her body crumpled on itself. One arm was thrown over her head and one foot dangled over the edge. The narrow outcropping where she lay had barely stopped her fall. A foot to her right and she would have continued tumbling another one hundred feet, but he couldn't think about that.

Stepping forward, he was surprised when the rocks gave way beneath him and rolled down on Jayda. Obviously that's how she had lost her footing. With feline agility, he maneuvered back and snarled in frustration. Two kits, hearing the familiar cougar cry, bounded from the rocks below and mewled at Jayda. No wonder they hadn't found them. Jayda had suffered the same fate as them. Only the kits had made the journey from the ridge to the ledge twenty-five feet below unscathed—Jayda hadn't been so lucky.

Zane studied the terrain. Sweeping to his left, he found a stable section of rock. Carefully picking his way down the slope, he trod a rambling path over the loose stones and scrub brush until he finally reached her. Fear coiled cold in his gut. She hadn't moved. How much time had passed since she'd fallen? Ten? Twenty minutes? He had no idea. It seemed an eternity.

He shifted as he rushed to her, rocks cutting into his bare feet. He knelt next to her lifeless body and gently brushed hair and dirt from her face. "Jayda? Jayda are you all right?" he whispered.

She moaned and her eyes fluttered. The warm rush of relief flooded through him. At least the fall hadn't killed her. She tried to move, but he held her in place. He needed to find out if anything was broken. He crooned reassuringly as his hands ran down her limbs, checking for broken bones or injuries. Zane took a steadying breath when he found nothing obvious. With tender hands he rolled her on her back and gasped at the blood oozing from the side of her head and covering the rock hidden by her hair.

He maneuvered closer and laid her head in his lap. The color had drained from Jayda's face and she looked ghostly cushioned on his bronzed thighs. More hair had been freed from the bonds of her braid in the last hour and it spread over his legs. This wasn't quite how he'd fantasized about her this morning when her hair had been on his mind.

Her amber eyes opened, working to focus on his face. "I guess we skipped summer and went straight to fall." Jayda laughed and then moaned, her hand cradling the injured side of her head.

"You gave me quite a scare." *That put it mildly.* Zane forced a smile. "From what I can tell, nothing's broken. How do you feel?"

"Like I'd like to sit up."

"I'm not sure—"

She moved anyway and he supported her back. The moment she was upright, Jayda groaned, grabbed her head and puked over the side of the ledge.

"Holy shit!" She scooted backward to a wider part of the ledge, the sudden movement bringing on another bout of puking.

"I'm not going to let you fall. Go easy," Zane crooned.



She scooted back and to the side, slowly this time, surveying the edge from a safer distance. "Zane, I could have fallen."

The anxiety in her eyes tore at his heart. "But you didn't." He moved to her and held her, speaking gently. "And now that I'm here, you're going to be fine." He looked up the steep wall. "I just need to figure—"

"Zane, you're naked!" Jayda sat up and pulled from his embrace, a flush washing up her chest to fill her cheeks. She quickly turned her face away.

With the embarrassment putting back her color and her eyes flitting everywhere but back at him, obviously she was feeling better. He couldn't hold back the broad smile curving his mouth and he winked when she sent him an uncomfortable look over her shoulder.

"Sorry, I would have dressed for the occasion," he said, unable to hold back a laugh. "But my clothes happen to be up on the ridge and the cougar in me wanted to make it to the party on time." He looked down his torso before turning back to Jayda. "And last I checked I have no fur-lined pockets in my cougar shift."

She looked up the side of the mountain, down into the ravine and back up the rock wall, anywhere to avoid looking at him. "Yes, well, I guess we need to find a way to get out of here. And quickly." Jayda used the wall to get to her feet, but her head spun again and she swayed. She slumped into Zane's embrace and he held her while she retched.

"Really, Jayda, I'm pretty sure you have a concussion." He brushed the hair from her face, his gaze raking over her features. The upturned nose fit perfectly with the rounded cheeks and full lips. *Christ, she was beautiful.*

Whoa, back up. What the hell was wrong with him? He had just been named head of the cougar shifters. Even considering getting involved with a wolf shifter was just a bad idea all the way around. And here he was, thinking lusty thoughts about the mate of the head honcho. *Down, boy, down.* He mentally refocused his libido. "There's no

hurry. We need to take this slow. Getting up the ridge may prove a little trickier than coming down."

Once again she realized how close their bodies were and pushed from him. "Yeah, well, I think there is a reason to hurry." She shot a glance over her shoulder. "Let's just get out of here. You can take me back to the clinic and you and your cougars can come back and find the kits."

*The kits.* He'd forgotten all about them. Zane went down on one knee and purred low in invitation. They popped out of the small crevice one at a time.

Jayda cooed. "Oh, you found them!"

"No, Jayda, you found them." He picked one up by the scruff of the neck and smiled. "Not that I'd recommend this method again, but we have them." Zane looked up the wall. "Now we just have to figure out how to get everyone back up to the truck."

"Well, how did you get down here?" Jayda looked up, shading her eyes against the noonday sun. "I'm not sure I can climb."

"I came down in cougar form. But I came in from that direction." He turned and looked at the slope, trying to work out a solution. "I could carry you on my back."

She didn't respond. He turned to see her appraising him and his cock immediately stirred under her probing gaze. Embarrassed, he bent and let the kit join his sibling. "Stupid idea. Why don't we both shift and we can each carry a kit in our mouths." He shot her a look over his shoulder. "Do you feel well enough to shift?"

Her face flushed. "Yeah, but..." She looked from his ass to her body. "But then there're no clothes for me when we get to the top."

His fingers dug through his hair and he blew out a breath. Driving home with a naked Jayda next to him was definitely more than he could handle. "How about you wear my shirt and I wear my pants?" He stood, giving her a view of his shoulder, his hands covering his over-anxious cock. In all his life, Zane was sure he'd never been naked in front of woman and tried to keep his interest in her a secret. "We just need to get the hell out of here. You shift and I'll follow."

“Well, turn around. I’m certainly not getting naked in front of you.”

“Oh sorry.” He turned his back to her. Zane heard the rustle of clothing and imagined that tight little tank top coming off and her bra falling to the ground, leaving her full breasts exposed. He bit back a groan when the zipper of her jeans rasped, but he couldn’t control the surge of blood to his cock. He was slime. The woman had nearly lost her life trying to save the tiny cougars and all he could think about was her curvaceous, naked ass.

“Okay, I’m shifting.”

He waited a heartbeat and turned, expecting to see a wolf. But the form before him rolled and shimmied in an odd mix of human, wolf and cougar parts. The kits cried and backed away from Jayda. Zane wasn’t sure how to help her. Tears welled in eyes that were surrounded by the round nose of a cougar then the full shape of a wolf and finally she gave up, her naked form appearing on her hands in knees in front of him. Her breasts hung seductively and her ass curved ever so provocatively toward the sky. *Shit.* Zane needed to focus. Obviously Jayda was upset.

“What’s wrong with me? I’ve never had problems.” She looked at him, frustration and fear drawing deep lines on her face. “I can’t feel it. My wolf isn’t here.” She pressed her hand over her heart and Zane’s did a little stutter step of its own. “What’s wrong?”

Zane knelt before her, working to ignore the fact that her body was even more alluring without clothes. Unshed tears were glistening in her eyes. She needed him. He pushed her back on her haunches, creating distance between her luscious lips and his. With gentle fingers he lifted her chin and forced her to look into his eyes. “How do you usually shift?”

“I’ve never shifted without Cole. He helps me...relax.”

“How?”

She grabbed the flimsy top and covered her breasts. “Zane, this is just stupid. We can find another way up. Maybe you should just try to take me up.”

“No, you can do this.” Zane cupped her face. “How does he help you relax?” he asked firmly. From the flush of her skin, he suspected he already knew the answer. Still, if he moved on Jayda before she was ready, that wouldn’t help her shift either. “How does he help you, Jayda?” This time his tone was more firm even as his thumb traced the line of her jaw.

“He takes my mind off it...but it’s stupid. I can do it myself.”

Zane held her gaze a moment before his eyes roamed her face and settled on her pouty mouth. He brushed his lips to hers. Her breath puffed, the sweet scent feathering his face. Uncertainty sparked in her eyes, but she didn’t pull from him. With a gentle caress, he sucked her bottom lip into his mouth. Jayda sighed and closed her eyes. He changed the angle and pressed his lips to hers. Soft heat exploded at his mouth and radiated down his torso, straight to his cock. He broke the contact but kept his face pressed to hers. “Feel me, Jayda. Feel the animal within. Give yourself over to it.”

He brought his mouth to hers again and sank into the sweet taste of her. Jasmine and honeysuckle filled his nose and he didn’t know if it was her scent or the summer breeze caressing his body. His tongue ran the seam of her lips, inviting her to open for him. A shock of desire jolted him as her silken tongue caressed his. Zane’s hand reached up to caress her breast but came up against the solid wall of muscle and fur as he filled his lungs with the scent of her. He pulled back, witnessing Jayda’s cougar stretching and changing her bones. He hadn’t expected her cougar to emerge. Pride swelled his chest. He’d brought out this part of her.

Fear sparked in her eyes.

“It’s all right, Jayda. Feel it. Your cougar is coming out. You’re not wolf. Let it go.” He laid his hand firmly on the top of her head, careful to avoid the open wound. Her silken hair shortened, her nose widened, and the beautiful features of a black cougar replaced the woman he’d met only this morning. That didn’t seem possible. He felt he’d known her far longer. Her shifting had reached in and touched the deepest part of him and he wanted nothing more than to take her as his own.

But that didn't make any sense. There was only one lifemate for each shifter and Jayda looked like she'd already found hers. What he desired, even in the shifter world, was considered traitorous. Zane couldn't think about that now. Getting Jayda and the kits to safety had to be his first concern.

He shifted with ease, Zane's cougar happy to stand next to the lithe black cougar.

Jayda stood where she'd changed, looking from side to side. She lifted a paw and licked it, confusion marring the deep gold of her eyes.

Zane walked to her and nuzzled her neck. With gentle licks, he caressed her nose and ears, watching the tension ease from the bunched muscles of her shoulders. He purred loudly and the kits bounded out to them. He picked one up by the scruff of its neck and it went limp in his mouth. Jayda nipped and missed and the kit growled at her. After two more tries, she finally managed to corral the little thing.

And looking very much like a family, they picked their way to the top of the ridge.

\* \* \* \* \*

Jayda stood next to the claw-foot tub, the cougar female lying placidly on the iron grating. She really wasn't looking forward to this necropsy, but it had to be done. The reason for death wasn't clear and until she discovered exactly what may have happened then all the wild cougars and perhaps – shifters – were in danger.

"So that's the last of them." Marissa breezed into the back room, her sneakers squeaking across the linoleum. "Everyone was pretty understanding. Well, except Mrs. Gehring. But you know her." Marissa grabbed a pair of gloves from the box on the counter. "When it comes to Puss 'n' Boots, everyone else's lives need to stop." The purple latex snapped on her wrist. "But I got her calmed down and she'll come in two days from now on Friday." She wiggled the other glove in place and snapped again as if the sound added credibility to her statements. "Lady's asleep on her bed in the waiting area. So it looks like we can get this started." Marissa smoothed graceful hands down the long plastic apron covering the front of her scrubs.

“Have you ever assisted in a necropsy, Marissa?” Jayda checked over the tray of instruments, sure she didn’t really want to cut into this beautiful animal, especially after what had happened that morning. “It’s pretty messy.”

“Can’t be any worse than the neutering. And definitely not more blood than birthing a calf. Is there?” Marissa had grown up on a ranch in Lonesome Fork. At twenty, the young woman found births and deaths as natural as drawing breath.

Jayda was grateful she’d found her. Marissa and her parents had helped ease the locals into accepting her. The Devlin family had been the first to take her on as the primary vet for their livestock. Slowly most of the town, shifter and human alike, had accepted the local vet. There were no more trips over the mountain to Dr. Jacobsen. “No, not more blood than birthing.”

Marissa clicked on the recorder and they donned their plastic face shields. Working together, they rolled the cougar from side to side, conducting the external examination. Zane had been right. There wasn’t a mark on her. Except for the red and swollen third eyelid, bloodshot eyes—which may have occurred postmortem, depending on how she’d been lying—and a swollen tongue, there wasn’t anything amiss about her appearance.

“I’m going to begin the internal exam. Are you ready, Marissa?”

“Ready when you are.”

Jayda took the number ten scalpel and pressed deep into the flesh just below the rib cage, opening the cougar to expose the internal organs. What a shame for such a magnificent animal to be dead. At least her kits were in the very capable hands of some cougar shifters. Zane had promised to look after them.

Marissa’s chatter became a lilting background tune as Jayda’s hands deftly worked the scissors, separating skin and muscle. An occasional nod or grunt of understanding seemed to satisfy her young assistant as they studied, weighed and took tissue samples of the cougar’s internal organs. It was rude not to listen, but the cougar in her hands had her mind wandering to Zane.

They didn't talk about her shift. She wasn't sure exactly how to deal with it. Her wolf hadn't known how to rise, but when she'd relaxed in Zane's presence, the cougar had flowed forward as naturally as if she'd been shifting to that form her whole life.

Guilt wrapped around her heart and squeezed, making it hard to draw breath.

"You all right, Jayda?" Marissa's look of concern brought her back to the present.

"Yeah. Fine. Why?"

"You gasped."

"I thought I saw something inconsistent with the kidneys," Jayda lied as she pulled the organ from the animal. "But they look normal."

Marissa took it from her, measured and weighed it, and placed it in the growing pile with the stomach and intestines. Her answer seemed to satisfy the young woman and Marissa went back to some story about her shifter boyfriend and a midnight skinny-dip in the river. It sounded very much like her evening with Cole.

*Cole.* Jayda had tried to reach him when she'd gotten back to the office, but he was still in court. She had no idea how she'd explain being naked with Zane. Though it had seemed quite innocent at the time, if the roles were reversed and Cole had kissed a woman to help her shift, even if it was to save her life, Jayda wasn't sure she wouldn't see it as a betrayal.

Jayda loved Cole with all her heart. Nothing could change that. But this morning Zane had stirred feelings inside her that a woman in a committed relationship wasn't supposed to have. Perhaps that was why the burden of guilt was so heavy. It hadn't been just about the shift. *That* she could explain. But the tension that had filled the cab on the ride back to her cabin to pick up clothes still prickled along her nerves.

Then again, she had been wrapped in nothing more than Zane's work-shirt. Corralling the rambunctious kits at her feet had almost been enough to keep her eyes from wandering over his well-defined torso and those tantalizing silver hoops glinting in the sun. The one time she had slanted him a look, she'd caught him staring at her, his lips parted as if he wanted to talk. But she hadn't been ready to acknowledge the sexual

energy that had sparked between them when he'd kissed her on the ledge. Like a coward, Jayda had reached for the knobs on the radio, letting country music fill the uncomfortable silence between them. Zane had been silent the rest of the trip. Jayda definitely needed to understand her own reaction to Zane before she attempted to explain it to Cole.

"Oh my!" Marissa stepped back and leaned against the stainless steel counter.

Jayda shut off the bone saw and looked up. "Marissa?"

"I'm sorry. It's a dizzy spell." She shucked off her gloves, swiping off her face shield before turning to the sink. "I've been having them for a couple of days. They come on so suddenly." Turning on the tap, she splashed cold water on her face. "I'm fine. It'll pass in a minute."

Setting down the saw, Jayda pulled off her gloves and removed her plastic face shield. She walked around the tub and put her hand on Marissa's trembling shoulder. "You sure you're all right? I can do this without you."

Grabbing a few paper towels from the dispenser, Marissa blotted her face. "Don't be silly. It's gone already. They're just quick bouts. Besides, aren't you nearly done?"

"Sure. A couple more minutes." The lie tripped off Jayda's tongue. There were still the lungs and heart to examine and then tissue samples of the brain to complete before Jayda could call the necropsy complete. But Marissa's skin had gone from summer bronze to a sickly shade of alabaster in less time than it had taken her to move to her side. Jayda wasn't sure the woman wasn't about to pass out on her. "There's no need for you to help if you want to sit in the office."

"Don't be silly." Marissa straightened and grabbed a fresh pair of gloves. "I'm fine." She glanced at Jayda's skeptical expression. "Really." She set her mask in place with a definitive motion that was meant to stop Jayda's questions.

The color had come back to Marissa's cheeks and she didn't look ill. Perhaps the girl was pregnant. Jayda smiled at the thought. She'd heard of women fainting in the first trimester. It wasn't uncommon. "Well, let's get that heart out and we're finished."



Jayda went back around the cougar, snapped on a clean pair of gloves, replaced the heavy plastic face mask and picked up the saw. "You sure you're all right?"

"I'm fine." Marissa laughed. "Talking about John gets my heart just fluttering, that's all."

Jayda started the saw and yelled over the whine as it bit into the ribs. "You two pretty serious?" That seemed the most polite way to be nosy.

"We've been dating two years this August." She paused as Jayda shut off the saw and set it aside. "And I can't lie, I'm hoping for an engagement ring and a mating ceremony on the autumn equinox." Marissa smiled shyly and shook her finger at Jayda. "Don't you dare tell my parents. They think we're too young."

Twisting her fingers in a locking motion in front of her lips, Jayda said, "Your secret's safe with me." Jayda envied Marissa her confidence. Here was a young woman, nearly a decade younger, who knew what she wanted in a man. Jayda loved Cole and had agreed to be his mate. But she wasn't even brave enough to move in with him. Until this morning, she wasn't sure what was holding her back. Now Zane had made her question her own fidelity.

Jayda pushed open the ribs and the engorged heart and lungs pushed from the confines of the chest. "Oh dear."

"Now *that's* more than I can handle." Marissa groaned and vomited into the sink.

## Chapter Four

Jayda sat on the back porch swing, listening to the cicadas and frogs chirp in the field just beyond her log cabin. The smell of butterweed and wood smoke floated on the evening wind. Someone across the lake must be having a barbeque. A great horned owl called for his mate, a haunting cry that ripped at her heart. She hadn't felt this alone and lost since arriving in Montana four years ago. Leaning over, Jayda scratched Lady's ears before searching out the wine bottle under the swing and refilling her glass. In the dark she couldn't tell how much she'd consumed, which was just as well since she'd lost count of how many times she'd emptied the glass.

The moon rose steadily over the tree line across the lake, its ruddy glow shimmering across the water's surface like a throbbing artery of blood. Last night the cougar had died. Surely this wasn't another grave omen. Cold fingers of dread skittered across the nape of her neck and Jayda promptly smoothed the lifted wisps of hair. That was foolish. Adults didn't operate on superstition. The color of the rising moon, whether it mirrored blood or bone, did *not* portend danger. It was simply the angle of light through the atmosphere that determined its shade. Simple science. Logical conclusion.

What wasn't simple was the state of her life at the moment.

Tenderly, she touched the gash on her head. The wound had sealed itself before she and Zane had left the ridge with the kits. Now her hair covered the scab and tomorrow there would be very little evidence left of her fall onto the rock ledge. When she'd gotten scrapes and bruises as a child, her mother had simply thought her ability to heal was the product of an overactive immune system. Now Jayda understood, it was all part of her shifter strengths. There was no doubt a human would have required a few stitches to help the head wound heal. But a shifter's ability to repair muscle and bone

was amazing. Now that Jayda understood who, or more correctly *what*, she was, it certainly clarified her childhood. The claustrophobic feel of the city and the vivid nightmares that had haunted her definitely could be attributed to the shifter side of her. A side her adoptive parents knew nothing about. In the last few months, Jayda had questioned her mother about her birth parents and the circumstances involved in her adoption, but her mother had tearfully claimed no knowledge of her past. Jayda had to be content with that.

But figuring out what it meant to be a polymorphic shifter—now that was confusing as hell. Maybe the human population had no idea where she'd come from, but surely the shifter community would understand her roots.

Sure as hell, no one understood *her*. She was a walking enigma. A conundrum of two opposing shifters wrapped in human form, all of them without balance. Alone. Isolated in a sea of confusion. There was no beacon of hope showing her the way. No maps to point her in the direction of equality for all her personas. No one to explain why she yearned for more love than she already had. Sadness speared her heart.

She took another sip of wine and Lady sat up. The dog cocked her head and whimpered a warning, but Jayda had already heard Cole's truck bumping down the lake road. His headlights cut a bright path through the heavy darkness. The shadows of the black spruce danced menacingly over the swaying marsh grass as the truck moved into the yard.

Jayda hadn't seen him since this morning at the clinic. Cole had been tied up at the courthouse until late afternoon. She'd missed his call while she'd been doing the necropsy and he'd already been headed to the shifter council meeting when she finally decided to come home.

The truck door slammed.

"I'm out back," Jayda hollered.

Lady ran down the stairs, barks of pleasure drowning out any greeting he might have shouted.

Cole's dark form came around the corner of the house. His hair wasn't up in his usual ponytail and the long tendrils lifted and danced with the wind as he came up the stairs. The man took her breath away.

"Hey." He bent down and touched his lips to hers and she breathed in the familiar scent of him, her pulse quickening just because he was there.

"Hey yourself." Jayda handed him the wineglass and smiled.

Sensing her melancholy mood, Cole leaned casually against the porch railing, crossing his sneakered feet at the ankles. "You and Zane have a productive morning?"

The man was nothing if not blunt. He always jumped right into the heart of things. Jayda had no doubt years of police training had helped Cole hone his skip-the-bullshit skills.

"We found both kits. And I did the necropsy on the cougar." Casually Jayda fished for the bottle of wine under the swing and held it up for Cole. "Not sure I found much." She emptied the bottle into his glass, barely making the halfway mark. Cole raised an eyebrow but no questions. Obviously he was waiting her out. "The spleen, heart and lungs were enlarged, the tongue pallid and swollen, eyes bloodshot." Jayda curled her feet under her body and hugged herself tight. "Blood and tissue samples are waiting to go to the lab in Columbia Falls. Without that information I don't have much to add to the investigation."

"Any chance someone killed her?"

"No outward evidence." Jayda shook her head and smiled. "Always the policeman looking to solve a murder."

"It has more to do with my role as head of the wolf shifter council." Cole finished the wine and set the glass next to him on the railing. "It seems rumors are beginning to circulate that wolves are looking for revenge."

"It's been three months, Cole." Jayda sat up and leaned forward, her hands nervously toying with the cushions on the swing. Too many shifters and wolves had been killed last winter because one man wanted power over all shifter populations.

“The mastermind behind the murders is in jail. There’s no reason for wolves and shifters to be looking to control Coppertip Mountain anymore. There’s enough land for everyone.” After what had happened today, Jayda wondered what her role would be in bringing peace to the shifter populations. “The councils are not backing down from that, are they?”

“Not my call. It all depends on Brodan and his cougars. It’s obvious they aren’t really interested in a dual council.”

“Why are you laying this at the feet of the cougars? If I remember correctly *your* wolf shifters didn’t look too happy at the meeting last week when it came up.” The words tripped over her lips much louder than she’d intended. Taking a steadying breath, Jayda tamped down her irritation. Her reaction had nothing to do with Cole’s assessment of the situation and everything to do with the guilt burning in her gut. She should tell Cole about her first shift to cougar form, but Jayda had no idea how or why it had happened, explaining it to him would be impossible. “All I’m trying to say is that everyone has to be in agreement or there will never be peace. The shifter population can’t afford more infighting.”

Cole shifted to the porch swing and gathered her in his arms. Jayda melted into the heat and strength of him. Fisting her hand in his cotton t-shirt, she anchored herself against the storm of doubt swirling her in a sea of confusion. Regardless of what had happened, she wanted to believe Cole was the only man she needed.

“Jayda, I wasn’t trying to be insensitive. I know you’re pulled between the two worlds.” He kissed the top of her head. “But you’ve chosen wolf. We’re pretty sure your first shift on the blue moon in the spring guaranteed that. The cougars aren’t your problem.”

Oh, how she wished that part of the legend were true.

Everyone who understood her abilities believed that since she had shifted during the second full moon of March, the *blue moon*, and had taken wolf form, she would only be able to shift to wolf until the next blue moon in several years. Only she and Cole saw

parts of her cougar appear during their lovemaking. They both believed it would lie dormant for several more years.

No one, least of all Jayda, would have expected that she could take on a cougar form. She wanted Cole to be right and let this morning be nothing more than a fluke—an accident of circumstance. Jayda only hoped Zane had kept the whole incident to himself.

“I certainly don’t want to worry about cougars now.” Jayda craned her neck and scraped her teeth along Cole’s bottom lip. “In fact there’s only one thing I’d like to think about now.”

“Oh?” Cole ran his hand down her long braid and pulled the rubber band from the end. “I suppose you’d like to shift and go for another run.” The words fell seductively out of his mouth. An exploring mouth that trailed kisses over her nose and cheeks and lips. “Or another swimming lesson like last night.” His fingers worked her hair free from its binding and combed through the long strands. “I suppose you think you can beat me to the ridge tonight.”

Snaking her hand under Cole’s shirt, Jayda smiled up at him. The moon, sitting stark and white over the pines, highlighted the desire in his eyes. “As lovely as that sounds, I was thinking we could enjoy some quiet time here.” Her fingers languidly toyed with the soft mat of curls on his chest. “Make love to me.” Jayda needed to be in Cole’s arms, to feel his strength and love as his lust devoured her.

His mouth came down greedily on hers, his tongue plunging in to dance with hers. Their need and lust ignited, searing molten desire through her veins. Cole stood, pulling her with him. He must have sensed her frantic need to join with him because the gentle caresses became demanding touches filled with desperate desire to feel skin on skin. Hands fisted in clothing and ripped at buttons with a reckless hunger that hadn’t consumed them in a long time. She needed Cole to need her tonight, to show her how good they were together.

When they were naked, he stepped back and admired her body. "Do you ever get tired of hearing me tell you how beautiful you are?"

"What?"

Cole laughed, a deep rumble that rolled over Jayda's nerves and shimmied down her back. "You are so beautiful and I love you."

Jayda pushed him back on the swing and leaned over him. "*I need you.*" She enunciated every word, not sure who she was trying to convince. But as Cole's hands squeezed and reshaped the pendulous mounds of her breasts and she moaned into his mouth, she forgot her insecurities.

As she made love to his mouth, Cole pinched and teased her aching nipples. Jolts of electric hunger shot straight to her pussy and clenched her womb. Moisture leaked onto her thighs. Damn, he could make her greedy with want with just a few deft strokes of his fingers or a flick of his tongue over hers.

"Just relax," she said as she kissed a path down his neck and scraped her teeth over the taut cords of his neck. "This isn't going to hurt one..." She sucked on his nipple and air hissed through his teeth. "Little..." Jayda dragged her nails over every quaking muscle of his washboard abs. "Itty bitty..." She knelt before him and buried her fingers in the halo of dark curls surrounding his erection. "Bit." Her tongue laved up the length of his cock and he moaned out her name, burying his fingers in her hair. He demanded nothing, but the way his trembling fingers massaged her scalp, she had no doubt he wanted to take as much as she wanted to give. Jayda was heady with the sense of power she held when Cole let go like this.

Her tongue circled the mushroom head and she kissed the tip of his cock, licking up his salty pre-cum. With ease borne of practice, she sucked him into the heat of her mouth, her tongue flicking along the tender underside of his erection. Veins bulged and his cock hardened to steel, its velvety flesh searing her mouth.

With a slow glide she took him into her mouth, relaxing her throat to allow him entry. Her fingers toyed with his balls, nails gently rasping the sensitive skin.

“Damn, Jayda. You have no idea how good this feels.”

She pulled back, creating a suction that had Cole panting love obscenities. Several more times she bobbed her head, swallowing his cock then pulling back with a hard suction. The sexy slurping sounds of her mouth mixed with the guttural moans of Cole’s pleasure speared straight to Jayda’s core. Her nipples beaded and her womb clenched, sending a hot surge of desire from her cunt.

“I want to make love to you.” Cole cupped her face and eased his erection from her mouth. Laying her cheek against his cock, she stared at his heavy-lidded eyes. “As absolutely wonderful as this feels, Jayda, I need to bury myself in your heat and feel you come around me.”

Jayda stood. His gaze raked her body with such a thorough inspection she felt the heat of its path as if he’d dragged his fingers over her skin. Her belly was far from flat and her full hips were a handful even for Cole. But no one had ever made her feel as sexy as the man devouring her with his eyes.

Without a word Cole leaned forward and took one tight nipple in his mouth. His teeth bit the sensitive flesh and his talented tongue soothed and suckled. Her fingers fisted in his silken hair, pulling him tight to her chest. More moist heat gushed from her pussy. She didn’t need more stimulation to be ready for him. But when his thick fingers pushed through the thin line of curls and plunged into her wet cleft, her knees buckled.

With his other hand, Cole steadied her, his hand and mouth continuing their assault. “You’re so wet. I love it when you’re hot and ready for me.” The pad of his middle finger found the hard knot of her clitoris and began circling it with gentle pressure. Sparks of heat jolted over her nerves and curled her toes. Cole knew her body and how to draw the most pleasure from its sensitive spots.

One finger pushed into her cunt, quickly followed by another. His thumb replaced his finger at her clit. She bucked and writhed, her muscles tensing with pleasure. The sublime pressure built. Divine pleasure rippled through her, lifting her up on wondrous clouds of bliss. Jayda soared on heavenly wings of joy, floating higher and higher. Her



muscles tightened, arching her back, pressing Cole tighter to her chest. Her hands tangled in his hair, anchoring herself against the impending explosion. Cole's lips and fingers and teeth worked her flesh until the world shattered around her and sent Jayda crashing into a mountain of ecstasy. She screamed out his name, her nails digging half moons in the steel bands of muscle at his shoulders. Wave upon wave of ecstasy rolled over her, stealing her breath and making her muscles weak. Only Cole's firm grip on her ass kept her from collapsing.

Slowly Cole eased his fingers from her slick channel. Sweat trickled between her breasts as Cole kissed his way up to her neck. She laid her forehead on his, her labored breaths washing over his sexy smile of triumph. He pulled her to him and Jayda knelt on the swing, her calves hugging his muscular thighs. Cole's cock was pressed pleasantly between their stomachs.

"How do you do that?" she asked before kissing him.

Cole smiled and brought his fingers to his mouth, sucking off the last of her juices. "It's a gift." He kissed her hard, the salty flavor of her cum still on his lips. The taste was sexy and arousing. Jayda deepened the kiss and ground her pubic bone against Cole's iron-hard dick.

A moan vibrated deep in his chest. Cole dug his fingers into her fleshy hips, separating her ass cheeks, opening her to the night air. The cool breeze over her wet labia sent a shiver up her spine and tingled in her nipples. His nails raked seductively over her sensitive flesh, sending a fresh wave of desire searing through her veins. Their kiss became a hot war of teeth and tongues meshing and battling for control.

Without a word Cole lifted her, canting his hips so his cock teased her slick opening. She was so ready and needy, but the sudden rush of sensation as he drove completely into her had Jayda arching her back and once again screaming his name.

He lifted her then pulled her back down, impaling her on his erection. Jayda squeezed her internal muscles to hold him tighter and increase the friction. The scent of their mating filled her nose and pitched her into a frenzy of want. Cole's ragged breaths

came out through clenched teeth. He was as ready as she. His cock stretched and filled her with each thrust, leaving her feeling needy as he pulled out. With each up and down motion, her aching nipples scraped the hair on his chest and added another dimension to the sensations skittering along her nerves.

“Oh yeah, fuck me.” Cole rasped.

Tilting her hips back, Jayda added pressure on her clitoris as Cole continued to piston into her. The slapping sound of their bodies echoed through the night. Shocks of heaven quivered through her muscles and the pleasure took over. She was aware of nothing save for the sound of her sweat-slick body slapping against Cole’s and her pussy screaming for release. Biting along the cords of his neck, she filled her mouth with the salty taste of him.

Once again the ecstasy built, pulling her to the edge of elation. Cole’s thighs and belly tensed. With one more hard thrust, he lifted his head and released a feral howl as his seed spilled into her channel. It was all she needed to tumble headlong into a chasm of rapture. Tremors of elation rocked through her body, convulsing her muscles in uncontrollable spasms that sent shocks of pleasure all the way to her fingers and toes. Pushing several more hard, long thrusts, Cole gripped her hips and held her. He rocked his hips, grinding against her sensitive clitoris until her orgasm was nothing more than small tremors quivering through her torso.

She collapsed against him, too tired to move. “Let’s sleep right here tonight,” she mumbled into his shoulder. “I don’t think I can move.”

Cole’s fingers threaded into her hair and gently pulled her head back so he could look into her eyes. “Are you asking me to stay?” The moon washed his face in a melancholy blue light. The pain etched on his features was achingly obvious.

“You’re always welcome to stay.”

“Just not move in.” The gentle tone of his voice now cut with a razor edge of anger.

The tender moment was lost.

Jayda separated from him and stepped back to lean against the railing. "I love you. You know that." The quiver in her voice roused Lady from her slumber and she laid her head against Jayda's thigh, seeking a quick pat and reassurance. "It's just all so...confusing. This whole shifting thing has got me screwed up."

Jayda paced to the other side of the porch.

Leaning forward, Cole toyed with the pack ring on his right pinky. "What's happened, Jayda?"

She stopped moving but didn't turn. "What makes you think something happened?" With the scent of Cole still on her, Jayda had no desire to talk about the events of this morning, especially when it involved another man. But Cole's radar had picked up on the words she hadn't said. *Damn*, why did the man have to be so good at interrogating suspects?

She turned to him, crossing her arms over her heart. "Why can't this be the same old, same old? Me. Confused about who I am and where I belong. Seems no one has answers to that." Jayda suddenly felt very vulnerable standing naked under his appraisal.

"Something happen with Brodan this morning?" he asked again. Cole stood and strode toward her. "Did he do something while you were in the woods?" His hand swiped over his long face, trying to soothe the rising enmity. "If he touched you..." The threat hung between them.

"Then what, Cole? You'll go all Neanderthal?" She fisted her hands on her hips. "I can take care of myself." Understanding straightened her spine. "Or does this have something to do with a lack of trust?"

"Christ, Jayda, of course I trust you." Turning on his heel, Cole paced back across the porch, his fingers raking through his hair. "But Brodan's a cougar. One of the more cooperative ones, I'll give you that. But a cougar nonetheless. It's still hard for me to completely trust *him*." He turned and stared at her, emotions ticking in his jaw.

"I thought you said he's working as hard as you to combine the councils and —"

“This has *nothing* to do with us working together on the councils and *everything* to do with him sniffing around my girlfriend.” Cole’s hand cut through the air, emphasizing the words. “I saw how he scented you this morning at the clinic. Do you think I was happy letting you go with him?”

“*Letting*? Did you actually say *letting* me go with him? We had work to do, Cole. I wasn’t going to let two kits die because you were jealous—”

“Jealous! Yeah, I was fucking jealous! All right?” He strode back to Jayda, pulling her against the solid wall of his chest. His pulse pounded visibly in his neck. “He’s a damn cougar. You’re *my* lover. A wolf shifter. I don’t want it to be more complicated than that. I don’t want to lose you to some cougar on the prowl.”

“You’re not going to lose me. I love you.” She ran a finger over the lines furrowing his brow, trying to soothe his doubt. Cole’s skin was hot against hers, his cock pressing against her belly. She wanted so much to lose herself in him and stop worrying about how the release of her cougar might change their lives. But he’d opened the door and she had to be brave enough to walk through. “Zane’s not on the prowl.” She breathed long and slow. “But something did happen this morning up on the ridge.”

He tensed beneath her hands but didn’t pull away.

“I shifted today.”

Knowing there was more, Cole waited.

“My...my cougar came out.” Pain and confusion lined Cole’s face, but she couldn’t let it keep her from telling him the truth. “I fell off the ridge and was hurt. I needed to shift to get back up. Zane was there, he...he...” She couldn’t tell him about the kiss. That would come later. “Something about him being near. My wolf couldn’t surface. It was the cougar that finally morphed.”

Cole smiled, but it didn’t reach his eyes. He slipped from her embrace. “Well, it was only folklore passed down for generations that claimed the blue moon would seal you. No one said it was based on fact.” He stopped at the top step, his magnificent body lit by the moon. Cole looked over at her, sadness riding on the breeze lifting his hair. “Did

you do anything? You and..." He swallowed and stared up at the sky. Jayda had no doubt the shimmer in his eyes came from tears. "You and Brodan...did anything happen between you?"

"We kissed." Jayda could barely push the words past the guilt burning her throat. It had been innocent, but at the moment it felt like so much more. "I'm sorry, Cole. I didn't intend for it to happen."

"Did you want more?"

"My cougar –"

"Screw your cougar," Cole said tightly, staring at her, the hurt evident in his face. "You, Jayda. Did *you* want more?"

"I don't know." She rubbed at the chill creeping up her arms. "Something felt..." Jayda had no idea what she'd felt, but something had happened between her and Zane. "It's so complicated."

"You aren't looking for my blessing, I hope."

"No. But perhaps patience and a little understanding." She wanted Cole to take her in his arms and ease the confusion, but he remained rooted on the top stair, very much separated from her.

"I'm not sure I have either. But you're not bound to me. I can't keep you from him."

"Will I lose you?"

"My heart belongs to you. My wolf believes you are his mate. The choice for me to stay will be yours, Jayda. But I warn you not to leave me waiting too long."

Cole turned from her, his wolf emerging as he ran blindly into the night.

## Chapter Five

Zane shoved the truck into park. The kits nearly tumbled off the front seat. Only a quick swipe of his hand kept them from rolling ass over teakettle. Zane stared at the cedar-shingled building in front of him. This was a bad idea all the way around. Nothing good could come from visiting Jayda here at the vet clinic. Yesterday he'd helped her shift and somehow that had been enough for her to nuzzle her way under his skin. He'd seen her. Smelled her. *Known* her.

It shouldn't matter.

He didn't believe in the whole one-mate-for-everyone hypothesis. Especially a theory where that proposed mate already belonged to another.

"Shit." He dragged the word into two syllables, gathered the kits and lumbered from his truck. "Okay, you two, work your magic." The kits growled and nipped at his jaw. Not even twenty-four hours had passed since they'd come to live with him and already they considered him part of their pride. He'd given them their feedings throughout the day yesterday. But it was the run through the woods last evening that had solidified his position as their provider.

Zane had taken the kits out to get his mind off Jayda. He'd thought a night in the forest would keep their development on track. After all, the hope was to teach them how to live on their own.

He'd left last night without an agenda, intending nothing more than a quick run along the river. But the lure of the lake had been too strong and he'd found himself prowling through the thick marsh grass. Internal radar had taken him straight to Jayda's cabin. Zane had convinced himself the internet search he'd conducted earlier in the evening for her address had nothing to do with knowing where she lived and everything to do with finding an emergency number in case the kits needed a vet.

But when he'd happened upon her naked form sitting expectantly on the porch swing, he'd had to steady his heart to keep from going to her. The blue light of the waning moon glistened on her raven hair and sparkled in her eyes. She'd looked so sad and lost. It had taken all of his willpower not to shift and go to her.

A cold shower and a quick hand job when he'd gotten home hadn't eased his body's desire for her. Jayda's naked body had taunted his dreams throughout the night and he'd woken with a painful hard-on that hadn't been satisfied by a good piss. He had a desperate need to see her, smell her one more time and convince himself she meant nothing to him. This foolish plan had been hatched the moment he'd fed the kits their morning formula.

With a kit squirming under each arm, Zane mounted the wooden steps in two giant leaps. The sun had barely crested the treetops, but he had no doubt Jayda was already hard at work, tending the needs of the animals left in her care. To his relief, the front door to the clinic was unlocked and he opened it. Assaulted by the earthy scent of animals and disinfectant, Zane cleared his throat. The odor reminded him too much of hospitals. He hated hospitals. Too many people he'd loved had died in hospitals.

The door to the back room swung open and Jayda's assistant strode efficiently to the desk. Disappointment mingled with embarrassment. Zane had hoped to have some time alone with Jayda. Just as well, this whole idea had been stupid from the outset.

He set the kits down and wiped his nervous palms down his pants. "Morning, Marissa." The cougar shifter population was finally rebounding from the infighting that had nearly wiped them out less than five years ago. But it was still small enough for him to know all the families in his pride.

The young woman smiled, a blush creeping up her cheeks. "Zane." The crimson color traveled to her hairline. "I mean, Mr. Brodan. Nice to see you."

"Did I see you with John Buchanan at the last council meeting?"

"We're dating." Her smile widened. "Well, it's more than dating. We're making plans to head off to the same college. John in pre-med. Me in pre-vet."

*Teenage infatuations.* Must be nice not having to worry about grownup relationships and lifemates, thought Zane. Or perhaps they'd already found their one and only. Only adults seemed to get all caught up in proper behavior, regardless of how the heart saw things. "Sounds like a plan. Hope it all works out for you."

The young girl craned her neck over the edge of the desk to study the two rambunctious cougars exploring the small waiting room. "Is something wrong with the kits?" She pressed her hand to her stomach.

He smiled. "No, they're fine. I just wanted to check with Dr. Kynslan to make sure the formula mixture I'm using is correct." The excuse sounded lame even to his ears, but the kits seemed to be his only connection to Jayda at this point. "Is she around?" Zane tipped back on the heels of his cowboy boots, hoping it made him look relaxed rather than the stalker he felt like at the moment.

"She's in the back." Marissa's smile faltered. "We autopsied the mother yesterday," she said in a whisper as if it would upset the kits.

"I figured as much." Zane looped his thumbs in his pockets. He was acting like a foolish teenager scoping out a girl. "Did Dr. Kynslan find anything?"

The girl's hand covered her mouth, a deep scowl furrowing her brow as if she'd just remembered something important. "Not that I know." The words came out through shaky fingers as the ruddy color of her blush drained from her face. "But Jayda has the details. Really, go out back and talk to her. I'll watch the kits."

She pushed him through the door, leaving him alone, and he wasn't quite sure what to do. Sunlight shined through the curtained windows. Cages of varying sizes held small animals of all species. A doorway opened to his right. The walk-in fridge was there. No doubt it held the remains of the female cougar. Zane hoped Jayda found a natural cause for her death. He had no desire to get into a territory war with some wolf out for revenge. The orange tabby in the pen next to him mewled. Without thought, he stuck his fingers through the wire mesh of the cage, stroking its satin fur.



"Zane." Jayda stopped abruptly in the doorway, a paper towel crumpled in her motionless hands. "What brings you here today?" She dropped it casually in the trash.

"Well, the kits –"

"What happened?" She rushed to him, her hand squeezing his forearm with worry. "Oh Zane, they didn't get sick, did they?"

He tried not to think about the warmth of her fingers on his skin.

"I was hoping we'd gotten to them in time." Tears welled in her eyes.

He covered her hand with his. *Damn, she smelled as fresh as a warm summer rain.* "Jayda, they're fine." Being this close to her wasn't proving anything other than how much he wanted to spend more time with her. "I just wanted to pick up more formula." He tried to remember if that was the same line he'd fed Marissa. But when Jayda's mouth curved at the corner, he knew it didn't matter. She understood he'd used the kits only as an excuse.

Her eyes raked his face and he held her gaze, unable to pull from her soulful inspection. Blood pooled in his groin. There was no denying how badly he wanted this woman.

"I –"

"Yester –"

Jayda laughed, a nervous giggle that tingled down his spine.

"We keep doing that," she said, her lips trembling with a smile. "You first."

"I just wanted to let you know that yesterday is between you and me." He dug nails into his palms to keep from touching her. "I have no intention of letting anyone know about your cougar shift."

"Zane, I already told him. It wouldn't have been fair to keep something like that from Cole."

The name was a kick in the gut, breaking the bond between them. He stepped back to give himself room to catch his breath. "And the kiss?"

She nodded.

"I'm sure that pissed him off."

"I think everyone's a little confused right now. I know I am."

Jayda's arms knotted over her chest. Defiance or protection? He wasn't sure how to interpret the move so he ignored it. Her foot shuffled an imaginary dust mote before her golden eyes met his.

"Obviously he understands that we're all treading murky waters," she said.

Clearing his throat, Zane tucked his hands in the front pocket of his work pants, no sense tempting them into going somewhere they shouldn't "Yes, well, combining councils is going to be difficult for sure." Even from this distance he could smell the heady floral scent of her shampoo. Blood rushed in his cock and he hoped Jayda hadn't noticed his response to her proximity. "But if the competition over land rights of Coppertip Mountain is ever going to stop, we're all, cougar and wolf shifter alike, going to have to work at it."

"I wasn't referring to the councils. I was talking about this." Her hand churned the heated air between them.

He imitated her hand motion. "I don't think there is any *this*." His tone was more emphatic than he intended. He was lying to himself and now to Jayda. Zane really shouldn't have come. Getting tangled with a shifter who was so obviously in love with another was just a bad idea all the way around. Unfortunately he had let his cock lead him around this morning before his thinking head had engaged. Standing in Jayda's clinic in the light of day certainly helped him focus on the futility of his quest. "Listen, whatever is going on with you and Takoda isn't any of my business. Coming here was a bad idea all the way around. Why don't you just give me more formula and I'll be on my way. I'm taking the kits to the river to check on the otter beds."

"Otter beds?"

*Good. Change the subject.* His libido slowed to a manageable pace. "Spring floods may have upset their nesting sites. I don't think it'll be a problem, but I'm checking on them just in case."

"Oh." The tip of Jayda's tongue flicked out and dampened her pouty lips. His cock jumped to attention again.

"River otters are pretty hardy." Zane needed to focus on anything but Jayda and her inviting gaze rasping over his skin, lifting gooseflesh and leaving him all too vulnerable. "They don't usually have problems in this area with diminishing population, but the warden service keeps an eye on them. The river's still running pretty high. We'd hate for them to be having problems with their nests and new litters and not do something to help. So I'm just checking things out." He was rambling, but anything was better than her heavy silence and that hungry stare devouring him. But perhaps that was only his overly active imagination.

"Oh," she said again. Her eyes continued their quest. Zane had no idea what Jayda hoped to see. She opened her mouth, closed it, drew a deep breath and tried again. "Zane, I don't want to talk about otters or shifter councils." Jayda shot a look to the outer office door. "We need to..." Her smile trembled. "I don't know, talk or something. Figure this out. What happened between us yesterday changed things for me. I've talked to Cole and we're trying to figure it out. I haven't had the luxury of growing up in a pack and I'm still learning about my shifting. And now this whole cougar thing is making everything so confusing."

He stepped in tentatively, closing the distance between them. She didn't back away as her full breasts brushed his chest. *Shit.* His cock stood up and took notice, demanding to make the next decision. Zane's attempt to catch his breath was audible and a shy smile lifted the corners of her mouth. He wanted to mold his body to her, let Jayda feel the erection she'd caused, but pushing her now might push her away.

"Zane, I don't want to hurt Cole but..." Confusion warred with desire in Jayda's eyes.

“My kiss affected you.” Zane pressed closer. “I’m not the only one feeling the heat crackling between us.”

“It just seems wrong to want you both, but I do think I owe it to the three of us to figure it out. I certainly can’t commit to one if my heart sings for another. I just don’t know how to do so without someone getting caught in the crossfire.”

Zane lowered his mouth to hers. Jayda’s heavy-lidded eyes invited, no, *begged* for more contact. At that moment it didn’t feel wrong to want her. “Deny you want my mouth on yours again and I’ll stop.”

“We shouldn’t—”

He took that as acquiescence and in one fluid motion, Zane’s arms came around her, pulling Jayda tight to his chest. His mouth brushed hers, a whisper of a touch that heated his blood and drew a quiet moan from her. He stroked the swell of Jayda’s bottom lip with his tongue and she eagerly opened for him, inviting him to explore her mouth. Zane’s hands slid up her arms to cup her neck, his thumbs caressed her jaw. His tongue swept in to taste and dance with the velvet heat of hers. She tasted like warm latte and Zane couldn’t get enough of her. He wanted to touch every part of her.

His hand slid over her shoulder blades, trailing down her sides, his thumbs brushing the lush curve of her breasts. Jayda’s tongue flicked into his mouth and her nails dug into his back. He took it as permission and palmed her breast, molding and reshaping the flesh. He pinched the puckered bud of her nipple and Zane felt Jayda’s knees momentarily give way. A deep moan vibrated through him, but he wasn’t sure from which of them it originated. The need to have her skin searing his drove him to reckless abandon. He pulled at the hem of her t-shirt.

The sound of a throat clearing cut through the fog of need enveloping them. Jayda pushed away from him, swiping her mouth with the back of her hand. Zane forced his hands into fists to keep them from wringing with guilt. *Shit*. This was going to be out as soon as he left the office. What was going on was between him and Jayda. Well—and Cole, but Zane didn’t want to think about him right now.

"I...I'm sorry to interrupt." Marissa's voice was small, her eyes unfocused. "You need to take these little guys." Marissa corralled the kits into the back room with her feet. "They're too wild. Mrs. Rebant will be here in just a bit with Tilly. That schnauzer doesn't like other dogs. Cougars will send the little thing over the edge. Besides..." A trembling hand covered the young girl's pale lips. She stole a glance at Zane. "Never mind."

"Marissa, are you all right?" Jayda asked as she stepped toward the swaying girl.

"I'm fine." Marissa fanned the sheen of sweat glistening on her face. "I just need some coffee and a granola bar. I obviously didn't get enough sleep last night." And with that statement, Marissa was gone.

"I think she's pregnant." Jayda turned back to him, her lips swollen from his assault. "She hasn't said as much so either she doesn't want to share or she doesn't know."

Heat crawled up his cheeks. He shouldn't have been so bold. "I'm sorry about that. It wasn't a good idea for that to happen here."

A rose blush spread to Jayda's hairline. "Yeah, stupid is what that was."

"Stupid or not, you can't keep your hands off me," Zane said boldly.

She scooped up one of the kits and shot him a disgusted look over her shoulder. "Let's just hope Marissa can keep that little display—" A loud crash from the reception area interrupted her.

Jayda burst into the front room and screamed.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Don't tell me you didn't suspect that would be the case, Cole?"

Cole stared incredulously at Aaron Wallace. His best friend was completely unfazed by his confession of jealousy. Aaron poured a generous helping of sugar into the heavy ceramic mug and pointed at him with the spoon before stirring. "Seems the cougar's not your only problem."

“The dead cougar or the living one I’d like to kill?”

Aaron ignored his comment and ran a thick slice of homemade wheat toast through the yellow slime on his plate that was supposed to pass for fried eggs. “I mean really, Cole. Look at it logically.”

“You mean like a detective?” Cole blew over the steaming mug of coffee in his hands. His stomach rolled with anger, making the scrambled eggs on his plate unpalatable.

“I don’t have to be a detective to see that both you and Jayda have been a little gunshy about this relationship.” Aaron took a big bite and talked around the food. “It’s been three months. Both of you agree you want to be mated.” He washed the words down with coffee. “But you’ve both found excuses to put off the mating ceremony.” A piece of sausage disappeared into Aaron’s mouth. “Given Jayda’s unique abilities, it’s not like you didn’t suspect she’d be looking for another mate to complement her *other* half.”

Cole choked on the scalding coffee. Leave it to Aaron to cut through the bullshit. “Fuck you, Wallace.”

Aaron laughed and lifted his cup to the waitress.

At eight o’clock in the morning the town diner was relatively quiet. Those up with the sun had come and gone and the coffee-drinking, internet-using crowd had yet to arrive. Aaron and Cole were sitting in a back corner away from the windows facing the street. Cole had enough to do without fielding questions from well-meaning citizens wondering why he wasn’t out protecting the streets of Lonesome Fork.

“The question as I see it, Cole, is no longer what *if* but what *now*.”

Resentment brought the mug down hard on the red-checkered cloth, Cole’s frustration overflowing with the coffee he spilled. “You think you—”

The waitress rushed over with the coffee pot. “I was gettin’ here. No sense raising a ruckus, Chief Takoda.” The petite blonde refilled both cups.

“Don’t mind him. He’s a little surly this morning.” Aaron winked at the waitress. “He hates talking business over good home cooking.”

The waitress flirted and offered to bag up a donut, which Aaron accepted with another wink. His friend was the most sought-after bachelor in town. Cole had no doubt the woman would be adding her phone number to the sack of food. Something about Aaron attracted humans as well as wolf shifters—of both sexes. It was no doubt why Aaron was indifferent about another man sniffing after Jayda. Cole had no idea if Aaron had ever slept with another man, human or otherwise. It really didn’t matter. Aaron’s love life wasn’t Cole’s problem at the moment.

Leaning forward, Cole stared at Aaron. “You’re telling me I should let her explore her feelings for Brodan?”

Aaron shrugged, the question hanging unanswered between them. He finished the eggs and began working on the stack of pancakes. How the man in the suit across from him stayed so trim was beyond Cole. He and his best friend were the same age. But at thirty-two, Aaron had the boyish look of a man a decade younger.

Cole fell back in his chair, the implication in Aaron’s eyes weighing heavily. “You really think Jayda needs a wolf mate *and* a cougar mate?”

Aaron swirled the last of the pancakes in the syrup and plopped them into his mouth. He set his fork down with deliberate precision and straightened the napkin in his lap. Cole felt like a suspect under interrogation.

“All I’m saying,” Aaron continued, “is that the cougars and wolves have been at each other’s throats for a long time on Coppertip Mountain. Everyone believed that a polyshifter would show up and unite the clans.” Aaron lifted his hands the way detectives do when they’re driving home a point. “Jayda’s here.”

Cole knew Aaron was probably right, perhaps Jayda had needs he couldn’t satisfy. He’d do anything to make Jayda happy, even if it meant sharing her with another man. But the cold knot of jealousy sitting heavy in his gut wasn’t making this easy. “You could share your woman with another man?”

“We’re not talking about me, now are we?” Aaron gulped down the last of his coffee. “Let’s face it, Cole. You didn’t fall in love with any run-of-the-mill wolf shifter. In the end it doesn’t matter what I believe—or hope. Seems to me this problem is between you and Jayda. I’m afraid I can’t tell your heart what’s right.”

Cole’s cell phone chimed at his hip. “When the hell’d you get so philosophical?” He flipped it open. “Takoda.”

“Chief, this is Dr. Kathryn Tan from the hospital. We’ve got a situation involving Dr. Jayda Kynslan and some cougars. We suspect this might become a police issue. I think you need to get down here to the ER right away.”



## Chapter Six

Cole wasn't sure what he expected when he got to the hospital, but finding Brodan wrapped around Jayda hadn't even been on his radar. He'd left the diner with lights flashing but no sirens. No sense alerting the whole town to his business. Now, striding down the hall of the emergency room, the heavy odor of disinfectant and jealousy clogging his lungs, Cole slowed his steps and tamped down the wolf looking to shred the cougar mauling his woman.

"Cole." Jayda pulled from the game warden's arms and ran to him.

A growl rumbled low in his throat and he shot Brodan a warning look. Cole hadn't had time to mull over Aaron's advice. The way Jayda had been leaning on Brodan, he figured warning off the cougar shifter probably wasn't the best approach to this whole situation.

Jayda fell into his embrace, racking sobs shaking her shoulders. "It's awful...Marissa. She's...she's...oh Cole." Jayda collapsed against him.

"They think she's been poisoned." Brodan stepped up to them, his hands in his pockets. "They're pumping her stomach, but it's not looking good. They've tested her for everything, but all the typical poisons are coming back negative. They're trying everything, but nothing seems to be working."

Jayda looked up at him, her red eyes filled with misery. "Why? Why would anyone hurt, Marissa?"

His thoughts had gone in the same direction, but until they had more information about the poison, Cole wasn't jumping to any conclusions. His thumbs wiped away Jayda's tears. "The doctors here are very good. I'm sure they'll be able to save her." Cole's words sounded hollow. He pulled Jayda against him as much to comfort her as

to feel her heart pounding against his. Brodan looked on without apology. Cole had no idea if he could share this woman who had stolen his heart.

But the way she'd been clinging to Brodan and how the man looked at her now, Cole couldn't deny there was something going on between them. Perhaps there had to be more than the kiss on the ridge yesterday. Cole couldn't stand the thought of losing her, but getting possessive and keeping Jayda from exploring a relationship with Brodan, if that's what she wanted, didn't seem like the right choice at the moment.

He swallowed hard and let his professional police persona shield his heart. "They're sure it's poison?" Cole asked. He felt as if he were reliving last winter when wolf shifters were being murdered. Now it appeared someone was taking out cougars. First the female cougar and now a shifter, Cole had no doubt they were somehow related. He hated to think his pack had anything to do with harming an innocent child, but at the moment his mind had no other place to go. "Where was she when—"

Footsteps pounded down the hall behind him.

"Where is she?" A young cougar shifter stopped in front of Brodan, tears glistening in his eyes. "Is she all right? Marissa's parents called and said she'd collapsed. They told me to hurry." Cole surmised it was John Buchanan, Marissa's fiancé. Jayda had talked about him, but they'd never met.

Jayda stepped from Cole's arms. "John, she's with the doctors now." Without thought, she squeezed John's arm. Perhaps that's just who she was—a caregiver. Maybe her interest in Brodan had nothing to do with her heart and everything to do with taking care of the young cubs. Cole could only hope.

Three people ran through the ER and joined their small group. Cole smelled the cats before they were halfway down the hall, no doubt John or Marissa's family.

Dr. Tan stepped from the room just up the hall. Her petite figure was in sharp contrast to the authoritative way she approached the group. Another cougar. The smell was overwhelming.

"Are any of you Marissa's parents?" the doctor asked.

A young couple stepped forward. They looked only slightly older than Cole and here they were with a teenage daughter. Until Jayda had come along, Cole hadn't thought about children. Now a cougar shifter may be stealing his future from him.

"We're her parents," the woman said, choking on a sob. "How is she?"

"And I'm her fiancé." John stepped up hopefully, the other woman, who must have been his mother, stepped next to him. "Can I see her?"

"Not yet." The doctor's voice was caring but firm. "We're still trying to determine what's making her so ill. I need to know where's she's been and what she's eaten in the last twenty-four hours," Dr. Tan said matter-of-factly.

"Is she going to be all right?" John's voice trembled with emotion.

"We're doing the best we can." Dr. Tan laid a hand on John's shoulder and squeezed. "Any information you can give me will be helpful." She turned to Cole. "I'm glad you're here, Chief Takoda. I suspect you should probably be part of the questioning."

"Questioning?" John's gaze darted fearfully from Cole to the doctor.

The doctor looked to Cole for permission and when he gave her a slight nod, she continued. "It appears Marissa's been poisoned."

Marissa's parents gasped.

"Poisoned? Who? Why?" The questions tripped off John's trembling lips. Then an idea formed, Cole saw it blossom across his face just before he looked at Cole. "And this wouldn't be something your *people* are doing?" At the moment John was just a young man hurting and the uniform didn't deter his attack. "Marissa's an innocent shifter." John poked his finger into Cole's chest with each word. "She wasn't involved in the whole wolf mess last winter. Those *deaths* had nothing to do with her. You can tell your pack to back off."

Brodan stepped between Cole and John. Cole heard the low growl of warning even if no one else did. "John, there's no reason to believe Chief Takoda's investigation won't

be thorough and unbiased.” Brodan looked over his shoulder at Cole, an enigmatic expression contorting his features. “He will look at all the facts before drawing conclusions.”

Cole wondered if the words were meant for him or the kid. He suspected both. “Son, we don’t know anything at the moment,” he said. “But trust me, if someone—*anyone*—has hurt Marissa, I’ll see justice is served.” Cole didn’t want to think a wolf in his pack was still looking for revenge for the shifter deaths, but there was no telling what went through people’s minds when territory rights were being disputed.

“John, I don’t think any of us should jump to any conclusions.” Dr. Tan toyed with the stethoscope around her neck. “Why don’t you just tell Chief Takoda what you know about where Marissa’s been and what she’s eaten in the last twenty-four hours.” She looked at the worried faces. “We’ll need that information from all of you. No detail is too small.”

“Well, except when she’s at work with Dr. Kynslan, she’s been at the farm with us,” her mother said quietly. “We’ve all eaten the same things.” The woman’s voice trembled with emotion.

“Not last night,” John murmured. “She was with me. I took her swimming at the river.” Deep lines of worry marred his serene face. “I suppose that makes me a suspect?”

“No one’s a suspect until Chief Takoda gathers all the facts.” Brodan’s deep voice seemed to calm the boy. “There must be somewhere we can all—”

The door to Marissa’s room slammed open. “Dr. Tan, come quickly,” a young man in scrubs hollered. “She’s seizing again.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Zane stole a worried glance at Jayda. Sitting stoically in the passenger seat of his pickup, she hadn’t spoken a word since hearing the doctor’s pronouncement of

Marissa's death. Jayda's assistant had never regained consciousness and had died shortly after her family arrived at the hospital.

Barely two hours ago he'd been standing in her vet clinic, kissing Jayda, knowing exactly what his next move was going to be. Now he didn't know what to do with the woman sinking into herself. He had no doubt Jayda somehow blamed herself for Marissa's death. "You don't have to go back to the clinic. I could take you home."

Jayda turned slowly, her red-rimmed eyes glistening with unshed tears. "No, it's better if I stay busy." She swallowed hard. "Someone's got to tend the animals. Two days away from the office is going to put me behind. Besides, you have work to do."

"I was just going out to the river. It can wait a day." There was no way he was leaving her alone. Not when Jayda looked like she was ready to crumble. "Cole asked me to make sure you're all right. I'm sure he didn't intend for me to abandon you at the door." The police chief had pulled Zane aside at the hospital and grudgingly asked Zane to stay with her. There had been something in the wolf's manner that had communicated more. Cole wasn't a stupid man. Anyone with eyes could see there was something developing between Zane and the beautiful polyshifter. But Zane wasn't sure the leader of the wolf council was stepping aside either. Whatever Cole's intentions, they didn't matter at the moment, Zane needed to focus on Jayda.

A hiccup of sorrow escaped Jayda's throat and Zane reached for her. His large hand wrapped around both of hers, stilling their incessant rubbing. "Jayda, none of this is your fault. You know that, right?" Her fingers were icy and he wanted nothing more than to gather her to him and soothe the chill Marissa's death had no doubt left in her heart. "There was no way for you to know."

"I really believed she had morning sickness." Jayda's words choked out on a sob. "I'm a doctor. I should have seen the signs."

"You're a vet. Her nose was warm and wet and her tail was wagging this morning. How could you have known?" Zane's humor fell flat, but Jayda forced a tremulous smile nonetheless.

Zane pulled into the gravel lot and parked. They stared at the weathered cedar shingles of the clinic, neither one knowing the next move. "Listen, Jayda, you don't have to go in, I'll get the kits and we'll..." Zane's voice trailed off when she turned to him.

Grief trembled along her chin and filled her eyes. "I can't ignore my practice. Besides, I want to go over the cougar's necropsy notes one more time. I have no doubt there's some connection. Cole will need to know the facts. Maybe Marissa remembers something..." He watched the pain finally pour out of her in huge racking sobs that tore at his heart. The wash of sorrow slammed into her with the force of a bullet, shredding any walls she had erected.

Zane pulled her to him, his arms wrapping around her trembling body. The scent of her filled his nose and her silken hair tickled his cheek. He didn't want to be this aware of her. But as Jayda curled into his chest, her hands fisting in his shirt, he couldn't stop his body from reacting. He only hoped like hell she didn't notice the erection tenting his fly. He was scum. It seemed the wrong response in light of what they were facing, but Zane didn't really want to control the heat washing over him. It had been a long time since he'd wanted a woman this badly.

"Marissa was so young, with so much ahead of her." Jayda lifted her face to him and he brushed a tear from her cheek with his knuckles. Zane looked into her amber eyes, so filled with sorrow, and wanted to push it all away and replace it with pleasure. Consoling the woman in his arms came as natural as breathing. The cab of the truck crackled with the awareness. Her eyes told him Jayda felt it too. The gentle brush of his lips to hers was only meant to comfort, but when her arms came around his neck, her fingers tangling in his hair, he urged her to open for him.

The sweet taste of her exploded in Zane's mouth and pumped fire through his veins. His hands were everywhere on her—running the silken length of her braid, kneading her back, caressing her face. Her deep moans vibrated against his chest,

straight to his heart. Zane had never wanted a woman with the desperation he felt with Jayda in his arms.

Her fingers reached for the buttons of his shirt and only Jayda's reputation kept him focused enough to realize the parking lot of her clinic wasn't a good place to be found naked like a couple of lovesick teenagers. He broke their kiss and gathered her hand in his. Red flags of embarrassment painted her cheeks and a questioning scowl furrowed her brow.

Smiling at her, Zane kissed her nose. "Not here. Let's go inside." He prayed Jayda didn't come to her senses between the truck and her office.

Jayda didn't know what had gotten into her. Except that she needed to feel something besides the heavy sorrow sitting uncomfortably in her belly. Lady sensed her sadness and had tried to come between them when she'd entered the clinic. Jayda had locked her in the back room. She didn't want anything to get between her and Zane. She needed his comfort.

Zane walked to her, pressing her against the wall, trailing desperate kisses over her face. "Jayda, don't make me stop, I need to do this for you...for us."

"But Cole. And..."

Zane pulled back and searched her face. "Jayda, he saw us at the hospital. The man isn't blind. We need to find out what all this means. He understands."

The steel bands of guilt that had been wrapped around her chest gave way as Zane filled his hands with her breasts and she gasped at his touch. He wedged her against the wall, his thigh pressed between hers, putting pressure against her clitoris. She rocked her hips, wanting to lose herself in the sensations ricocheting over her nerves.

Cole had called in Aaron and the investigation into Marissa's poisoning was well underway. She hadn't missed Cole's little tête-à-tête with Zane before the cougar shifter had bundled her up and taken her from the hospital. Cole had to have known the feelings between her and Zane were combustible.

“Did you lock the door?” Zane asked breathlessly.

“I did, but maybe we should go in my office. There are no windows.”

That pulled him up short and Zane’s gaze searched her face. An intimate probe that left Jayda feeling exposed.

“No doubts?” he whispered before scraping her bottom lip with his teeth.

“None.”

“Cole?”

“I’m not going to pretend I understand what’s happening here.” Jayda laid her hand over his heart. “But it can’t be wrong if I need you so badly, can it?”

“Christ, Jayda, that’s all I needed to hear.” Zane scooped her up in his arms and strode around the front desk. Jayda tried not to think of Marissa lying on the floor only hours early. She buried her face in Zane’s neck and inhaled the spicy scent of his cologne. Her teeth rasped over the rough edge of his jaw and air whistled in through his teeth.

He kicked the door shut with his foot and leaned her against the edge of her wooden desk. It wouldn’t be the first time she’d had sex in her office. She and Cole had christened the desk a month ago when she’d opened the clinic. There should be some guilt in recalling that memory while she removed the shirt of another man, but Jayda couldn’t work herself up to feeling anything but desperate. Desperate to stop the movie reel of Marissa dying in her arms. Desperate to discover the cougar part of her persona. Desperate to mate with Zane.

Her thought conjured her cat, her nails lengthening momentarily to claws and she raked them down his chest, leaving red welts along the trembling muscles. She hooked a claw in each of the silver rings at his nipples and tugged gently. Zane’s cat growled before he fisted his hands in her hair and pulled her hungrily against his lips. His mouth ravaged hers. She opened for him and his tongue swept in and danced with hers. He tasted of mint, and something hot and masculine and needy burst on her tongue and straight to her bloodstream, quickening her pulse. A low growl vibrated in



his throat and Jayda returned the sentiment with a feral snarl of her own. Theirs would not be a gentle coupling but an animalistic rutting of pure lust. That suited her just fine.

Zane stripped the yellow cotton t-shirt over her head and skillfully flicked the front clasp of her bra. With one frantic push, he slid the bra off her breasts and down her arms. When his mouth met the tender skin of her neck, wet heat and reckless need, a gush of liquid desire seeped from her pussy and dampened her panties. The sound of his heavy breaths filled the tiny office and her heart rate ratcheted up several levels. Jayda was finding it increasingly difficult to fill her own lungs.

The love bites to her flesh were edged with pain that zinged straight down her core. Zane nipped and kissed his way to her breasts. He laved first one nipple with his silken tongue and then the other, his fingers alternately pinching and pulling the sensitive tips. Thrusting her chest forward, she urged him to take more. He seemed as desperate to possess as she was to be claimed.

Jayda fumbled with the heavy buckle of Zane's belt, her shaking fingers desperately tugging at the leather. "Zane, I want you. All of you." Her heart warned she wanted more from this union than satisfying a primal need, but Jayda didn't want to face that at the moment. Sliding her hands around Zane's narrow hips, she pushed at his khakis and they fell with a satisfying thud. The man went commando and she nearly came undone as his thick cock bobbed between them. Her nails dug into the lean muscle of his buttocks, grinding her pubic bone against his sizeable erection, not caring that her jeans may be uncomfortable against his sensitive flesh. His cock was so hard and ready, all she could think about was having him buried inside her. Her pussy clenched with the thought and another warm gush of liquid seeped from her nether lips.

"Jayda, we can slow down if you want." Zane unsnapped her jeans and tugged at the zipper. "But fast is good. *Real* good for me."

"Shut up. I like this speed just fine." Her hands were quicker and she toed out of her sneakers and pushed the jeans off her legs before he could do the honors. "Who said I needed it slow?"

Zane's mouth curved in a lopsided grin, the passion sparking in the jade depths of his eyes. "Are you sure?" he asked as he pulled off the cowboy boots and stepped out of his pants.

Her breath caught in her throat as she stared unbelieving at his nakedness. Acres of bronzed skin stretched over hard muscle. Jayda's gaze roamed from his strong chin to the silver hoops piercing the chocolate skin of his nipples, continued over the muscles of his stomach to the deep hollow of his bellybutton. Without control it followed the narrow line of hair to the halo of curls around his cock jutting proudly from his body. The furred sac of his testicles was snugged tight between his legs.

She suddenly felt inadequate next to his perfection. The soft curves of her belly and fullness of her hips made her feel self-conscious under his assessing gaze. Her hands reached up to cup her breasts, but Zane gently wrapped his hands around her wrists.

"You are so much more beautiful than I imagined, Jayda." His knuckles skimmed her cheek before he bent close to her, his breath feathering across her lips. "It would be wrong for me not to take a moment to take in all your splendor."

"But I'm—"

"Just perfect," he said before crushing his mouth down hers. With his tongue exploring her mouth and his hands once again roaming her body, Jayda lost herself in Zane.

His hand slid down her stomach, his palm following the narrow line of curls on her mons. Zane curved his fingers around her pubic bone and plunged into the heat of her slit. She moaned when the pad of his finger found the tingling bud of her clitoris and circled the aching nub. With his other hand splayed wide on her lower back, he pulled her tight against his body. Where Cole's chest was dusted with hair, Zane's chest was hard and smooth, the rolling muscles marred only by the tantalizing hoops begging for attention. She leaned close, pulling one into her mouth. Zane groaned.

When his middle finger plunged into her aching channel, she couldn't hold back the gasp of pleasure as she called out his name.

“That’s right, Jayda. It’s me. And I have so much more to give you.”

He turned her quickly, her thighs pressed against the edge of the desk. She arched her back. Reaching behind her, Jayda’s fingers dug into his hips, pressing his cock snugly into the cleft of her ass. Zane’s teeth scraped along the sensitive skin behind her ear and his hands molded her breasts. She watched his fingers expertly pinch and roll her nipples, the prickles of pain sending hot shots of pleasure straight to her clenching pussy.

Bending her at the hips, Zane bit and licked a path down her spine. He knelt behind her and urged her legs wide. He blew air on her hot cunt and she shivered with the sensation rippling up her back. He laid a palm on each ass cheek and his thumbs opened her folds.

“Sweet nectar just for me,” Zane said before laying his tongue flat and running the length of her slit. The scent of her arousal filled the air and she heard him inhale the intoxicating aroma. A thick finger filled her cunt as his tongue flitted back and forth over her clit. A second finger joined the first as he worked them in and out of her slick channel. The wanton sounds of finger-fucking mixed with her moans of pleasure.

The pressure mounted, the tingling radiating from her clit down her trembling thighs. She circled the precipice of elation, letting the thrill raise her to a higher plane of raw pleasure. But the rhythm of Zane’s fingers and the flicks of his tongue on the swollen button of her clit brought her to the edge and she tumbled headlong into the ecstasy. Waves of pure bliss rolled over her and Jayda bucked against Zane’s assault, riding the surge of her orgasm.

She had barely stopped shuddering when Zane stood, deftly rolled a condom over his erection and pushed his shaft into her quaking pussy. As ready as she was for him, Jayda didn’t expect his wide cock to stretch her tight muscles in such a wonderful and exciting way. She arched her back, pushing him deeper into her aching channel. Zane’s fingers dug into her hips as he sought purchase.

His hips pistoned, his skin slapping against her ass.

“Oh Jayda, you’re so hot. So tight.”

“Fuck me hard, Zane. Make me feel alive.”

His hand snaked around her belly and once again found the hard knot of her clitoris. Zane rolled it in pulsing rhythm with his cock pounding her body.

“Yes. OhmyGodyesZane.” The words slurred from her lips as another orgasm slammed into her, the euphoria quaking through her body, rushing molten heat to her fingers and toes. Zane’s cock slammed into her twice more and she felt his thighs tremble against hers as a feral growl ripped from his throat, his orgasm prolonging the thrill of hers. Zane slowed the motion of his hips. Pulling almost all the way out and sliding slowly back in. She fell across her desk, Zane toppled down on her back, his breaths coming hard and fast across her shoulder blade. Zane’s heart thumped against her back in perfect rhythm with hers. She could only pray Cole would understand.

## Chapter Seven

“There you go, Charlee. No worse for the wear.” Jayda set the Shitsu on the floor and watched the little white tail bounce as the dog pranced to its owner. “Now no more chocolates for her, Mrs. Rand, no matter how much she begs and bats those big brown eyes at you.”

The older woman picked up the dog and kissed it on the mouth, receiving several wet kisses in return. “Thank you so much for seeing me after-hours, Dr. Kynslan. I had no idea she’d get so sick from the candy. She was just so happy while we shared the box.” Then to the dog she added in a baby voice, “Charlee’s not getting any more of that icky chocolate ever again. No she’s not. No she’s not.”

“That rice and lamb dog food will help settle her stomach.” Jayda walked to the clinic door and held it open. “Feel free to call tomorrow if she doesn’t seem to be keeping anything down.”

Jayda closed and locked the door behind them, leaning her back against it, grateful the afternoon was finally over. Pressing her hands to her stomach, she swallowed down the nausea, wishing a little lamb and rice would settle her problem as well. She had no idea if it was the guilt over not saving Marissa or her morning with Zane that was upsetting her. But through her afternoon appointments, Jayda had barely been able to keep down her lunch. She pushed from the door and walked into the back room.

She’d sent Zane away to do whatever game wardens do and she’d kept her afternoon appointments and added a few more, just to keep herself busy. Even a death didn’t keep pets from necessary shots and physicals. Time away from the office had backlogged her workload. Without Marissa, things would be even more difficult.

A sob escaped. How could someone hurt sweet Marissa? The morning’s events replayed in her head. Only a few hours transpired between her and Zane rushing to the

emergency room with Marissa, her tongue swelling out from her lips, white foam frothing down her chin, and the young girl's death. Despite the doctor's attempts to save her, Marissa never regained consciousness and died without her family having a chance to say goodbye. Jayda leaned on the edge of the steel countertop, tears streaming down her cheeks.

Too much pain all the way around. She didn't know where Cole was, hadn't heard from him since she'd left the hospital. Jayda needed to see him, to feel his arms around her and tell her everything would be all right. How could she need so?

The phone rang and Jayda debated ignoring it. She didn't really have the energy to face another sick animal. But her conscience got the best of her and she picked it up.

"Dr. Kynslan."

"Oh Dr. Kynslan, I'm glad I caught you. I thought I'd be leaving a message. This is George Stonington at the state toxicology lab. I ran some preliminary tests on the cougar tissue samples you sent."

"That was fast."

"Yes, well, I got a call from the chief of police who said there might be a human death that's related."

Blame weighed heavy on her shoulders and knotted uncomfortably in her belly. She'd thought Marissa's queasy stomach and vomiting had been the result of pregnancy. Even while the two of them had done the necropsy on the cougar, poison hadn't crossed Jayda's mind. Despite the fact that the cat had displayed the same symptoms, Jayda never made the connection.

"Any information you have would be helpful," she stammered.

"The tests show an unknown toxin in the blood, concentrating in the brain and heart tissues. We found some traces of crystals. We're running more tests on those. In any case, toxicology is consistent with an ingested poison. Which doesn't make sense since the cougar was unlikely sharing a food source with any humans, but stranger things have happened." He laughed and Jayda cringed, thinking the man had no idea

what happened in the wilds of Lonesome Fork. “Anyway, I just thought I’d call and compliment you on the necropsy specimens. They were well-preserved. Do you still have the cougar?”

“Yes, it hasn’t been picked up yet.”

“I suggest you hold on to it. There may be additional samples we’ll need. In the meantime, we’ll continue to test and see if we can determine the specific poison and pathology.”

She thanked him and hung up the phone. The thought that someone was poisoning cougars and more specifically – shifters – made her ill.

She turned and puked in the sink.

\* \* \* \* \*

Cole stood at his office window, watching the sun paint the sky in brilliant hues of orange and yellow. The heat that had weighed so heavily throughout the day was finally subsiding, but the stress of the cougar shifter’s death still hung heavy around his shoulders. Questioning her family hadn’t garnered him any information. Marissa Devlin had consumed all the same foods her relatives had, yet none of them showed any signs of illness.

Neither the Montana state toxicologist nor the hospital’s pathologist had discovered the specific toxin that had killed the cougars. But he had no doubt whatever had killed the cougar had also killed the shifter. He just needed to find the connection. Cole hated to think one of his pack was looking to sabotage the joint shifter councils, but it was hard for his thoughts not to drift in that direction when every other avenue of questioning brought him up against a brick wall.

Of course now that he wasn’t as preoccupied with the investigation, thoughts of Jayda swarmed over him. He had no idea how he’d given Brodan permission to take his woman. It’s not exactly what he’d said, but it’s how it felt. Cole’s head knew it was the right thing for all of them, but his heart ached with a searing pain he hadn’t expected.

A knock at the door pulled him from his malaise.

"Yeah." Cole inhaled and turned, expecting his duty officer to be looking for him, but it was Aaron's blond head that poked around the door.

"You still here?" Aaron shut the door and settled in the leather chair across from the desk.

"Look who's talking. We defenders of the law keep long hours. You get any information?"

"I assume you're talking about the kid from Jayda's office and not Brodan."

Cole flipped Aaron the bird and mouthed an obscenity at him. "Yeah, the kid. Why the hell would I give a shit about Brodan? Unless you tell me you've got something on him?"

Aaron rested his ankle on his knee and bounced his foot. "Nothing about poisoning cougars. But I'd be hard-pressed to believe the head of the cougar council had anything to do with poisoning the cat or the girl."

"Yeah, me too." Cole rubbed at the stress bunched along the back of his neck. "You go to the Devlin farm?"

"Checked it over from the kitchen to the barn."

"Find anything?"

"A romantic love nest in the hayloft where Marissa used to meet her fiancé, complete with candles, incense and body oils."

"Like I needed that mental image." Cole rolled his eyes. "Anything *suspicious*?"

Aaron laughed. "We took water and food samples, which we sent to the state crime lab, checked for chemicals in the barn, but nothing obvious stood out as something that would poison a shifter."

"Jayda's clinic?"

Aaron's foot began to bounce faster. "Yeah, about that..."



Cole slapped his palms on this desk, his head dropping. "Jesus, Aaron, please tell me you didn't find incriminating evidence at Jayda's."

Aaron dropped his foot and balanced his elbows on his thighs. "Are we still talking about the alleged homicide?"

Cole raised his head, the confusion furrowing his brow. "What the hell are you talking about, Wallace?"

Clearing his throat, Aaron toyed with the pack ring on his pinky. "Well, I went to the clinic but..."

"But what, Aaron? For chrissake spit it out!"

"I didn't go in. She wasn't there alone."

"Brodan?"

Aaron nodded.

"Clients?"

"Listen, Cole—"

Cole's palm came down hard on the desk, bouncing a couple of pens. "Damn it, Aaron, it's a simple question. Were there clients at the clinic with Jayda and Brodan?"

Aaron fell back into the chair and shook his head.

Cole straightened and filled his lungs to ease the pain squeezing his heart. He'd sent Jayda home with Brodan knowing full well something could happen between them. The heavy air that had surrounded them at the hospital had been obvious—at least to him. Her shift to cougar yesterday had been another step toward Jayda figuring out who she was. It bugged the shit out of him that it couldn't have been something he'd done for her. And it definitely changed things between them. Cole's heart still believed Jayda was meant to be his lifemate. He hadn't expected to be wrong in that arena.

But maybe he wasn't wrong, just working on misconceptions and incomplete facts.

Cole was sure he didn't want to be involved with a partner who *belonged* to another. But *sharing*—now that was something he had to work through. He'd always wondered if he was enough to satisfy all parts of Jayda. With Brodan coming into the equation, Cole was seriously thinking he wasn't. That sure as hell grated on his ego.

The question had become not *if* he wanted Jayda, *that* was a no-brainer. He loved her with every fiber of his being. But did he want her if her cougar required another? Now *that* was something he couldn't answer.

He realized Aaron was staring at him, concern knitting his brow.

Cole strode around the desk. "Well, we need to check everywhere Marissa's been in the last forty-eight hours. And that includes Jayda's clinic. Make sure that gets done tomorrow."

"Where you going?" Aaron asked.

Cole slapped him on the shoulder as he walked by. "A run. Work out some of these pains in my neck."

\* \* \* \* \*

Jayda rotated in front of the full-length mirror, studying her body. The bedside lamp didn't show any changes, but she definitely felt different. Turning, she scrutinized her butt. It was undeniably more round than the tiny curves under runway clothes and her thighs were fuller than the women on the magazine covers. She pressed her palms to the paunch of her belly just below her bellybutton and threw back her shoulders. Jayda's large breasts jutted from her chest, the rosy areolas puckering in the cool night air wafting through the open window. Men never seemed to mind this perk of her fuller figure, especially Zane and Cole. She filled her hands with the soft flesh and rolled the stiff nipples. Tingles of pleasure zipped along her nerves and clenched her pussy.

She would have liked nothing more than to pleasure herself while thinking of the two men, but that wasn't why she'd locked all the doors of her cabin, shut Lady out of her bedroom and stripped. Her young assistant's life had been stolen from her before

Marissa had had a chance to discover who she was and what she wanted to become. Wasn't Jayda in danger of having the same thing happen to her? At twenty-seven she thought it was just about time she figured out who she truly was and what she wanted from life.

But as an orphan, Jayda didn't have the luxury of asking anyone about her family history. Sadness speared her heart. Her adoptive mother knew nothing of her birth parents, which meant the woman was also unaware of the animals that lay within Jayda's heart. Three months had passed since the fateful night when her wolf had taken over to protect Lady from a killer cougar shifter. Cole had told her about the animal within, he'd been the first to see it. It had been his support and encouragement that had allowed her wolf to shift for the first time. She would always love him for that. Until this week, Jayda had been sure being his lifemate was the right decision.

But then Zane had shown up and the cougar within her wanted to be heard—and satisfied.

She hadn't been able to deny her need for Zane. Making love with the cougar shifter this afternoon had barely caused any guilt. Jayda understood now that Cole couldn't complete her the way she had hoped. But neither would Zane know how to nurture her wolf.

Loving two men seemed wrong.

Obviously her heart hadn't gotten that particular memo because that's exactly what was happening. Her stomach rolled and she pressed a hand just below her breasts, trying to settle the unease. Jayda swallowed the guilt and focused on the image of the woman standing in the mirror.

She had never shifted by herself. Generally by puberty shifters learned how to control the animal within. Most children could pull their cat or wolf forward with control. But Jayda hadn't developed that particular talent. She closed her eyes, slowing her breathing, centering her thoughts on the animals within. Jayda thought of the other

night in the forest, the feeling of the grass beneath her pads and the scent of rabbit riding on the wind.

With little pain she felt the slow movement of muscle and bone. Excitement threw her eyes wide and she stared at the black muzzle of a wolf. The scream of joy came out as a feral growl, but then the fur disappeared and became skin as her muzzle shortened and formed her lips and nose again.

Lady whined and scratched at the door. No doubt the snarl had frightened her.

"It's all right, girl. Your mother's just fine." Pride lifted the corners of her mouth. "Go lie down. Good girl." Jayda listened to the clicking of the dog's nails across the floor as she headed back to her bed. Jayda would need to keep the animal noises quiet. Lady had seen them shift, but Cole had always been close to keep Lady safe. No doubt the dog worried as much as Jayda that something would go horribly wrong without another person near to protect them both.

Like an athlete readying for a long run, Jayda shook out her arms and legs and rolled her neck. "You can do this," she said to herself. Inhaling a steadying breath, Jayda concentrated on slowing her racing heart. With the focus she had during one of her surgeries, Jayda once again called her wolf. The familiar wash of sensation flooded over her and she relaxed into the change. In the past it had been Cole's sweet kisses that called to her wolf and her shift flowed easily from his love. Tonight she had to depend on herself and her ability to allow the animal to come forth. Jayda squeezed her eyes tight, the pull of muscle and bone uncomfortable but familiar. Her legs shortened and she felt the braided rug under her paws.

Jayda didn't want to open her eyes. Didn't want to witness her failure to complete the shift. She had no doubt the mirror would reflect an odd conglomeration of wolf, cougar and human in disproportionate measure. But standing there, shutting out the truth, would get her nowhere. Cautiously she opened her eyes. Immediately the perspective had changed. Not only was she low to the ground, but her field of vision had widened. Swinging her neck, she caught her reflection in the mirror. A black wolf

stared back at her. From the sensitive twitch of her nose to the full tail, she had done it. Nothing was out of place. When the joy came this time it rolled from her mouth with the haunting howl of her ancestors.

She felt the wolf working to take over. Ears lifted to an owl welcoming the night as darkness swallowed the last vestiges of day. Her nose picked up the scents of the lake carried on the gentle summer air and Jayda had to work to tamp down and control the animal wanting to hunt. Without knowing how much control she had, it wouldn't do to give over to the animal until she felt comfortable with a shift both ways.

Concentrating on her human form, Jayda pushed away the animal and brought forth her human form. The shift back was much harder than she remembered. There was pain as she forced her leg bones to lengthen and fingers to spring forth from her paws. Though not nearly as excruciating, it reminded Jayda of the first time she'd pulled back from her wolf. She had no idea until this moment how much Cole's presence had helped her transform.

Jayda's eyes fluttered open, trepidation knotting her stomach. She wasn't sure she wanted to know she'd failed. But it was only the human Jayda staring back at her with the lopsided grin of childish pride lighting her face. One down. One to go.

She shot a look over her shoulder at the door, wondering if she should wait for Cole. Jayda had never been so daring, allowing her animals to come forth without someone nearby to help her control them. What if they took over and she couldn't shift back? That thought sat heavy in her belly, churning acid and she pressed her fists to the knot of fear, pushing it aside. Determination had set her on this path and she had no desire to turn back now, no matter how foolhardy her plan seemed at the moment.

Closing her eyes, Jayda let her thoughts drift to Zane and the first mouth-watering sight she had of him standing naked over her on the ridge. The hard planes of his chest covered in the bronze satin of skin. She'd been too frightened to allow her eyes to wander below his bellybutton, but her hands had traveled that path just this afternoon.

Inhaling, the smell of him filled her nostrils and called to the very primal part of her. She felt the cat within her stir and Jayda turned herself over to its power.

Once again the familiar ache of bones stretching and muscles shifting filled her. But there was no pain, only the glory of knowing she'd found a way to call forth the animals. Nothing had ever made her feel so powerful and in control.

When Jayda opened her eyes this time, the change in her perception did not startle her. The beautiful cougar that was another part of her stood proudly in the mirror. Her ebony coat shone like black satin in the soft glow of the bedside lamp. Amber eyes, sparking with pride, stared back at her. With her tail swishing triumphantly, Jayda strutted around the mirror. The movements of the cougar were different, yet the familiarity in them brought her a sense of calm. There was definitely a grace and power she hadn't felt either as a human or a wolf.

The owl once again called into the night, its cry beckoning her.

Her muscles bunched, ready to spring out the window, but she hesitated. Cole may stop in, find the cabin empty and worry. She'd never gone hunting without him. When the haunting cry came again, it reached deep to her elemental need for the open forest. No one would know if she took a quick run. With the lithe spring of her cat, Jayda bounded through the open window and onto the back lawn. Her paws dug into the cool grass as she ran toward the tree line without a destination.

Riding high on her first independent shift, Jayda didn't want to acknowledge the blood-red glow of the waning moon rising over the lake on the opposite side of the cabin.

\* \* \* \* \*

Zane sat on a boulder, its surface polished smooth by years of weather. His bare foot hung in the cool water, the diamonds of moonlight reflected in the gentle flow of the water. He had come up here with the kits this afternoon to give them some exercise

while he checked the otter beds. Many of the original nest sites had been underwater, but from all appearances, the new litters all looked healthy.

Not that he'd given them more than a cursory glance. Visions of Jayda had filled his thoughts and made concentrating on the job he'd intended to do much too difficult. Zane had finally given up the pretense of work somewhere around sunset and he'd gone back to his truck, stripped and shifted. He'd run the kits hard and helped them forage for food. They now lay in a heap in the grass, tired muscles and full bellies making it impossible for them to stay awake.

He'd been sitting on this rock for nearly an hour, talking himself out of going to Jayda's house. No doubt Cole was there this evening and Jayda needed to have the time to explain to the wolf shifter what had happened in her office.

Zane didn't feel one bit of remorse.

He'd had enough guilt for a lifetime. When his parents had been murdered five years ago, Zane had promised to avenge their deaths. He'd joined a cougar faction rampaging against the pride he believed had slain their leader—his father. But nearly a year later when Zane discovered a random *human* act of violence had taken his parents and he'd joined forces with the very sect his parents had been trying to control, well, that had thrown his life into a tailspin.

Guilt and dishonor had separated him from the clan.

He'd headed off to live with his mother's second cousin in Chicago. The shifter gangs there, hemmed in by the cement walls, warred incessantly. They'd taken the last of his dignity and self-worth. When he'd nearly become a casualty, Zane had pulled himself together and come back to Montana a year ago only to find the pride who had loved and nurtured him in turmoil. When the traitorous head of the cougar council had been found guilty of murder, Zane had stepped up to reclaim the position that was rightfully his.

He'd done nothing but fight to survive for the last five years. Finding a lifemate wasn't even on his radar. But at thirty-one his cougar was clamoring to be fulfilled.

Fortunately for him, the open space and fresh air of Montana had helped him regain control of both his cat and his temper. In the midst of all the turmoil he'd managed to graduate from college. His cougar clamored for the rugged terrain of the mountains, this job with the warden service suited him just fine. And now the council was looking for young blood to repair the damages done by a greedy SOB who'd wanted to control both the wolf and cougar shifter populations.

Zane understood too well how the desire for power over territory could cloud a man's judgment. He'd been there himself. Of course back in Chicago it had nothing to do with the area itself and everything to do with controlling the share of the drug market. Still, infighting was infighting and repairing the damaged egos and broken families was something he had firsthand knowledge of.

But working with another population of shifters was a whole other ballgame. The tentative first meetings had been tense and full of anger. Both he and Cole had worked to control their councils. There was no doubt they would learn to work together for the benefit of both, but truly becoming one with a common goal, well, Zane wasn't sure that was possible. Especially if someone was working to kill off cougars. That thought just pissed him off.

Zane stood and stretched. Too much introspection wasn't good for a man. He'd be glad when they figured out what poisoned Marissa and the cougar. Then he'd make sure Takoda brought them to justice.

He needed to run off the melancholy the memories had stirred. His cougar growled and he gave in to the animal, shifting easily. With a low purr, he called to the kits. He'd go for a short run and work off some of his anger and frustration before heading home.



## Chapter Eight

The night opened up to welcome Jayda. Wide paws pummeled the ground as powerful shoulder muscles and haunches worked in tandem, driving her through the forest and up the mountain ridge. The speed was exhilarating. Jayda hadn't expected to feel differently as a cougar, after all an animal was an animal. But the grace and power of this new form was intoxicating. She'd spent hours in this forest as a wolf, but this night her eyes perceived the familiar world in a new and beautiful way.

As the grass gave way to the ledge and scrub trees of the mountain ridge, Jayda marveled at her new visual acuity. Every nuance of rock and pine was outlined in great detail. Her hearing was not as acute, but her nose picked up the cacophony of flora and fauna scents riding on the evening breeze. Finally she stopped and surveyed the river below.

She'd run to the ridge where she and Zane had found the kits. Jayda hadn't thought memories of her afternoon with the man had propelled her forward, but standing high over the river, a lone silhouette in the blue wash of the gibbous moon. She ached to share this moment with someone, no, not *anyone* – Zane.

He was probably home, doing whatever he did at night, not out pining for her. Their coupling this afternoon had been nothing more than two people needing to feel alive after such a tragic death. And what would this do to her relationship with Cole when she told him what went on in her office? Worry burned in her gut.

With surprising agility, she worked her way the short distance down the slope toward the river. It had taken little time to run the miles from her cabin to the ridge, but the effort had made her thirsty beyond measure. Jayda stopped at the water's edge and surveyed the swollen river. It amazed her how vivid and clear the inky night became when viewed from a cougar's perspective. The moon sat just above the tree line, its

beams of light dancing along the locoweed and white bitterroot and shattering into tiny diamonds on the water's surface.

Laying her belly on the cool ledge, Jayda dipped her tongue into the sweet water. Refreshing liquid soothed her parched throat but didn't seem to slake her thirst. She drank greedily, studying her reflection as it twisted and warped with each motion of her tongue. She couldn't help but see it as representative of her life at this moment. Until she had a chance to talk with Cole, everything would be in chaos.

Jayda stood and stretched, her front paws out in front of her, her back arched in the lazy way cats often do. She needed to think about heading back to the cabin. There was so much work to catch up on. Jayda turned just as a cougar kit mewled and tumbled out of the brush behind her. A second one followed and the two greeted her with happy purrs as they wound around her legs. Their appearance confused her until the large cat strode proudly down the ridge. Zane's muscles rippled seductively as he moved and his eyes never left hers. If she had known this shifter better, Jayda would have sworn he was smiling, but the natural curve of his feline mouth probably lent to the illusion.

The predatory glint in his eye held her frozen, not from fear but from natural animal attraction. Even in cougar form Zane couldn't hide his desires. With slow, steady movements he approached. The rich scent of his cat rode on the soft breeze and Jayda filled her lungs with its heady fragrance. He nuzzled into her neck and she closed her eyes, enjoying the feel of his tongue as it rasped over her ear in greeting. She pressed her head against his powerful jaw, snuggling into Zane's warmth. Jayda didn't realize she'd been looking for him, but Zane's presence quickened her heart rate.

The kits continued to nip at Jayda's legs, but she couldn't pull her eyes from Zane. He marched around her as if inspecting to be sure her shift had been complete. His strong body brushed against Jayda—a shoulder running along her side, the flick of his tail along her jaw, the unexpected nip of his teeth on her haunches—that made her jump and her womb clench. In any form the man made her hot.

With the instinct of a mother, she sensed more than saw the bored kits bounce and tumble their way back to the brush. She hoped Zane had worn them out and they were ready to sleep. Jayda didn't want to worry about them—not when she had Zane so close, scrambling her thoughts.

He stared at her, his pupils dark and bottomless. Jayda thought she'd like to fall into them and stay safe and warm in Zane's embrace forever.

But the mournful howl of a wolf rent the stillness of the night and broke the spell holding her captive. She'd heard it so many times, Jayda knew immediately Cole called to her. When she turned, Jayda saw him high up on the ridge, Cole's wolf head thrown back, his anguished wail splitting the night.

No doubt the man thought she'd left him for another. But that couldn't be further from the truth. She didn't want to choose. She loved Cole, but her cat yearned for Zane.

Jayda looked from Cole to Zane. The cougar stepped back into the shadows, giving her room to think. Cole howled again then stared down at her, his legs spread wide in defiance. She needed to explain to him—to both of them—how much her heart needed their love in equal measure. Jayda had no idea if it could work, but she took off up the ridge to convince Cole to join them. She hadn't bounded more than three steps when her cougar gave itself over to her wolf.

\* \* \* \* \*

Cole stared disbelieving at their mating dance. Zane's cat pressed against Jayda and he cried out in jealousy and anger. It wasn't as if he hadn't expected this, but seeing Jayda, *his* Jayda, in her cougar form was like a sucker punch to his gut. Having Brodan scenting her added steel bands of resentment around his chest, making it hard to catch his breath. Still Cole managed to communicate his heartache with another feral call that had them both looking up at him.

He thought he'd gone running tonight to burn off some anger over Marissa's murder, but obviously his wolf had been searching for its mate. Cole stared down at the

two cougars, weighing his honor against his heart. He wasn't sure he could lead his pack effectively if he couldn't keep a lifemate by his side.

Cole watched the black cougar take off into the trees. He had no idea if it was guilt that brought Jayda to him or her opportunity to say goodbye. He wondered if he could accept that. A person couldn't always control their heart, but Cole was sure at that moment he wouldn't give her up without a fight.

When Jayda's wolf broke through the tree line, his heart leapt with joy. She'd made her decision.

Jayda stopped only a foot from Cole, her eyes glistening with emotion. With little effort she shifted and stood in all her human splendor in front of him. Jayda's luscious curves never failed to take his breath away. Bathed in the moonlight, her raven hair danced on the wind. Her full breasts glowed softly in the blue wash of the moon, her areolas dark and puckered, the nipples tightened into round little buds. The soft curve of her belly and rounded hips drew his sight to the small line of hair at the apex of her thighs. She had never looked so achingly beautiful.

"Cole."

A name—*his* name. The way she said it was a siren's call every time, even when it was laced with immeasurable sadness. He wouldn't willingly let her go to Brodan. He couldn't. His heart needed hers to keep beating. Cole understood how deeply he'd come to love her, but until this moment, when he believed he might lose her to another, did he realize how much her heart had intertwined with his. Even without the mating ritual he had bonded to her for life.

Tentatively he took the few steps across the ledge and closed the distance between them. He nuzzled against the silky skin of her thigh and inhaled the scent that belonged to only Jayda. Not wolf but definitely not cougar, which is what he had feared. A thrilling mixture of mountain air and forest, rain and lavender, human and animal filled his nose and heated his blood. He pushed against her, craving the contact, silently urging her to shift and be with him—only him.

When her fingers dug into his fur, she repeated herself. "Cole." The name came out as a plea.

He didn't want to shift, didn't want to hear her say goodbye. If he could convince her to shift to wolf and be with him, there would be no Brodan. No wondering whom she loved. No worry that she would leave. He nuzzled her with his nose.

"We need to talk."

His heart sank as his wolf gave over to his human form. Cole's limbs felt heavy and only pride kept him standing. "Jayda, I—"

Her finger pressed gently to his lips. "No, Cole let me. Please. I need to say this. Like ripping off a bandage, I need to get it out."

Cole wrapped his hands around hers and gently kissed her fingers. He held on to her hand as much to control his own needs as to keep her close. Her breasts brushed his chest, the tight nipples begging for attention. He wanted to make love to her one more time to fill her with his seed and remind her of all they were together. But he simply nodded and encouraged her to go on.

"I didn't expect to feel this way. The last three months with you have been more than I ever dreamed I could have with a man." Her hand cupped his face. He closed his eyes and kissed her palm. "You've taught me so much. I never knew how much the wolf in me needed to be released. To be free to run the wilds of the mountains." Jayda moved their hands and pressed her warm lips to his.

Oh, how he wanted to deepen the kiss and ignore everything else she needed to say. But he knew that wasn't fair.

Her gaze swept his face before she continued and his soul ached with the sorrow he saw deep in her eyes. "I had no idea my heart could be so full of love and I have you to thank for teaching me that also, Cole. The last few months have been the happiest of my life." Jayda's voice cracked on the last few words. "But things have changed."

Cole felt the axe come down on his heart. It took all his energy to keep himself standing. He'd opened the door for Brodan and the man had walked into his life and

stolen everything. Sadness, anger and jealousy burned in his throat but Cole refused to give any of them voice.

“Cole, I can’t ignore who I am any longer. I was ignorant for too many years. Now I know and I need to nurture *all* parts of me. The—”

“Jayda, stop.” Grief sat heavy on his heart, but Jayda needed to know how he felt too. “Before you go any further I want you to understand that I won’t hold you back. But neither will I walk away without a fight.”

“Neither will I, Takoda.”

Jayda gasped at the unexpected voice. Cole turned to see Brodan coming out of the trees. A growl rumbled low in Cole’s chest. He wanted to protect his lover. “I think this is a private conversation, Brodan.”

“I have no doubt it also involves me.” The naked man strode up the ridge and stood on the other side of Jayda.

“No, Cole, this is good. Zane being here makes this so much easier for me.” Jayda stepped away from Cole.

He steeled himself to hear the words but didn’t know if he would survive Jayda walking from his life.

“Well, not easier...I didn’t mean to say this will be easy. Because this sort of thing is never easy.” Jayda shook her head as if trying to clear her thoughts. “What I mean is...” She inhaled and turned to him. “Cole, you bravely gifted with me with a chance to discover who I am. I will love you forever for that.” Her breath trembled as she inhaled and turned to Brodan. “And, Zane, you reached in to touch a piece of my heart that had been dormant, the part of me I didn’t know was yearning for something more.” Jayda closed her eyes, a single tear slipping down her cheek. She steadied herself and opened her eyes, emotion glistening in their depths. “It’s all so clear to me now.” As if to protect her heart, her arms came around her waist, and she whispered softly, “I need you *both*.”

Cole’s heart rejoiced and he laughed.

“Well, I don’t think it’s funny.” Jayda looked almost hurt.

“I don’t think it’s amusement we’re feeling, Jayda.” Brodan walked up to the beautiful woman who had stolen Cole’s heart months ago and squeezed her shoulder. It surprised Cole that the gesture didn’t upset him as much as he’d expected it would. Perhaps Aaron had been right in letting fate carry them where it would.

Brodan brushed hair from Jayda’s neck and nipped at her shoulder. “I think it’s more relief that you’re not going to make us fight for the lovely maiden.”

“I’m willing to see how this works.” Cole closed the space between him and Jayda and gently pressed his lips to hers. “I just don’t want to live without you.” Cole’s hand cupped one of her breasts and squeezed the steeped nipple. Jayda’s scent was intoxicating and blood rushed to his cock. “I just don’t want to live without you.”

“Neither do I,” Brodan whispered in her other ear.

Jayda couldn’t believe this. She had expected there would be more posturing from these men. But Cole’s mouth was hot on her lips, his tongue sweeping in to taste and possess. Zane’s hand swept away her hair and his teeth rasped along her neck and shoulder, his smooth chest against her back. The cool metal of Zane’s nipple piercings rubbed against her shoulder blades, sending fingers of need trailing down her back.

When Cole’s hand fisted in her hair, she changed the angle so he could deepen their kiss. The taste of him swept fire through her veins and liquid desire dampened her thighs. A moan rumbled through Cole’s chest, and the vibration went straight to her pussy.

Zane’s hands roamed down her rib cage and gripped her hips. He pushed his erection between her legs. Jayda arched her back and rubbed her nether lips against its silken heat. Cole’s cock, hard and ready, pressed between their stomachs.

Two mouths. Two hot tongues. Two rock-hard cocks. All seeking to give her pleasure. Need burned within Jayda, seared over her quivering muscles, making her

dizzy with want. Her world spun away as Cole lay back in the soft moss of the ledge, taking her with him.

As if they had choreographed the move, Zane followed them down, kneeling between their legs, his hands massaging her ass, his thumbs flirting with her labia.

“Beautiful, Jayda. You are so beautiful,” Cole whispered against her ear.

She kissed Cole’s jaw, scraping her teeth along the taut cords of his neck. Dragging her nails up his ribs, Jayda rolled the tight peak of his nipple, enjoying Cole’s sharp intake of air. These men might be intent on pleasuring her, but she also held power to make them tremble.

When Zane’s firm hands urged her legs wide, she pushed up on her hands and knees, forcing Cole’s legs to spread as well. His cock stood tall between them and Jayda had the uncontrollable desire to fill her mouth with the steel heat of him. Kissing down the firm muscles of Cole’s stomach, her tongue laved each ridge of his abdomen, his muscles quivering with the touch. Her sensitive nipples dragged along his hot flesh, the burning heat traveling down her belly to settle heavy in her pussy.

Zane’s fingers slid in the moisture pooling between her thighs. A thick finger speared into her aching pussy while his thumb found her clitoris. His teeth dug into the flesh of her hip, the pain startling her in its ability to arouse. Jayda arched her back to give Zane better access to her sopping cunt.

Jayda’s fingers slid lower to cup his balls as she kissed around the base of Cole’s cock. As Jayda’s tongue slid up the quivering shaft, Cole filled his hands with her breasts. Kneading and reshaping the flesh, he anchored himself as Jayda licked up the salty drops of pre-cum glistening in the moonlight. With a gentle squeeze of his testicles, Jayda filled her mouth with Cole’s cock, taking him in until he touched the back of her throat. With practiced ease, she relaxed and took him deeper, sucking hard. Cole groaned and rolled her nipples between his fingers. The electric shock of pleasure zinged to her fingers and toes and her moan lifted with Cole’s, joining the whisper of the breeze singing through the nearby pines.



Zane interpreted her growing desire and added another finger to her pussy. His other hand dragged her slick moisture to her anus and rimmed the rosebud opening with tantalizing pressure.

The sexy slurping sounds of Zane's finger-fucking, the suction noises of her mouth on Cole's cock and their sensual moans and whispers of gratification were like a well-tuned carnal orchestra of lustful music. Both men played her body with masterful skill that had Jayda's blood singing with the rising cadence of need.

Her muscles bowed tight, her legs trembling with the effort to remain upright. Zane bit and laved his way down her ass until his lips replaced his finger at the tingling pearl. When he sucked her clit into the warmth of his mouth and flicked his tongue along the bundle of nerves, Jayda arched into the contact.

She pulled her head back, dragging her tongue along Cole's cock, creating suction as she moved. Her hand following the slick path her mouth had left. She gently added pressure to balls and cock, milking along Cole's shaft in the same rhythm as Zane's pulsing hands.

Pleasure rippled through her body and the pressure built in her cunt. Jolts of ecstasy shot along her nerves, leaving her tingling and weak. Both men must have sensed the imminent explosion as their hands worked her body in tandem. Cole pinched and teased her nipples, the pain adding a wonderful dimension to the myriad sensations thrumming through her. Zane's hands and mouth loved her pussy and when his finger pushed through the tight circle of her anus, it was the stimulus she needed to let go and soar.

Her hand continued to caress Cole's cock. It seemed to be the only thing holding her to this plane. The orgasm slammed into her with such force, Jayda could barely hold herself up. Waves upon waves of heaven hit her, trembling her muscles, making her cry out. Even with all the bucking, neither man lost contact. Zane's assault did not slow until she begged him to stop. And even then he simply softened the pressure. His fingers and tongue made wider circles, easing her back down.

Cole pulled her up his body and she collapsed on top of him, his heart beating in time with hers. Zane pulled back but kept his hands on her cheeks, smearing her juices up her ass. She spread her legs on either side of Cole's hips and arched into Zane's touch, grinding Cole's cock with her belly.

"I want you to make love to me," she whispered to Cole before kissing his chest where his heart hammered. Turning to look over her shoulder, Jayda smiled at Zane. "Both of you, together."

Zane's face contorted as his eyes met Cole's. For a moment, concern knotted her stomach, she didn't know how to interpret their silent exchange. Jayda didn't want them to balk now. Not when she realized how much she needed them both. But when she turned back to Cole, his trust in her had smoothed his furrowed brow. He cupped her face and pulled her to him, pressing his lips tenderly to hers.

Cole moved from her mouth to kiss the tip of her nose. "*Your* pleasure is all that matters tonight."

"The rest will come later." Zane echoed Cole's sentiments.

Not quite the loving acknowledgement she was looking for, but enough for now. Besides, Zane's hands hadn't stopped their exploration and the fingers of both his hands flirted with her slit, making her ready all over again. Jayda rocked into his touch, her stomach rubbing up and down Cole's hard cock.

"Jayda if you keep that up, I'm going to come without ever having made love to you." Cole's words came out tense and she laughed at his desperation.

"Well, we certainly can't have that," she sighed. "I want to feel you touch every part of me."

Sliding up, Jayda moved until Cole's cock was released from their bodies. She reached around and guided it to her opening, sliding the tip in her juices. Zane pulled back, giving her room, his hands massaging her calves and thighs.

With an arch of her hips, Jayda slid down the length of Cole's cock, her cunt taking him in an inch at a time. He was thick and long and stretched her quivering pussy

muscles, the glorious pressure sending shivers of bliss up her spine. A low keen of rapture vibrated through Cole's chest and joined with hers.

Cole captured her mouth, his tongue hungrily sweeping in to touch hers. His hands held her hips steady as he moved with gentle pulses, his pubic hair rubbing pleasantly against her clitoris.

Zane's hands worked their way up her thighs and vigorously worked the flesh of her ass. His mouth came down on her anus, hot saliva running between her cheeks. Zane's thumbs pressed against the tight ring of muscle, urging it to relax and open. Jayda understood what was about to happen and she welcomed the idea of loving two men at the same time. The thought clenched her pussy and sent a hot rush of liquid to bathe Cole's cock.

Cole pulled from her. "Are you all right?"

Zane's hands stopped and he lifted his head.

They'd misinterpreted her body's need. "I'm more than all right." Jayda didn't recognize her own tight voice. She arched her hips, pushing Cole's cock deeper and Zane's fingers into her ass. "Don't stop. Don't either of you think about stopping. I had no idea it could be like this."

Cole pulled her down and kissed her long and hard, his cock becoming impossibly harder inside her. Zane pushed both thumbs into her ass and began stretching the tight muscle. The two of them worked in tandem until Jayda was quivering from the assault. When Zane pulled his mouth away and held the tip of his cock to her ass, she was ready and panting breathlessly for his entry.

Sensing the change in position, Cole stopped his pulsing hips. He kissed a gentle path along her jaw, allowing her the opportunity to catch her breath or give Zane direction. But Jayda couldn't have talked if she wanted to. Emotion clogged her throat and tightened around her heart. This was what she wanted.

Zane's cock pushed against her anus, the burning pain zinging pleasantly to her womb and tightening her nipples. She groaned as he slid past the tight opening and she

rocked back on his cock, feeling both men fill her. Zane came forward over her back, one hand fisting tightly in her hair, the other digging into her shoulder.

It seemed they all found their rhythm with a couple of thrusts of their bodies. Soon there was nothing save for the slapping sound of skin against skin and the lifted groans of pleasure as they all moved to increase the friction. Zane's balls slapped against Jayda's thighs and the thought of them brushing against Cole's testicles made her shiver. She wondered if their cocks rubbed against each other through the thin wall of muscle between her cunt and her ass. Her pussy wept at the thought.

Their cocks pounded into her, filling her with ecstasy. The heat of their bodies surrounded and engulfed her, melting away any insecurity she may have had about her relationship with these men.

As the passion rose, sensations tumbled one over another, nearly overwhelming in their intensity. Jayda's body arched and she let Cole and Zane's pounding cocks carry her to the edge of bliss.

"I'm coming. I can't hold on any longer." Cole panted the words into her ear as the first hot shots of cum filled her channel.

It was just the stimulus Jayda needed to tumble headlong into her own release. Her body quaked and shuddered as she fell over the edge of reason, shocks of bliss bursting along her nerves. Throwing her head back, Jayda let the feral sound of ecstasy join Cole's guttural cries.

Zane held on the longest, but only seconds behind them both. His grip tightened in her hair as his body tensed. His hips pulsed once, twice, then the hot stream filled her ass and Zane also growled with the strains of euphoria.

The pistoning slowed. Jayda fell heavily on Cole with Zane on her back. She felt their hearts pounding in time with hers and thought nothing could ever come between them.

"Brodan, you mind?" Cole's terse tone was like ice water on her heart.

Zane shifted and rolled to the ground. Angry that Cole had ruined the mood, Jayda came up on her knees, the separation from the men harsh and unwelcome. The breeze that had caressed her heated flesh now felt like cold fingers clawing at her skin. It dug away at the loving atmosphere until only the rough edges of jealousy surrounded her.

Deep lines of resentment marred Cole's normally serene features. Jayda turned to see it mirrored in Zane's face. She stood and brushed the leaves from her knees, hoping she would straighten to find it had all been a misunderstanding.

Cole jumped up and moved in close. "Thanks for finding her, Brodan, but I'll help Jayda shift and get her home." He turned to her, his plastic smile hostile in the blue wash of the moon. Tucking his hair behind his ear, Cole wet his lips before turning back to Zane. "I mean, I'm sure you need to get the kits back to tend them. They probably shouldn't be alone too long." He turned back to Jayda. "Right?"

"They're just down in the rocky outcropping. But I think they're fine for a few more minutes." Zane ran his hand down her arm. "I can help Jayda shift to cougar and we can corral the kits and both get them back to my place." Zane's lips curled in an almost feral snarl.

Jayda's stomach churned, threatening to heave its contents. This was the posturing she had expected earlier. But the three of them had shared their bodies and she had thought—their hearts. Obviously she'd been mistaken. Bile burned up her throat as resentment ricocheted between the men. Jayda willed herself to speak evenly. "I don't require the assistance of either of you." The misery squeezed her chest, making it hard to fill her lungs. Her hand fluttered to her trembling lips. "I got here on my own." She swallowed hard against the disappointment burning in her throat. "I can make it home without either of you." Anger and frustration boiled up. Jayda turned to the bushes and puked. She hated when her emotions got the best of her.

"Jayda—"

"Jayda, are you all—"

Both men spoke at the same time as they moved to help her.

She held up a warning hand. Jayda had no desire to be near either of these stubborn men as they jockeyed for her affection. Her head spun with too much emotion. She wanted them both. Jayda thought they understood that. This was going to be harder than she'd believed earlier. The thought had her stomach wrenching again. It was another minute before it settled and she felt under control enough to stand straight.

Swiping the back of her hand across her lips, Jayda turned to face them. Fury continued to churn her gut. She would not let them see how upset they'd made her. "This isn't how I saw this night ending." She walked to the top of the ridge, careful not to get too close to the edge. "I just think we all need some time to...I don't know." Tears filled her eyes, blurring her vision. She swallowed the discomfort. Suddenly her little cabin and a warm bed seemed very far away. "I'm just going to shift and head home." Jayda willed her wolf to surface. Pain cramped her muscles as bones changed form. "You two figure out—" The words stopped. Her face morphed from wolf muzzle to cougar. Suddenly her tongue felt too big for her mouth and she gasped for air that wouldn't come in the confusion of the shift. Like the fur rolling over her skin, panic engulfed Jayda. Heat and ice alternately pricked her skin. Bands of agony seized her arms and legs, contorting her appendages. Falling to the rocks, she heard the feral cry of a wounded animal and knew it had come from her. Her human form tried to swim from the quagmire of confused body parts, but pain controlled her now. She lay on her back, staring at the moon winking through the clouds as if it understood something she didn't.

Darkness crawled along the edges of her vision, obscuring Cole's and Zane's worried expressions. Their lips moved but no sound registered. A cold emptiness swept over her, relieving the agony. Jayda let it close around her until there was only the tiniest pinpoint of light. Without the desire to return to the pain, Jayda followed it into the tunnel of darkness.

## Chapter Nine

*Shit.* The stench filling Cole's nose made it hard to think. Hospital antiseptic mixed with the rancid odor of cougar hung in the air. Okay, so maybe in the last few hours he'd gotten used to Brodan's cougar stink, still, his proximity made Cole uncomfortable. They'd been circling each other, scuffing edgy tracks of despair in the industrial carpet. The ICU family room where they'd been sequestered didn't offer much for comfort—a small coffee pot, burning the last remains of black sludge, a couch with sagging cushions and a couple of chairs, one containing an elderly man who was currently snoring. At least something filled the empty silence. The two of them couldn't go on like this. Not when they'd shared the woman he loved and now she lay dying in the room down the hall. Really *shit*. Just *shit*.

"What time is it?" Cole asked, trying to break through the tension.

"About ten minutes since I got back," Brodan muttered. "And another forty-five before you can go in and see her."

Jayda was on life support, which meant they could only be with her ten minutes out of every hour. Brodan had gotten the last rotation.

Cole hated to see Jayda that way. Monitors steadily counted every beat of her heart—a heart that obviously beat for two men. He couldn't go there right now. His mate was stable and that was what he had to focus on. Dr. Tan would save her. The alternative was inconceivable. "That wasn't what I asked."

Brodan stepped in front of him. "No, but it's what you were thinking. Just say it for chrissake, Takoda. You don't think I should be here cutting into your time with Jayda." Brodan pushed the words out through clenched teeth, trying to keep his volume down. He didn't succeed. "I get that. And I've thought about walking away. I had intended to do it earlier tonight. You can see how *that* worked out."

The elderly man snored, shifted and resettled deeper in the chair.

Brodan lowered his voice. "You think I went looking for this fucking complication?" He turned his back to Cole, walked a couple of steps, giving himself room to breathe, and turned back. "Mating rituals and relationships are hard enough between two shifters let alone..." Brodan's brow furrowed and he rubbed at the confusion. "I just want you to know I didn't go sniffing around, looking to—"

The elderly man's watch chimed. As if on autopilot, he got up, stretched, acknowledged them both with a wan smile and left the room. The routine had been like this for several hours. They now had ten minutes of uninterrupted time to talk. Cole wasn't sure he wanted it.

"This thing..." Brodan waved his hands between them. "Sucks."

Cole held up his hands. He *really* didn't want to get in a pissing match about what happened on the ridge. It wasn't as if any of them had planned it and Cole still wasn't sure how he felt about the whole thing. They needed to work through it for sure, but not without Jayda. "Forget it. Right now it's about Jayda."

"How is she?" Aaron walked into the room. Even at three in the morning, with his crisp button-down shirt and jeans, Aaron looked as if he'd just stepped off the pages of some men's magazine.

"Great. Backup," Brodan snarled. "Nothing like stacking the home team."

That did it. Cole was ready to hit something or *someone*. "Fuck you, Brodan. I didn't call him." His nails dug into his palm, trying to remain controlled. The chief of police starting a brawl in the ICU wouldn't go over too well with the locals. "But even if I had—"

"Down, boys. Doctor called me." Aaron casually poured the last of the coffee into a cup and added several packets of sugar and powdered creamer. "Dr. Tan's convinced this is the same poison that killed Marissa. When we get the toxicology reports on the cougar, I'm sure it will show the same thing."

"She didn't say anything to us." Cole and Brodan spoke at the same time.



Aaron stirred the concoction. With deliberation borne of years as a detective, he chewed on the wooden stick, regarding them both. "She's not sure who to trust."

"What the fuck?"

"Who the hell –"

Brodan was as indignant as Cole.

"Just doing my job," Aaron said.

"I'm the damn police chief." Cole couldn't believe he actually had to defend himself. "And the head of the wolf council."

Aaron shrugged. "Cougars are dying."

"Right, so that means it wouldn't be a cougar doing the killing," Brodan countered.

"Except when you put into play the mutual shifter council angle." Aaron settled onto the couch, casually throwing a leg over his knee. "Getting rid of Jayda would certainly squash those plans." He sipped the coffee. Cole wasn't sure how he didn't wince at the stale flavor. "Perhaps Marissa was just collateral damage." He let the last statement hang in the air as a question.

"What the fuck, Wallace?" Brodan paced the room like a caged animal. "These are *my* cougars being killed. My pride is looking to *me* for answers." He emphasized the word with a thumb to his chest. "With all the shit going down over the past year, the last thing the cougars need is someone divisive pulling them apart. I'm working to rebuild the trust that the last leader destroyed. It only follows that I'd be willing to work with the wolves to mend relationships and rebuild the population on Coppertip Mountain. If that means a shared council, then so be it. I'm not fighting it. But you're a fucking wolf. Despite the laws you've sworn to uphold, it comes down to sticking with your own kind." Brodan strode toward the door. "This is fucking bullshit. I don't need to defend myself. I'm innocent."

"That's what I think." Aaron spoke casually, blew on the coffee and drank again.

Brodan stopped, his hand poised on the doorknob. "What?"

"I didn't say I suspected either of you. I was simply explaining Dr. Tan's rationale for calling me." Aaron smiled.

"You're an asshole, Wallace." Brodan turned to Cole. "I need some air. You know how to reach me if—" He swallowed hard. "Twenty minutes. I'll be back." With that statement, Brodan left.

"He's a bit touchy." Aaron finished the coffee and crushed the cup. "Usually sex eases a man's tensions. Of course under the circumstances..." He did a basketball shot with the cup into the trash can across the room. "I guess it's understandable."

"Which circumstances, Aaron? The fact that he screwed my woman or the fact that she's dying?" Cole waved away the question. "Don't answer that. Sometimes it sucks having a detective for a best friend."

"Being a detective had nothing to do with it." Aaron tapped his nose and smiled. "You two reek." Leaning forward, he put his forearms on his thighs. "So?" His question hung stiff like the plastic flower drapes.

Cole rubbed his temples, trying to think through the pounding headache and uncertainty. "So I don't know. It wasn't as if the three of us planned the whole thing. It just sort of *happened*." Cole began pacing again. "I'm sure we would have talked, but Jayda collapsed. I got in a fucking pissing contest with Brodan about who would stay with her and who would get a vehicle."

"Where were you?"

"Up on the ridge." Cole shook his head, trying to rid his mind of the image of Jayda convulsing in Brodan's arms, foam frothing from her lips. "My place is closer, but I didn't want him to be alone with her. How stupid could I get? After what we'd done? You know, like she'd come to and choose him. She's..." His voice caught on the fear in his throat. "I may lose her, Aaron, and all I could think was I didn't want her to choose him."

Aaron stood and put his hand on Cole's shoulder. "Dr. Tan is working to figure this out. She won't let Jayda..." His voice drifted off.

Even Aaron, who never bullshitted about anything, couldn't admit that Jayda may not make it through this.

\* \* \* \* \*

Though it was against hospital policy, Zane stood at the window of the secluded room. Quiet echoed loudly in the empty corridor where he stood, staring at Jayda's lifeless form. Her raven hair surrounded her face like a dark halo, accenting the pallor of her skin. Even with the bruised rings below her eyes and the swollen lips, she was beautiful. He'd just found her. Zane didn't want to lose her before they'd had a chance to explore their feelings for each other.

He should have walked away.

He shouldn't have let yesterday in the office happen and sure as hell shouldn't have been part of what happened on the ridge tonight. But sharing Jayda with Takoda had felt as natural as taking a piss. Zane scoffed at himself. From the other man's reaction, he was fairly certain the wolf shifter didn't feel the same way.

He laid his palm on the glass, as if touching its smooth surface would bring him closer to her.

"Zane, you can't be here." The gentle brush of a hand warmed his forearm.

He looked down at Dr. Tan. The soulful depths of the shifter's eyes were nearly his undoing. "I just needed to see her."

"She's stable for now. I'm just waiting for the pathologist to call me back. He told me earlier they should have the preliminary reports from Marissa. I'm confident that information will help me save Jayda."

She squeezed his arm, but it didn't comfort as she'd intended. It was just a stark reminder of how much he wanted Jayda's hands on him, to feel her in his arms. He hadn't had enough of that, her warm body pressed to him. Zane couldn't stand the thought of losing her.

"She needs her rest and you need to give us space in case —"

As if the doctor's words had beckoned a crisis, the monitors in Jayda's room sent out a mournful wail. Two nurses jumped from the desk and jogged down the hall, their masks of professionalism firmly in place as they followed Dr. Tan into the little room. Medical jargon spewed from her mouth, sending the nurses into a chaotic ballet.

"What's happening?" Takoda ran to the window. As if the confusion wasn't enough, he stared at Zane, trying to figure out why he was standing there and not out in his truck as he'd said, "What the hell did you do, Brodan? Did you do something to her?" He grabbed the collar of the other man's shirt. "I swear—"

"Me?" Zane pushed Takoda away. "Why the hell are you laying this at my feet? I love her too. I thought I'd made that obvious tonight."

The wolf shifter's blue eyes blazed and he growled low. "Hot sex doesn't equal true love, Brodan."

"Fuck you—"

"And that would be enough." Aaron stepped between them, his back to Zane. "This isn't helping anyone. Least of all Jayda. You need to calm down, Cole. Cut *everyone* some slack."

If Zane hadn't known better, it sounded as if Aaron were defending him.

"Screw you, Wallace. It's not the woman you love in there dying with no explanations."

"I'm going to kill him," Zane growled through clenched teeth. He hadn't realized he said it out loud until Aaron stared at him. "The person responsible for this. Whether they're cougar or wolf, I'll kill them with my bare hands."

"Not if I get to them first," Cole said evenly.

Aaron pinched the bridge of his nose and inhaled deeply. "Jayda's a fighter. Dr. Tan isn't going to let her die."

"Look at her." Zane spoke quietly.

Dr. Tan and the nurses moved around the bed, tubes and wires snaking around Jayda's body. But nothing seemed to stop the convulsions shuddering through her muscles. His lover's skin boiled, fur appearing and disappearing, limbs shortening and lengthening in odd intervals. Ears of a wolf rolled over her head while her cougar's nose morphed on her face, and then it was Jayda's human mouth and some odd combination of wolf and cougar stretching her face. It was as if her animals fought human for control of Jayda's body.

"What the hell is going on?" Takoda asked, the fight gone from his voice. Zane wondered the same thing.

They stood watching, time elongating, swelling and warping. Zane's fear stretched each second until he had no idea how long the team stood over Jayda, shouting nonsensical jargon, trying to control whatever was happening. Slowly, in piecemeal parts, her wolf seemed to win the battle for possession of Jayda's body. The doctor didn't stop the shift. If anything she seemed relieved when it was finished. When the monitors stopped their keening cry and settled back into a rhythmic beat, Dr. Tan stood back, her shoulders lifting in a visible sigh of relief.

Jayda lay on her side, her wolf fully emerged. Her chest heaving from whatever internal battle she had just fought. Only occasional muscle tremors shook her legs as if she were batting at something in her sleep. Zane didn't want to take it as a sign, but when Takoda looked at him, the smile lifting one corner of his mouth appeared triumphant.

It was hard for Zane not to feel like he'd lost.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Heard anything?" Aaron asked as he slipped back into the family room.

Cole took the disposable cup of coffee he offered and tried to stifle the yawn. "Nothing. Dr. Tan's still waiting on the pathology reports. They've put a rush. But you know how that goes." He looked at Aaron knowingly. Things only happened quickly

on television. This was real life for chrissake. Autopsies and lab results didn't get done in an hour.

Aaron motioned to Brodan's form reclining in the sagging couch. "How long's he been out?"

"He's not out." Brodan mumbled. "He's just resting his eyes."

Cole had suspected as much, but since he didn't really want to have a lengthy discussion with Brodan, he'd let the man *sleep*. At some point in the night the old man had gone somewhere else and it had been just the two of them shrouded in the heavy silence. Hours had passed since Jayda's last episode. Still they had no answers. Jayda remained in wolf shift, and Cole, like everyone, wondered what significance it held. Pale rays of sunrise slanted through the windows and he could only hope this new day offered some answers.

"I've brought coffee if you're interested, Zane."

Zane stood, stretched and took the coffee Aaron offered. The cougar shifter looked like shit. Cole suspected he had the same basset hound appearance dragging on his facial features as the cougar leader. The day-old stubble accented the tight muscles of Zane's jaw and the worried lines around his mouth. There was nothing sexy about it. Cole didn't even want to conjecture how *he* smelled.

"Zane, maybe we can shift...you know, here in the hospital," Cole offered.

Zane glared at him.

"Or not." Cole fell back in the chair, tucking away his white flag.

"What the hell would shifting prove, Takoda?"

Damn he was tired. He couldn't even get a sentence out straight. Cole plowed rows through his unkempt hair, working to brush away the bone-weary fatigue. "Not animal shift. I mean, you go home. Shower. Eat. Maybe get some sleep. I'll stay for a couple of hours. Then you..." Cole didn't bother to finish.

Zane worked up a whole bunch of mad. "Or...I could stay with Jayda and you could go home and eat, shower and sleep."

"Zane, I don't think Cole meant anything other than you two aren't doing Jayda any good if you fall over from exhaustion," Aaron said gently.

"Yeah, you're right." Zane sent the cup flying into the trash can. Coffee exploded up the wall with his frustration. "No one seems to be doing Jayda any good. And it's been a fucking long night. They should know something by now. Why haven't they *done* anything?"

Aaron leaned forward. "Dr. Tan—"

"I know. I know. She's doing everything she can for Jayda. Yeah, we've heard that all night." Zane's words came out loud and angry.

Aaron held up his hands.

"Sorry." Zane strode to the door. "I guess I do need to get out of here. Just for an hour or two. A shower and some food." He looked at Cole. "Call me?" Zane opened the door, nearly trampling Dr. Tan.

"Sheesh, I'm sorry." Zane caught her by the elbow, keeping her from falling backward. "Is something wrong? It's Jayda?"

"What's happened?" Cold fear slammed into Cole's gut.

"No. No. Nothing." She stepped around Zane. "Nothing's wrong with Jayda, but we may have something. Well, it's just a theory, but I'm going with it." Dr. Tan put her hands in the pockets of her lab coat. "We still don't know the origin, though it has been isolated as a retrovirus that can be carried in both feces and saliva rather than a chemical as we believed. And we've discovered a little bit more about its mode of delivery. The pathologist called. Their preliminary findings indicate the virus attached to the RNA genome that targeted the leukocytes and replicated. Which is interesting. So I took blood samples from Jayda and found a peculiar number and irregular shape to her leukocytes. Unlike Jayda, we never stabilized Marissa. Her organs just failed one after another. We never got ahead of whatever it was that was attacking and poisoning

her body. But in Jayda, it appears only thirty percent of Jayda's RNA is following this same pathology and her leukocytes—

Cole held up his hand, stopping her medical diarrhea. From the confusion furrowing Zane's brow he didn't think he was the only one understanding only a small part of her explanation. "Doc. English. Please."

She waved her hand and shook her head as if erasing her words. "Right. The pathology doesn't really matter. The point is—I think Jayda's wolf knew her cougar was the part of her in trouble. It's as if the wolf is fighting the virus that's trying to kill the cougar." Dr. Tan's eyes sparked with excitement as her words tripped over themselves. "With the cougar RNA replicating the virus at an alarming rate, the leukocytes outnumber the erythrocytes, dropping her oxygen levels. The high number of leukocytes would indicate infection, but in this case it's caused the viral levels to rise to toxic levels and..." She stopped herself that time and smiled knowingly at the men. "The bottom line?"

They all nodded in unison.

"I think Jayda needs a transfusion."

"Hook me up." Zane held out his arms. "Anything to save her."

Cole wanted to speak up, muscle his way to the front. He'd fallen in love with Jayda first. But the wan smile Dr. Tan shot Brodan told him Cole didn't need to say a word to be chosen.

"I know you would, Zane." Dr. Tan squeezed his shoulder. "But I suspect your cougar DNA would only make her more ill. If my theory is correct, it's wolf's blood she needs to help fight the virus in her system."

Cole didn't want to gloat, but it was hard not to feel triumphant as Zane's shoulders slumped.

"Dr. Tan." The door opened and a nurse peeked around the door. "The ER called, we've got another poisoned cougar shifter downstairs. I think it's the young man who came in to the ER yesterday with Marissa's family."



The doctor turned to Aaron. "You're part of Cole's wolf pack, right?"

Aaron nodded and stood.

"I suspect we'll need your blood as well. You come with me to the ER." She turned to the nurse. "Page Dr. Reynolds and have him get the transfusion set up for Jayda. Cole's the donor. Get him prepped."

Cole's back straightened. It was childish, but it felt good that he could be the one to save Jayda.

\* \* \* \* \*

Zane felt trapped between what *felt* right and what he believed to *be* right.

Cole lay next to Jayda, *his* hand stroking her black pelt, *his* voice soothing her in her deepest need, *his* blood flowing into her veins – saving her life.

Zane was on the outside—outside their world and definitely outside of the bond they had forged months ago. What made him believe he could ever be part of what Jayda shared with Cole? *Three days*. Three days he'd known her and already he believed he loved her? Foolishness. Love at first sight and sensing one's mate were the stuff of fairy tales and girls' romantic dreams. None of that happened in real life. What he and Jayda shared had been a fleeting moment of comfort in a difficult time. She'd turned to him out of desperation and an opportunity to satisfy her curiosity about her cougar. It had been nothing more.

In the grand scheme of things, he couldn't expect Jayda to give up her bond to satisfy his need to find a mate. After all, he didn't even know her favorite color or whether she liked ice cream or beer on a hot summer night or preferred a long bath with her lover to a quick romp in the shower. He didn't know if she went to bed in the nude or wore one of her lover's t-shirts or whether she slept on her back, tucked in the arms of her lover, or whether she preferred to be spooned, her lover's hands caressing her beautiful breasts. Hell, he had no idea which side of the bed she slept on. But there

was no doubt the man lying next to her, his life's blood flowing straight to her heart, knew all of that.

All the little details that make a relationship strong and a mating bond forever— Jayda shared with Cole. She had nothing to hold her to Zane. A couple of sexual exploits did not a lifelong relationship make. He was fooling himself that there was something more to it.

Zane studied her sleeping form, finally at peace as Cole's blood flowed through her veins and healed her wounded body. Human, cougar or wolf, Jayda was beautiful in any form. He would certainly miss her smile and those coffee eyes filled with desire, staring at him as he lavished her body with attention, the smell of her hair as he kissed her neck and the taste of her tongue on his. The memories he took with him would no doubt be pulled out late at night when he yearned to have her in his arms.

In return, he'd leave a little bit of himself with her. He'd freely given her a piece of his heart the first time she'd shifted on the ridge. He'd felt his own heart swell and join them as they'd walked up the ridge with the kits. But Jayda had already found her mate. Zane understood that now. He was strong enough to admit when he'd made a mistake. And coming between her and Cole had been wrong.

There was only one solution and it was so easy to see from this perspective. Zane walked away, leaving Jayda and her true mate alone.

## Chapter Ten

“Don’t try to walk. You’re still too weak.” Cole jumped out of the truck and ran around the hood, grabbing the door before Jayda could push it open. The virus might have weakened her body, but it sure as hell hadn’t wounded her stubborn streak. He stopped her from stepping out. She had no idea how wobbly she looked.

She scowled. “Cole Takoda, you let me walk.” The words slurred over sluggish lips.

Cole scooped Jayda into his arms. “Not on your life.”

Only three days had passed since she’d nearly died on the ridge. Two days since the transfusion and barely an hour since she’d been released. Dr. Tan had wanted to keep her another day or two for observation, but Jayda had been determined to go home. Cole would have preferred to take her to his place, but she insisted he drive her here to the cabin. Whatever. As long as he could get her in bed, snuggled under a warm quilt and held tight in his arms, he didn’t give a shit where they were.

Lady’s deep barks started the moment they walked across the porch. No doubt the poor dog was beside herself with worry for Jayda. Cole braced himself as he opened the door. The dog jumped, crying and whining as she licked Jayda in greeting. He wasn’t sure which of them was happier, dog or mistress.

“You left her here alone?”

Cole set Jayda on the couch and Lady snuggled in between her legs.

“And have you read me the riot act?” Cole laughed. “She’s been spending days with Aaron at the station.” Cole walked into the kitchen area of the cabin to make a pot of coffee. “Then he took her home at night. I have no doubt he spoiled her rotten and she was living like a queen.”

Jayda scratched both sides of the dog’s neck and planted a loud kiss on her nose. “Just what my Lady-dog deserves.”

The dog barked. Cole had no doubt they understood each other perfectly.

“You talk to Zane today?”

The cougar’s name was a solid kick to his conscience and Cole had to work to shove aside his guilt. He knew it would come up, but Cole had successfully avoided the subject of the cougar shifter the entire time Jayda had been recovering in the hospital. Cole wasn’t sure if he held any culpability for Zane walking away from her. His ego had certainly been stroked as her wolf emerged and ultimately saved Jayda’s life. But he could feel Jayda’s emptiness even as she said the man’s name.

“He left the hospital the day of the transfusion.” Cole pulled the coffee filters from the cupboard and got the coffee from the freezer. “He didn’t call. Not the station. Not my cell. Not the hospital.” He set the filter in the pot and dumped coffee grounds in without measuring. Cole had no intention of drinking the concoction. The process of brewing it simply kept his hands busy and his mind occupied.

“Did you check my answering machine?” She started to get up, but Cole moved quickly and gently pushed her shoulders, settling her back down on the couch.

“Jayda, bed rest for another day.”

“Dr. Tan said some activity would be good for me. Besides...” Her eyes flicked to the answering machine, imploring him to care about the person who had walked from their lives. Cole wanted to tell Jayda to forget him. That her body had chosen *him* and he was here, loving and caring for her. Cole wanted to scream that he was enough. Wolf or cougar he could be enough for all of her. But he could see the pain in Jayda’s eyes and he didn’t know if he’d put it there or if the cougar’s cold shoulder had been the cause.

“Please,” she spoke the word so quietly, Cole wasn’t sure if he’d heard her or simply read her lips.

His feet were heavy as he walked to the machine. The light pulsed the number two. Cole’s stomach knotted. He didn’t want to hear the man’s voice let alone some

profession of love from the asshole trying to steal his woman. Cole wasn't strong enough to walk away if she chose the cougar.

He loved Jayda too much.

Which is why he pushed the button and closed his eyes—because it was what she needed.

Like the heart monitor he'd been listening to for days, the machine beeped. "Jayda dear, this is Mildred Rebant. I heard you had a terrible spell. I hope you're all right. I've put you on the prayer chain—" the machine beeped, cutting her off, and moved to the next message. Cole held his breath. "Jayda, it's Aaron. Lady is a peach and if you ever need a babysitter again, call me. And make sure Takoda waits on you hand and foot. The ba—" Cole didn't want to speculate what else Aaron would have said if the machine hadn't cut him off as well.

"Do you want anything to eat with the coffee?" Cole inhaled deeply and sauntered back into the kitchen nook, hoping Jayda would move on as well.

"What did you say to him?"

Cole stopped and turned around. She'd managed to stand, hands fisted on her hips, chest jutting forward, anger sluicing off her in waves. Through the pallor, the hint of red irritation dusted her cheeks.

"What?" he asked.

"I want to know what you said to Zane in the hospital."

Her accusation stole his breath. He didn't much care for the man, but the cougar shifter had made his own decision to walk away. "Now hold on."

"No, Cole, you hold on." Her knees wobbled for a moment and he moved to help, but she held up a hand. "Don't touch me right now." She steadied herself and looked at him accusingly. "For two days I've said nothing. I figured you two had it worked out. But I *expected* Zane to be here today. And since he's not, I can only presume *you* decided something different."

"That's hardly fair, Jayda." She was still so weak he shouldn't be doing this, but Jayda had accused him and, damn it, Cole wasn't going to take the blame for something the cougar asshole had done on his own. "I'm not going to pretend that this whole love-triangle thing doesn't have me just a little freaked out. It's not quite how I envisioned our mating bond. But it's obvious from what happened the other night that the relationship with Zane is something you need to explore. If you need me—"

"Explore? You think it's something I need to *explore*." As if the concept were too much for her, Jayda sat heavily back on the couch. "I don't need to figure anything out, Cole." Her voice softened. "I love him."

Her words sliced his heart as surely as if she'd taken a knife to his chest. He had no doubt if he looked down blood would be spreading across his t-shirt. Cole had saved her life only to lose her to another. He'd survived fist fights, bar brawls and two gunshot wounds. But this? This he had no doubt would stop his heart.

"Cole?"

He tried to focus on Jayda but could barely see through the pain. "Then I should go. Call...call..." He couldn't say the man's name. "Call Aaron if you need anything." He needed to leave, to run from this place.

But Jayda pushed to her feet and stood in front of him, blocking his escape. Her hand pressed gently to his chest. He shouldn't find it so difficult to draw a breath.

Her gaze searched his face. Jayda's stubborn expression softened as she read the pain of her words in the tremble of his chin and the hard set of his jaw. Tears of—well, he wasn't sure what they were—regret? pity? shame?—shimmered in her eyes.

"No, Cole. That's not what I meant."

Her hand, soft and warm, stroked his cheek and he wanted to lean into it, to gather her in his arms and tell her she had chosen wrong. But he held himself rigid, not wanting to believe he might have misunderstood.

"I love you. With every part of my wolf, I know you are mine."

“But...”

“But Zane is mine as well. I have never felt as complete as the night on the ridge when I was joined with both of you. It may be wrong, but I *need* you both.” Her hand dropped in defeat. “I don’t want to choose. Is it so wrong that I love you both?”

Cole hadn’t wanted to admit as much, but he’d felt it too. The connection had been complete when the three of them were joined. Lovemaking at an emotional level he’d never experienced with Jayda. It was as if nature had celebrated their joining and rejoiced in their union. “I haven’t talked to him. He left the hospital during the transfusion.”

Jayda’s chin trembled with emotion. “I need you to find him...for me.”

\* \* \* \* \*

“Yeah, I’ll be filing the report as soon as I get out of here.”

Zane watched Aaron slather butter on the thick slice of homemade toast. The detective had already been through a stack of pancakes and now dug into the scrambled eggs as if he hadn’t eaten in two days. Zane’s stomach grumbled in protest. He hadn’t felt much like eating since he’d made the decision to walk out of the hospital. “I’ve sent word through the pride that Marissa and the cougar died from a natural environmental virus and not human action,” Zane said. The diner was buzzing for the middle of the morning and Zane craned his neck around, searching for the waitress. He needed to force himself to eat something. “With your transfusion saving John Buchanan there’s no reason for anyone to question the veracity of the report. Besides, Dr. Tan corroborated my findings and sent them on to the state pathologist.”

Aaron took a large gulp of coffee, washing down the last of his eggs and toast. “Yeah, she mentioned you’d taken bacteria samples from the river.”

Zane raised a curious eyebrow, but their new friendship didn’t permit probing questions about Aaron’s love life. “When she mentioned the pathology it got me

thinking.” Zane shrugged. “With the recent flooding, it just seemed a good place to start.”

The waitress stopped over, flirted with Aaron, took Zane’s order and cleared Aaron’s dishes. It had just been luck of timing that Zane had found the detective here. Aaron had been the one to extend the invitation. It was just as well, Zane was tired of his own company. Taking the samples from the river had been a great distraction. Now that they knew the flooded otter beds had washed fecal material with the virus into the water and sickened the cougars, he had nothing left to occupy his time. Zane had wandered into the diner to keep himself from going over to Jayda’s cabin.

“Any other cougars sick?”

“One other, but Dr. Tan had wolf blood on hand to do the transfusion. We’ve warned all cougars to stay out of the river until the viral level has proven safe. We’re all very lucky Dr. Tan figured it out before anyone else died.” Zane swallowed hard. From the understanding look Aaron shot him, it was obvious he was thinking of Jayda.

“Dr. Tan told me she’s talking at your council meeting tomorrow night. To quell any suspicions that wolves might have been involved.”

“I think it’s better coming from a medical expert who can answer questions.”

“Probably should have her speak at a joint meeting of the wolf and cougar council boards as well,” Aaron said.

“Yeah.”

“She also mentioned Jayda was going home this morning.”

Zane knew that too. “Yeah.”

“What are you doing here?”

“She’s Cole’s lover,” he said through clenched teeth.

Aaron stood, counted bills off the wad of money from his pocket and dropped them on the table. “Seems to me someone with Jayda’s special talents may need more than Cole alone can give her.” He shrugged. “But what do I know? I’m just a detective.”



Zane watched him banter with the waitresses at the counter and several tables of patrons on his way out the door. Did he know something Zane had been trying to deny?

“French toast with sausage and bacon.” The cute waitress who’d taken his order set a plate of food in front of him. “He a friend of yours?”

“Yeah, it appears he is.”

“If I give you my number, will you give it to him?”

He attempted to wave her off. “No, I—”

“Thanks.” She dropped a slip of paper on the table, picked up Aaron’s empty plate and hurried away.

He laughed at the woman, the sound surprising him. Without realizing it, Aaron’s statement had given him hope. Zane poured a generous amount of maple syrup over the thick slices of bread, his stomach grumbling in anticipation. Right after breakfast he was going to swing over to Jayda’s cabin. No, maybe he should just call. Either way he was going to see how she was doing. Cutting a large chunk with his fork, he opened his mouth to savor the first bite. For the first time in days he was actually hungry.

“Mind if I sit?”

If Zane’s mouth hadn’t already been open his jaw surely would have unhinged at the sound of Cole’s voice.

“I’ve been looking for you. Aaron told me you were in here.”

Zane set the loaded fork down on the plate with careful deliberation. It amazed him how quickly the food before him had become unpalatable. “Listen, Cole—”

“A minute.” Cole slid into the chair that Aaron had just vacated. “You think this is easy for me?”

“As if I went looking to make your life hell.”

“That’s not what I said. Look, it’s pretty obvious neither of us expected things to happen the way they did. But now we’ve got to deal with this shit man-to-man. Or—”

“Or what? From my perspective you’ve come out ahead in all of this. You’ve got the woman. I don’t really need to hear you gloat. I quit. You win. Game over.”

“But *I* didn’t get her.”

Zane wasn’t the only one trying to interpret Cole’s last statement. Their voices had carried and attracted attention. Patrons hadn’t turned, but it was obvious they waited to hear Zane’s response. Smiling wanly at the waitress behind the counter, Zane motioned for another mug and more coffee. He hoped it was enough to distract and send people politely back to their own conversations.

Cole waited for the coffee to be served before leaning in. “Jayda sent me,” he said tightly. “Seems you can’t just walk away.”

“But you would have liked it if I had.”

Cole shrugged.

“So I’m supposed to talk with her? Explain. *Then* bow out? That what you want?”

“Christ, Zane,” Cole spoke through clenched teeth. “If this was about what *I* wanted, I sure as hell wouldn’t be here, telling you all this.” Shaky fingers smoothed over his ponytail and Cole inhaled. “This is about Jayda and her happiness. It appears she loves...”

The pain on Cole’s face shouldn’t have felt so good, but Zane couldn’t help but feel true hope exploding in his chest. He finished Cole’s sentence, “Jayda loves us both.”

“Yeah.”

“Can you live with that?” Zane asked cautiously.

“You love her?”

“With all my heart.”

“Then it seems none of us has a choice in this.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Jayda stood at the front window, the quilt around her shoulders doing nothing to ward off the chill. It had been over an hour since Cole had left. Perhaps she had been wrong and Zane had simply been looking for a quick romp. It hadn't felt that way, but who really understood a man? Could it be possible Zane had walked away because he didn't really want to get tangled with a polymorphic shifter and her mate? Her heart pinched at the thought. She and Zane barely knew each other. Love at first sight was the stuff of girlhood fantasies, not something to base a lifelong commitment on.

Lady's insistent bark pulled her from her musings. "What is it, girl?" Jayda knelt to scratch the dog's ears. Then she heard what had excited her, the distinctive rumble of Cole's truck coming down her driveway. In the past, the anticipation of his arrival thrilled her, this day it filled her with nervous apprehension.

But when the low roll of a second engine joined Cole's, Jayda relaxed a little. At the very least the three of them would be able to talk about what had happened on the ridge the night she got sick and how they were all going to move forward from here. Anything more would be gravy.

The men got out of their trucks, ignoring one another. Obviously they hadn't figured anything out. Jayda opened the door and welcomed Cole with a quick kiss.

"I'll make coffee," Cole said.

Zane stopped at the foot of the stairs, his questioning gaze searching her face. Her nervous mouth trembled in a smile and she stepped out on the porch to bridge the distance between them.

"I'm sorry, Jayda."

"For what?"

"For not believing my heart." He slowly moved up the steps.

"Sometimes it gets confused."

"Is your heart confused?" He moved within a breath from her.

She had to crane her neck to see the love shining in his emerald eyes. "I think I'm the only one who's understood from the beginning." Jayda couldn't pinpoint the moment she'd fallen in love with this tall blond man with the quick smile, but she had no doubt that's what was filling her heart. Inhaling, Jayda filled her lungs with the sweet scent of him, her body reacting to his proximity. "I am anything but confused."

His hand caressed her cheek. "Then you'll have to be the one to lead the way. I think the two of us are more than a little lost." The satin warmth of his lips met hers. Zane nipped her bottom lip and she opened for him. Mint and heat and something all Zane filled her mouth and swelled her heart. His arms engulfed her and Jayda melted into the strength of him. The thought of losing him had made her desperate for his touch.

"Hey, you two, I think we should bring the party inside before it gets any hotter and the neighbors across the lake pull out binoculars." Cole said from the doorway.

They all laughed, soft, low and comfortable. Cole threaded his fingers through hers and led the way into the cabin. Zane's hand warmed the small of her back.

The quiet burble of the coffee pot mixed with Lady's contented sighs, and Jayda had never felt so comfortable in her home.

"I'm not sure any of us knows how this will all settle out." Cole kissed her tenderly, his hand pushing under the quilt she no longer needed and skimming down her bare arms.

Zane pulled the quilt from her shoulders and laid it over the couch. "But we'll figure it out as we go," he said, gathering her hair and laving the nape of her neck with hot, wet kisses. "Right now, if you're up to it, we want to show you how much we love you."

She nodded. Jayda hadn't felt this much energy since they'd been together on the ridge. There was no doubt she needed them both.

Cole gingerly stripped her t-shirt over her head and Zane unhooked the back clasp of her bra. She let it fall to the floor, smiling in satisfaction at the look of lust in Cole's

eyes. "Jesus, Jayda. I will never tire of your body." Cole undid the button of her jeans and shimmied them down her hips.

Zane's hands slid around her belly, the smooth heat of his chest pressed to her back. She wasn't sure when he'd removed his shirt, but when his hands cupped her weighty breasts and rolled the steeped nipples in his fingers, that detail seemed unimportant. Cole went down on his knees, urging her to step out of her pants as Zane helped her balance on shaky knees.

Cole's hand soothed over her calf, his teeth taking small love-bites at her thighs. Zane continued to tease her breasts, each pull of her nipple shooting tiny sparks of pleasure over her nerves. Jayda was breathless as their hands and mouths moved with a gentle passion that fanned the tiny flickers into molten fire that shot through her veins. Closing her eyes, Jayda let the sheer joy of their touch envelope her in warmth.

"Sit on the couch, Jayda. I want to bury my face in your juices and taste your sweet honey on my tongue." Cole's husky voice rasped over her nerves, sending a tingle down her spine. She backed up, falling onto the soft cotton of the quilt. Cole hooked his thumbs under the edge of her panties and with excruciating leisure, lowered them down her legs. His kisses followed the trail.

Zane moved behind the sofa, bending over her, his hungry mouth covering hers. His hands massaged the fleshy mounds of her breasts as if he couldn't get enough of them.

Not patient enough to wait for Cole, Jayda's hands pushed through the narrow line of curls at the apex of her thighs, plunging into her wet heat. The pad of her finger spread her juices over her clitoris, circling the tingling bundle of nerves, bringing her to the edge of release.

"Patience, sweet Jayda." Zane grasped her forearm, urging her hand toward his mouth. He sucked her fingers in, lavishing attention on each one and she groaned as the need tightened her womb. "You taste like heaven." Finished with her fingers, Zane

stepped to the side of the couch, his mouth taking possession of her nipple. He sucked it hard into his mouth, his teeth grazing the tender flesh.

When Cole's tongue licked the length of her slit, separating the folds, it was nearly her undoing and Jayda bucked up, her body begging for more contact from both men. Cole obliged by pulling her clit into his mouth, masterfully flicking it with his tongue. Each touch shuddered through her, the ecstasy spreading out from her breasts and her pussy to warm her heavy limbs.

Overwhelmed by the sensations flowing over her, fearing she would float away with the rising tide of sensation, her hands reached for something solid. One fist in Cole's hair, the bob of his head as he sucked and lapped, added to her euphoria. The other reached for Zane. Bent over as he was, his erection was at the perfect height and she ran her hand down the veiny shaft, wrapping her hand around his balls.

"Do you know how fucking hot it is watching Cole eat you, Jayda?" Zane whispered before kissing her deeply.

She could only imagine how they looked, the two men, hands and mouths on her naked body. The sublime pressure built. Cole pushed a thick finger then another into her aching channel. She pulsed her hips with the in-and-out rhythm of his fingers. The low growl of her beasts filled the air and she heard her lovers' pants join the chorus.

The skillful come-hither motion of Cole's fingers in her pussy sent rippling jolts of pleasure to her core, pressing her higher until her muscles pulled taut. Zane sensed the imminent release. His mouth and hands tortured her nipples, his mouth making love to hers. The sensation zinged straight to her clitoris, adding a deeper dimension to Cole's talented ministrations. She closed her eyes tight, inhaling deeply, filling her nose with the scent of her juices and Zane's pre-cum on her hand. Riding the pleasure, Jayda's body bowed. And when one of Cole's fingers pushed into her ass, Jayda burst into a thousand shards of heaven. Her body bucked and writhed, riding the crest, enjoying the pleasure Cole and Zane had offered without reservation.

She was exhausted from the effort and her hands dropped to her side. Zane and Cole slowed their movements, gathering the bits of her and gently putting her back together.

“Wow,” was all she said.

“I’ve never had a ringside seat to an orgasm.” Zane bent and kissed her forehead. “That was amazing.”

“You’re not going to pass out on us, are you?” Cole laughed, coming up between her legs to kiss her breasts.

“That hardly seems fair considering...” Jayda reached between her legs and cupped Cole’s rock-hard penis through his jeans and slid her hand down Zane’s sizeable erection. “I think there’s more fun to be had.” She gave each of them a gentle squeeze. Sharp whistles of air emanated from both men. Jayda felt wanton with power. “How’d you manage to stay dressed, Takoda?”

He jumped to his feet, kicked off his loafers and shucked out of his jeans. It didn’t surprise her that he wore nothing beneath. She knew he went without socks and underwear—less clothing to deal with when he shifted.

The sight of Zane and Cole so stiff and ready, kicked up her pulse. She thought the orgasm had taken all her reserves until her lovers stood naked before her. They weren’t pressuring her and she understood the next move was hers. Jayda smiled knowingly at Cole. There wasn’t anything they hadn’t shared, but she had yet to taste Zane.

Coming up on her knees, she leaned over the low arm of the couch. With a smile full of mischief and knowing, Jayda flicked her tongue across the mushroom tip of Zane’s cock. It bounced against his belly.

“Jayda, you don’t have—”

“No, but I *want* to.” Her fingers tickled over his fuzzy sac. She glanced over her shoulder at Cole. “You can either watch or,” she looked at her ass, “or think of some other way to entertain yourself.” Under the circumstances, Cole wasn’t assuming anything and Jayda understood he wouldn’t make love to her without her consent.

Well, she'd granted it. She only hoped he would take her up on her offer. Already her pussy was twitching with need.

How could they do that? How could these two men make her want so? An hour ago she wouldn't have believed she had enough strength to fry an egg. Now her body quivered with need and she felt she could go on all day.

Bending, she sucked the tip of Zane's cock into her mouth, his guttural groan guiding her to his most sensitive spots.

Cole got on the couch behind her. She spread her legs and bowed her back, exposing her quivering cunt to him. He spread her ass cheeks with his palms and his thumbs flirted with her slit.

Jayda guided Zane's cock to her mouth, her tongue circling the tip and pressing into the slit. His hands fisted in her hair. Not to insist but to guide. She sucked him into her mouth, wetting the silky skin before pulling back. She repeated, each time taking him deeper in her mouth.

Cole pressed the tip of his penis against her waiting pussy and it was all she could do not to impale herself on the length of him. She needed to feel full. To stretch from his assault and feel his thighs quiver against hers. When at last he pushed most of the way into her, she groaned around the steel of Zane's cock and he canted his hips, burying himself deeper. Relaxing her throat, she swallowed Zane's cock to the hilt, the soft fuzz of his pubic hair tickling her cheeks, the musky taste of him on her tongue.

"Jesus, Jayda, that feels fucking wonderful." Zane's grip tightened in her hair and added to the incredible sensations zinging over her muscles and nerves. She pulled her head away, sucking with her mouth as she did. Her tongue continued to flit and tease the underside of his cock as she swallowed him down and pulled back.

Cole found his timing as well. As his cock pounded into her, his arms wrapped around her hips, his fingers teasing her clit.

Skin slapped against skin and the slurping noises of fucking and sucking filled the tiny cabin. With each rocking motion her sensitive nipples rubbed the fabric of the quilt.



The sensations building within her were incredible, but it was the emotion of sharing herself so freely with these two men that nearly brought her to tears.

She felt Zane tense, heard the quickening of his breath. Cole's nails dug into the lush curves of her hips, the speed of his thrusts increasing. Pleasure radiated out from her pussy, tingling up her spine and zinging to her fingers. When she thought she couldn't hold on, Zane's feral cry of release rent the stillness, his seed spilling over her tongue and she greedily drank his essence.

Like a domino effect, her release quaked through her. Pussy muscles quivered, liquid desired coating Cole's cock. He came hard and fast, slamming himself against Jayda's thighs, her name ripped from his throat on gasps of pleasure and she knew she would never be the same again.

\* \* \* \* \*

The moon had risen an hour ago. Its bony color not the harbinger of death the burnt surface had predicted so accurately less than a week ago. Jayda sat on the porch swing wrapped in her grandmother's quilt, Lady snoring gently beside her.

It's how she'd left Cole and Zane. Each battle-weary warrior rested in her bed. There was no doubt they would need a bigger bed. Her full-sized one barely fit them all when they were spooned one against another. They had had to do some interesting maneuvering as they'd explored each other throughout the afternoon and into the evening. Her lovers would never partner with one another, but she didn't mind that. The fact that they had come to enough of an understanding to see how much they loved her and how much she loved each of them. It would have to be enough for now.

"Hey, the bed got cold without you." Cole stretched and yawned as the door snapped shut behind his naked body.

She opened the quilt and Cole snuggled in next to her, gathering Jayda in his arms.

"Zane still sleeping?" she asked.

He kissed her cheek. "Yeah, which is why I'm not. We're going to have to do something about that man's snoring."

"I do *not* snore." Zane shuffled out of the cabin and came up behind her.

She looked up at him and he bent to kiss her. His hand smoothed over her hair and rested comfortably on her shoulder.

They sat in contented silence, staring at the gentle sway of the trees and the shimmer of the moon playing on the lake.

"It's not going to be easy," she said quietly.

"Nothing worth fighting for ever is." Cole absently traced circles on her thigh.

"It's only through the difficulties we endure in our travels that we can appreciate the true joy of the gifts presented along the way."

Cole and Jayda looked up at Zane.

"What? A cougar can't be profound?"

They all laughed, a harmonious sound that blended perfectly with the world around them. Like the waning moon above, Jayda had no doubt their problems would decrease each day even as their love rose higher and brightened everything in its path.

## **About the Author**

Nina Pierce lives in northern Maine with her soul mate of thirty-two years, her three adult children and a menagerie of pets. She is a multi-published author of erotic suspense stories. Her passion for bringing out the sensuality in her characters continues to drive her to find new and exciting stories to bring to readers.

The author welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at [www.ellorascave.com](http://www.ellorascave.com).

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