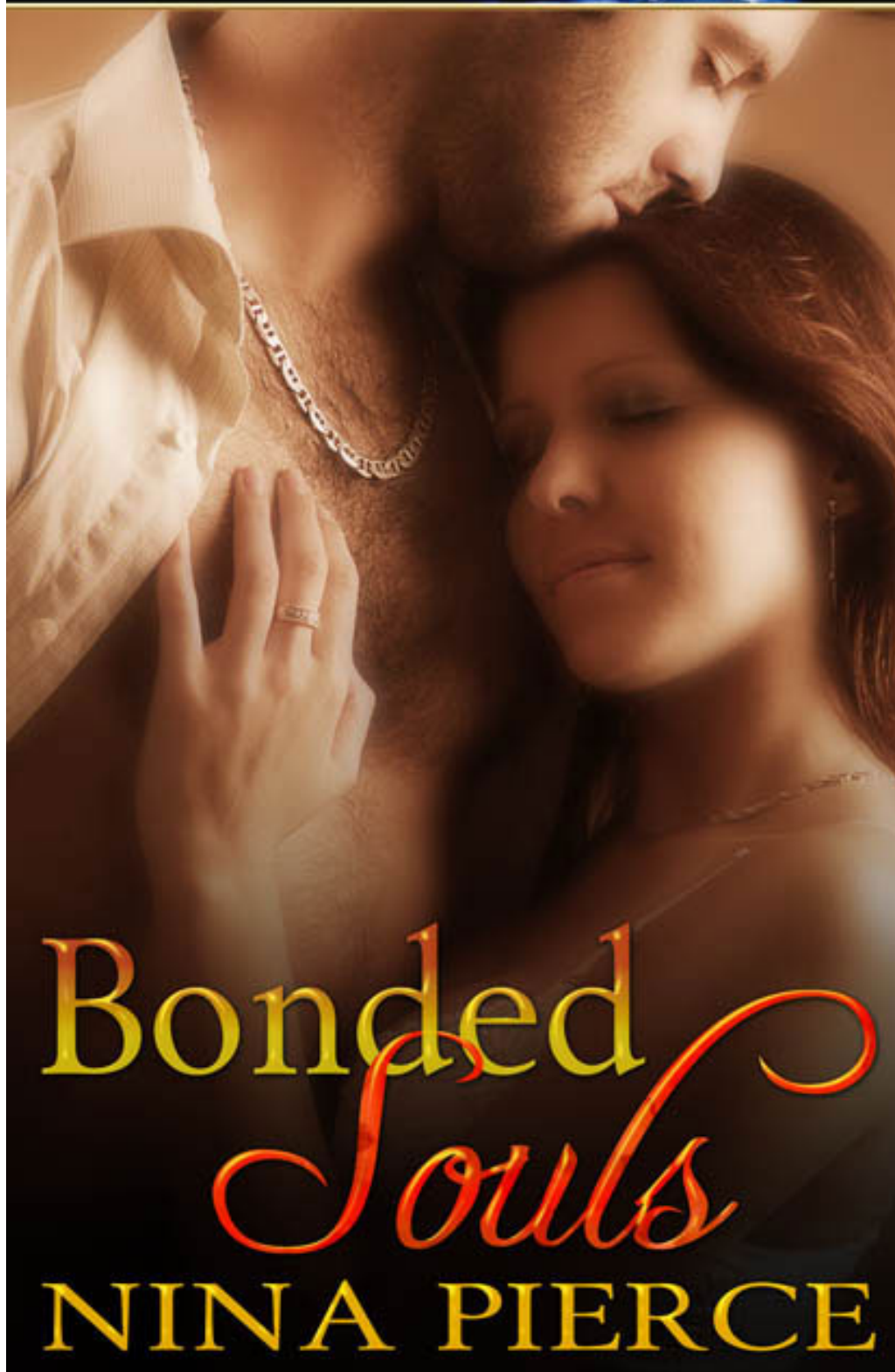


ELLORA'S CAVE TWILIGHT



Bonded
Souls
NINA PIERCE

Bonded Souls

Nina Pierce

Standalone prequel to the Shifting Bonds series.

After finding out her boyfriend is married, veterinarian Jayda Kynslan decides to give up men. She has every intention of planting her feet firmly on the path of celibacy—right after one more night of shameless sex with a stranger. A vacation in Montana would certainly ease the pain of betrayal and offer her anonymity.

Police chief and wolf shifter council leader Cole Takoda needs a break from investigating the murders of shifters plaguing his town. When a beautiful stranger seduces him at the local tavern, it's more than a tryst...it's uncontrollable desire. And Cole can't stand it. To top it off, their quickie becomes a revelation of shifter secrets and unfulfilled prophecies.

The discovery of a dead man in the forest behind Jayda's rented cabin thrusts her into a foreign world of animal shifters and murder, and the man she thought was only a casual diversion seems to be the only one willing to hear her side of the story. Jayda's just not sure if Cole's going to take her to jail—or his bed.

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Bonded Souls

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BONDED SOULS

Nina Pierce

Dedication

To my husband, who's taught me the true meaning of soul mate and best friend.

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Chapter One

Jayda Kynslan sauntered into the Whip and Bull Tavern, wanting only two things—a cold beer and a hot cock. The first, she hoped would ease the heavy ache in her chest. The second would be attached to a good-looking man who would replace the images of the jackass who'd broken her heart. This whole road trip to the high mountains of Montana had been a knee-jerk reaction to the asshole's selfishness. Jayda shook her head, clearing away thoughts of the friggin' pig of a manwhore. She didn't want to go there tonight. This night was about getting a little buzz and a whole lot of sex.

Her first objective was only as far away as the bar across the room. But weaving her way through the handful of empty tables, her red cowboy boots tapping across the peanut shells strewn on the marred floor, Jayda realized finding someone to fulfill the second thing on her wish list wasn't going to be as easy. She'd picked a bad night to go cruising for male flesh in a nearly empty bar that seemed to cater to the college crowd.

Plunking her voluptuous ass on one of the padded barstools, Jayda lifted her hand to the bartender. Some might consider Jayda overweight, but she liked to think of her size-sixteen frame as curving in all the right places. Why men would go for the little waifs with nothing to hold on to, like the petite blonde behind the bar, was beyond her understanding.

"A long neck. Something domestic. I'm not picky," she said to the female bartender, who looked only slightly less bored than Jayda felt at the moment. Except for football season, which had already passed, she figured Monday nights, even in a cowboy town like Lonesome Fork, weren't really big tavern nights for most people.

The bartender's ponytail swayed as she set down the bottle, offered a glass, which Jayda refused, and slid over the bowl of peanuts. In a hurry to begin her vacation, Jayda hadn't bothered to eat lunch before leaving the vet clinic. Anticipation had kept her

driving through the Montana mountains and now her stomach rumbled, reminding her she hadn't taken time to fix herself dinner before leaving the cabin either. Grabbing a handful of nuts, she broke open the shells and popped them in her mouth. She scanned the reflections of the patrons in the mirror behind the bar, searching for possible targets.

Tonight, Jayda decided, would be her last go-around with the opposite sex—unadulterated, uncomplicated coitus with a complete stranger. A nice memory to hold on to in the quiet of the night when she was alone in her bed. Jayda didn't want to need a man. She was a successful veterinarian in a big practice. It should be enough.

After tonight, she'd spend the week in solitude at her friend's mountain cabin, mending her shredded heart and planting her feet solidly on the path to celibacy. Obviously, two weeks drowning her sorrows with tears hadn't helped. Men, Jayda had come to believe, were nothing but scumbags of trouble on the garbage heap of misery. The sooner she cleared them from her mind, the happier she'd be.

Jayda nervously toyed with the bangle bracelet at her wrist. She'd chosen this evening's outfit to accent her best features. Her ass was swaddled in her favorite pair of worn jeans. A white cashmere sweater displayed her plentiful cleavage quite nicely. The clothes definitely announced, "I'm yours for the taking."

She hadn't wanted to mess with the corkscrew curls of her hair while traveling the ninety minutes from her condo in Blackfish Springs to the cabin in Lonesome Fork, so Jayda had pulled the whole mess into a long French braid. The thick tail of black curled over her shoulder and draped invitingly over her left breast.

Unable to make out faces in the murky light of the tavern, Jayda gave up on her sly inspection of the clientele and kicked the stool a half turn. Leaning one elbow on the padded edge of the bar, she casually sipped her beer, assessing her chances of getting laid.

A rowdy group of young men, barely old enough to drink, sat at a booth, flicking a paper football between them. A few others spilled onto the tables next to them. Most likely students from the state university at the base of Coppertip Mountain. Though

their youthful stamina would be a definite plus, Jayda thought a more experienced man would leave her with more *satisfying* memories. A sigh puffed out her cheeks, and she turned the stool back to the bartender.

“Quiet tonight,” she said.

“Give it another thirty minutes.” The bartender flicked her head toward the door leading to the back room of the tavern. “Monday’s the mechanical bull competition. They’ll start filtering in here soon enough.” The woman swirled a couple of beer steins in some homemade rig for cleaning glasses and set them next to the sink. “Not from around here?” She turned the statement into a question.

“That obvious?” Jayda casually shelled a few peanuts, adding the husks to her neat pile on the bar. “I grew up in New York City, but now I’m living in Blackfish Springs. Even after four years in the foothills of Montana, I can’t seem to lose the city accent.”

The bartender smiled. “Lonesome Fork’s a small town. I know most everyone coming and going. Accent’s not that obvious.” The bartender used her cloth to wipe the bar and push the peanut shells to the floor. “Part of the Whip and Bull’s ambiance,” she said, almost as an apology. “What brings you to Lonesome Fork?”

“A man.” Jayda immediately regretted the words. It didn’t help that the cobalt eyes staring back at her grew wide with surprise. Jayda’s hand shook with her head, wiping away the confusion. “That came out wrong.” She took a long pull of her beer, trying to wash down the embarrassment. “What I mean is...I’m not looking for a man. I just broke up with my boyfriend and I’ve come here for a vacation to get my head on straight.”

Tension eased out of the bartender’s shoulders and she smiled and nodded. “I’m Becca.” She wiped her hand down the small apron around her waist before extending it to Jayda. “Nice to meet you...”

Jayda shook her hand, relaxing into the female kinship of understanding. “Jayda. Jayda Kynslan.”

“Well, Jayda, Jayda Kynslan, welcome to Lonesome Fork.” Becca leaned in conspiratorially. “I guarantee the fresh mountain air smells a hell of a lot better than testosterone.”

* * * * *

Cole Takoda shoved the Saab into park, wondering again why Aaron had felt the need to call him. It was one of his few nights off, and he’d wanted nothing more than to settle in with the most recent Clive Cussler novel and some classical guitar music. But Aaron’s curious phone call had made that impossible. He’d left the quiet of his log house, grabbed his leather jacket, and hightailed it to the Whip and Bull all because his head detective had *strongly* recommended he stop over for a beer.

Cole’s cheeks puffed with the frustration heating his blood. With each step through the dirt parking lot, weaving around the old trucks and rusted beaters of the college crowd, the apprehension squeezing Cole’s gut drew tighter. Two nights before the full moon and something certainly seemed a little — *off*.

It probably had more to do with the tone of Aaron’s call than something riding on the chill air of March ruffling through his hair. He could smell the snow. Forecasters claimed to have a clue, but they’d said clear skies and warm temperatures would brighten everyone’s spring for the next couple of days. He laughed. Obviously none of them had Cole’s nose or they’d know a real storm was brewing.

Pushing through the battered door of the tavern, Cole was immediately assaulted by the scent of stale beer, wolf shifters and bodies in heat. Okay, sometimes his acute sense of smell wasn’t an asset. He kept his head down, not wanting anyone from his pack to stop him for a lengthy conversation about legends. With the upcoming full moon, it seemed that was all anyone wanted to discuss these days.

He took a moment to acknowledge Becca behind the bar and signaled for a beer. The woman was a permanent fixture here. But so were the college kids and regulars he was hoping to avoid.

Cole had every intention of running in, helping Aaron control whatever fire was currently burning, and heading back home to enjoy the rest of his evening. Quiet nights at home were rare for the chief of police.

Not that it appeared anything out of the ordinary was happening at the moment. But then again, it was only ten o'clock. Trouble never started at the Bull until well after midnight when too much booze mixed with shifter testosterone and feminine allure.

"Hey, Cole." Aaron Wallace stepped away from the crowd gathered around the mechanical bull and strolled up to him.

Cole didn't read anything in his best friend's casual posture or the nonchalant way he drank his beer. Aaron was as mellow as a well-aged cognac and just as smooth under pressure. But the fact he'd called Cole at all meant something significant was going down.

"I'm here. What's up?"

"Sorry to pull you from your exciting night." Aaron cocked a brow with his shit-eating grin.

Aaron's teasing of Cole's austere ways didn't bother him. The two of them had gone through the academy together, competing for grades and status. But Cole had worked his way to chief of police while Aaron had chosen to take the detective's exam.

"Anyway, I thought you'd like to check things out. You know, keep your finger on the pulse as they say." Aaron lifted his chin toward the crowd. "Check out the woman in the white sweater. Front row. Long braid."

Aaron wasn't prone to getting worked up about anything if it didn't include evidence to a crime, and even then one had to really be looking for it. The slight tick in the man's jaw told Cole something more than a great ass and pretty eyes had launched Aaron into investigative mode.

"I've never seen her around here—" Aaron stopped abruptly as the waitress delivered a beer. Cole slipped her money for the long neck, along with a generous tip. Though Aaron's head motioned casually toward a corner table, there was nothing

relaxed about the way he steered them away from the raucous crowd. The man obviously didn't want others inadvertently overhearing their conversation.

Cole swallowed his confusion with a few gulps of beer before settling at the battle-scarred table next to Aaron. "Why the hell are your panties in a twist? Strangers pass through Lonesome Fork all the time."

"She's more than a random stranger." Aaron shrugged. "She's a wolf shifter. But there's something else."

"What the hell else is there?"

Aaron leaned back in his chair. "It's no skin off my nose and I don't really give a shit if you believe me. I just thought you'd like to know something may be brewing and this woman could be a catalyst." Aaron shrugged and slugged down the last of his beer. "I stopped by to grab a couple of brews, watch a little of the bull riding competition and maybe offer Becca a ride home. Then *she* came in. Got everyone's attention without even trying. She's got them all riled up. You'll see."

Cole shot a look over his shoulder at the men and women gathered around the foolish bucking machine that passed for entertainment near the end of a long winter.

"I mean she's good-looking and all, but even the women are sniffing around." Aaron lifted his empty beer bottle to signal the waitress. "And with the timing, I'm just wondering..." He let the thought hang out there with the confusion roiling between them.

"Wondering what exactly, Aaron?"

"People are talking, that's all." Again he let the words drag slowly over his tongue. "We've both heard the rumblings going through the town. About you know."

"No, Aaron, I don't know." The impatience clogging his throat made the words come out hard and clipped.

"Sure you do." Aaron leaned forward. "Maybe she's here because she's the one. Timing's right."

Cole laughed out loud and slapped Aaron on the shoulder. His best friend had definitely fallen into a deep pool of crazy. "Right, and I'm the next president of the United States. What is it about the blue moon that gets everyone's heads thinking of legends and folktales? I didn't peg you for someone who believed in that sort of thing."

"Whatever. Just thought you'd like to check it out." Aaron leaned back and put his hands behind his head. "The second full moon this month is only two days away. I can't say it doesn't have everyone on edge as always, but you and I both know that's not why I called you." Aaron paid for the beer the waitress delivered and waited until she was out of earshot before speaking again. "Jesus, Cole. I'm not one of the village idiots seeking the Holy Grail. You know I believe only half of what I read and even less of what I hear."

Again Aaron leaned in close and lowered his voice. "But I'm telling you, this stranger's got something up her sleeve, and I for one would sure like to know what it is." Motioning toward the crowd with his head, he fell back against the chair, his brows knotted in a deep furrow. "You get one whiff of her and tell me you don't feel it."

Chapter Two

Jayda lifted her knees high, hoping the pointy toes of the unfamiliar cowboy boots would clear the thick padding around the mechanical bull. Her head buzzed pleasantly from the two beers, and she smiled at the young man offering her a hand up onto the machine. Maybe he'd be the one to take her home. It seemed, from the crowd gathered in the back room, she might have her pick of a few guys tonight. Heck, maybe she'd do them all one at a time or, perhaps, all together. Jayda giggled at her absurd fantasy as she threw her leg over the rounded seat of the bull. This was her second attempt at the bucking monstrosity.

"You all set, honey?" The older cowboy with the kind eyes looked at her from the control panel.

She hooked her left hand under the rope tied around the front section of the mechanical bull. The oversized glove made it more difficult to anchor herself properly. Someone had shown her how to grip it on her first ride, but she'd slipped off almost immediately after the operator had started it bucking. Jayda had been watching, studying, sipping beers and enjoying the rowdy crowd for nearly an hour before she'd been coaxed to try it again. Her competitive nature had her mounting the apparatus with determined focus.

Jayda waved at the man standing behind the switches. "Don't go easy on me because I'm a woman, Slim," she said. "I'm ready for this beast."

The crowd cheered and whistled, calling out her name with encouragement as the mechanical bull rocked back then forward. She gripped tighter with her left hand, throwing her right arm high in the air, using it as counterbalance. When the monster rotated, this time she was ready and squeezed tighter with her thighs. The crowd

continued to clap and whistle through their fingers as she held on, determined not to be thrown this time.

Boobs bouncing, braid flapping wildly behind her, Jayda was giddy with joy. This was exactly what she needed. A chance to let loose, have some fun and be fawned over by attentive males. Her body pulsed with the bull, every fiber of her being acutely aware of the eyes on her.

Even as the machine bucked and rotated, Jayda realized she didn't want one of the college kids who'd been hitting on her. A more mature man who already knew all the hot spots on a woman's anatomy was more her speed. Perhaps the blond cowboy with the chocolate eyes who'd been staring at her all night. Yeah, she'd find him and ride him until he begged for mercy. Between that thought and the soft leather of the bull rubbing between her legs, Jayda's pussy throbbed. *Damn, she needed a man.*

"You had enough, sweet thang?" Slim yelled into the microphone to be heard over the chanting crowd.

"Jay-da. Jay-da. Jay-da."

She laughed as she circled her arm over her head, indicating she was done with the ride. Even knowing Slim had slowed the speed as he did with all the women, it pleased her that she'd managed to hang on and not be thrown unceremoniously to a heap on the thick padding around the bull.

"Come on, sugar, one more time for all of us."

Jayda shook her head and blew a kiss at Slim. Swinging her leg over the bull, she slipped onto the thick pads and winked at the crowd. She hadn't known anonymity could bring out this flirty side of her, but she was enjoying the freedom. Now all she had to do was savor another beer, pick a man, fuck him senseless and walk into the obscurity of the night. No one would remember her.

Jayda focused on getting over the padding without falling on her face and didn't see the person who belonged to the large hands wrapping around her waist. With one

swift movement, he lifted her off the soft pad and deposited her on the floor in front of him.

"Why, thank you, swe..." The rest of the sentence caught in her throat. Her eyes traveled up the buttons of the chambray shirt, taking in the soft spray of dark hair dusting the exposed copper flesh just below his collarbone. She swallowed as he did, his Adam's apple bouncing in her line of vision. Continuing the slow, visual climb, she made note of the strong jaw line, accented by the shadowed hint of a day's beard, and the full lips curving into a breathtaking smile.

Neither spoke, but the humor he found in her frank appraisal danced about in the depths of his mesmerizing eyes. The color of a frozen lake, they sparked a brilliant shade of periwinkle. The man was less than a foot taller than her five and half feet, but at the moment, standing so close, with his heat and scent teasing her nostrils, he seemed to fill the room.

Time and place warped as his smell invaded her keen senses. Not the fresh scent of his cologne, which was pleasant enough, but the elemental essence of him. Jayda filled her lungs, allowing it to percolate into her bloodstream, infusing her with heat, need and an odd sense of knowing. She would like to have basked in the security of it, but the deep timbre of his voice broke through the spell.

She smiled in her confusion.

"I said, 'nice ride'." His voice, thick and rich as molasses, ran slowly down her spine, trailing gooseflesh in its wake, rushing heat to her cheeks. Her head bobbed, acknowledging the compliment, but nothing came from her parted lips. Jayda reminded herself to close her mouth, her teeth snapping with the motion. She was an idiot.

Just as quickly as he'd grabbed her, he turned and strode across the thick padding in his boots. Mounting the mechanical bull in one fluid motion, he wrapped the rope in his gloved hand and smiled at Slim. The crowd cheered and focused on the hunk of a man riding the apparatus like a pro. Not that Jayda had seen many rodeos, but from the

lithe movement of his arms and thick muscles of his thighs, it was apparent he knew what he was doing.

Feeling like a freshman cheerleader crushing on the senior quarterback, Jayda melted into the crowd. Instead of impressing the man, she'd made a complete ass of herself.

* * * * *

Cole hated this flipping contraption. It was meant for men to prove their prowess and women to showcase their wares. Neither of those categories fit him. Mingling in the growing crowd of onlookers had been the only way he could get close to the woman. He'd helped her off the thick padding, intending only to buy her a beer. When his nose had filled with her scent, he'd been overwhelmed by the aroma ricocheting over his synapses. Too tongue-tied to say much of anything, he'd walked up to the mechanical bull, not knowing what else to do with himself. Now, as the mechanical bull bucked and twisted, throwing his body in every direction, it required him to focus on anything but the raven-haired beauty who'd stolen the air from his lungs.

Aaron was right. The woman was emitting some pheromone that had everyone spellbound. They definitely needed to keep an eye on her. With nearly every male wolf shifter in the place, and half the females, salivating as she'd rocked seductively on the monstrosity, there was no doubt the woman had come here for a reason.

Cole didn't want to admit that he too had felt her magnetism the moment he'd seen her riding. He hadn't been able to stop himself when he'd pushed through the crowd, intent on getting a nose full of her scent. What he discovered floored him. It was just as Aaron described, wolf, with something else riding on her earthy aroma. She smelled like heaven—a refreshing rain on a hot summer day and the sweet smell of hay grass baking in the sun all rolled together.

But something more wafted through him with her scent, a sense of oneness he'd never experienced. His mother had told him from a young age that he'd know when he

met his life mate, but he'd never believed it to be true. And though Aaron hadn't mentioned that particular sensation, Cole suspected everyone in the vicinity was feeling it.

Working to ignore the growing knowledge that this woman was somehow wrapped around his future, Cole didn't anticipate the bucking machine to turn one way as he twisted in the opposite direction. With his mind focused on the beautiful stranger, he was unable to recover fast enough and found himself facedown on the padding. Obviously, this newcomer was wreaking havoc on his equilibrium.

Brushing himself off, Cole stomped over the cushion. He didn't like being the current source of the tavern's merriment. He grabbed the beer Aaron held out to him, grateful a woman had agreed to take the next turn. At least it would keep eyes focused away from him and the task at hand.

Like a kid watching cartoons, Aaron couldn't hide his amusement. "So, what do you—"

Cole waved his best friend off on an oath that came out very close to a growl. The irritation over Aaron's smug look of satisfaction was a small prick compared to the current pain in his ass Cole was about to confront. But confront the stranger he would. How she'd come to be in his corner of the world and what she intended to do while she was here were among the answers he'd get out of her. Hopefully, she hadn't left while he'd pulled himself together.

Few people were in the front room. A shifter couple snuggled in the corner. A gaggle of rowdy females sipped fruity concoctions at one of the tables, and the black-haired goddess nursed a beer at the bar. A couple of collegiate types were standing, working up the nerve to hit on her. When they caught the warning look Cole shot their way, they slid back to the table where they'd been sitting and redirected their attention to the college women giggling over sophomoric girl talk.

Cole didn't usually find college kids annoying; as a matter of fact, most of the time he enjoyed the enthusiastic way they approached life, but tonight, everyone and

everything seemed to be skating on the razor edge of his patience. He wasn't sure how his quiet night had taken such a wrong turn and become this chaotic knot of confusion, but he'd sure like to get it back on course. Sitting one stool down from the stranger, he lifted the bottle he'd drained to cool the irritation burning up his throat and silently ordered another.

His job would be difficult enough this week without some beautiful newcomer getting in his way. Blue moons, the second full moon in a month, happened only every two or three years. For humans, their arrival was just an intriguing celestial anomaly. But in the shifter community, the event was cause for great speculation.

Wolf shifters from elementary school to the university level would be playing pranks on one another. Adults would be looking for signs of legends come to life in the snow or on tree trunks or riding on the spring winds. The fact the blue moon would arrive in less than two days had everyone in his pack buzzing and his nerves pulled more than a little taut.

"You come here often?" Cole couldn't believe the lame line had fallen from his lips. Even Becca rolled her eyes as she set a fresh beer in front of him and took the empty.

But the woman didn't seem to notice his ineptness.

"No, I'm vacationing up on Rustler's Ridge at a friend's camp." She neither looked at him nor stopped peeling the label from her beer bottle.

He hated when women toyed with men. She'd obviously been flirting with the patrons and skulking for a man not fifteen minutes ago but now seemed uninterested. How women could turn their seductiveness on and off like flipping a switch was feminine witchery he'd never understand.

"You have a lovely town," she said with a shy smile curving her full lips.

"Thanks." Cole inhaled deeply, catching her scent, trying to understand the enigma. Once again the reality of what filled his nostrils scared the living shit out of him. Over the years, as friends in his pack had claimed women and had their hearts broken when they left them for another or became disillusioned with the binding, it had solidified

Cole's resolve never to tie himself to one female. But basking in the heat of this woman, Cole had no idea why he'd made that promise.

It took all his willpower not to pull her into his arms and ravage her right here in the bar. But he must be mistaken. The woman's magnetism had nothing to do with mates and everything to do with Aaron's overzealous imagination. It was something she was doing, and of course Cole's own nonexistent sex life. He was definitely assessing the situation with the wrong head.

"I've only been in Montana for a few years, but it's all so beautiful." Her soft voice caressed his skin.

"I've lived here all my life, but I have to agree." It appeared she was completely oblivious to her effect on him, or—and this was probably more the truth—she *did* know and had some ulterior motive.

Cole stole another look around the bar, sure he'd find someone watching covertly from some shadowed corner. Sending spies into his territory at a critical time like this would be exactly something the council would do. He hated having his authority questioned. But no one, except the woman, seemed out of place.

Jayda's heart jumped wildly in her chest. The air between her and the hunk vibrated with her embarrassment. She thought she'd made a fool of herself with the tongue-knotting incident in the other room. She'd abandoned the idea of finding a guy—and salvaging her pride—when she'd run from the crowd. But here this guy was, a drool-worthy cowboy fantasy in the flesh, talking with her. He'd probably lost some bet when he'd fallen off the bull. Hell if she cared.

"I'm Cole Takoda," he said, sliding onto the stool next to her, his hand a breath away from her breast.

"Jayda..." She paused, thinking it best not to offer her last name to a stranger. Leaning back, she filled his hand with hers. The calluses added dimension to his skin, and the heat from the wide expanse of his palm wrapped around hers, radiated up her

arm. He held her hand and gaze a beat longer than necessary. "I'm just passing through, Cole Takoda. I saw the bar and thought I'd stop in for a beer." *And a good man*, she thought, but decided it wasn't prudent to add that.

He smiled, the gesture lighting his face and sparkling in the icy depths of his eyes. Which, despite the color, weren't cold at all but warm and inviting. "Well, then I'm glad I came over to talk with you. Monday nights don't usually attract anyone but the college crowd." He looked at their joined hands with confusion and finally released her fingers.

"But you're here." Her tongue found the most inopportune moment to work.

He laughed as his fingers raked through the curls at his temples, brushing the long strands of midnight black hair away from his face. "Yeah, well, I didn't have much going on. I just came out because..."

He kept talking, but Jayda had stopped listening. She stared at his full mouth forming words, the flick of his tongue as he paused and wet his lips. The man was gorgeous. What was she waiting for? She'd come here with the sole purpose of hooking up and having sex. Now Apollo himself was sitting next to her, making small talk. She realized he'd stopped talking, his beer suspended on its way to his mouth, his head quirked in a half cock of questioning.

"Okay." Jayda drained her beer and stood.

His hand shot out and caught her forearm. "Okay?"

Leaning in, her lips brushing the shell of his ear, Jayda dropped her voice low. "Okay, I'd like that. You don't have to sweet-talk me into bed...I'll go willingly." She stood and winked. "But if you're not interested..." Jayda didn't want to finish the sentence. Every cell in her body hoped he wouldn't turn her down.

"No, I...I mean...yeah...but no, I..." He swiveled the barstool so his thigh pressed against hers, her eyes directly challenging the confusion in his.

She liked that she'd thrown him. "Cole, it's not that hard to figure out." Feeling more brazen, she laid her cheek against his and lowered her voice. "I'm not looking for

Mr. Right, just Mr. Right *Now*. You don't need to call me. Hell, honey, you don't even have to remember my name." She stood up and laughed. "I'm going out to my truck. Follow or don't. The choice is yours."

Jayda focused on her feet. Her shaky knees made it hard to wind her way through the tables. Never had she been so audacious and daring. Another cheer rose from the backroom as she passed, and Jayda had a hard time not flinching at the sudden noise. She refused to turn around to see if Cole was following, fearful that he was, nervous that he wasn't.

Inhaling courage on a shaky breath, Jayda grabbed her down parka from the coat rack next to the door. With trembling fingers, she zipped the waist-length jacket and pulled her wool cap low on her head, heading out the door.

Chapter Three

Cole stared at Jayda's ass as she sashayed her way to the door. Damn, she had him hot under the collar. He'd wanted to follow her immediately, but the tented fly of his jeans would make their intentions a little obvious. It wouldn't do for the chief of police to be caught in a compromising situation. When she'd bent in close, the scent and heat of her overwhelming his senses, his cock had jumped to attention. Decorum and judicious prudence aside, he needed to be with her. Had the woman known she'd have that effect? Was this some kind of setup?

Finishing his beer in one great swallow, Cole banged the bottle down on the bar just as the door closed behind Jayda. She hadn't even turned around to see if he was following. Maybe she hadn't meant what she'd said. Part of him hoped that was the case. Then he'd only have to see her safely to her car, and this whole thing would be over. But the wolf clawing for a piece of the sexy woman who'd just left was certainly hoping for a different outcome. There was only one way to find out what Jayda intended. Cole let his cock lead the way.

"Hey, champ, it's cold outside. You'll need this." Aaron stood at the entry between the two rooms, holding Cole's leather jacket. The smile on his face was nonjudgmental.

"Shit," Cole said as he snatched the leather jacket and shrugged into it. They'd been friends since their days on the reservation. Aaron would be the only one who'd know it was lust as much as fear contorting his face.

Aaron smiled. "Shit is right. Be careful."

Now that he'd made the decision, Cole headed for the door. He wondered if he'd waited too long and she'd left. That thought quickened his steps. He'd have no way of finding Jayda if she walked out his life tonight. He had no intention of letting that happen until he knew exactly what had brought her to Lonesome Fork.

The night air slapped him in the face the moment he walked out the door. He scanned the lot, panic sweeping through him with each pass.

"Over here." Jayda's quiet voice called from around a truck parked in front of the tavern and off to his right. He smiled at her from the other side of the hood.

"I wasn't sure you'd come," she said.

The brassy woman who'd propositioned him in the bar had once again morphed into a timid debutante. If not for her voice and the breathtaking smile she flashed, Cole wouldn't have known the bashful person holding keys in her hands was capable of offering an uninhibited sexual romp in her truck.

"Jayda, why don't we go sit in my car?" Reason found its way back to his consciousness. "It's in the back corner away from the lights." Police chiefs didn't boff strangers in the parking lot of the local tavern. But no one could fault him for finding a place for a quiet chat with a suspicious stranger, and now that he was thinking with the right head—conversation was all he intended.

"Sure." Jayda lifted a shoulder with the lilt in her voice.

She came around the back of the truck, and he wrapped his arm around her waist. She laid her head in the crook of his shoulder, molding against him as if her body had been made for his.

Cole's body reacted again to her proximity; the blood rushing to his dick made it hard to think like a gentleman. "We don't have to do this. I'd understand if you want to back out."

Stopping, she looked up at him. "You don't want to?"

"No, I...I mean, yes." Damn, this woman tied his tongue in knots. "What I mean is...if you're having second thoughts about being alone with me..."

"Not even sort of. Now, which car is yours?" Her hand snaked into the front of his jacket, dragging up his stomach to pinch his nipple through the soft cotton of his shirt.

Cole hit the button on the remote starter, and the lights of his Saab flashed. Jayda hugged him tight, pulling him toward the back shadows of the parking lot.

"Oh, such a shame, you have bucket seats, I guess we'll have to snuggle in back," she said before opening the door. Jayda didn't even turn around before climbing in, her luscious ass disappearing a moment before he reached the car.

"Leather seats, nice," she said as he slid in behind her. "Buttery soft, like skin."

He barely had the back door closed before her lips assaulted his. Her teeth nipped hungrily at his bottom lip, and he opened for her, inviting her tongue to plunge in and explore. Thoughts of conversation were swallowed with her sexy moans vibrating into his mouth.

She tasted of peppermint and the beer she'd consumed. His tongue clashed with hers, and when hers retreated, his followed, delving into the salacious heat of her mouth. Unable to get enough of her, he deepened the kiss and pulled her across his lap.

There was no reasonable thought now, only the desperate need to bury himself in Jayda's heat. Cole hadn't been this reckless since his years in college, nearly a decade ago, when willing co-eds were as plentiful as the beer at the fraternity. Somewhere in the deep recesses of his brain, Cole knew he should be more concerned about his actions. But with Jayda's breasts pressed against his chest, her ass rubbing provocatively against his erection and the sweet scent of her filling his nose, Cole couldn't think of one damn reason he shouldn't go through with this.

Jayda buried her fingers in his hair, pulling him hard against her mouth. Sandwiching her face in his hands, Cole possessed her mouth with wild abandon. He could smell her arousal mixed with her floral perfume, and it was nearly his undoing.

Cole lost himself in Jayda. There was no one in his world at the moment, save for the woman in his lap intent on sharing herself with him. It was more than male hormones coursing through him and making him want. The woman's scent wrapped around his nostrils, filtered into his blood and took over his system. With this stranger in his arms, Cole's brain turned to mush and his cock to steel.

How could a stranger take so much from him in such a short time? Jayda's lips broke from his, her teeth grazing his chin then his neck, and he buried his face in the soft flesh of her neck. He wanted to ravage her, fill her and claim Jayda as his. The thought knotted in his gut. Never with any other woman had that feeling overtaken him so completely. Cole laved her neck, whispering her name, overwhelmed by what she was doing to him. He had no doubt that his past and present were crashing with the incontrovertible path of their future.

His hand slid up the curve of her ass and higher still, over the luscious curves of her belly until the heavy weight of her breast filled his palm. Cole's cock throbbed, painful with the need to drive deep in her hot depths and fill her with his seed. The beast within him clamored to rise up and make this a ritualistic mating that would mark her as his forever – but he had no right to do that without her consent.

Several cars came into the lot, their headlights flashing over them. Like a teenager, he instinctively ducked down in the seat, covering Jayda's body with his, hiding her from discovery. She gasped out giggles of embarrassment, the sound like chimes in the wind, shivering through his blood. "It's probably just college kids," he said, his gaze raking over the beauty of her face flushed from arousal. He wanted to ask her if she was feeling the same pulse-pounding need that flowed through him. "Jayda..."

"Yeah." She sounded breathless.

It wasn't fair. They'd only just met. She wasn't looking for anything more than a quickie in the backseat of his car. "You want the radio on?"

She cleared her throat and sat up. "Sure. That'd be nice."

Jayda moved off his lap, and Cole leaned between the bucket seats, turning the key in the ignition and flipping on the radio. Their quick jump on each other had fogged the windows and warmed the frosty night. The crooning music of Toby Keith came over the speakers. "Country music okay?"

"It's nice. Soft. Romantic."

Even in the muted light, he could see she was blushing. Her fingers nervously replaced the hair his wandering fingers had pulled from her braid.

Cole leaned back against the seat, staring at her silhouette. The tip of her nose jutted out in a cute little curve that seemed to fit perfectly with the fullness of her lips. Laying a finger on her chin, he turned her toward him and brushed his lips against hers. Velvet. Soft. Warm and pliant against his.

“Cole.”

The breathy way she said his name beckoned him. He wrapped an arm around her waist and coaxed her back into his lap. Their mouths joined, hot and furious, even as she maneuvered her legs so she was straddling his lap. Her heated pussy landed square on his cock. He ground himself into her, and they both moaned. Pulsing her hips, Jayda rode the length of his cock through the denim, and he had to focus on stripping her or he would surely finish before they had really begun.

Jayda’s hands fumbled with the buttons of his shirt, and he relieved her of her down jacket. He filled his hands with her breasts, enjoying the weighty feel of them. Even through the fuzzy softness of her sweater, he could feel the peaked pearls of her nipples, and Cole pinched them, loving the little gasp of pleasure that feathered over his lips.

The need to possess and be possessed took over. Their hands stroked and soothed even as clothing was removed and thrown to the floor. Their location no longer mattered. There was only Jayda, her heat and the incredible way her body responded to his touch.

“I can’t get it.” Jayda’s words were spoken into his neck. Her teeth and tongue seared his flesh, eliciting deep moans of hunger. Her hands flirted at the waist of his jeans. “I need your help.”

Cole couldn’t focus on what she was saying. He wanted only to have her naked and her body at his mercy. He pulled the sweater over her head, leaning forward to bury his

face in her cleavage. Perfume had been dabbed there, but nothing covered Jayda's warm scent and he greedily filled his lungs with her unique fragrance.

She pushed his face away. He met her eyes, worried she had changed her mind. Cole was a gentleman and would do whatever she asked, but his dick begged him to continue.

"Cole, I can't get the buttons of your jeans undone from this angle." Jayda leaned forward and nipped at his jaw. "Focus for just a minute and shimmy out of them. Someone wants to come out and play."

Standing, she straddled his legs. With her back pressed against the roof, Jayda's breasts nearly fell from the flimsy lace containing them. She unbuttoned and unzipped her own jeans as Cole fumbled with the buttons at his fly. Canting his hips, Cole slid the jeans to his ankles, his cock popping out to stand proudly between them.

"Commando. I like." Jayda smiled down at him.

With her hand on the back of the seat, somehow Jayda maneuvered her body so she could wiggle one leg free of her jeans. Cole had no idea when she'd shucked off the sexy, red cowboy boots, but they lay in a heap at his feet with the growing pile of her clothes.

Cole sat in the seat with his leather jacket and shirt thrown open, his boots still on his feet, the jeans around his ankles and his knees wide. He would have laughed at the visual of himself if the smell of Jayda's arousal hadn't brought him right back to her nearly naked body, begging for his attention.

The woman's sexy body still hovered over him, the wicked smile on her face telling him she knew she was in control. Fine, let her take the lead. He could be at her mercy for as long as she wanted to use his body. He just hoped she didn't ask him to stop.

Her mouth came down on his, and he eagerly accepted the heat of her exploring tongue. Cole's fingers dug into the roundness of her hips and pulled her down into his lap, their flesh slapping with the contact. Running his hands up Jayda's thighs, he

reveled in the satin heat of her skin and the moan that rumbled through her chest. He was sure he'd never get enough of this woman.

His hands once again roamed to her breasts, kneading and reshaping the fleshy mounds. He found the front enclosure of her bra, releasing the clasp and pushing the lacy fabric from her chest.

Pulling his mouth from hers, he nipped kisses along her jaw and down her throat, stopping to graze his teeth at the pulse point at the base of her neck. When she moaned out his name and slid her slick pussy up his cock, he paused to suckle and soothe the tender flesh.

His fingers dug into her ass, pulling her tighter to his aching dick, even as hers roamed aimlessly through his hair. She blew hot gasps of arousal over his ear, and her teeth nipped at his neck. Cole had to slow his own need and remind himself that gentlemen pleased the lady first.

"Fuck me, Cole. I want you buried inside me. I can't wait."

Cole couldn't believe she was ready, but he couldn't deny her request. Hell, he was having a hard time not letting the pulsing heat of her wet nether lips release his need. "Condoms. Back. Pocket. Jeans. Wallet. Condoms." He didn't know if he could wait, but when Jayda bent to fish his wallet from his jeans, he knew he needed to slow things down.

"In here?" Jayda handed the black leather billfold to him. "Hurry please," she begged. Her hips pulsed, driving the wet, lacy thong up and down the length of his shaft. If she didn't stop riding him like a mechanical bull, he'd be hard-pressed to last longer than a randy teenager.

Fishing out the ancient prophylactic, he prayed it wouldn't break. Somehow pregnancy didn't seem like a good idea when they hardly knew each other. Jayda grabbed the foil packet from his hands and ripped it open with her teeth, throwing the package on the floor next to the abandoned wallet.

She scooted back on his thighs, making room between them. The earthy scent of her arousal filled the tiny car, flaming the burning embers of his need. Damn, she smelled like heaven and he wanted nothing more than to lose himself in the dreamy aroma of her musk. But her talented fingers, running the length of his erection pulled his attention back to her.

Focusing on his cock, her bottom lip pulled between her teeth, Jayda smiled and repeated the sliding motion of her hand, drawing a moan of bliss from his throat. His hips lifted involuntarily, inviting more contact. Cole couldn't remember aching for a woman the way his body did now. Surely he would die a slow and agonizing death if he didn't join his body with hers and make them one.

She held the condom at the tip of his cock, once again sliding her hand slowly down its length, unrolling the latex as she went, stripping away the last of his defenses. Jayda's other hand snaked between his thighs, cradled his balls, squeezing them with just the right amount of pressure, and sending sparks of pleasure jolting down his quivering thighs. Watching her hand caress his body sent more blood rushing to his groin, and his dick jumped in response.

"You like that?" she asked.

"I like everything about you, Jayda."

Task completed, her hand slid back up his cock. Closing his eyes, Cole lost himself in the silken warmth of her hands stroking his erection. Jayda continued to slide up and down the latex with one hand while the fingers of the other stroked the sensitive underside of his sac. "Jayda, if you keep this up I'm not going to last very long." Cole could already feel the pressure building in his balls and the tingle bunching in his back and working its way up his cock.

"Then how about this?" She tipped her hips forward, pulling the thin slip of her thong aside and rubbed her wet pussy lips up his cock.

Air hissed through his lips.

"You like?"

"I like." He didn't know how his mouth formed the words. Cole's hands sought purchase on Jayda's tits, and he pinched the hardened nipples, knowing her desire for him had made them sensitive. Her responsive moan invited him forward to take one deep in his mouth. Even in the murky darkness of the car, he could tell her areolas were dark, not the dusky pink of some women. The large nipples were responsive to the flicks of his tongue and graze of his teeth.

He sucked on the sensitive nubs as she lowered her body onto his cock. Her slick channel gloved his cock in its silken fist. His teeth bit into her flesh, stifling his moan of pleasure as her pussy took all of him. Jayda arched her back, offering him more of her breast as he sank deeper in her depths. A low moan dragged from her throat and vibrated down her back when her ass met his hips.

Cole wanted nothing more than to pound into her, but from the tight heat of her channel, he knew he needed to give her time to adjust to his girth. She rocked gently back and forth, moaning his name in hiccupping gasps, pulling his face tighter to her chest. Her internal muscles convulsed with each flick of his tongue to her sensitive nipple, coating his cock in her cream.

Leisurely, she angled her hips back, sliding him out of her pussy, only to rock them forward and take him fully back into her body. Their need found a rhythm. Cole flexed his ass, driving himself up as Jayda slammed down on his cock. Skin slapped against skin. Moans of pleasure overrode the music, and the car filled with the sweet aroma of their passion.

One of Cole's hands gripped the curve of her ass while the other slipped between their bodies. His thumb found the hard nub of her clitoris. In tight little circles he teased the spot, drawing gasps of pleasure from Jayda.

The pressure built in his balls, and his cock throbbed in the convulsing confines of her velvet core. Cole knew he was circling the precipice of sweet release. When Jayda's body tensed then shuddered, her internal muscles clenching and drawing tight, pulsing

wet heat around him, Cole gave in to his own release. Jayda quaked in his arms, crying out his name. His body pounded tirelessly into hers, his seed spent in the latex condom.

As her gasps slowed to hiccupping breaths of contentment, Cole brought his arms up her back and pulled her close, wishing this union could have united them forever.

Chapter Four

Cole's heart thumped against Jayda's cheek, her breath fluttering across his chest. They cleaned their bodies and disposed of the condom, but neither of them it seemed wanted to move from each other's arms.

He wondered if her emotions were as raw as his and if the coupling had touched her as profoundly as it seemed to be wrapping around him. He wanted to learn everything about her. In their little cocoon of body heat, the air rife with their sexual musk, the windows fogged with their moans of pleasure, he hoped she felt secure enough to share.

"Jayda."

"Hmmm?" She didn't lift her head.

"What are you?" He nuzzled his cheek in the satin softness of her hair.

Her head came up slowly, but her eyes didn't quite focus. "What?"

"I know I should know, but I can't figure it out." He kissed her nose. "What are you?" Brushing the hair from her cheek, he smiled at her, trying to reassure her. In these dangerous times, he understood the need for discretion.

She stretched away from him, embarrassment and perhaps uneasiness clearing the fog of sexuality from her eyes. "I'm a veterinarian." She rotated off his lap, slapping her back against the leather of the seat. "But you wouldn't know that. Why would you? Unless you're clairvoyant or something." Her mouth trembled at the corners in an awkward semblance of a smile.

"No, not what you do for work. I want to know what you are." His frustration rode on the words. She must know they were kindred spirits, both of them neither totally human nor fully animal. She was a world-shadow with the ability to suspend herself between the species, like him. But which animal, he couldn't discern.

"A woman? A daughter? An orphan?" Jayda thrust her leg into her pants and pulled them up her legs with vengeance. Even the rasp of the zipper sounded angry. "I have no idea what you mean, Cole." Her fingers moved rapidly to fasten her bra across her chest.

"Doesn't matter," he muttered, wishing he'd never broken the spell. Obviously, Jayda didn't like talking about that part of her. *Whatever*. It wasn't as if he were going to ask her to shift and go for a run in the woods, though the beast inside him clamored to do just that. He lifted his hips and pulled his jeans back up.

The cell phone in his back pocket sang out the final strains of Tchaikovsky's *1812 Overture*. Cole pulled it from his pocket and checked the display. Aaron. Calling so soon after he'd left the tavern could only be something important; there was no way his friend would be seeking details on his liaison. "I've got to take this," he said to Jayda.

A lifted shoulder was his only response.

"Cole here," he said into the phone.

"I don't know where you are, but you had best haul ass back to the Bull and make sure you wear that tin star of yours." Aaron's voice was calm but the commotion in the background put Cole on edge. "Trouble's brewing. I've got it covered for now, but a little official backup would be nice."

Cole sandwiched the phone between his chin and shoulder and leisurely buttoned his shirt. "The college kids getting out of hand?"

"I wish," Aaron scoffed. "A bunch of Kurt Hansley's cougar shifters came in just after you left."

"Kurt Hansley?" Anger erupted with the name, and Jayda's head snapped around. Cole smiled at her, his fingers working the buttons on his shirt a little more quickly. "Why the hell would they venture into wolf territory?"

"Does it matter? They're here and cruising for trouble. How fast can you get here?" A loud crash sounded in the background. "And so it begins," Aaron said dryly.

"I'm not too far away." That was an understatement. "I'll get there as fast as I can." Cole snapped the phone shut.

Jayda was pulling on her boots, her eyes focused on the floor.

"Jayda, I—"

"Cole, you don't have to say anything." She sat up and smiled, but the expression only looked sad. Her eyes sparked with some emotion he couldn't quite identify. "It is what it is." Jayda shrugged into her parka and tucked stray hair behind her ears. "It's done. Your buddy called, and now you have to go." She shook her head. "It's not like I haven't done the same thing myself."

"No, it's not like that." Cole put his hand on her arm before she could run from him. "I'd like to see you again. It's just that..." He held the phone up between them.

She pushed open the door, and he couldn't tell if the sudden chill oozed from her or snuck in through the opening. "Let's not, Cole." Jayda pushed out of the Saab and slammed the door.

"Damn it all to hell." Cole leaned forward, unlocked the glove box, and retrieved his 9mm. He didn't have time to deal with the hurt feelings of a woman when all hell seemed to be breaking loose in the tavern, but the gentleman in him refused to let her think the call was only an excuse. "Jayda, wait," he called to her retreating back as he leapt from the Saab.

She'd moved quickly and was already in front of the building. He jogged to catch up.

"Cole. Let it go. I just want to go home." Jayda waved a hand over her shoulder but didn't slow her pace.

He caught up to her just as the door of the tavern burst open and two men tumbled out, falling over each other onto the hard-packed gravel. Jayda jumped out of the way. A crowd followed, shouting encouragement. With a quick assessment, Cole realized it was two opposing shifters swapping punches. As if he needed this bullshit right now.

Training took over. Cole stepped up to the two young men and pulled the man on top off. John Kilmer, grandson of one of the pack elders, lay on the ground, his face no worse for the beating. With his attention focused on the ground, Cole didn't see the cougar shifter's fist, and the punch connected squarely with his cheekbone. Pain sang through his head but didn't topple Cole. When Cole straightened and turned slowly to face him, the kid's cheeks flamed red.

"Chief Takoda. I...I'm sorry. I didn't know it was you." The kid he didn't recognize, other than by scent, swiped at the blood crusted on his fat lip. The battered face of the young man told Cole who had been on the losing end of this squabble, and he silently celebrated John's victory. "It's just that that foul, good-for-nothing canine insulted my girlfriend."

"No reason for you to be sniffing in this territory in the first place, now is there, son?" Cole had to swallow the growl itching to escape his lips.

"The Whip and Bull is open to everyone." Youthful pride and stupidity threw back his shoulders. "We just came in for a beer. They're the ones looking for trouble." His voice shook with the finger waving at the crowd. Now that the fight seemed to be over, several other cougar males and females separated from the group, stepped around Cole, offering him a wide berth, and joined the battered man.

"Well, since it appears you got what you came for, why don't you fellas call it a night?" Cole spoke to the college boys in front of him before turning to the crowd still gathered at the door. "The rest of you go back to what you were doing. Show's over." The young men gratefully turned on their heels and dragged their battered egos across the parking lot.

"It's a shame young men don't know how to handle their youthful exuberance." The voice clawed its way up Cole's back.

He turned to see the cougar pride leader Kurt Hansley. His smug expression was not shadowed by the bottled beer he tipped back and finished in two great swallows.

"Kurt."

"Cole." The man nodded, the slits of his eyes shadowing his emotion.

"Any reason you came to this corner of the mountain tonight?" Cole asked.

"Last I knew, a man of legal age could order a beer at any tavern in Montana. Or should I consult my attorney on that?" The laugh bellowing out of him nearly drowned the sound of revving engines and spewing dirt of the retreating vehicles.

Cole shot a look over his shoulder. At some point during the altercation, Jayda had slunk to her truck and driven away. The hollow space between the vehicles where she'd been parked left him feeling just as empty.

"Or does the chief of police have an issue with me?"

Kurt Hansley was a trial lawyer from the valley and head of the cougar council. His reputation as a ruthless mouthpiece in both roles had spilled over into several counties. There was no way Cole was going to get into a war of words with him here in public. Their occasional run-ins in court were already more than Cole could stomach.

The man was itching to regain control of Coppertip Mountain from the wolves. Stupid thing was, the wolves had no problem making room for the shifters now that the cougar population was rebounding from the infighting that had nearly decimated their clan.

"You know you're welcome on the mountain anytime," Cole said. "And as long as you follow the law like everyone else, we'll have no problems. Now if you'll excuse me." Cole pushed past Kurt into the stink of the Whip and Bull.

Damn cat smell nearly made him gag.

* * * * *

Jayda turned the shower on as hot as it would go and watched the steam billow into the tiny master bath. She hadn't stopped shaking since leaving the tavern. Even reaching the safety of the cabin hadn't stilled her pounding heart. Whether it was the fight she'd avoided or the odd sense of connection she'd felt with Cole or the fact he'd mentioned Kurt Hansley, Jayda had no idea what specifically was churning the beers in

her belly to acid. But she suspected it was the last that had her knees going weak and her head spinning with questions. Had Kurt followed her to Lonesome Fork?

She padded back into the bedroom and ruffled Lady's ears, seeking comfort in the familiar connection. The yellow Lab curled up on her bed could always sense her moods, and Lady licked Jayda's fingers in sympathy.

"I guess it's just you and me, girl. Best friends forever." She kissed the top of the dog's head and scratched her neck. "You'll never leave me or break my heart." The dog had been Jayda's constant companion since she'd picked her up in a shelter and moved to Montana.

Lady kissed her face.

"Be a good girl and stay here. I just want to wash off the crappy night before crawling into bed."

Stepping into the steam of the shower, Jayda let her insecurities wash down the drain with the water. She stretched her neck from side to side, the pressure of the spray working into her muscles. She thought of Cole, and her hand instinctively splayed over her breast as she remembered the heat of his mouth at her nipple. He'd left tiny love bites in her flesh. It saddened her that they would likely fade by the morning.

Leisurely, she poured lavender body wash onto the loofah, squeezing it several times until it foamed. She didn't really feel dirty, quite the contrary as a matter of fact. Her body still hummed with the sensations Cole had trailed over her skin. Her encounter with the cowboy had been so much more than she'd expected. The man certainly knew how to please a woman. She hadn't had an orgasm that intense in years. Memories of Cole would certainly keep her warm for many nights to come.

Slippery bubbles slid down her belly and she gathered them, rubbing them over her breasts. Cole had molded the fleshy mounds, pinching the sensitive nipples until she'd cried out his name with the pleasure rising up. Her fingers rolled the pointed tips and Jayda closed her eyes, imagining it was Cole's teeth and tongue laving her body.

Her other hand slipped lower with the loofah. The rough texture of the sponge trailed sparks of renewed excitement straight to her sex. She hadn't had many lovers, and it had surprised her that he seemed to understand her body and know what she needed. The rough calluses of his fingers had teased her clitoris, and she'd bucked against the assault. Though the loofah didn't have quite the same effect, her circular motions on the sensitive bundle of nerves elicited a gasp of pleasure.

Jayda slid her hand down her torso as she increased pressure on the loofah, rotating it in tight little circles. "Oh, this is what I need." Her free hand spread her nether lips, and she dipped two fingers in slick moisture gathered there. Her internal muscles clenched and trembled as the pressure built.

All she could see was Cole's body filling her aching sex, her body riding him as the sublime rapture built within her. Her fingers weren't a very good substitute for the hot cock that had stretched her so completely, but the memory of how Cole had felt inside her was enough to carry her toward release.

Jayda added a third finger and bucked against the coarse fibers of the sponge. Her nerves were taut currents of electricity sparking heaven out from her core to settle in her fingers and toes. The orgasm rose slowly, not the heart-pounding explosion Cole had given her body, but a satisfying release of tension and trepidation. It quaked through her, and Jayda called out the only coherent thought she had at the moment. "Cole!"

* * * * *

Cole stepped out of the stifling heat of the Whip and Bull, pulling the leather collar of his jacket up against the first flakes of snow lazily drifting from the sky. They trailed tranquil paths through the murky orange light of the two sulfur lamps lighting the empty parking lot. Save for Aaron's Hummer and Becca's SUV, only his car sat in the shadowed corner of the lot.

Cole had stuck around the tavern long after Kurt and the rest of his cronies had cleared out and the last college kid had been thrown by the mechanical bull. He wanted to find out what had brought Kurt's clan here and make sure nothing more came of the earlier scuffle. He didn't want to think Jayda had been part of the setup, but the way she'd come on to him and gotten him out of the tavern just before the cougars had arrived seemed a little too convenient.

Had she returned, he would have asked her. But then again, maybe the timing of her arrival was just a coincidence all the way around. Jayda had seemed to be exactly who she said she was, a woman on vacation, looking for sex without complications. No doubt, Jayda didn't give him a passing thought after she'd driven her truck out of the parking lot. Cole would like to think it didn't matter, but acting like a randy teenager wasn't his style. Like his ride on the mechanical bull, the woman had thrown him completely off balance. Cole wanted to see her again, if only to find out why she would so willingly share her human body with him, but not her animal prowess.

Instead of climbing behind the wheel, Cole shoved his key in the trunk lock and popped it open. Looking around to make sure he was alone, he stripped. Transforming in the dead of winter certainly had its drawbacks, but when nervous energy and sexual frustration coursed through his blood, there was nothing better than a midnight run through the mountain terrain.

Cole slipped into the shadows of the forest, barely feeling the snow surrounding his bare feet. The animal within him was already taking over. Muscles stretched and bones lengthened as the human part of him gave itself over to the wolf begging to be set free. He came down on all fours and his inadequate skin was replaced by a thick pelt of gray fur. His hands and feet were now clawed and protected against the winter landscape by thick pads.

Human reasoning gave itself over to instinctual behavior as his beastly eyes interpreted the dark world of the trees in a new and wonderful way. Cole's snout and

ears lengthened, and his acute senses picked up the scurrying of a rabbit. He bound into the woods to give chase.

Chapter Five

Jayda stepped higher with the snowshoes. Working the foolish wooden contraptions strapped to her winter boots was much more difficult than they made it look on the Discovery Channel. She'd already fallen forward on her hands and knees when the curved front of the shoe had caught on the tip of a small bush. Thank goodness Lady had been there to support her while she hauled herself to her feet.

Now, nearly an hour after she'd entered the forest, Jayda had finally found her rhythm. Lift. Step. Plant. Lift. Step. Plant. It was the steady mantra that kept her upright and moving over the ridge.

Lady bounced around her, barking with excitement or frustration over the slow pace, Jayda couldn't be sure. Four-legged animals definitely had the advantage over two-footed *Homo sapiens* in the snowy realm of the forest.

The morning had dawned bright and clear, the sun winking off the four inches of new snow like millions of diamonds, but she'd been too exhausted, unmotivated and sore to get out of her pajamas before lunch. Jayda suspected her achy thighs and butt had more to do with the two rides on the mechanical bull and not the romp with Cole in the backseat of his car. But a girl could fantasize.

Despite the relaxing shower and double dose of sleeping medication, her night had been a restless one filled with visions of the sexy stranger with the dark hair and mysterious eyes. The division between dreams and reality had been a gossamer fabric that shuddered and shifted until she hadn't known on which side she lay.

Her nights had been like that for a very long time.

Jayda blamed it on the upcoming full moon and an imbalance of hormones. The onset of puberty had carried with it a burden she couldn't seem to shake. Night terrors

of beastly animals permeated her sleep for a week before and a week after her period, which came precisely on the evening of the full moon every month. Talk about PMS.

Not even her family doctor knew the secret of what she endured month after month. The heavy-duty sleeping pills he prescribed were for fictitious symptoms. She saved her monthly supply for the worst of the two weeks when the visions made her want to run into the night. As a doctor, even of animals, Jayda knew her addiction was unhealthy, but she was helpless to fight the horrible phantasms that invaded her peaceful rest. She found the oblivion of the medication an acceptable alternative to insanity.

Jayda's adoptive mother didn't know the full extent of all that accompanied the fits of screaming that rent the night when she was living at home. Only once had Jayda dared share her visions of slaughtered cattle that lay dead by her own teeth, the copper stench of blood filling her nostrils and their raw flesh filling her belly. Her mother had been so frightened by her daughter's revelation that Jayda hadn't dared share the horrible details of the visions after that. They'd never spoken of it again. Her mother didn't know that at twenty-seven, Jayda hadn't outgrown the terrible malaise that still plagued her dreams.

She'd chosen this week of the full moon for her vacation, hoping the ugly visions would remain in Blackfish Springs and not follow her to Lonesome Fork. Well, that and the nightmare of a love life gone awry.

Two weeks hadn't passed since she discovered her lover was a married man with a child. As much as she thought about it, Jayda still couldn't understand why a successful man like Kurt Hansley, with a beautiful family, would need to collect more women. The betrayal bit hard and brought tears to her eyes.

The edges of the snow-covered trees warped in her watery vision. She didn't see the change in terrain and tripped, her knee coming down hard. The rock ripped through her jeans and tore the tender flesh beneath. The pain vibrated up her leg and churned her stomach. Rolling on her back, Jayda scooped up snow to stanch the bleeding. She

cursed her own blindness both now and at misinterpreting the missed holidays and the nights Kurt had left her wanting and alone. The signs had all been there, but she'd been blinded by her heart.

Pushing herself to a sitting position, Jayda tried unsuccessfully to get back up. The pain in her knee throbbed.

"Lady," she hollered into the quiet of the forest. "Laaaa-dy."

Nothing.

In her pity party, Jayda hadn't noticed the dog had gone missing. She whistled. "Lady. Good girl, come!" Icy panic knotted her stomach. It wasn't like Lady to wander.

Jayda maneuvered backward on her butt. Scooching closer to a tree, she used the lower branches to pull herself back to her feet, hopping on the injured leg. "Lady, come on, girl. Time to go home for a treat." The fear clogging her throat made it hard to keep the tone light.

Looking around, Jayda detected no evidence of the dog. No trail of footprints to follow. No barks of glee. Nothing. Inhaling the cold mountain air, Jayda worked to tamp down the dread. Lady had chosen her at the animal shelter in New York not the other way around. She'd become Jayda's constant companion and had helped make the move to Montana a smooth transition. The dog was the one constant in her life that had never let Jayda down. Jayda couldn't bear to lose her now, especially when the rest of her life had so recently fallen apart.

Placing her finger and thumb in the corners of her mouth, Jayda let out a piercing whistle that sent a flock of mountain chickadees scurrying for cover. A keening wail sounded in the direction of the cabin, and Jayda took off toward the call. Without concern for the ache in her muscles or the pain in her bruised knee, she lumbered through the snowy forest with surprising agility. Visions of Lady, hurt and bleeding, pushed her through despite the soreness.

Then Lady was there, running toward her through the trees, blood covering her muzzle. The dog raced up to her, jumping up and down and barking. Lady's actions

made no sense. “What is it, girl?” Jayda bent to check her injuries, but the dog darted out of reach, her eyes filled not with pain but with expectation. The dog barked again, two sharp yips that—if Jayda didn’t know any better—sounded almost desperate.

“You need me to follow you, don’t you?”

The dog pushed off her front paws twice and barked in affirmation before bounding in the direction she’d come.

Jayda followed. Observing Lady’s quick movements, she had to believe the blood was not Lady’s. The dog stopped at a snow-covered mound, the crimson stain of blood visible long before Jayda could see what it belonged to. Alarm clawed up her back, lifting the hairs on her nape. They weren’t headed for a rabbit hole.

She saw the fingers first. Still wanting to believe the sun-dappled snow was playing tricks on her eyes, Jayda moved in for a closer inspection. The unmistakable arch of human butt cheeks peeked out of the fresh snow. Bile rose in her throat, choking down the scream begging for release.

Her shaky hand reached where she suspected the head to be, and Jayda brushed away the snow. Though the body was prone, the head was twisted backward, the dull eyes of death staring blindly into the cerulean sky. The scarlet snow ringing the upper half of the man’s torso had flowed profusely from the hole where his neck had been.

The scream worked its way out, and Jayda promptly vomited on the man’s back.

* * * * *

Cole pushed the cruiser as fast as he dared. On this empty stretch of road running up to Rustler’s Ridge, he was driving with only his strobes flashing. No sense having the siren scaring the wildlife and adding to the headache throbbing at his temples.

He’d like to think his crappy mood could be attributed to the impending arrival of the full moon, his lack of sleep and the pot of coffee pounding through his bloodstream. But as he careened around a corner, the tires skidding in the new snow, he thought his

current state of mind had more to do with the stranger who'd invaded his life last night and filled his thoughts throughout the morning.

When he'd shifted back to human form in the pre-dawn hours this morning, the metallic taste of blood had filled his mouth. He couldn't remember the hunt, only that it had energized him. Cole had been just restless and pissed off enough last night to turn himself completely over to his wolf and forget everything that had transpired. But when the fog of animal instinct faded, Jayda had been right there, his first coherent thought and desperate need. His cock jumped again at the memory of her curvaceous body, nearly naked and trembling with sexual euphoria beneath his hands.

He needed to stop thinking of her. The woman had gotten what she'd wanted and walked away without a second thought of him. Cole needed to do the same. He pounded his fist on the steering wheel, trying to get his head out of Jayda's pants and focused on his current problem. "Another fucking body."

What the hell was happening in his little town?

This was the third shifter killed since the beginning of the year. Add that to the five wolf carcasses, and one would think all hell had broken loose in Lonesome Fork. Rumors of werewolves and vampires had leaked into the human population, and he still hadn't figured out where *that* was coming from. Shifters had always lived both secretly and peacefully on Coppertip Mountain, mingling seamlessly with the human population. Now, over the past couple of months, someone had been creating unnecessary friction, and he'd been busting ass, tracking down leads and squelching the rumors.

With each body found, humans worried the underworld was rising up to bring about a cataclysm of apocalyptic proportions. And each time an animal carcass was discovered slaughtered, the shifters grumbled about penny-ante revenge. No one, least of all Cole, thought the two statistics were unrelated.

At the moment, he just wanted to figure out who was behind this killing spree and bring them to justice—human or shifter. He was keeping his eye on Hansley and his

shifters, but nothing had panned out in that arena. If it was the cougar shifter, Hansley would slip up soon enough, and Cole would be there to strike.

He pulled his cruiser into the crowded yard of the log cabin. No one usually stayed in this remote part of the mountain in the winter, so the smoke rising from the stone chimney surprised him. He assumed the person who found the body had come from lower down on the mountain, not a member of the family in residence. Hopefully not another complication.

Cole had barely gotten out of the cruiser when an officer trotted over. Mullins wasn't a shifter, but he was one of the best he had on the force.

"Afternoon, Chief."

"Where's the body?"

"Deeper in the woods. I've got the snowmobile ready for you. Detective Wallace and the coroner are already out there."

"Witnesses?"

"The woman who found the naked body is renting the cabin for the week. She's in the —"

"Naked?" Cole ripped off his sunglasses and stared at his officer.

"Yes, sir." Mullins pointed to his face. "Sir?" He lifted the title into a question.

Cole had forgotten about the black eye the cougar shifter had gifted him with last night. "It's nothing. Just tell me what you've got."

"Right." A blush colored Mullins' face, and he hastily turned his attention to his notes. "The coroner thinks he lost his way last night and probably froze to death, and then some animal got to him. Though that doesn't explain why he was running bare-assed through the woods in the first place." Mullins looked around before leaning in conspiratorially. "You don't suppose this is one of those werewolves killed by their own kind do you? I mean, that's what happened in that *American Werewolf in London* movie."

Cole shook his head and frowned at Mullins, hoping to squelch that train of thought. The man had no idea how close to the truth he probably was. "Forget the horror movies, Mullins. Let's stick to real-life facts." Cole replaced the sunglasses. "I want you to sit on that woman. No one questions her until I get a look at the scene."

"Yes, sir." Mullins headed back to the cabin.

Cole mounted the idling snowmobile and followed the trail through the woods. The trees cast long shadows in the waning light of day. Time was not on their side. Evidence could be overlooked in conditions like this. Parking the sled near the two others, he joined Aaron, who was hunched down, staring intently at the body with the coroner, a wolf shifter from his pack.

"What do we have?" Cole asked, tucking the sunglasses in his coat pocket.

Standing, Aaron kept his eyes focused on the body. "Near as we can tell, it's the same MO as the last two murders. The gashed throat appears to be the primary cause of death, but Doc will have to determine for sure. He says TOD appears to be around three a.m. No witnesses. And other than the snowshoe tracks of the witness and her dog..." He paused and stared at Cole, the professional façade dropping. "They tell you who found him?"

Cole shook his head. The look on Aaron's face filled his gut with lead.

"Jayda Kynslan."

Cole turned around as if he could see the cabin through the thick stand of black spruce. "She's the one renting the cabin?"

"Right now she's nothing more than a witness."

"You don't think..."

Aaron shrugged. "Does seem coincidental that she shows up at the Bull then Hansley's cougars come in stirring up trouble, and the next morning we've got a dead wolf shifter on our hands."

Cole hated to admit Aaron was right. Fortunately, they'd been friends long enough, and he didn't have to. So he moved on. "Who is it?" He lifted his chin in the direction of the body.

"See for yourself."

Cole stepped closer. Only the professional shield of his uniform kept his face stoic. The way John Kilmer had been ripped apart spoke of a violent ending to a young life. Cole had to agree with Aaron's assessment. The fight at the tavern last night and the kid's death were not coincidental.

Chapter Six

Jayda dealt with death every day, but bleeding dogs and stillborn calves were in a totally different category from a dead human. She sat on the couch of the cabin, her fingers tracing the intricate Western print of the material. Lady, sensing the uneasy emotions swirling around her, lay at her feet, whining. Nausea churned Jayda's belly, but since she'd puked twice already, she didn't expect there was anything left to come up.

The police had told her to stay put and out of the way. They had come in and out throughout the afternoon, using the bathroom, drinking her coffee, but no one had questioned her yet. Dealing with the body and the crime scene details were obviously their top priority, or maybe she'd just watched too many crime shows. Who the hell knew exactly what the police did when someone was murdered.

Whatever they were doing, it was happening in slow motion. It had been nearly two hours since the coroner arrived, a little more than that since the first police officers came screaming into her dooryard, four hours since she'd discovered the body, and a lifetime since she'd been warm.

Neither the hand-crocheted afghan around her shoulders nor the tepid mug of coffee in her hands did anything to rectify that situation. Jayda had already dumped the liquid out and refilled it twice. It seemed a waste to repeat the process. Even the fire blazing in the stone fireplace a few feet from her didn't throw off enough heat to push away the chill enveloping her.

A soft knock came at her door, and it opened before she could respond. But that had been happening all day. Used to the routine, Lady simply sat up, barked twice but stayed by Jayda's side. The low rumble in the dog's throat kept anyone from venturing too close. She leaned over and patted the dog's head, comforting them both.

The young officer who'd answered her 9-1-1 call stepped into the living room as she rose to her feet. "Ms. Kynslan, I'd like you to meet our chief of police —"

"Cole Takoda?" The name fell from her lips at the sight of a familiar face. She wanted to run into his arms, but his furrowed brow held her at the couch. Obviously, his officer knew nothing of their encounter at the tavern last night, and the chief of police in uniform intended for it to stay that way.

"Mullins, I think you've done all you can here," Cole said flatly, running his hand over his hair and down his short ponytail. "Why don't you head back to the station and start the reports? I can question Ms. Kynslan and get all the personal information we need. It's been a long day for all of us. You can head home when you finish the reports. Leave them on my desk and I'll fill in any missing information when I get back to the station."

Toying with the rings on her fingers, Jayda commanded her feet to stay rooted as she watched the officer leave. Falling apart was the last thing she wanted to do. But having Cole there, strong and familiar, made that a difficult task. Lady trotted up to Cole the moment the door shut behind the officer.

"You all right?" Cole bent to scratch behind the dog's ears before untying his hiking boots and toeing out of them.

Jayda lifted a shoulder and fought to control the tears burning to be set free. "I've never seen a dead person, let alone one..." She didn't want to remember how the man had died so violently.

"I know it's hard to go through the details over and over, but I need you to tell me everything that happened from the time you left the tavern last night until you found the body this afternoon." He settled in the overstuffed chair across from the couch, too far from her to be of any comfort.

Jayda wanted to crawl into Cole's lap and have his arms, strong and warm, wrapped around her. She wanted him to kiss her passionately and tell her everything would be all right. But the hungry eyes that had gazed at her naked flesh last night

were now hard nuggets of blue ice, looking out through a hard mask of professionalism. As much as she'd like to remind him of the passion that transpired between them, Cole was obviously here in an official capacity and cuddling her certainly wasn't part of the job description. Jayda folded her feet up under her, covering her shivering muscles with the afghan. Fine, if he wanted a detached rendition of her side of the story, she could manage that.

Thirty minutes later, after she'd shared nearly all the activities of the last twenty hours of her life, leaving out the details of her shower and the sexy dreams, Jayda fell back against the couch. Reliving the scene in the forest had really shaken her up.

"You're sure that's it?" Cole asked.

Jayda couldn't keep the confusion from contorting her face. "What else would there be?"

"You don't remember seeing the kid at the Bull?"

"I already told you I didn't." She'd gone over the details of her visit to the tavern—twice. Jayda had no idea what Cole was searching for. "There were lots of people at the tavern, Cole. I'm not going to remember one stranger from another."

His features softened as he tucked away his professionalism with his notepad. "I believe you, Jayda."

"I was beginning to wonder."

"Word's going to get out that we were together last night and I didn't want to be accused of showing any favoritism toward a witness." He leaned forward and brushed his knuckles over the back of her hand still wrapped around the coffee mug like a life preserver. "You got more of that? I think we could both use something to ward off this chill."

"In the kitchen."

"I'll get it." He stood and offered to take the cup from her, but she waved him off. Somehow having Cole in her kitchen, pouring himself a mug of coffee, would feel too much like a morning-after scenario and she just couldn't deal with that.

On autopilot, Jayda stood, walked around the couch and down the tiny hall to the kitchen nook. The ticking of Lady's nails on the wood floor was the only sound filling the awkward silence. The police officer following her certainly didn't seem to be the same passionate man who had held her last night, and she really needed that man right now. Being in a strange town and apparently the sole connection to a murder was taking its toll. A little compassion would certainly go a long way.

The smell of burned coffee assaulted her nose. "It's old. Let me make some more." With shaky hands, she reached for the pot, the decanter bumping several times against the machine.

"Don't." Cole came up behind her, his hand covering hers, solid and warm. He guided the coffeepot back into place and snapped off the machine. The hard planes of his chest pressed solidly against her back. With a sigh, Jayda's head fell back as she leaned against him, seeking comfort she so desperately needed. There was no one else to share this horror with. Not here. Not back in Blackfish Springs where she'd given up all her friends for a man who loved someone else. Cole was all she had, and as temporary as their connection might be, Jayda would take all he had to offer.

He turned her to face him and she looked up into the compassion filling his eyes.

She touched the bruise on his cheek.

"Gift from the kids' brawling last night. I forgot to duck." Cole took her hand and kissed her fingertips. "It's going to be all right," he said.

"Is it?" she asked softly. "Is a person ever the same after finding a human being slaughtered?" The tears she'd held at bay all afternoon finally released.

Cole sandwiched her face in his hands and wiped the tears with his thumbs. When he bent close, she closed her eyes, anticipating the softness of his lips on hers. He didn't disappoint. The heat of his mouth seared through her, and she opened to him, inviting

his tongue to delve in to taste and explore. He tasted of fresh mountain air, hot male lust and something uniquely his. And before she could assimilate their connection, it was there again, flowing over her with the power of a tidal wave, the feeling of being swaddled by the quintessence of Cole. It wasn't just the heat of his arms around her or the solid wall of him pressing against her from breastbone to knee, but the complete meshing of her life force with his.

But that thought was insane.

She wanted him only because he was here and familiar. Lust and need had simply been forged in the heat of adversity, making her believe it was something more pulling her toward him. This was about the sex and feeling blood searing hot through her veins and the touch of another human being. Not about intimate connections or bonds. What Cole felt for her didn't matter. Right here, right now, she simply needed him.

He pulled from her mouth, his gaze raking her face. "This is wrong to want you so badly, but I can't help myself. Tell me to stop now and I will." His needy pants feathered across her lips. "I'll die a slow, agonizing death but I'll stop."

"God, no, don't stop." Her arms sought the strength of his body. Snaking her hands under the black leather jacket of his uniform, she dug her nails into the hard muscles of his back. A moan vibrated between them, and Jayda had no idea where it had originated, only that it spurred her into deepening the kiss.

But reality broke through and she pulled from his mouth. "Aren't you still on duty?" She panted out the words, fearful he would leave her, grateful when he stayed close.

"Not at the moment." Cole's hands slid down her back and settled on her ass, kneading the flesh, pulling her hard against his hips. She felt his erection against her belly and wanted nothing more than to have it filling her.

"Everyone's finished up and gone back to the station to process evidence. All that's left is questioning the witness, and I've been known to take hours." Cole breathed the words over her neck then tracked love bites up her throat and along her jaw, settling at

the sensitive shell of her ear. "Maybe longer. No one's going to miss me for a while. Just don't ask me if it's professional for the chief of police to be intimate with a witness."

"I don't really want to talk about police business anymore."

With surprising ease, he swung her into his arms. "Neither do I." Cole carried her into the living room. "I have a whole different kind of interrogation technique in mind for you at the moment." He deposited her on the couch where, only minutes ago, she'd sat alone and afraid. He shucked off his jacket and utility belt before laying his body over hers. "I didn't think I'd see you again, Jayda." He whispered the words in her ear.

"Cole, I haven't stopped thinking about you." Her frenzied hands pulled at the hem of his shirt, freeing it from his pants. She wanted him naked, fucking her senseless, making her forget death and remembering life.

In one fluid movement, he pulled the shirt over his head, and she inhaled the masculine heat of him. Her hands traveled over the muscled contours of his abdomen, through the soft tufts of hair on his chest, then settled to pinch his pebbled nipples. Air hissed through his teeth. She hadn't known he was sensitive there, and she lifted her head and laved one with her tongue.

"It hardly seems fair that I'm half undressed and you're still fully clothed." Coming up on his knees, he leisurely undid the buttons of her blouse. "And no keeping clothes on this time. I want you completely naked and at my mercy."

Jayda smoothed her hands down his arms. She hadn't seen the tattoo ringing his left biceps, it danced as his muscles flexed with the motions of removing her clothing.

"This is sexy," she said, tracing the intricate pattern.

"Mark of my pack."

"Pack? Like a gang?"

His hands froze over the front clasp of her bra. The blush coloring his face seemed to have started around his collarbone and now blazed all the way to his ears.

"You really don't know, do you?" he asked.

“About gangs?”

“Yeah, gangs.” He bent and captured her mouth with his, sucking her bottom lip between his teeth before letting it go. “Kid stuff. Forget it.” His fingers released the clasp and he pushed away the satin of her bra, freeing her breasts. His roughened calluses added a pleasant texture to his caresses. When he rolled one sensitive nipple between his thumb and forefinger, Jayda gasped and arched into his hand. Obviously, the subject of his past was closed.

“I want all of you writhing beneath me.” Cole’s mouth curved in a naughty smile that sparked all the way to his eyes. “Just you and me, with nothing between us.”

He stood and pulled her to a sitting position, relieving her of the blouse and dangling bra. Jayda swung her feet to the floor, planting one on either side of Cole’s. Painstakingly, she undid his pants, slowly pulling the zipper, her own breath quickening with each click of the teeth, exposing the sensible boxer briefs below his uniform. She smiled up at him.

He shrugged as if apologizing. “Uniform’s sexy enough, don’t you think?”

“Everything about you is sexy,” she said as she parted the pants at his hips. Circling her hands around to his ass, she pushed the uniform away as she did. It fell to the floor with a thud. With the front of his boxers tented in front of her, she hardly heard the noise.

Cole shucked off the boxers, pulling off his socks as he stepped out of the whole mess. He was gorgeous standing in front of her, acres of bronzed skin, bunched muscles and oozing testosterone, making her sex clench with need. Jayda couldn’t resist leaning into the soft halo of hair surrounding the cock and inhaling a great gulp of his warm musk. Her nipples peaked as her lungs filled. “I love the way you smell.” *That* was an understatement.

Cole pulled Jayda to her feet and buried his face in her neck. “You have no idea what you do to me either.” Cole’s gaze devoured her as it wandered from her mouth to her eyes and back again. Her stomach tightened with every movement of his long

lashes, and the feeling twisted lower to make her sex heavy with want and damp with desire. He brushed kisses over her upturned nose and fluttering lids.

“Take me. I’m all yours.” Her voice was a mere whisper.

With quick efficiency, he relieved her of her pants and lacy underwear and laid her down on the couch, naked and exposed. But being with him didn’t make her feel vulnerable, quite the opposite in fact. In his presence, Jayda felt secure and protected.

Coming down heavy on top of her, Cole’s heat meshed with hers. Her fingers kneaded the strong muscles of his back then slid to his ass, her nails digging into the flesh as she pulled him hard against her. Spreading her legs wide, she invited his cock to fill her and bring her to that place of completion.

“I have something else in mind.”

He kissed a path down her torso, stopping briefly to tease and suckle her sensitive nipples. Currents of pleasure jolted down her core, making her pussy wet with need. His fingers lingered to pinch and tease while his tongue and lips forged a heated path down her torso. His tongue dipped and licked, delving deep into her bellybutton, eliciting a deep moan of desire. He scooted back on the couch as he moved lower until he lay comfortably between her thighs. It had been a long time since a man had loved her with his mouth, and Jayda wasn’t sure she wanted this from him.

“You don’t have to do this, Cole. I have condoms in my purse.” The confession should have embarrassed her, but after last night in the car, she thought her intention was fairly obvious.

“I want to love every inch of you.” His hands wrapped under her ass, lifting her. He bit the soft flesh of her inner thigh and Jayda gasped at the pleasure the pain elicited. “Just lie back and enjoy, Jayda.”

That she could do.

Splaying open her pussy lips with his fingers, Cole blew over her heated skin, sparking tiny jolts of sweet current up her core. He laid his tongue flat and laved up her slit, pushing back the little hood, before sucking her swollen clitoris into his mouth.

With quick flicks of his tongue, he teased and manipulated the bundle of nerves, and she was helpless against the assault. Her body bucked against his talented tongue, the pressure building, her internal muscles clenching.

Cole pushed two thick fingers into her clenched channel and she arched her back, inviting them deeper. It amazed her how quickly he'd driven her to this height of passion. Without thought, her hands found their way to her breasts and she pinched and rolled her steeped nipples, enjoying the tingles of bliss the added stimulation sent shooting to her pussy.

Alternately sucking and licking, pulsing and pressing, Cole seemed to be hitting every hot spot. One of his fingers plunged deep in her cunt, making a "come hither" motion that ignited tiny sparks of ecstasy, sending flames of rapture burning over every nerve. Cole's other hand dragged her slick moisture to her ass and pressed against the rosebud opening of muscle, finally pushing through the barrier, making her cry out his name.

Bombarded by the myriad sensations, Jayda released her breasts and dug her fingers into Cole's shoulders, mooring herself against the onslaught. With him so focused on her body, Jayda closed her eyes and enjoyed everything his tongue, lips and fingers were offering.

Cole seemed to be very adept at drawing out her pleasure, and she climbed excruciatingly slow to the edge of bliss. Though her body writhed uncontrollably, waves of rapture shuddering over her muscles, he never lost contact with her. With her eyes shut tight, Jayda lost herself in the sexy sound of his finger-fucking and her labored moans of pleasure, the scent of her honey blanketing them in its musky warmth and the feeling of what Cole's mouth and hands were doing to her.

Her throaty pleas sounded almost animalistic as the orgasm shattered through her, giving her a powerful release she'd never experienced. Every cell in her body was involved and reacting to Cole's masterful techniques. Her muscles rolled with the

sublime ecstasy rippling through them. Her blood pounded in her head, rolling and thundering in her ears. Jayda had no idea a man could do this to her body.

As the tumultuous spasm slowed to quivers, Cole's ministrations to her clitoris became soothing licks of his tongue. The fingers filling her pussy and ass eased from the quivering channels and massaged the aching muscles in tiny strokes.

Cole slid his body up her torso and settled over her, laying sweet kisses on her face. With her bones soft and her muscles lax, she snuggled into the comfort and warmth of his weight. Jayda filled her lungs with contentment.

From a distant place, she heard a phone ring.

"I'm still on duty, Jayda. I have to get that," Cole whispered. She felt the loss of him the moment he sat up and dug the phone from his belt. "Takoda here."

Jayda pulled the afghan around her shoulders as she sat up next to Cole.

There was a long pause as he listened. She tensed as his body stiffened next to hers.

"You're sure?" He shot a quick look at Jayda. "Yeah, no, I understand. I'll just bring her to the station with me." Cole snapped the phone shut and turned to Jayda. "That was Detective Wallace." He cleared his throat. "There's been a development in the case, something to do with some evidence they found." He raked his fingers through his hair as he stood. "I need you to come to the station with me."

Cold fear knotted her gut. "But I can't identify anyone, Cole. I didn't see anything."

"I'm afraid you're no longer a witness, Jayda. You've become a person of interest."

Chapter Seven

Driving Jayda to the police station was one of the hardest things Cole had ever had to do. How they connected her to the killing of John Kilmer was beyond him, but right now he had to play the part of Chief Takoda, head of the Lonesome Fork Police Department, not Cole, Jayda's lover. He'd never taken into custody someone he cared about.

The woman sitting next to him, staring out the window only looked frightened and lost, not conniving and duplicitous. He had a feeling she had no idea what had just truly happened between them. If he hadn't seen it, he wouldn't have believed it either. But there was still plenty of road between here and the police station to find out if her innocence was sincere or a cover for something more sinister. He suspected the former.

No one with the power Jayda held could act so convincingly naïve.

"Jayda, I wouldn't worry too much about this." The protective male wanted to touch her, but his professionalism required Cole remain detached. *Right*. As if he could do that after what they'd shared over the last couple of days. The wolf inside him not only clamored for more of what he'd just had but was insisting on making their next mating an official bonding. Cole had no idea what to do with *that* need. "I'm sure we'll get there and find out it's all been some terrible misunderstanding."

She turned to him, her eyes unfocused. The soft curve of her mouth held no joy, and he could see by the tremble of nerves in the gesture that she had no faith in what he was saying. The eerie glow of the dashboard lights accented the deep lines of fear creasing her brow.

He wanted to hold her, shield her from whatever the immediate future held and keep her safe from the trials fate would throw in her path. But he suspected he could do none of these things. What was to come would be Jayda's journey. Cole understood that

even if Jayda was blissfully unaware of the legends unfolding and her intricate part in completing them.

“Tell me about yourself, Jayda Kynslan.”

“Is this part of the interrogation? Should I wait for my lawyer?” She locked her hands together and sandwiched them between her thighs.

“Jayda.” He dragged her name quietly over his tongue. He needed her to trust him even if, at the moment, he wasn’t sure he could reciprocate.

“Sorry.” She stared out the front window. “I’ve never been arrested. It’s made me a little testy.”

Jayda wasn’t officially under arrest at the moment, but only because Aaron hadn’t wanted to give him specific details over the phone. Cole decided to ignore her statement and try a different tack. “Tell me about your parents.”

“Birth or adoptive?”

It took all of his controlled professionalism not to react to her statement. He turned from the road to study her profile. “You’re adopted?” That would explain so much. He may have only met her twenty-four hours ago, but Cole suspected he knew this woman better than she knew herself. At least two-thirds of her anyway.

Lost in her own thoughts, Jayda didn’t seem to notice his startled reaction to her question.

“From what I understand, my parents died shortly after giving me up for adoption. I don’t know anything more than that.” Her voice was a monotone litany of words. “I grew up in New York City and hated it. It was loud and busy and crowded.” A wan smile curved her mouth. “Nowhere to run.”

“When did you come to Montana?”

“Four years ago after graduating from vet school. I needed the mountains...the fresh air...the space.” Jayda picked at invisible lint on her jeans. “I’m making a life for

myself in Blackfish Springs. I'm a vet in a fairly large practice there. I thought that's what I wanted. But I think I'd rather have my own small practice in the country."

"Why did you choose veterinary medicine?" He prodded carefully, already suspecting he knew the answer.

"I love animals." She lifted a shoulder. "And it seems odd, but they love me too. Sometimes I think I totally get what they're thinking."

"That's not odd." Cole finally pulled the cruiser to the side of the road. He had no idea how to broach the next topic, but he needed Jayda to understand what kind of spider web she was falling into. If evidence was going to cocoon her in the murder investigation of a shifter, she needed to go into it fully aware of who she was. He believed she had no idea of the power she held locked within her. Shifting in his seat, Cole waited until she looked at him. "Some people are more in tune with their animalistic nature than others."

Jayda just looked at him, her furrowed brow shadowing the amber pools of her eyes. Her lips were pursed thin. Cole would like to kiss them until they softened to the responsive mouth he'd been enjoying less than an hour ago. He wanted to hold her while he shared with her the details of a life she didn't know existed. His wolf wanted to claim her. But at the moment, he could do neither.

Right now, Cole needed to focus on helping Jayda understand all he'd come to know. He'd seen the truth ripple through her in waves as she'd quaked in orgasm. Her legs and arms had rolled with the black fur of the animals working to break free. His shoulders bore testimony to the claws that had raked over his flesh. But it wasn't until he looked into her face that he fully comprehended all that was Jayda.

In her rapture, her eyes squeezed tight in the pure freedom of her climax, he'd watched Jayda's facial contours soften and pulse with the features of a cougar then a wolf and then back to human. She was a polymorphic shifter. A living prophecy sent to bridge the feud that was tearing apart the local shifter community.

He didn't know how else to help her understand, except straight out, like ripping off a bandage, quick and smooth. "Have you ever heard of shapeshifters? Humans who become animals?"

"Only in my nightmares." Her voice was barely audible.

"They're real." Cole laid a hand over hers and held tight. "And I think you're one."

* * * * *

Jayda didn't know what to expect at the police station, but the rowdy crowd of townspeople gathered below in the parking lot certainly wasn't it. In the darkness, they looked all the more threatening—like a hungry pack of wolves ready to devour her—not the quiet people of Montana she'd come to know.

She heard the office door behind her open. "Can I get you anything, Miss Kynslan?"

Jayda turned from the window and shook her head. Officer Mullins' bland expression told her nothing, but the pity in his eyes led her to believe something grave was about to happen. Even if she had been hungry, the acid-churning fear in her belly would have kept her from holding anything down.

"Chief asked me to move you to another room. Seems some folks are having issues with police procedure." He shrugged. "You know how small towns can be." Motioning with his hand toward the door, Mullins attempted a warm-hearted smile. "No need for you to watch that. Why don't you come with me?"

He'd lifted the last few words into a friendly question, but Jayda understood it hadn't been a request. She followed him, feeling like an innocent lamb being led to slaughter. She had no idea what she'd done to make people in this town hate her. Sure she'd enjoyed a few beers, found a dead body and slept with the chief of police; near as she could tell, none of that was against the law.

Jayda's thoughts trailed back to Cole, and she wondered where he'd gone. After delivering her safely into the police station through a back door and securing her in his office, he'd disappeared. That had been over twenty minutes ago. Until this man had

shown up, no one had come to cuff her or fingerprint her or take her picture with a number plate in front of her face, nor allowed her one phone call. Nothing had happened the way she thought an arrest would be handled. Of course, Cole hadn't said anything about an arrest. Simply that she was "a person of interest".

Jayda had no idea why she was here. She needed something, someone familiar to hold on to. Though after Cole's little admission, she wasn't sure she wanted it to be him. She wondered how her vacation retreat had landed her in an episode of the *Twilight Zone*. Cole's statement had shaken her to the core. Surely, not everyone in Lonesome Fork held to the same delusions as the chief of police.

"In here," Mullins said, pointing to an open door.

The stark room was without windows, which was just as well. Jayda didn't really want to peer into the blackness. Her heart already felt heavy in her chest. This whole situation was worse than any nightmare she could have conjured.

Sitting in the metal chair Mullins offered, Jayda folded her hands, trying to still them. This was more what she had expected, and feared—an interrogation room. The camera mounted high in the corner replaced her vision of the two-way mirror.

"Are you sure I can't get you anything? Diet cola? Coffee? Water?"

Words would not pass the heated lump in her throat, so Jayda just shook her head. Mullins nodded, smiled and left.

She didn't have time to compose herself before Cole swept into the room followed closely by a man in a dark suit. Their presence seemed to consume all the air and she had a hard time filling her lungs.

"Ms. Kynslan, this is Detective Wallace." Not surprisingly, Cole was all business.

Jayda recognized the blond man taking a seat in the chair across the table from her. He had been at the bar last night. His gentle smile and kind eyes did nothing to assuage her trepidation. Of course, Cole's nervous pacing wasn't helping.

"We just want to talk," Detective Wallace said. "Did anyone offer you something to eat or a drink?"

Looking back later, Jayda couldn't be sure where the sudden surge of bravado came from. Perhaps it was the anger over the injustice being served or the fear of being sucked into some unearthly realm that gave her the audacity to stare down Cole's sidekick. She'd never know for sure, but whatever it was had her planting both palms flat on the table and leaning in close to the detective.

"I know my rights," she said through clenched teeth, though she had no idea what they could or couldn't legally do at this point. "And unless you have some smoking gun, which I suspect you don't since I haven't been charged..." She paused, offering them an opportunity to refute her statement. When they didn't, she continued. "Then I'd like to go home. You have nothing to hold me on." She had no idea if any of that were true, she was flying by the seat of her pants—and information gleaned from television.

She sat back smugly, expecting Cole to stop pulling at his bottom lip and the detective to throw his hands up in surrender and announce that she was free to leave. Neither happened.

"Where were you last night, Ms. Kynslan?" Wallace's voice was even.

Jayda inhaled deeply, trying to steady her nerves. She still believed she'd done nothing illegal, and if they intended to railroad her into some confession, they had a long haul ahead of them. It dawned on her then that perhaps they were looking for a scapegoat to explain away some ritualistic death. She'd seen how the body had been ripped and mangled. Wouldn't a stranger passing through town be just the perfect person to convict of such a crime?

"I was at the tavern. But you both know that already."

"Witnesses have corroborated that fact." The detective folded his hands over the manila envelope he'd set on the table. "Where were you between the hours of midnight and six a.m.?"

"At the cabin I'm renting." Fear wrapped its icy claws around her throat. "And before you ask, no one else was there except my dog Lady." She looked from Wallace to Cole and back again. "Do I need a lawyer?"

"Do you have something to hide?" Despite its innocent quality, Wallace's question dropped her stomach to her feet.

"I suspect you think I do since you've held me here for questioning."

"Does this look familiar?" The detective produced a syringe from the envelope.

Though the syringe could have been from anywhere, Wallace held it so she could read her initials in bold, red ink on the tube. She marked all of the veterinary equipment she carried in her travel supplies in the lock box in the bed of her truck. It made accounting for her inventory so much easier when she returned to the clinic. Panic rose with the bile filling her throat. She thought she was going to puke. The cabin was so remote she hadn't bothered to check the lockbox this morning as was her usual routine.

"We assumed it came from the local pharmacy. But after some investigation —"

A commotion erupted in the hall. "Heads will roll for this." The door slammed against the wall as it was shoved open. "That's enough," Kurt Hansley declared as he strode into the room. "Imagine my surprise, Chief Takoda, when I found out through an inquiring reporter that you'd taken my client into custody."

"She didn't request a lawyer," Cole stated evenly. "We were just asking her some questions. She's our only witness to a *murder*."

Jayda watched the two men—the one she'd sworn never to trust again and the one who'd worked magic on her body. One had tried to possess her while the other wanted her to believe in horror movies come to life. She wasn't sure either one was a safe bet at the moment.

"What do you have there, Wallace?" Kurt asked.

"A syringe belonging to Dr. Kynslan."

Hansley came around the table and squeezed Jayda's shoulder. She'd come to detest Kurt over the last several weeks, but being accused of murder by a small town police force made his presence oddly comforting. "Was it used as a weapon on the victim?"

Cole strode over to the table. "That's part of an ongoing investigation and not information we're going to share with you, Hansley."

Jayda felt Kurt's muscles tense. Obviously, not everything going on between these two men involved her.

"Have you charged my client with anything?" Hansley's hand slid along her back and settled on her biceps, effectively hugging her to his body, not a usual posture for a lawyer and client.

"It's just a friendly inquiry." Cole looked at her expectantly, his mesmerizing eyes filled with pain and confusion. "We were interested in finding out what she knows." Cole leaned on the table, his gaze searching Jayda's eyes.

She refused to be moved by the misery contorting Cole's face. He'd falsely accused her of murder. He had no right feeling betrayed by her and the comfort she found in the lawyer's embrace.

"Jayda, just say the words, and all this will be over." Kurt hugged her tighter to his thigh.

At the moment, the security of someone she knew was preferable to the insanity of this police department.

"I want my lawyer."

Chapter Eight

Cole sat at his desk, head in his hands, Jayda's dog sleeping peacefully at his feet. He desperately needed to figure out what the hell had transpired over the last thirty-six hours.

A strange woman had wandered into his town two days before the full moon, captivated nearly every patron—shifter and human alike—at the Whip and Bull, fucked the chief of police, discovered a dead body, been accused of murder, been remanded to the custody of her lawyer, who also happened to be stirring up trouble in the shifter community, and, *fuck it all to hell*, made Cole believe in forever loves. His fists came down hard on his desk.

Hell of a week and it wasn't over yet.

As head of the council, he still had to stand before his pack tonight and explain Jayda Kynslan and her possible effect on their future. Obviously the woman had been sent by Hansley to infiltrate the pack and undermine the very foundation of the wolf shifter population. Cole suspected someone had been spying on his pack for a while. Too much shifter information was filtering into the human population not to have a mole walking among his clan. As far as he knew, Jayda had only arrived.

Something just wasn't adding up.

All Cole understood for certain was that Kurt Hansley had been skulking after wolf shifter territories for some time. He'd sought to regain control over lands he felt belonged to his clan, lands that had once been populated by cougars. Infighting had diminished the cougar numbers over a decade ago, and wolf shifters had moved in to fill in the gap.

Cole had been preaching tolerance to the wolf pack. There was enough space for both populations. But Hansley didn't want to share Coppertip Mountain, not with

wolves and especially not with humans. He wanted to lord over the land and both councils along with it. What Kurt was trying to accomplish was unprecedented. Until Jayda had insinuated herself into his life, Cole hadn't thought anything could unite rival shifter clans — least of all a power-hungry cougar shifter.

Cole pushed away from his desk and stood to stare out the window at the empty parking lot. It had taken a couple of hours after Hansley had spirited Jayda away last night to convince his neighbors that Armageddon was not coming to Lonesome Fork. It seemed shifters wanted revenge for the murder of their pack mate and humans were simply running scared. Add whispers of unholy creatures and the gathering outside the police station had nearly become a lynch mob. It had taken all his sweet-talking to calm them down and convince everyone that justice was best served by allowing the courts to decide the woman's fate. Though he wasn't entirely sure he believed that himself.

"Come in," Cole shouted at the soft knock on his door. Lady lifted her head.

Aaron stepped tentatively into his office. "Do I need to wave a white flag?"

"Eat shit."

Lady stood, stretched and trotted over to the detective. "Who do we have here?"

"Jayda's dog Lady. Jayda had the gall to ask me to look after her before she left with Hansley. Not sure why she didn't just swing over to the cabin and pick the dog up herself. Whatever. I'm a sucker for a cute female."

"Tell me something I didn't know." Aaron settled in one of the utilitarian chairs across from Cole. Lady laid her head on his thigh, her tail thumping happily against the side of Cole's desk. Aaron absently scratched the dog's ears. "Don't you find it a little odd that Hansley showed up at the Bull only hours after Jayda sauntered into town?"

Cole leaned against the wall and stared at Aaron sitting casually with his foot bouncing on his knee. "I've been going over and over that all day. I can't help thinking that she set me up. But for the life of me, I can't figure out why. There's something I'm missing here."

"You sure she didn't know about shifters? She could be one hell of an actress."

"I wouldn't know. I was going to shift to prove it to her, but the station radioed to say things were getting out of hand here so I didn't take the time. Everything just sort of fell apart when I arrived." His head fell against the wall and Cole closed his eyes, trying to sort through everything he knew. "She could be playing me for a fool."

"You look like shit, Cole. Go home and get some rest."

After two nights without sleep, exhaustion permeated deep into Cole's bones. "I wouldn't be able to sleep even if I did."

"Look, Jayda went with Hansley." Aaron dropped his foot, settling his forearms on his thighs. "Nothing you can do about that. She's obviously made her choice. Chances are she'd made her choice before last night and you were just some kind of pawn."

"But it doesn't make sense, Aaron. Why tip their hand two nights before the blue moon?"

"Like you said, there's something they needed from you. Maybe the kid put a glitch in their plans. Maybe Jayda went rogue last night. Who knows?"

"The pack's going to be looking for some answers tonight. What the hell am I going to tell them?"

"The truth."

"What, that the legend is true and we lost? Or that some polymorphic shifter led their leader by his dick before screwing him and his pack over?" Cole's fist landed solidly against the wall and made Lady whimper. Aaron crooned softly and scratched behind her ears. "How the hell could I have fallen for that whole 'Oh, I'm an orphan...feel bad for me...I don't know who I am' bullshit?" Cole said in a high-pitched imitation of a whiny female.

"Stop beating yourself up, Cole. She had us all fooled. Shit, I was the one drooling over her at the Whip and Bull."

"Yes, but you figured who she was from the get-go." Cole let out a derisive laugh. "I was blinded by hormones. Obviously, Hansley's been planning this for a while. She

all but fell into his arms last night when he swooped in to rescue her from the clutches of the evil wolf shifters."

"So, what do you think he has planned now?"

"Besides giving her a congratulatory fuck?"

Aaron arched a brow.

"Honestly, I haven't figured that out. As a polymorphic shifter, Jayda has the power to dominate both wolves and cougars. Even if she's acting as if she doesn't have a clue. We both know whoever she claims as mate will have the power to rule with her."

Aaron leaned his elbows on his thighs. "You didn't claim her?"

"I was working on the assumption that she was telling the truth and didn't even know what a shifter was. It wasn't my place."

"But you told me you thought she was your —"

"I know what the hell I told you!" Cole shouted as he pushed away from the wall and began pacing. "Apparently I haven't a fucking clue about life mates and shit."

"You don't think she intentionally came here on Hansley's behalf, do you?"

Cole's fingers plowed rows through his hair. "I don't know what I think. But it sure as hell appears Hansley's been orchestrating this little coup de grace for a while. Despite his conventional marriage, I have every reason to believe he's already claimed Jayda as his mate. I didn't see any marks, but there's no doubt in my mind that when she shifts tonight, their mating will make his possession of her permanent. And I suspect he'll be looking for Jayda to claim my position as head of the wolf council." Cole wasn't sure if it was anger over his own stupidity or jealousy that had blood pounding in his ears. "Then Hansley will have what he's been working toward for years, control over the majority of shifters in the area."

"I still don't understand why he wants all that power," Aaron said. "Cougars and wolves can share the territory. You've made that perfectly clear to their council. There's more than enough room for both clans. Hansley's just a power-hungry cougar who

hates humans. He's only doing this..." Aaron sat up and looked at Cole who had stopped pacing. Aaron shook his head, not wanting to believe the conclusion they'd reached together.

Cole verbalized the sickening thought. "He wants control so he can rid the mountain of the human population so only shifters reign."

* * * * *

Much to her ex-lover's dismay, Jayda had spent the night alone, tossing and turning in the opulent bed of Kurt's weekend home. She stood at the sliding doors to her balcony, surveying the snowy mountain vista overlooking the lake below. The seven bedrooms and ten baths would have been more than enough for two families. The fact Kurt held this property only as a getaway home sickened her. Most things about Kurt sickened her, despite her relief at having him rescue her from the local police.

The last thing she'd asked Cole was to look after Lady. The dog never did like Kurt, and as much as she missed her, she hadn't wanted to upset the poor animal. Jayda only hoped Cole didn't believe Lady was some human stuck in animal form. That thought brought a smile. This whole thing was ludicrous and would make a great story for the Friday luncheons at the vet clinic, if in the middle of this whole adventure, she hadn't also been accused of murder.

That thought sobered her.

Kurt was a great defense attorney—according to him. He'd rehashed all his professional accomplishments as they'd driven up the mountain last night. Even in the dark, she'd been aware of the acres of forest, and then the mansion had risen out of the snowy pines of the forest, lighting the night sky like some false beacon for safe harbor. As Kurt pulled the Mercedes up to the stately front door, Jayda wasn't sure she hadn't jumped out of the proverbial frying pan and now sat dead in the middle of a raging fire.

Kurt had been ever the gentleman, introducing her to a large number of guests and offering her the full use of his kitchen staff. She'd declined food for rest, and when Kurt

had shown her through his humble abode and then escorted her to this bedroom, it had taken much convincing to send him away. The man was nothing if not determined, but there was no way in hell he was going to find himself in her bed again. Despite his protestations to the contrary, she did *not* believe he'd left his wife.

Whether he had or hadn't wasn't of any consequence to Jayda. She had no intention of making a life with Kurt or any other man. Though Cole had climbed quite quickly up her potential husband meter, she realized that two sexual quickies did not a commitment make. Connections such as she felt with him only happened in fairy tales. She was a grown woman, and teenage fantasies were far behind her. Still, when Kurt had slammed into the interrogation room and bullied them into releasing her, Cole had looked so—what was it? Hurt? Betrayed? Pissed? Hell if she knew. But she hoped it was jealousy contorting his features.

A soft tap came at the door and Jayda instinctively gathered the satin robe in her fist, holding it securely closed at her neck. She had no intention of leading Kurt on. "Come in," she called softly.

Kurt opened the door, pushing a cart of food trays ahead of him. Already dressed for the day in khaki pants and a white button-down shirt, Kurt was ever the lawyer, even in his casual moments. The female bartender from the tavern shuffled in behind him, looking less professional in her baggy wool pants and oversized flannel shirt. Jayda felt foolish standing there in her pajamas.

"I'm so glad you're up, sweetheart. This is Becca. Another *guest*." He punctuated the last word with venom, and the woman cowered. "Becca stopped by unexpectedly this morning, and she could use some female companionship."

He left the breakfast cart next to a couple of wingback chairs in the corner. "As you know, I have much to do to prepare your defense." Walking up to Jayda, he squeezed her face with his fingers, puckering her lips before kissing her squarely on the mouth. "Do be a doll and entertain her in my absence." And with that odd display he was gone.

"A stranger in town making the locals comfortable?" Jayda mumbled absently. "Lonesome Fork is about as screw —"

"What?" Becca toyed with the hem of her shirt.

"Nothing." Jayda plastered on a smile. "Are you hungry?"

"Is he holding you captive too?" Becca's eyes sparked with fear and darted wildly about the room.

"What? No."

Becca shuffled close to Jayda, invading her personal space and making her uncomfortable. "He's up to something. I just know it." The woman's hands stirred the air in wild motions. "Something sinister and—" Becca looked around again, as if checking for cameras, and even though there were none, she lowered her voice. "I intend to discover what he's doing."

"Doing?"

"Isn't that why you're here?"

"No, Kurt's my lawyer. He —"

Becca ignored Jayda and ran to the balcony door. The woman had morphed from jovial bartender to crazed lunatic. Her body moved in quick, jerky motions, and her kind eyes sparked with madness. "We'll shift, and we can both get out. It's a long drop to the ground, but we can do it in animal form."

Becca slipped out of her heavy work boots and pants and pulled the bulky shirt over her head. She wore nothing beneath. How could a whole town share the same outlandish delusion? Questions tumbled one over another in Jayda's mind until there wasn't a coherent thought among the jumbled mess.

"Well, come on." Becca looked at her expectantly.

"Becca, you have mistaken me for someone or *something* else."

Becca pulled open the slider and inhaled. "No, Jayda, I don't think I have."

Jayda watched in abject horror as Becca's pixie features thickened and pulsed. Her body came down on all fours as fur replaced skin. Her torso lengthened and fingers and toes curled into paws. Becca flexed, and a tail sprang from her back as her neck lengthened. Ears and teeth stretched until all that stood before Jayda was not the sweet woman who had served her beers two nights ago, but a living, breathing *cougar*.

Jayda screamed and ran for the door.

The Becca-cougar snarled.

"Kurt!" Jayda screamed as she twisted the knob. *Locked*. "Kurt!" She pounded on the door, her voice hoarse with fear. "Someone, help me!" But no one came.

The cougar snarled and sprang, landing only a foot from Jayda in a crouched position. Except for the blueberry eyes, there was nothing of Becca in this animal. One swipe of the deadly claws, and Jayda would be shredded.

"Becca, I don't know if you can understand me—"

The cougar sprang again, and Jayda twisted away from the door and ran to the corner of the room. The big cat thumped her shoulder against the wall and landed on her feet with another gut-wrenching snarl.

The bathroom. It was Jayda's only hope. She ran for the opposite corner of the room and the shelter of a locked door, but her eyes must have telegraphed her intention. The animal sprang and blocked her path. The cougar's deadly stare pinned Jayda against the wall next to the marble fireplace.

The cougar's flanks quivered with anticipation. Becca was toying with her, but Jayda had no intention of becoming anyone's breakfast.

"Becca, you can escape...just like you planned...off the balcony. I...I won't call for help until long after you're gone," Jayda pleaded with the Becca-cougar. In animal form, who knew what the woman could understand.

The cougar sneered, bunched her muscles and sprang.

This time, Jayda was prepared for the attack. In one swift motion, she grabbed the iron poker from the fireplace tools. With a Herculean strength induced by fear and adrenaline, she swung it like a bat. It landed square across the cougar's face and shoulder. The unexpected impact sent the cat off balance, and Becca landed on her side and rolled. With her path to the bathroom totally blocked, Jayda ran for the balcony, intent on locking herself outside.

"Motherfucker!"

Becca's expletive stopped her short. Jayda turned to see the naked woman standing on the other side of the room, the last vestiges of the cougar disappearing. She rolled her bruised shoulder and cradled her battered jaw.

"I sure as hell didn't agree to this shit."

Completely ignoring Jayda's stunned expression and the lifted poker, Becca stalked past her and gathered her clothes. Throwing the oversized flannel over her head, Becca went to the door and pounded. "I'm done here. Get me the fuck out."

To Jayda's surprise, the lock on the door snicked and it eased open.

"She's no more a shifter than my Aunt Maisie. Let Kurt deal with the bitch."

Chapter Nine

Jayda would not die without a fight.

That's fully what she expected them to do with her now. Pin the murder on her then kill her and throw her body to the cougar-shifter-human-animal things like Becca and Cole. If she hadn't seen Becca morph before her eyes, she never would have believed what Cole said was true. She had no idea why he would think she was one of them. Obviously, Kurt had been under the same impression. Maybe that's why he had pursued a relationship with her in the first place.

A shudder rippled up Jayda's spine. Tonight was the full moon. Perhaps she was to be the sacrifice for some pagan ritual like the man in the woods. She had no idea. Whatever it was they wanted with her was evil. That much she understood.

Someone had tried to sedate her with the food. Jayda had smelled the strong elixir when she'd gone through the trays looking for weapons, but the plastic silverware they'd provided wouldn't help much against another cougar attack. The fireplace poker was her only weapon and that she kept close to her at all times.

She'd flushed a good portion of the food in hopes they would think she'd eaten it and become incapacitated. Since no one in the mansion was going to help her, she'd faked sleep when one of the servants had entered to collect the food cart, hoping to lull them into believing their plan had worked. Eventually, her guard had moved from her door.

Recognizing the futility of her situation, Jayda understood her only means of escape was through the mansion. The balcony in this room hung two stories over a steep mountain slope. No amount of bed linens and towels tied together were going to get her safely to the ground.

The nail file she was working with slipped out of the screw in the doorknob and jabbed her thumb. She cursed in frustration and fear. Her time was running out. Already the light of day was waning, and the moon would be up in only a few hours. *Patience.*

She steadied the file and began working the screw again. Jayda had every intention of getting out of here, losing herself in the forest and making her way home. And not just the cabin, and probably not her condo in Blackfish Springs either, but all the way home to New York where crazy people didn't pretend they were normal.

Jayda checked the clock. Nearly five. This was taking longer than she expected. Picking the lock hadn't gotten her anywhere, so removing the screws on the knob casing was her only option. Now, with one out and the second one just millimeters from falling, her heart raced wildly. As she twisted it the last few rotations with her fingers, Jayda pulled on the knob and separated it from the door. With some finagling, she managed to pull the two halves apart and release the lock mechanism with her finger.

Cautiously, she opened the door. As expected, the hall was empty in both directions. Without wasting too much time, she pushed the two knobs together so no one would be alerted to her escape.

Running down the hall in her stocking feet, her sneakers tucked into her denim jacket, Jayda believed her only hope lay in reaching the servants' entrance in the back of the house. She prayed if she came across anyone, she could fake delirium and make them think she was sleepwalking. The whole plan was a long shot, but at the moment, it was all she had.

The stairs were clear. Jayda rushed down and turned right.

Kurt's voice boomed from the great room on the other side of the hall. "Oh, Takoda can go fuck himself and along with every goddamned wolf shifter in his pack!"

Wolf shifter? Confusion stopped her. She contemplated running for the safety of the kitchen, but at the moment, learning more about shifters seemed a higher priority. Jayda slipped behind a large potted plant at the foot of the stairs.

"Kurt, be reasonable, if that Jayda woman isn't the one we've been waiting for, then tonight may not be the right time." A male voice.

"You planted the syringe. That should be enough to indict her for the killing of the wolf shifter." Another man. "Let their justice system send her to jail and be done with it."

"I don't give a hit about Jayda." Kurt spoke through clenched teeth. "I want what I've been working toward—ultimate power over cougar and wolf. How we do it is of no concern to me."

"Be reasonable, Kurt. I've been walking among the wolves for nearly a year." Jayda recognized Becca's voice. "They suspect nothing. The serum altering my scent is working. Add more spies if you want, but don't throw away all the work we've already put in."

"I don't want to wait another fucking three years for the next blue moon." The sound of splintering glass emphasized Kurt's words. "Besides, how many more wolves will we sacrifice to make it seem like humans are doing the hunting? Answer me that. Wolf shifters and humans can be sacrificed, but not the innocent animals." His voice actually softened with the last admission. "The rumors we started are spreading like a prairie wildfire through the humans. Soon Takoda won't be able to control the panic sweeping through their neighborhoods."

"Cole Takoda isn't going to turn his back on the humans he's sworn to protect." Another male. "I'm with the others, Kurt. Wait."

Murmurs of agreement rippled through the group.

"Stop worrying about Takoda and his fucking wolves!" The sound of fluttering paper and objects rebounding off a wall floated out with the words as if Kurt had swept the contents off a table. "Kill them. Kill them all. They can die along with the humans if

that's what it takes. I don't give a shit. I. Want. What's. Mine!" His voice rose with each word. "I've worked too damn hard to get this far, and I won't have the power of the councils snatched from me at the eleventh hour!"

"But, Kurt, I forced the woman's hand this morning. She can't shift. She'll do you no good tonight." Becca's voice.

Jayda held her breath in the deafening silence.

"But I suspect Takoda doesn't know that. He looked pissed when I took possession of Jayda last night at the police station. There's no doubt in my mind he's thinking she's the key to the legend." Kurt's words had lost their angry edge and now oozed with smooth confidence. "What if we parade Jayda into their pack meeting tonight and declare she's the one that's been prophesied? Tell them I already claimed her as mate and as such, *I* control both cougar and wolf councils. Who are they to argue? We'll do just as we planned. Only I won't have to suffer through another abysmal rutting with her."

Jayda scoffed at that. After what Cole had done to her body, she realized now how much she'd been missing in her years with Hansley.

"The woman will never go along with it," Becca said.

"She'll go along with anything I suggest as long as it gets her off that false murder charge. Besides I put enough sedative in her food for the foolish woman to be incoherent at least until tomorrow morning."

"If you get away with that, then what?" one of the males asked.

"Then forward as we planned. Begin killing off the humans systematically and any wolf shifters who oppose my new law."

Jayda had heard enough, she eased from behind the plant and moved stealthily toward the kitchen. Cole wasn't her enemy. Obviously, he had no intention of ruling a shifter-only world. Kurt Hansley was a madman, and the cougar shifters under his spell were just as frightening. Now, more than ever, she needed to escape, find Cole and warn him.

A maid stepped out of the dining room. "Miss?"

Jayda groaned and played woozy while still moving toward the kitchen.

Feet pounded down the stairs. "She's gone! The woman's gone!"

Jayda did her best impression of a swoon and landed in the arms of the burly man stepping through the kitchen door. He dropped his sandwich and scooped her limp body against the hard muscles of his chest.

"Where the hell is she?" Hansley's voice yelled from the hall. "Find that bitch."

"I've got her!" the man hollered. "And with all those sedatives in her system, she's not going anywhere."

* * * * *

Cole fought the urge to fidget in the uncomfortable metal chair as the critical stares of his pack weighed on his shoulders and squeezed the air from his lungs. He took a long pull of water from the glass in front of him, hoping it looked like the nonchalant act of a leader in control and not the desperate move a man floundering under his own guilt.

Normally, council gatherings didn't set Cole's stomach on fire with nerves. He'd been head of the wolf council since his father died nearly four years ago. From a very young age, Cole knew he'd carry this responsibility. It's what the eldest son in his family did. And when he had a son—make that *if* he had a son—it would pass on to him. So far, the closest he'd come to finding a mate had ended up costing him his self-respect and possibly his position as pack leader.

From his elevated seat on the makeshift stage, he could see out the side window. The blood-red glow of the rising moon silhouetted the tall pines and cast an eerie hue across the inky night. The blue moon was rising along with his anxiety. Cole wasn't sure he hadn't completely fucked up over the past couple of days and put his pack in some serious danger. Tonight he would share the truth about Jayda and accept whatever censure his pack doled out.

Only Aaron, sitting on his right, knew every intimate detail of his relationship with the woman. The three elders just past his beta wolf and the other four councilors to his left knew only that Cole had witnessed Jayda's near transformation between wolf and cougar – but not the circumstances.

The tiny structure in the middle of the woods where the pack gathered for their meetings held one hundred people comfortably. Twice that many now crammed into the open meeting room. Many stood along the walls and spilled into the adjacent kitchen they used for monthly Saturday suppers. He had no doubt every adult wolf shifter on Coppertip Mountain was here tonight.

Someone had thrown open the windows and doors, allowing the evening air to cool the heated bodies and eventually – tempers. Rumors had spread like a virus throughout the pack and Cole wasn't sure how the wolves would react when they had all the facts. Hell, he wasn't even sure how he felt about everything that had transpired.

Well, he'd just have to come to terms with the fact Jayda Kynslan had chosen Hansley and his cougar shifters and forget what his wolf and heart wanted.

Cole took his frustration out with the gavel. The sound echoed through the hall, and he waited for the rumble of voices to ease.

"I know the blue moon has brought you all here, and we'll get to what that means to our pack soon enough. But first we have to acknowledge the death of John Kilmer and offer condolences to his grandfather Frank."

The oldest man at the dais simply bowed his head in quiet acceptance.

"This is bullshit!" someone shouted.

Suddenly the room exploded.

"It's those damn humans killing our children!"

"Something's got to be done!"

"How many more have to die?"

People began shouting over each other. Cole slammed the gavel three or four times, hollering for order. When the roar was down to a low din, he spoke. "The killing will stop. My officers are working diligently –"

"To hell with human law!"

"How's that going to keep us safe in the meantime?"

The rowdy members were shushed by those around them.

"Let Cole speak."

"As I was saying, all of the families affected by the killings understand we can't go meting out vigilante justice. Like every other citizen, we need to let these crimes work their way through the justice system."

"Human justice doesn't work for shifters," a familiar voice called from the open door. Gasps rippled through the crowd, and Cole stood to see who had spoken.

Kurt Hansley strutted into the building with Jayda on his arm. His council of eight or ten cougars crowded in behind him. Several of Cole's pack stepped up and blocked their path.

"Is this any way to treat the only man who can protect you and bring these murderous humans to true justice?" Hansley asked.

"Let them pass." Cole forced the words from his lips.

Cougars on sacred wolf ground were unheard of, but having Jayda by the man's side changed the rules. Cole wanted not to care about her, but something in the way she looked put his wolf on alert and his resolution to forget about her dissolved. He could barely control the animal clawing at him to protect its mate. With her feet shuffling sluggishly and her unfocused eyes staring through everyone, Cole wanted to run to Jayda's side. It was only Aaron's tight grip on his forearm that held him in place.

Cole dropped heavily back in his chair, unable to stand the last blow of knowing she belonged to another man and that after tonight – he would have lost everything.

Hansley and his council pushed through the crowd and sauntered up the stairs to stand behind the elders. Frank Kilmer reached to help Jayda as she stumbled. Lady, who'd been lying peacefully at his feet, growled and trembled but didn't run to Jayda. The dog obviously didn't like cougars. Smart dog.

Hansley scanned the crowd, the showboating demeanor of a lawyer dropping into place. "Cole Takoda will not protect you in the dark time to come." Years in the courtroom had made Hansley a great orator. His charismatic presentation lay down the bait with its ominous tone. "Legend says there is one who will come to unite the cougars and wolves so they might defeat the evil that is rising up against them." Hansley paused, skillfully setting the hook.

"A polymorphic shifter," he continued, slowly reeling them in, drawing them closer to his net and ultimate control. "A child born of cougar and wolf, who on the blue moon can walk the realm between all three worlds." Kurt paused, drawing the tension taut. "I have brought to you tonight that living legend..." He stepped back, satisfied he'd captured the attention of the entire pack. "Jayda Kynslan. My mate!"

Feet and chairs shuffled and murmurs lifted, but no one challenged the cougar.

Hansley whispered in Jayda's ear and her arm lifted in a weak wave of greeting.

What the hell had he done to her? It took all of Cole's willpower to tamp down the growling wolf in him clamoring to be set free.

Hansley threw back his shoulders, his voice gaining power. "This great warrior will unite our clans and take us into battle against the humans, who even now are preparing to kill us all!"

"That's a lie, Hansley!" The words came out on a snarl and the metal chair bounced on the floor as Cole pushed to his feet. Lady barked several times. He turned to his pack, imploring them to believe his words. "Don't listen to him. Kurt Hansley wants only power. He doesn't care about wolf shifters. He wants to take from us the lands we will gladly share. He intends to take control and then go on a murderous rampage, wiping out humans and wolf alike."

“The man is only jealous of my mate, he tried to claim her, but she would not—”

As if waking from a dream, Jayda’s elbow connected solidly in Hansley’s ribs, cutting him off in mid-sentence. She broke from his grasp and ran to Cole’s side.

“Cole’s right. Don’t listen to Kurt,” Jayda shouted at the crowd, her finger shaking accusingly at Hansley as Lady jumped on her, licking her face. “He lies. Everything he tells you is a lie. I heard him today.”

Hansley turned slowly to face Cole, the hatred contorting his face into a mask of evil, but his voice was soft and even when he spoke. “Jayda, my love, I claimed you as my mate. You are mine. Don’t let Takoda and these wolves corrupt you.” Lady dropped to the floor, baring her teeth at the man who had taken her owner.

Jayda ignored both the dog and Hansley and spoke to the crowd. “I am not who he says I am. I am nothing but a mere human he despises. I knew nothing of shifters before coming to Lonesome Fork two days ago. It’s Hansley who’s killed the wolves and members of your pack. I heard the words from his own lips.”

“Shut up, bitch!” Hansley snarled and tried to back off the stage, his body changing, clothes ripping as he moved. Men stepped forward out of the crowd. They held guns and stopped the cougars who were shifting from leaving the dais.

The morphing of humans into animals didn’t seem to faze Jayda; she looked at the crowd and continued. “He sent cougar spies among you who disguised their scent and posed as wolves. Where’s Becca from the Whip and Bull?”

“She just left,” a person shouted from the back.

“She’s one of them. I don’t know who else. He’s been killing your people and making it look like the humans did it. But it was all him.”

Cornered by guns and accusations, Hansley, now in full cougar form, sprang at Jayda, claws and teeth bared, ready to rip open her throat. Cole read the intention in his eyes and pushed Jayda to the ground, simultaneously drawing his gun. But Lady was quicker and tackled the cougar, their bodies rolling in a mass of teeth and claws.

Cole had no clear shot.

"Lady, no!" Jayda shouted.

Instinct to protect the dog took over, and she rolled to her knees, Jayda's full cheeks and button nose flattened to the round shape of cougar nose then stretched and elongated into a muzzle, her amber eyes grew wide and canines extended. She snarled the warning growl of a wolf, and Hansley turned his attention from the wounded dog to the woman he wanted to possess.

Jayda's clothes ripped as her torso grew long and sleek, black fur growing where once was skin. Her hands curled into the paws of a cougar then filled out to the wide feet of a wolf. The narrow cougar tail springing forth became the bushy appendage of a wolf. As Hansley bunched his haunches, ready to strike, Cole realized he could take the kill shot, but this had become Jayda's fight.

In full wolf form now, Jayda sprang and clashed with Hansley in midair. They came down on the dais, rolled under the table and dropped heavily down to the concrete floor. Everyone, cougar and wolf alike, understood the battle belonged to the two animals fighting for their lives.

Gun aimed at the fray, Cole promised himself he would step in only if Jayda couldn't defeat Hansley. He would not lose her to this bastard.

Never having shifted before, Jayda was awkward in her movements, Hansley had the advantage of years of shifting, and his lithe ballet and strength were leaving their bloody marks on Jayda's hide. But instinct is a wonderful thing, and Jayda had the advantage of a blue moon shift. With the moonlight shining fully through the windows, Cole prayed Jayda would discover the power that lay within her heart.

Determination narrowed her eyes, and Jayda sprang, using her momentum to throw Hansley to his back and expose his jugular. Animal instinct took over, and her teeth clamped down hard around the man's neck. One twist of her powerful head, and she would end his life.

But she didn't.

She held him there. Her teeth positioned just right to slow the air to his lungs until Hansley was gasping for breath and powerless. His body morphed back to human form. Naked under Jayda's considerable wolf strength and weight, the man looked scrawny and pathetic, wheezing through his injured windpipe.

Cole jumped over the dais. Laying his hand on Jayda's shoulder, he urged her off the whimpering man.

Others moved in to take over and confine Hansley and his council. As Cole pulled Jayda from the gathering crowd, a foot shot out and caught Hansley in the ribs. Aaron stepped up to stop any further confrontation from the pack. As much as Hansley deserved whatever the shifters served up, true justice for his crimes would only come through the human laws Cole and Aaron had sworn to honor.

Cole turned to the black wolf, tattered and panting. He knelt before her, fear shadowing the golden glow of her eyes. Her wolf had finally been set free, but she obviously had no idea how any of it had happened. "It's all right, Jayda. Your wolf took over and finished what Hansley started. It's over," he whispered sweetly in the wolf's ear. Without the adrenaline coursing through her, Cole knew Jayda's first shift back would be painful. "Let go. Feel my strength and belief in you. I'm here."

Confusion and tears filled her eyes, but she didn't fight him. His hands stroked the velvet fur, soothing away her anxiety while his eyes remained focused on hers. Slowly Jayda's muscles boiled and bones shortened. Cougar features overrode wolf features. Human features appeared before being swallowed by animal. She rolled to her back in his arms and he removed his shirt and covered her torso. Her body convulsed and limbs shook as if death itself were tearing Jayda from him. Cole wished he could make this easier on her, but there was nothing he could do. Low moans of pain rose from her throat, some noises more animal than human. Cole talked to her, cradled her in his lap, helping Jayda find her way back to him.

Aaron carried a wounded Lady to them and laid her next to Jayda. Blood oozed from puncture wounds in her neck and shoulders. Skin hung from her flank where

claws had done damage, but nothing appeared life-threatening. The dog whined and nuzzled her owner as more human features appeared and remained. Lady understood what Jayda was, even if Jayda hadn't.

Then it was just Jayda, lying naked and beautiful in his arms. Her angelic features marred only by apprehension.

"Cole?" Her gaze searched his face for answers he wasn't ready to give. Not here. Not in this place, in front of so many people. He still wasn't sure how she would accept what he had to tell her. Most people understood all the advantages—and difficulties—of being a shifter from an early age. What Cole had to teach Jayda would be further complicated by her uniqueness.

"There'll be time for explanations later." He brushed tendrils of silken hair from her face.

The furrowed lines of her brow softened and the pinched corners of her mouth curved in a tremulous smile. She nodded. Lifting her arms around his neck, Jayda buried her face in the curve of his neck, her breath feathering across his chest.

Choosing Hansley earlier had been a decision made without knowledge or understanding, but Jayda's body had chosen her wolf for her first shift under the blue moon. Her choice now to trust Cole was based on fact—not fear. He saw her complete faith in him in the depths of her eyes, right before she closed them in exhaustion.

Cole stood and lifted Jayda as if she weighed no more than a child. She molded to him as if their bodies were designed for one another. The strength he garnered from her proximity made his steps more sure. Sensing the sacredness of the moment, the crowd parted. No one tried to hold them there with questions or accusations. There would be time to sort through pack concerns later.

Right now, only one person held his focus.

"Jayda," he sighed out her name as he walked into the night. Everything he had feared and worried about had been for naught. The blue moon had risen and with it—Cole's belief in life mates.

Chapter Ten

Jayda stretched her legs long, her paws throwing up bits of spring snow behind her. Even without the dappled drops of moonlight filtering through the thick canopy of black spruce, the inky shadows of night were uncharacteristically sharp in her vision. The myriad scents of animals and plants skittered over her flared nostrils, too overwhelming to interpret. *Amazing*. It's all she could think as she swerved effortlessly around a tree and bumped shoulders with another wolf in the pack. Jayda still wasn't used to the agility, strength and heightened senses her body had in this form.

In three days, she'd come to terms with all the years of joy and freedom she'd lost. The years of her adolescence and young adulthood spent without knowledge of the power that lay within her were gone. She'd spent a full day raging and crying over the loss. With Cole's help and the approval of his pack, Jayda had come to accept there was nothing she could change and no one to blame.

Her adoptive parents hadn't known. That had been clear as she'd chatted with her mother on the phone the day after the full moon. Gentle probing hadn't brought forth any information. Finally, Jayda realized it didn't matter. Mourning over the lack of knowledge was no more productive than grieving the loss of the birth parents she'd never known. Though she had to admit, this opened a new avenue for solving *that* mystery.

The dozen or so wolves broke through the tree line into the clearing at the top of Coppertip Mountain. They stopped as a group to admire the valley below. Some of the males threw back their heads and released plaintive howls that carried on the spring winds. Wolves had always sounded pitiful to her, their cries mournful to her human ears. Tonight she understood the celebration and joy they proclaimed. Wolves in the distance joined in the song of jubilation.

Jayda could only stare at the wolves she'd come to know in such a short period of time, her heart swelling with the love she already felt toward them. With the light of the waning moon bathing the pack in a soft wash of blue, their silver fur was nearly luminescent in her vision.

When Jayda had shifted the first night to run with them, only *she* had been concerned how her ebony coat had singled her out from the rest of the wolf pack. Cole's clan had accepted her as if she were a long-lost relative, none questioning her right to become one of them. At first she thought it had to do with her intimate relationship with their pack leader, but over the past couple of days, Jayda had come to understand there was some prophecy surrounding her first shift on the blue moon.

Refusing to listen to more than the basics involved in the folklore, Jayda was content to simply come to terms with her wolf-shifting persona. Cougar prides, polymorphic shifters and legends could wait until she'd completely integrated the truth of her genetics. One animal at a time was plenty for her, thank you very much.

A nose nudged her shoulder. Jayda turned and looked into the mesmerizing blue eyes of the wolf who had become such an integral part of her life in such a short period of time. Love at first sight had never made sense until she'd met Cole Takoda. Now she didn't know how she would ever live without him. His muzzle caressed her neck and she understood immediately what he wanted. When Cole turned and ran into the woods, she followed. But she was no match for his years of experience and masculine strength.

This was only their third run in as many days and Jayda had always stayed close on his heels, fearful to lose her way. When the unfamiliar darkness of the forest swallowed his shadow, panic rose in her chest and pounded in her ears. It took only a moment before she realized Cole had probably done it on purpose. He'd threatened to leave her during their morning run, but after tearful pleas to the contrary, he'd stayed by her side while they'd run.

Now she was forced to find her own way. The howling sound of the pack behind her comforted and gave her confidence. Closing her eyes, Jayda let her nose be her guide. The unmistakable scent of Cole's wolf lingered on the air, mixed with the woody aroma of a chimney. *Home*. How many times had she watched Lady find her way by smell alone? Jayda centered herself and bent her nose to the ground. Following the familiar scents of Cole and Lady, she found her way to the cabin within minutes.

Coming around the driveway, she stopped to admire Cole on the front porch. Already in human form, the man was a breathtaking sight to behold. With his broad chest heaving from the run, the wind dancing through his hair, his manhood hanging heavy at the apex of well-muscled thighs, his nakedness ratcheted up her heart rate another notch or two.

"I knew you could do it," he said, his smile of pride reaching up to spark in the depths of his eyes. "You need to trust your instincts. It just takes a little practice." Cole pulled open the door and she padded up the stairs and into the cabin, brushing across his thighs as she passed.

He closed and locked the door. Lady lazily lifted her head from her dog bed in the corner. Having seen Jayda shift on several occasions, the wolf entering the cabin didn't bother her and the lab settled back down without a sound. Though the wounds inflicted by Hansley in cougar form had looked terrible, only one had required stitches. The others Jayda had cleaned and bandaged and would heal on their own. She would always be grateful to the dog for helping her discover the animal living within her.

Hansley on the other hand, could rot in jail while he awaited trial for all the murders he'd committed over the last several months. It saddened her that shifters and wolves had died for his selfishness and greed. She still didn't understand the full history of cougars and wolves on Coppertip Mountain but suspected it would simply be another chapter of her ongoing shifter education.

As was their usual routine, Cole settled on the couch and waited as Jayda lumbered up. She lay on her belly next to him, her muzzle in his lap, her head snuggled into the

warmth of his stomach. As he'd done with her last shifts, he chanted an ancient prayer, stroking her head and Jayda gave herself over to the shift.

She focused on his voice and the comforting heat of his body. Years of her body holding tight to its secret meant that it hadn't discovered the natural rhythm of shifting back to human form. It was only Cole's proximity and gentle coaxing that allowed her to find her way back to him.

Steeled against the inevitable, Jayda readied herself for the pain. Lightning bolts of current ripped through her muscles and burned in the depths of her bones as they warped and reformed. Her back arched in spasm and claws curled into the couch cushions. Agony tore through her gut as organs rearranged. Though Jayda clenched her teeth against it, a growl of panic and misery ripped from her throat.

It took less than a minute for her body to find equilibrium. The heat dissipated and her muscles relaxed as she rolled to her back. She opened her eyes to find comfort in Cole's eyes, his compassionate gaze searching her face. He tenderly wiped the tears from her cheeks and gently pressed his lips to hers.

"It will get better, Jayda. I promise." Pulling her into his lap, Cole cradled her in the comfort of his body. "Your body will figure it all out. It's only been a handful of shifts and already you're focused enough to go straight from wolf to human without any cougar parts in between." He brushed the hair from her face. "How was the pain this time?"

"On a scale of one to ten?" she asked.

Cole nodded.

"Twelve."

"That's better than the fifteen you had this morning. See? You're making progress." He smiled and kissed her nose. "You don't have to shift, Jayda. No one would blame you." His sincerity made her heart ache. "You've lived this long without your animals. Your life would certainly be less complicated without the shifting."

"That's not really an option, Cole." She whispered the words, but the truth was obvious to both of them. "I may not understand all that I am, but it's clear your pack has laid a great responsibility at my feet." Forcing her mouth into a smile, Jayda attempted a bravado she didn't feel. "Besides, now that I've discovered this part of myself, I think I'm becoming addicted to the power and strength of my wolf. I'm not sure I'd ever want to give that up even if the pain never subsides." She laid her palm on his cheek. "As long as you're by my side, I have no doubt I can do it. Besides, I don't think I've *ever* slept so soundly. Though that's probably just the fresh mountain air."

Laughing, Cole pulled her tight to his chest. "Oh, is it now?"

It was a lie and they both knew it. He'd essentially moved into the cabin the night of the full moon and she barely stood the empty hours he was forced to work. Her nipples peaked as she rubbed her breasts against the fuzzy softness of his chest. "What else could it be?"

"Definitely not the extra recreation I've been offering. No doubt that has nothing to do with your exhaustion."

"The runs in the woods are amazing for sure —"

He pinched her ass and she yelped in surprise. "I was referring to our *other* form of exercise."

"Oh well, then perhaps we should test that hypothesis and be sure it's not the runs under the full moon that are wearing me out." Jayda wiggled her ass provocatively against his growing erection.

"Hmm, I'm not sure how to test it exactly. Are you tired now after your run?" Humor sparked in his eyes.

"I'm a little worn-out but I might have enough energy for this." She dragged her teeth along his jaw.

"That's a good start."

"Or maybe a little of bit of this?" She sucked his sensitive earlobe into her mouth, laving it with her tongue. She couldn't hold back the smile when his cock jumped.

"I can't imagine that would wear you out."

"I never said I was tired, Takoda." Trailing her mouth down the cords of his neck, Jayda kissed the juncture of Cole's shoulder. Her hands slid down his torso and she pushed to her feet. "As a matter of fact, having you naked and at my mercy gives me plenty of energy." She bent at the waist, licking and nipping at his neck before sinking to her knees between his trembling thighs.

"Exactly what do you have in mind, Dr. Kynslan?"

Jayda kissed a path down his torso, tracing each indentation of his trembling muscles with her tongue. The fingers of one hand skimmed around the fuzzy sac of his testicles, lifting and squeezing, while the other pulled a slow, torturous path up his growing erection. "I was thinking a little test of my oral abilities might be in order."

Cole leaned back and sighed. She loved that she'd rendered him speechless.

She pressed her voluptuous breasts together and surrounded his cock. Jayda bent and kissed the mushroom head, licking the pre-cum and savoring the musky taste of him. She ran her tongue around the crown, drawing another groan of pleasure from Cole. His fingers twisted in her hair, the pain of the gesture a sexy reminder of the power she held to drive him mad with lust as her mouth made love to his cock. Releasing her breasts, Jayda leaned back on her heels and slowly sucked his penis deeper into her mouth. The velvety skin slid over her tongue, the roadmaps of veins adding another texture. Her pussy clenched and wept as he groaned with the pleasure she offered him.

She pulled up, her cheeks hollowing as she sucked and added pressure, her tongue flicking along the sensitive underside of his cock. Bending again, Jayda swallowed him deeper into her mouth. When his cock hit the back of her throat, she relaxed and took him deeper still until his halo of hair tickled her lips and the earthy scent of him teased her nostrils.

She pumped up and down, the sexy slurping sounds of his cock fucking her mouth matching the hitch of his breath.

"Jayda, this feels so wonderful, but I want to make love to you."

She lifted away from his erection, the tip of her tongue pressing into the slit before she spoke. "I want that too, Cole."

He bent and retrieved a condom packet from the floor.

The action didn't insult her. Quite the contrary, it warmed her heart that he would want her so much. "You were pretty sure of yourself, Takoda, to have that handy."

He actually blushed. "A man can always be hopeful."

"You can't fool me. You've got me pegged as an easy mark." Jayda crawled into his lap and took the condom from him. "Don't forget who first propositioned whom at the Bull."

He stilled her hands, all humor gone from his intense gaze as it scorched to the very soul of her. "Jayda, you may have been the one to make the first move, but it's me who's completely under your spell. I had no idea you were missing from my life. But here you are and I don't know what I'm going to do when you leave in a few days."

Tears burned the back of her eyes and a hot lump of emotion pressed hotly in her throat. Neither of them had dared broach the subject. But here it was and Jayda couldn't believe she wasn't the only one who felt the deep connection that had wrapped her heart around Cole's in such a short span of time. "I don't want this to end when I go back to Blackfish Springs, Cole."

"Neither do I." His hands came up and sandwiched her face. "I've been searching for you for a long time, Jayda, and I didn't even know it until you were here and warm and in my arms. You're so beautiful. I never expected my mate to take my breath away." He froze, his gaze assessing her reaction as if he wanted to take the words back.

"Cole, the word *mate* doesn't frighten me like I thought it would. It's just that I'm not sure I can live up to all it intimates." Her lips pressed gently to his, gathering

courage from the contact before she pulled back and continued. "I asked Aaron exactly what being a mate means to a shifter. He explained the intimate marking ceremony and that once I agree and it's done—it's forever. Even I know wolves mate for life."

"Yes, but I meant—"

She quieted Cole with a finger to his full lips. "It's all right. I know I want you..." Jayda waved her hand between them. "And I want this. It's just that I'm not ready to be marked and promise you that kind of commitment. There's so much for me to learn and understand. You're the pack leader. Even I understand that whoever becomes your mate takes on a great responsibility and I'm just not sure..." She couldn't go on. There hadn't been enough time to assimilate all that had happened in the last few days. But Jayda had no doubt she wanted Cole as desperately as she wanted her next breath.

"I don't need your lifetime commitment now, Jayda." His mouth curved in the boyish grin she'd come to love. "I'm just happy you won't be leaving for good. We'll figure it out. This is right. Right now I have enough belief in the future for both of us."

Sexual hunger darkened his eyes the moment before his hot mouth crushed against hers. Jayda opened for Cole, the heat of him filling her mouth and searing through her veins. When his tongue plunged in to tangle with hers, the familiar taste of him bursting on her tongue, their breaths mingled in a dizzying dance of passion. Her internal muscles contracted and liquid need dampened her thighs. His hands came up, massaging the back of her neck, his thumbs caressing her jaw. Cole changed the angle, deepening the kiss, completely stealing her breath as her world narrowed to the places where his body touched hers.

Mindless sexual lust had Jayda's fingers fumbling with the condom, working it down the silky steel of his cock. She wanted—no, make that, *needed*—Cole to fill her. To feel him take possession of her. To have his cock fill and stretch her, fusing their bodies into one inseparable unit. To rise as one on the plane of bliss where lovers' hearts and souls bonded together.

Though she suspected they'd already bonded in the backseat of his car days ago.

Already drenched by passion and need, Jayda lifted up on her knees and guided Cole's penis to her waiting pussy. Without prelude, other than the fire of his kisses burning desire through her veins, she came down hard, impaling herself on his sheathed erection. Cole's wide girth stretched her, eliciting an oath of desperation. Flexing her ass, Jayda canted her hips and buried him to the hilt in her silken channel. Pleasure trembled up her spine. The soft halo of curls rubbed provocatively against her sensitive clitoris.

Cole broke from their kiss to suck her achy nipple into the damp fever of his mouth, branding her with his teeth. She groaned out his name, arching her back to give him better access. His tongue whirled around the areola before traveling to lave attention to her other pearled bud. Her breasts grew heavy with his ministrations. When his teeth bit into the sensitive nub, jolts of bliss shot straight to her cunt, clenching her internal muscles. The deep groan rumbling through his chest communicated that he felt it too.

His fingers dug into her ass, urging her up and down Cole's cock in a steady rhythm. As the speed and their desperation increased, the sound of skin slapping against skin lifted with their incoherent oaths of rapture. Jayda's nails dug half-moons into Cole's broad shoulders as she fought against the fire of bliss blazing over her muscles.

She captured his mouth, swallowing his moans of pleasure then giving them back to him as her own throat vibrated with uncontrolled sounds of bliss. Cole slipped his hand between their bodies, seeking the sensitive nub of her clitoris. With gentle circles, the pad of his thumb teased the bundle of nerves until frissions of pleasure sparked from her pelvis along her nerves to curl her toes. Waves of heaven rolled through her, carrying away all logical thought. There was only Cole and the mounting pressure of ecstasy his body brought to hers. Sparks became lightning strikes quaking through her body. Her muscles clenched, the pressure building until there was nothing she could do but give herself over to the explosion of euphoria sending her flying on clouds of ecstasy.

Cole's orgasm came hard and fast as her pussy contracted around his cock. Throwing his head back, a feral cry of rapture ripping from his throat, Cole slammed his throbbing cock into her body. Jayda shattered into a thousand pieces of bliss, torn apart by the joy of tumbling into the abyss of ecstasy with Cole.

Shudders of heaven rippled through them as they milked the last of the pleasure from each other's bodies. His arms came up her back, surrounding her, gathering Jayda in the safety and comfort of his embrace. Muscles lax, Jayda settled on Cole's chest, her racing heart pounding in synchronized harmony with the man who had opened a new door in her life.

He may not have marked her as his mate, but Cole had reached in, branded her heart and permanently bound Jayda's soul to his.

There would be no turning back now.

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.

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