



TWILIGHT

CAROLINA VALDEZ

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...One hot afternoon, they crossed a flowering meadow through golden sunlight to the blue waters of a large, spring-fed pond on the ranch's property. On impulse, they'd skinny-dipped. Removing their clothes, backs turned, they'd entered the water without peeking. When they left the water to dry in the sun, whatever self-consciousness they'd felt about their bodies had disappeared.

Cade sensed they'd reached another stage in the mating ritual. Surely the sex he longed for with this fascinating man would happen soon.

Lee had stood on the bank, hands on his hips, comfortable with his nudity. His eyes roved over Cade's body as he walked out of the water. "I knew you'd look like this. All big muscle and corded sinew. I've wanted to see your thighs. I love the way they strain your jeans and the control they have over the horses you ride."

"My thighs? Are you sure that's all you've wanted to see?" The rush of feeling he'd experienced in the bar when Lee smiled at him made its appearance again. It was difficult to catch his breath as he teased, "Did you think maybe a Lakota Native's dick would be different from a white man's?" He'd stood proudly, his cock burgeoning as he gazed at Lee's body and had watched with pleasure as Lee's dick loaded and lifted in response to his.

Lee came to him, and their lips met as easily as if they'd done this before, sending a punch of heat right to his core. Lee opened to him, and he explored the heat and wetness, tasted the tangy essence of Lee as their tongues swept and tangled, enjoying an erotic dance that promised more intimate things to come...

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TWILIGHT
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To the horse whisperers

CHAPTER 1

*Lazy M Ranch
Mountain Valley, Wyoming*

As the shadows of twilight brushed the sky and land with a gray wash, Lee absorbed Cade's excitement over the adventure he was leaving on the next day. His talk was upbeat about the expedition as he led Lee to the new addition to his stable—a stall for the stallion he hoped to break in the wild and bring home.

“All the Pryor Mountain horses are direct descendants of the Spanish Colonial horses brought here by the *conquistadores*. I like that idea.”

Lee smiled. He understood why that would appeal to a Native American. First peoples, early horses.

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He enjoyed the sight of the broad man moving with quiet, catlike grace past the other wooden stalls toward the new one. The first time he'd seen Cade he was on the back of a disgruntled horse, riding without saddle or blanket. Sweat glistened on his shirtless, muscular arms and torso. A faded red headband had tamed his black hair and kept the sweat out of his eyes. His strong thighs had anchored him to the bucking Paint so determined to unseat him.

A lusty hunger had leaped in Lee's core and settled at the base of his spine as he saw the power in the man, watched in awe at his skill and confidence as, with patience, he coaxed the animal to submit to his weight. A sudden hard-on had prompted Lee to slide his medical bag casually in front of him to hide the swell in his groin. He'd wanted the rider with unbridled urgency.

Now the sweet smells of fresh hay and new wood rose around them, and Lee thought he couldn't be more fascinated by anyone than his gifted, earthy Cade with the patrician nose and prominent cheekbones who'd become his lover. He'd contacted every doctor he knew to find one to fill in for him at the town's veterinary hospital, but it was not to be. He couldn't ride with Cade on this venture. Instead, he'd wait here impatiently until he returned.

As they stood just outside the stall talking about the anticipated new resident, twilight deepened, promising a moonless darkness. A sudden trill of fear hit him, as if it warned that someone or something threatened to destroy what they had together. Lust—hot, urgent and ravaging—raced desperately through him, as if the sex act could meld Cade to him and weave a charm that would keep him safe on his journey and bring him home again.

Telling himself this wasn't rational for someone with science degrees who thought in logical terms, he nevertheless pushed Cade

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into the stall, kicked the door shut behind them and pulled him down with him onto the thick, clean bed of straw.

Cade smiled his slow, lazy smile, but his voice rasped with an echoing lust. “Hey, what’s all this about?”

“I have to have you. Now. Fast.” Crazy with the raw need to touch him, to inhale the clean scent of Cade’s skin and press his lips and mouth to it, to feel the hard length of his velvet cock in his hand and taste its salty drool, Lee pushed Cade’s fly buttons through their holes and yanked his jeans and boxers down in one swift pull.

Cade’s skillful hands had already freed Lee, and he rose like a mantle over him. “What if someone comes?” he asked. His voice was rough, but it was obvious he had no intention of stopping. He was poised to plunge into Lee right where Lee wanted and craved it.

“They’re all busy elsewhere. Hurry—”

CHAPTER 2

*Pryor Mountain
Montana, US*

For two days, under a blue crystalline sky, Cade Montana followed the wild, reddish-bay mustang as its thick black mane flowed and the tip of its black tail brushed the ground. Cade rode behind and at a distance, but always in sight of the brown eyes that were dark, liquid pools, giving them a chance to understand he wasn't going to hurt him. He knew it was important not to rush or frighten the spirited equine.

He'd paid the Bureau of Land Management a hundred-twenty-five dollars to adopt this particular mustang and attempt to break him in the wild. At only fourteen hands high, the horse wasn't big,

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but there was something about the intelligence in the deep, dark eyes and his spirit as he ran—tail high, head up, mane flying in the wind—that wrapped around Cade's heart and captured his imagination.

Even though Lee, the most important man in his life, couldn't leave his vet practice to be here, other friends skilled with horses were with him. After riding several miles, they'd located the bay's herd on the low ground of the Wyoming wild horse range on Pryor Mountain.

"There he is. The one with the white blaze on his forehead." Excitement poured through Cade as he pointed to the remarkable horse he'd purchased.

"I'll cut him outta the herd, and Callie'll lead them in the other direction so he can't go back to them," Mark said, saddle creaking as he turned. Mark had worked the Lazy M since even before Cade had agreed to run it for an uncle. Despite the judicious use of sunblock, his skin was too brown and craggy for his age. "Ready, boss?"

"Let's do it!" Cade pressed his heels into Iron Man's belly, and they set out at a trot through pine-scented air over tasty grasses and around clumps of dark green sage.

Riding On A Dime, his Quarter Horse, Mark skillfully separated the horse from its herd. He drove him away from his family, just not by biting and kicking the way an alpha mare would drive an unruly youngster out when his behavior displeased her.

Colleen's red hair bounced as she rode her Appaloosa, and she and her seventeen-year-old son, Nick, chased the herd away. Cade blocked the mustang's flight to return to his family.

The horse took off, heading toward high ground.

On the reservation where he was raised, Cade's grandfather had

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taught him a young horse knew how vulnerable he was if separated from the protection of the herd. Big cats might tear his throat open and clamp down on his windpipe until he suffocated. Wolf packs might bring him down and rip him apart. His grandfather said it wouldn't take the horse excluded from the herd for punishment long to be properly penitent and plead with the matriarchal mare to be allowed to return to the herd.

The BLM had granted Cade special permission to break a mustang in the wild, and he'd chosen this particular herd because it had been proven that their DNA was untainted from the days of the Spanish conquerors. To gentle this feral thing, he counted on its need to join up with a family to bring the horse to him. Meanwhile, he must keep it in sight and safe from predators.

As relentless in his pursuit as the Hound of Heaven in Francis Thomas's poem, Cade rode and dozed in the saddle, only leaving it to change mounts, to relieve himself, or when the young horse stopped to rest or graze. The high altitude added to his fatigue. When Cade gave in to these brief naps, the enhanced weariness caused snatches of frightening dreams to move like torn film through his mind. Once he woke himself up when he dreamed of a huge cougar's teeth tearing at a downed bay belly. Another time, he saw a black, analogous mass of a monster enveloping Lee.

As the nightmare dissipated, a sudden ache threaded through him to his groin because his need to have Lee here sharing this challenge with the youngster ran deep. There was no question in his mind that Lee really couldn't have been here, but, as nice as the friends with him were, loneliness cut deep into him.

Now Cade munched on beef jerky and apples and drank water from his canteen. The nights had turned bitterly cold and although he'd dressed for it, he still felt chilled bone deep. Exhaustion

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fought to defeat him, and every movement made his tailbone feel like it pounded on a steel anvil. But nothing dampened his determination to break this wild creature and take him home.

Figuring they'd covered way too many miles by now, his Lakota blood told him soon, soon the strong youngster would decide this man was not going away and was his last best chance at survival.

The sun dipped below the horizon and the refraction of the sun's rays through the atmosphere created the soft glow of twilight. That would fade and twilight would descend into darkness. Twilight was always a dangerous time for horses because predators went on the prowl.

While his friends ate hot food and slept around a campfire, taking turns standing guard, Cade stayed painfully in the saddle for the third night, his rifle strapped to his saddle in case he needed to protect the teenager running on nimble hooves through the darkness. Cade wasn't sure his body could manage through even one more night. His ass was tough because he'd ridden since he was a tyke, but it wasn't tough enough. He reached under and massaged first one butt cheek and then the other. Even standing in the stirrups at times to relieve surefooted Night Fox of his weight didn't help much with his butt.

As the light faded, the strange tingling in his hands and feet, which had cropped up for no reason in the last couple of weeks at twilight, began again, adding to his discomfort. Hoping to alleviate the pain, he wiggled his toes in his boots and rubbed his gloved hands together to bring more blood to them. Fact was, he hadn't felt like himself in general since this project began, especially with the nightmarish quality of his dreams. His entire body felt out of sorts.

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Damn it. If I'm going to be sick, it better not hit until I'm home.

He rode Night Fox after sundown because of his unerring ability to avoid holes and other dangerous obstacles in the dark. The feral horse also had this trait or he wouldn't be running with such unerring agility when the moon was only a sliver in the velvet sky.

Without warning, Night Fox began blowing and trembling. Instantly alert, Cade's keen sense of hearing told him what the danger was before he saw what alarmed his mount. Fear jolted through him. "Puma! Two-o'clock!"

The small stallion screamed and ran. Cade's war cry rang out as he dug his heels into Night Fox, unsnapping his rifle case as the big horse took off running toward the terrified mustang.

Mark had left the campfire only minutes earlier and swung into his saddle to join his boss, and now he thundered past him, whirling his rope and letting out a piercing whistle to look big and dangerous to the mountain lion. Cade joined him, his rope waving as he pushed Night Fox against his will between the cat and the terrified mustang. But the puma was intent on feeding. It snarled and, abandoning the stallion, turned on Mark's mount. Cade pulled Night Fox up as he yanked his rifle from the holster, aimed and fired, hitting the puma in its throat.

The animal dropped, twitched and lay still.

The smell of rifle fire was acrid in the air. The weapon's punch made his shoulder ache, adding to his misery. Cade's heart continued to hammer from the excitement of the kill as he circled the body. He stared at the thing on the ground, at the dark, spreading liquid he knew was blood. Night Fox was still jittery from the scent of the cougar, and he kept a tight rein on him. Maybe the failing light, coupled with fatigue and dealing with his

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mount accounted for the eerie feeling he had that the animal's eyes, pleading and sad, stared right into his. Then life left the cougar, almost as if it were a fog drifting away, and the eyeballs disappeared from their sockets, leaving black holes.

What the hell? Cade's skin crawled. The hairs stood up on his arms and he couldn't move.

"Go," Mark shouted. "I'll be sure it's dead."

Eagerly, Night Fox shot away from the puma and into the darkness after the escaping mustang. Cade gritted his teeth as his sore butt pounded down on the saddle with every stride.

It seemed the night and the flying horses raced on forever, but, at last, the terrified equine slowed and stopped to rest. Night Fox did the same. Relaxing, Cade let himself fall asleep in the saddle, trusting his horse to keep tabs on the mustang and alert him again if danger struck.

* * *

Dawn peeped over the mountains with fingers of lavender, pink and gold, and Cade wakened and stretched, rubbing his eyes. When he opened them, he heard the mustang chomping grasses and sage behind him.

Yes!

Urging his mount forward a few feet, he listened to see if the mustang would follow. He did.

Turning slowly in the saddle so as not to startle him, Cade spoke in his native tongue, offering soft words of welcome and of thanks for coming to him. As he drank in the sight of the proud head, powerful hindquarters and sure feet, he whispered his own secret Lakota name, one known only to himself and the shaman

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who'd bestowed it when he'd declared him a true warrior. He told the wild thing he'd be a warrior, too, when he accepted a saddle with Cade on his back for the first time. Then Cade would give him a secret name of his own.

Callie brought Cade a thermos of hot coffee, two sugar glazed donuts, and a fresh horse.

"You've just saved my life." Cade sank his teeth into the rich sweetness of the first donut and let the flavor roll around in his mouth. He swigged the bitter, dark coffee and raised his cup in a salute. Having downed drink and sweets, he slid to solid earth and walked off to relieve himself. Then he mounted the fresh horse Callie led to him.

Callie laughed. "The way you stuck with that mustang, you've got to be the most patient person I've ever known. And a horse whisperer extraordinaire." She led Night Fox away for a rubdown, a drink and food. But not before Cade patted his neck, whispered thanks in his ear, and rubbed his face in appreciation.

Mark rode up. "Great work, Cade. Have you named the mustang?"

"Thanks, but we all did the work. I couldn't have done it without the three of you. I'm thinking Wild Heart for his name."

Mark nodded. "He's certainly got a big one. I'd say he gave you quite a chase before he decided to stop running from you."

"I think rescuing him from the puma settled that question."

He shuddered as the weird image of the cougar's eyeballs popped into his mind again. Sadness. Pleading. Then disappearing from their sockets. It must be his Native blood imagining that fantasy. He shook his shoulders to relieve the tension and erase the strange encounter. He almost held his breath as he waited for the answer to his question, "Anything unusual about that puma?"

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“Nope. Gaunt and dead. He must have been a hungry son of a bitch. Thank the good Lord you’re the marksman you are. He was crouched and eyeing On A Dime’s neck, ready to spring when you got him.” Mark shuddered.

“It’s why I risked the shot. I’m glad hunting them’s okay in this state. In California, I’d have to justify the kill.”

“There’d be no problem with that. I’d be the first to testify it was a life and death issue! Let’s head for camp and get some rest. You’ve got bags the size of Frisbees under your eyes, my man.”

* * *

It was early afternoon before Cade recovered enough to begin the training of Wild Heart. The stallion accepted Cade when he leaned from his saddle and rubbed his neck, face, and the sensitive areas of his belly and rump. With Mark on the opposite side of the horse, they slipped a rope over his head.

Terrified, Wild Heart rose on his hind legs and struck out, slashing with his deadly front hooves. The men, prepared for this, stayed well out of his way until he’d calmed and was quiet again. Cade slid off his horse and approached on foot as he tightened up the slack in the lead rope. Wild Heart waited, eying Cade with suspicion, while Cade repeated the touching actions he’d used when mounted. To the horse, the man on the ground was a different person from the one he knew on horseback. He had to learn to trust Cade all over again.

Wild Heart stepped forward to snuff Cade’s face.

“See that?” Cade kept his voice quiet so as not to startle the mustang, but he was excited enough to shout about this small victory.

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“We can all stay as long as breaking him takes, Cade. Unlike horses raised on a ranch, he’s never seen any of this equipment and stuff. If we rush him in accepting all these new things, he’ll balk for sure.”

Cade nodded. “Thanks for being willing to go at his pace. I’ll talk to Callie first, but I think Nick is the best choice as the first one up. Lee suggested him, and I think he’s right. You agree?”

“I do.”

They worked with the stallion for the next few days. Now the crew ate canned beans around a campfire that hurtled orange and red flames against a midnight sky. Its occasional crackles and the shuffling of the horses on the picket line were all that broke the stillness.

Cade turned to Nick. “Wild Heart’s ready for a rider, and you’re the lightest among us. Willing to go for it?”

Callie chuckled. “We’ve located some nice soft sand near the river in case you’re bucked off.”

Firelight danced off the grin on Nick’s face. “Cool! Wait ’til the kids at school hear I was the first one up on a wild mustang. One with pure Spanish blood from the horses of those conquistador dudes.”

All the adults chuckled, but Cade felt everyone’s anticipation rise because tomorrow they’d break a mustang in the wild with nothing but gentleness and an understanding of a horse’s nature. He smiled at Callie’s description of him as a horse whisperer. Memories of hours spent as a boy with his grandfather on the reservation, watching and analyzing how horses behaved, sent warmth through him.

They rose at first light, groomed and fed the horses and led them to water. Callie and Nick cooked bacon, hot oatmeal and

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scrambled eggs, and made coffee. Cade and Mark made ham and cheese sandwiches and packed lunches for them.

Cade fed Wild Heart. As he walked to the water trough, Wild Heart followed him so close his breath warmed Cade's neck above his heavy jacket. Cade's happiness expanded. The young mustang had bonded with him. It would be a life-long connection. He rubbed the stallion's neck. "Lord, but I can hardly wait for Lee to see you. He's going to love you as much as I do."

All along he'd wanted to keep Lee posted on his cell phone, but they didn't get reception here on the mountain. Nick had insisted on taking digital photos, but Cade stored in his mind all the news for the return to his ranch. And to Lee.

Wild Heart balked the first time Cade tried to put the training saddle on him, rising on his hind legs and slashing out again with his sharp, death-dealing hooves. Second time around, he accepted it, and Cade rubbed the bones of his face and stroked his neck as he told him in the Sioux language of the Lakota what a wonderful horse he was. Now it was time for a rider, and he spoke of that as well.

"You know the routine, Nick. This first time, just lay crosswise in the saddle so he feels your weight. Next time, swing a leg over and sit astride."

"Gotcha." Nick grinned with excitement.

Callie gave him a leg up, and Nick lay across the saddle. Wild Heart danced sideways, but Cade held him tight and when he'd quieted, Nick slid off.

Next, Cade sensed Callie's tension as Nick swung into the saddle. She was his mom, and as much as she trusted her son's abilities, her mother's concern for his safety with a young horse this unschooled surfaced.

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“Watch him!” Mark cried as Wild Heart, acting on instinct, bucked off the unwanted thing on his back.

“I’m okay.” Nick had rolled away from the thunderous hooves and now he hopped up from the ground.

Three more times, Wild Heart threw him off and Nick landed in the soft sand a little bruised but without serious injury.

When he mounted the fifth time, Wild Heart accepted him with minor fussing. He even allowed Nick to take him a few paces. When they tried the Western saddle, he resisted, then gave in. When Nick mounted him and rode him for a longer stint, Cade felt his heart almost pound out of his chest with pride.

When Wild Heart accepted Cade on his back, Cade patted his neck and declared him a warrior.

Leaning down, he whispered Wild Heart’s new, secret Lakota name in his ear.

CHAPTER 3

*Lazy M Ranch
Mountain Valley, Wyoming*

Twilight had colored the land gray as Cade pulled up at the Lazy M. Darkness hovered, bringing with it the tingling and uneasiness Cade had felt on the range with Wild Heart. The hairs stood up on his arms.

Damn, but I'm tired. Too weary for things to seem normal.

As Mark and the other stablemen tended to the rest of the horses, Cade backed Wild Heart's trailer up to the chute that led to the training corral. The mustang wasn't trailer trained, so to get him home they'd loaded him using a chute. Since he'd bonded with Cade, Cade released him into the training corral. He would be

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the only person working with the stallion, and once Wild Heart fully accepted him, he could accept other people.

Cade turned his back on him and headed for the house. Wild Heart, who wasn't on a lead of any kind, followed, his nose almost touching Cade's back as if he feared being separated from him. He nickered when the fence stopped his progress.

The screen door slammed and Lee stepped out, his worn boots sounding on the wooden verandah. He could see the training corral, and he stood and watched, his neat brown hair shining with health despite the fading light, his thumbs hooked in the pockets of Levi's washed to faded blue and tucked into his boots.

A wash of heat and lust and happiness rolled through Cade at the sight of the man who'd captured his heart. The happiness helped stem the fatigue urging him to collapse.

"Showing off, are you, Cade Montana?" Lee smiled, the corners of his mouth crinkled with mirth. Lee spoke his name with the intonation a native would use, stressing what he'd said was one of the unique things he loved about him.

"Showing off? Who, me?" Cade stopped and his return smile bubbled up.

Lee's laughter rolled out. "I take it the experiment was a success. Want to take him to the stable so I can examine him?"

Cade shook his head, hands resting on his hips. "You can do Wild Heart later. First, I'm going to take a hot shower and then you're going to examine *me*." Examine him, not for the strange symptoms he was experiencing, because he would not speak of them to Lee, but as foreplay.

Now Lee's smile broadened to a grin. "Gotcha."

Cade stepped up onto the verandah, and Lee wrapped him in a bear hug. Locked together, their kiss felt to Cade like a long drink

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on a sun-baked day on a parched open range. He wondered if he'd ever cease to feel his dick responding when their bodies and mouths pressed, hungry and demanding, together. Not feel the molten liquid of desire pooling like quicksilver in his groin and gut.

"Damn, but I missed you," Lee said.

"Busy as we were, I missed you, too. Missed you so much I had a nightmare you were in danger."

"Talk about danger. You in the middle of feral horses was where the danger was. Despite what a capable man you are, especially with equines, I admit I worried about you." Lee ran his hand across the beginnings of a beard. "For a Lakota Native, you've grown a lot of facial hair in the time you've been away."

"And in a matter of minutes I'll lose it when I shave." Cade threw his arm around Lee's waist, and they turned to enter the ranch house.

In his bedroom, a small frown of worry creased Lee's forehead. Cade closed his eyes as Lee's warm sensitive fingertips touched his lids and the lines around his eyes. His hands traced the sharp curves of Cade's jaw line as he said, "I've never seen you this exhausted. You look like you lost your seat, couldn't free your foot from the stirrup, and the horse dragged you for a week."

"After being in the saddle for three straight days and nights, and then working with the stallion almost daily, I feel like an old man. Still, it was a wonderful experience, one the BLM'll never let happen again. We broke him without hurting him. The cruelties I've seen even Natives do to horses to tame them fills me with rage. I proved it doesn't have to be that way."

He peeled off his dirty jacket, and Lee motioned him to sit on the bed while he removed first one dusty boot and then the other.

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When Cade's tingling and now trembling fingers fumbled with the buttons on his shirt, Lee pushed his hands aside and had the shirt off faster than swatting a fly. He reached for the belt buckle and one corner of his mouth lifted in a smile at the bulge behind the buttoned fly. He ran his palm over it, but when he'd have unfastened the buttons, Cade's big hand closed over his.

Exhaustion killed any thoughts he'd had about foreplay moments earlier. "Much as I want to fuck you hard after all this time apart, I'm too filthy and too tired to be any good at it tonight. I hope you can stay over. I'll be better in the morning. I promise." He turned Lee's palms over and pressed his lips into them, marveling as he often did at how luck brought them together and love leaped up unexpectedly between them.

They'd met because Lee was the new veterinarian in town, and Cade had called him to check out a sick horse. Intent on bringing a new Paint under control, Cade hadn't been aware of the visitor until the Paint had stopped bucking and was letting Cade ride him around the corral. Cade's chest had immediately tightened and his entire body thrummed when he'd noticed the tall, slender man waiting at the fence. The man's smile and the rich, greenish-blue eyes the color of turquoise had intoxicated him. He'd felt embarrassed that his shirt hung over the railing instead of over his bare chest. Dismounting, he'd returned the smile and stepped quickly to the fence to put on his denim shirt.

"I'm Cade Montana, the ranch manager," he'd said, clasping the firm hand extended to him.

"I'm Dr. Donaldson, your new veterinarian. Please call me Lee."

Relaxed yet professional, Lee had run caring and competent hands over Iron Man's sleek chestnut coat and immediately found

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the problem. He also noticed Thornbird, one of the hounds, limping even before anyone else picked up on it, and he diagnosed that problem as well. Iron Man and the dog were well now because of Lee's medical skills.

A couple of weeks later, with thoughts of Dr. Donaldson never far from his lustful mind, Cade had entered a gay bar to relax with a beer. Lee was on the dance floor with some other guys. Cade had stood riveted just inside the door, experiencing again an intoxicating rush of happiness, mingled with lust as it rolled through him. He'd watched, enjoying the way Lee lifted his arms with his head turned looking at the floor and how unconsciously sensual the movements of his hips and booted feet were. He was dressed in a blue crew neck with long sleeves that heightened the striking color of his eyes and made Cade's heart sing and his belly sizzle. Every taut muscle sliding beneath the fabric as Lee danced showed Cade the tensile strength in the slender man.

Spotting Cade, Lee had waved and left the dance floor, much to the surprise of the man dancing opposite him. Cade had seen it on the man's face. It had pleased him that Lee came to him the moment he saw him. Later, he'd thought that was the moment they'd linked as lovers. It lit up his world.

Lee had approached him, smiling an easy smile. His voice was low and throaty, the turquoise of his eyes deepening as he'd said, "Hi."

"Hello. I didn't know this about you."

"Or I about you. May I buy you a drink? I see your hands are empty, and I hope you're arriving, not leaving."

"I'd very much like to have a drink with you." Cade had sensed they'd just engaged in a kind of mating ritual. Something ancient. Sacred.

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“Afterwards, maybe we can dance.”

At that, Cade had smiled and chuckled. “I don’t think so. I’d embarrass myself and trample you. My big feet get all tangled on a dance floor and I can’t hear the beat. I hear and feel the rhythm of the drums and rattles of my people, and I dance their sacred dances, but this kind of music and its moves are foreign to me. I suppose I lived on the reservation too long when I was young.”

They’d had so much to say to each other that, drinks finished, they’d ordered a meal and more drinks, then talked until the bar closed. Mostly they’d shared why they were living here, why Lee had become a veterinarian, and about horses.

A few days later, Cade had wanted to see him again so much he couldn’t wait until the next scheduled ranch visit, and he went to the animal hospital on a pretense.

“Hello, Sarah. What beautiful cats. Are they yours?” Sarah Crew, Lee’s receptionist, was twice his age. He liked her. Everyone liked her.

“Oh, hi, Cade. No, they belong to Dr. Donaldson. They hang out here during the day.”

“Is Dr. Donaldson free?”

“He’s out in back with his dogs. One of them has a thorn in his paw, I think.”

Cade had found him there. “I hear your dog has a problem. A thorn, I hear.”

Lee had been crouched, and the dog’s paw was on one knee. “Only a sticker,” he said, looking up and smiling.

The wonderful feeling of contentment had flooded his chest when Lee turned and smiled at him.

“Lucky pooch to have a doc for an owner.” He’d wondered if his happiness showed on his face. He’d wondered if he was nuts to

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think he saw some on Lee's face, too. "And you have cats."

"Cats and dogs, but no horse. You're the one blessed with horses."

Later, Cade discovered Lee was a fine equestrian. Because Lee owned cats and dogs but was horseless, he invited him to ride with him.

In the weeks that followed, they rode and talked as often as their schedules allowed. Sometimes they rode in comfortable silence beside each other. Contentment surrounded them like a soft aura. One hot afternoon, they crossed a flowering meadow through golden sunlight to the blue waters of a large, spring-fed pond on the ranch's property. On impulse, they'd skinny-dipped. Removing their clothes, backs turned, they'd entered the water without peeking. When they left the water to dry in the sun, whatever self-consciousness they'd felt about their bodies had disappeared.

Cade sensed they'd reached another stage in the mating ritual. Surely the sex he longed for with this fascinating man would happen soon.

Lee had stood on the bank, hands on his hips, comfortable with his nudity. His eyes roved over Cade's body as he walked out of the water. "I knew you'd look like this. All big muscle and corded sinew. I've wanted to see your thighs. I love the way they strain your jeans and the control they have over the horses you ride."

"My thighs? Are you sure that's all you've wanted to see?" The rush of feeling he'd experienced in the bar when Lee smiled at him made its appearance again. It was difficult to catch his breath as he teased, "Did you think maybe a Lakota Native's dick would be different from a white man's?" He'd stood proudly, his cock burgeoning as he gazed at Lee's body and had watched with pleasure as Lee's dick loaded and lifted in response to his.

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Lee came to him, and their lips met as easily as if they'd done this before, sending a punch of heat right to his core. Lee opened to him, and he explored the heat and wetness, tasted the tangy essence of Lee as their tongues swept and tangled, enjoying an erotic dance that promised more intimate things to come.

When the kiss ended, Cade couldn't resist touching the glistening droplets covering the fairer skin of the slender but strong Lee. When Lee didn't pull away, he leaned in and licked them.

Sighing with pleasure, Lee had spoken, his tongue thick, his dick now fat and long. As it rose, his foreskin slipped back to reveal his cock's dark, bluish head. "No, I hadn't wondered if your dick was different from mine, but all these weeks *I have* hoped you wanted to see me naked as much as I did you. To touch me as much as I've wanted to touch you. I thought I was going to have to initiate the touching." He'd groaned. "Don't stop. Don't ever stop."

When Cade had licked his way down the glorious body and knelt before Lee's shaven genitals, he felt Lee tremble in response to Cade's hands sliding up his sensitive inner thighs to caress the backs of his knees. He licked and kissed Lee's sac, then, with a gentle drawing in, sucked it into his mouth.

"Oh, God, don't wait too long or I'm going to lose it here and now."

So Cade didn't wait. Intent on pleasuring Lee, he'd released the sac, which had thickened and tightened in preparation for the pulsations that would spurt creamy strips of cum. He'd wrapped his hand around Lee's dripping cock and tongued the dark crown as his thumb stroked the sensitive v-nexus of nerves under its lip.

When at last he took Lee's cock fully into his mouth it only took minutes. A few gliding tugs with teasing scrapes of his teeth

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growing more and more urgent, and Lee had shuddered as he made the final pushes deep into the heat of the sucking, tonguing mouth. He'd cried out Cade's name when he came, and it danced through the meadow before fading and slipping to earth.

If Lee's hands hadn't threaded themselves through Cade's dark hair and he hadn't steadied himself holding onto Cade's head, Cade thought the powerful orgasm would've sent Lee to his knees. And he knew he'd been lucky himself to be kneeling. While he'd pleased Lee, his other hand had been busy pumping his own wet cock, and his shout rang out soon after his lover's.

For a time they'd rested in the afterglow on their saddle blankets in the warmth of the sun, and then they rose and washed off in the pond before sitting, still unclothed, cross-legged and talking as the soft air had dried them. When they stood to dress, prickles of electricity shot through Cade along the trail Lee's hands made as they marked the deep curve of his spine, spread out to his hips and then arrived to squeeze his butt cheeks. When a finger had slipped down his crack and teased his asshole, he'd leaned forward to give it access as his entire body flared to sexual heat and his skin sizzled with need. When the finger dipped into and through the first taut manhole muscle, a rush of excitement had made Cade instantly hard and stiff. Talking was tough over the full throatiness he felt.

"Again?"

"Once is not enough." Lee's breath had been warm against his nape, his kisses wet and hot. Lee had spread Cade's butt cheeks and his hard cock pressed against the tight opening. "I think it's knocking, knocking at your door," he'd said in a hoarse voice.

"Wait," Cade had said. He knelt and searched in the pocket of his jeans. He pulled a foil packet out and handed it to Lee.

TWILIGHT

Lee smiled. "My, aren't you the big boy. Are you always so prepared?"

"Only when I'm with you. Only when I'm hoping to make frenzied, fucking love with you."

While Lee had unrolled the condom over his swollen cock, Cade lay on his back and watched, letting excitement simmer in the sensually sensitive tissues between his pelvis and spine. Lee had knelt and pressed his covered cock to Cade's mouth to let him lick and lubricate the condom with his saliva. Their gazes had locked and never wavered as Cade pulled his knees up and Lee pushed his cock past the first muscle and stopped.

"You're tight. I don't want to hurt you."

"Hurt? It feels wonderful." Cade had grunted. "Keep going."

And then Lee was past the second tightness, murmuring as he'd pulled his cock back and in, back and in, massaging the erotic tissue of its head against the tight sphincters. Cade had felt Lee's cock enlarge even more inside him, filling him with such a rush of searing heat and passion that he'd cried out with the pleasure of it. When Lee slid his hands down Cade's inner thighs, the signal for him to put his legs over Lee's shoulders, he'd obliged, knowing this left him completely open and vulnerable to this lover as he exposed his most intimate physical self to Lee's view and access.

Once his legs were supported, Cade had gripped his own dripping cock, aching for release, letting his sensations swell as he felt Lee's body tremble and build to a fevered pitch. He'd tried to prolong the wonderful feelings fomenting inside him, but his body responded by pushing hard toward every descent Lee's cock made into him. In agony, unable to resist the need for the explosion only orgasm could bring, he'd cried, "Now! Just do it now!"

Lee had made the final hot thrust into Cade's ass. Cade's hand

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brought him to the edge. They reached the peak of excitement and as the heady sensations of sex broke, flooding them, they flew together off the edge of passion into ecstasy.

For a moment, Lee had relaxed across Cade's chest. "Oh, my, God."

Cade held onto him. "I know. Oh, how I know."

After they'd recovered, they'd bathed again, dried off with their blankets and dressed.

When Lee had prepared to mount Iron Man, Cade extended his hand. "Ride with me."

On these outings, Cade always rode Native style, bareback except for a blanket. Lee had nodded, swung a leg over Night Fox and settled there while Cade handed him the reins of Iron Man and then swung up behind him.

He'd walked Night Fox back to the ranch, entranced by the feel of Lee's buns as they rubbed against his groin with every step the horse took. Next time, he'd thought, I'll be the one savoring someone's ass.

CHAPTER 4

Relief at Cade's safe return welled up in Lee, and he felt just a little foolish for his previous concern. He listened to the sounds of a weary Cade already in the shower, and the fresh, warm scent of meadow grasses and leaves he connected with him drifted into the bedroom.

Impatient to be with him, Lee couldn't wait out here when his lover was naked under the streaming water. He pulled his shirt off over his head, stepped out of his boots and socks, unbuttoned his Levi's and pushed them and his briefs off. He laid his clothes over a chair, enjoying the rush of blood filling the veins in his cock because he was thinking of Cade's firm body only steps away, nude in all its natural splendor.

As he entered the stall's steamy heat, he told himself there was

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one perfect way to help Cade relax, to restore him. But then he smiled, admitting to himself in a way it was really all about the sex. Not only would it help Cade, but he'd missed him too much to wait.

Cade kissed him. "I didn't expect company, but I'm glad you're in here with me. Should've thought to invite you."

Lee pulled the shampoo bottle off the ledge and started to work on Cade's black hair. When he ran his fingers through it and felt it squeak, he knew it was clean. Cade threw his head back and let the water rinse his face.

Lee took the bar of soap and washcloth and scrubbed Cade's arms, chest and legs briskly because that was what he knew he liked. He was more careful when he cleansed his sac and sensitive thighs. Cade's penis remained unresponsive. He truly was utterly fatigued. Lee abandoned the washcloth and stepped behind him to use his hands to lather and slowly massage shoulders, back and the big muscles of his butt, taut from weariness.

"That feels wonderful," Cade said.

Lee felt the tight muscles loosen a little bit. While Cade was still slippery, Lee stepped in close, letting his hard-on slide just beneath his lover's butt cheeks.

"I told you I'm too—"

Lee kissed the nape of his neck. "Shush. Let me relax you." Wrapping one arm around Cade's waist to support him, Lee slid his other hand around until it closed on Cade's dick.

"God, but I love touching you here. Has anyone told you what a gorgeous, sexy man you are? I love thumbing your dick like this when it's limp, love bringing it to life. Gives me a woody just thinking about how big you'll get when I stroke it. And how good it feels against me. Inside me."

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Cade groaned, but didn't protest, didn't break Lee's hold.

"What would wipe the fatigue away and relax you the most? Pulling on it like this?"

Cade gasped.

Knowing he was working an erotic spell on his lover, Lee continued to thumb, and now he pulled, slow and easy, slow and easy. "What I'd really like to do is plant my cock in your tight ass, but I know you're too weary for that, so I'm content to just pull and tug—faster and faster until you stop resisting and let yourself go."

Lee felt Cade's excitement rise with his own as he also pushed his cock back and forth under Cade's crack. Sensing Cade was on the verge of climaxing, he closed his teeth on the curve of Cade's neck where it met his shoulder. Just as a stallion did when he mounted a mare in estrus.

His reward was hearing Cade cry out in his native language as he spasmed and climaxed, sending swift spurts of creamy cum into the cup Lee's hand had made.

That was the moment Lee's own cock gave up its load into the tight pocket behind his lover's balls. It had needed no hand to stroke it at all.

Afterwards, clean, dry and warm under the covers, Cade thanked him and fell instantly into a slumber as deep as anesthesia.

Unable to drift off, as sometimes happened after sex, Lee lay with his head resting on his folded arms staring up in the darkness next to this unique man he loved. His thoughts wandered. The attraction he'd felt for Cade that first day was the most compelling he'd ever felt for any man. Seeing how much he loved the big horses and how good he was with them had opened Lee's heart to him. Cade dealt with the ranch hands respectfully, and when he

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spoke, they listened and did as he asked. However, once when Mark had challenged him on something, Cade had listened and even changed his opinion.

Amused, Lee regarded changing an opinion as quite a remarkable trait for a man. Men had to be confident in order to listen to someone and change their minds. He had to admit he'd wanted to fuck Cade, to stroke him, to sink himself into the very heat of that tight manhole, almost from that very first day. Meeting him in the bar and getting to know him more intimately had cemented his lust and emotions to him.

He rolled onto his side facing Cade, listening to his deep, steady breathing, smelling the clean scent of his skin. It settled him. Tomorrow he'd hear all about the mustang, and he fell asleep thinking of the physical exam he'd need to do, planning how he'd rid the wild horse of any parasites a wild horse was sure to have. He trusted Cade would even let him ride him around the corral.

* * *

The heat from Cade's hands held close to and above Lee's face the next morning wakened him. True to his word, Cade was "better" at it that morning. Murmuring dirty words that gave Lee an instant erection, he stimulated him until his skin was on fire with desire and his pulse pounded in his cock as Cade touched and tongued him in all his most sensitive places. Only when Lee groaned and begged did Cade at last sink his cock deep into Lee to fuck him hard and rough. By the time they'd climaxed, the bed sheets were a tangled mass and their pillows were forgotten mounds on the floor, testimony to the wild excitement and desire they'd shared.

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After he'd recovered, Lee extricated himself. "I have to get to work. Go back to sleep and get some rest. I'll come this afternoon to examine your prize."

* * *

They were leaning on the corral fence, shoulders touching as they watched Wild Heart run, his tail up and mane flying. When Cade had opened the gate earlier to bring him in so Lee could examine him, he'd nickered and raced over to Cade to nuzzle him. He'd come without being called or coaxed. The sight of the big man was enough.

Lee had watched the wonderful connection between the two and smiled. Now he watched as the horse cavorted in the yard.

"My gosh, look at that Paso-like gait. Did you teach him that?"

Cade laughed. "Wonderful, isn't it? No, I didn't train him in it. The Pryor Mountain horses have it naturally."

"So interesting. You know, Cassie's son was in the office this morning. Brought in one of the new dogs for a distemper shot. You're his hero. You really impressed him with how you broke Wild Heart."

"He's a great kid. Cassie and her husband can be proud of him. He has a special knack for understanding horses that he wants to develop. I'm thinking of opening a training school using my methods to break horses without pain. He'll be ahead of all the other students after his time with Wild Heart."

"A school for horse whisperers." Lee let his words echo in his mind. The students would have the perfect teacher. "It's a wonderful idea."

By now, Lee had examined and ridden Wild Heart. "The

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mustang's a real beauty. His gait's as smooth as a Thoroughbred's. He's also sound and healthy. I'm sure I'll find parasites because most wild horses have them, but I'll be careful in clearing them up so the medicines don't make him sick."

Lee turned and looked into Cade's green eyes, the color of light jade, so unexpected in a Native American. They were filled with pleasure as they watched the frisky stallion. Lee dropped his voice low so none of the other stable hands could hear. "Have I told you what sexy eyes you have? They're one of the things that fascinated me when I first saw you. Wild Heart's are dark brown, as they should be, but I'm thinking you must not be pure Sioux or yours would be black."

Cade laughed. "According to the elders, every generation in my clan, some have had eyes this color, but no one knows why. Maybe some day scientists will figure it out, but don't tell anyone else in my family we aren't pure Lakota Native or you'll have a fight on your hands. It's a matter of pride."

"And with you? Is it a matter of pride?"

Cade was a long time answering, then he gazed out at Wild Heart and said, "Yeah, it is. But there was a time when I hated the color of my skin and my straight black hair. Hated the color of my eyes because I was Native and yet, because they weren't black, not considered by some as pure Lakota. I hated being called Indian because of this country's history with its first peoples. It's why the Lakota call themselves Natives instead of Indians. It's as if we're throwing off a name that has a history of degradation."

"But the Sioux have a history of great warriors—Sitting Bull, Red Cloud, Black Elk. Crazy Horse and his warriors killed Custer."

"But in the end they each *failed* against the white man, didn't

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they? Some say the death of Custer and his soldiers at what whites call the Battle of the Little Big Horn turned the mood of Washington against us, making them determined to annihilate us. Did you know, the Lakota rarely use the word Sioux among themselves because it's a French corruption of the Ojibwa word for 'treacherous snakes'? We prefer Lakota because it means 'Alliance of Friends.' That's much nicer."

Lee smiled. "That fits your personality exactly."

"It didn't until I left the reservation and came here to the Lazy M. I was bitter and angry, but here I figured out who I really am and what I can do. I think my uncle knew this when he asked me to run the ranch. So now, yes, it's a matter of pride for me. Green eyes or not, I'm full blood Lakota Native."

Lee nodded. He understood.

* * *

Over the next several weeks, they resumed their occasional rides, Cade usually on Wild Heart and Lee on Night Fox. On one ride, Cade said, "Come spring we can bring tents and bedrolls and sleep out."

Lee pretended to shiver. "Brr for right now. Winter's still here in case you haven't noticed."

On a visit a few days later, Wild Heart's penis lengthened and hung, sometimes moving and tapping up against his belly. Imagining Wild Heart mounting a mare in heat did wondrous things to Lee's package. It was like him mounting Cade.

"We have a mare in estrus. He's smelled her," Cade commented.

"Have you thought about using him as a stud?"

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“I have. But it would only be with a Pryor Mountain mare. I want to keep the bloodline intact.”

“Speaking of keeping bloodlines intact, how about coming to my place this evening? You haven’t seen the inside of my house. All our visits have been here on the ranch.” His words were deep with meaning. With no possibility of offspring, gay sex always kept the bloodlines intact.

Cade nodded and one corner of his mouth lifted in a crooked little smile. Lee noticed him readjusting where he held the coiled rope in his hand, and Lee thought it was to hide the front of his body—where his dick seemed to be making his jeans way too tight.

* * *

Only days after the visit where they kept bloodlines intact, Cade pulled his truck up in front of the animal hospital and parked. He’d come to pick up medicines for the ranch.

His big hound Thornbird flew out of the truck and raced around to the back of the hospital where his friends, Lee’s two dogs, hung out. Hearing the scream of a big cat and the sound of dogs going berserk with barking, Cade pulled his shotgun out and racked it before tearing after Thornbird.

Rounding the corner of the building, his gaze fell on a cougar stretched out in a cage for large animals. The big cat’s cries were defensive, directed at the dogs threatening it. Shock caused Cade to stop and his reason to blur as memories of the dangerous cougar who’d threatened On A Dime and Wild Heart blistered his mind. He raised the shotgun as the urge to shoot the thing caused his hands to tighten, but the cougar tried to rise, and Cade saw it was

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injured. He also saw the closed lock on the door. The cage was firmly locked. He unracked the shotgun and lowered it, staring into the big cat's golden eyes. They didn't lock back on his. He saw nothing but the eyes of an animal. No pleading, no sadness, just a wild thing trying to survive.

To survive and kill again. Anger coiled hot in Cade's chest. When Lee showed up, he turned on him, unable to keep cold steel from his voice. "What in hell are you doing?"

Lee stopped, surprise furrowing his brow as he glanced at the shotgun pointed to the ground. "I'm healing a cougar found caught in a trap. What were you going to do with that gun?"

"I thought the cat was free, and I was going to destroy the damned thing. Save the dogs. What will you do with it once it's healed?"

"Truck it into the forest and release it."

"So it can come back to the ranches here and kill our livestock, our horses?"

"No. We'll take it beyond its usual territorial range."

Cade couldn't keep the anger out of his words. "It marked its territory, and it'll just follow its scent marks and come back. How can you do this when you know what almost happened to Wild Heart and Mark's horse on Pryor Mountain?"

"Surely you wouldn't have expected me to shoot it. To finish it off when it had a chance to be healthy again."

Sickness showed on Lee's face as if he were torn between his respect for Cade and his own sense of what he needed to do. Cade sensed a quiet anger behind his words.

"I'm a *doctor*. I treat *animals*. If it'd been unsalvageable, I'd have euthanized it in a humane way, not shot it. But I can't turn my back on an injured animal I can help, even if it's wild."

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Cade shook his head, turned on his heel and stormed away, whistling for Thornbird to follow. "I'll send Mark from now on for the vaccines and other medicines we need."

Cade hit the accelerator and drove away. He'd been betrayed by this man he'd thought understood him, understood how ranchers felt about pumas and what a menace they were. The feeling ran deep, like a canyon cut by a river flowing through solid rock.

When he reached the Lazy M, he wanted to ride, but Wild Heart refused to come near him. Instead, he began to blow and rear as if Cade presented a danger.

That damned cat. Wild Heart senses I'm upset.

It was the same with Night Fox and Iron Man. None of the horses wanted anything to do with him. It made his day a complete hell.

Lee's betrayal came at a time when the tingling in Cade's hands and feet was worsening and, discouraged by their rift and the energy it took to keep his symptoms a secret, he traveled to the nearest town with a major medical center to see a physician as soon as he could.

The smooth young face of the Japanese doctor was serious and thoughtful as he sat down with Cade in his office. Cade tensed, expecting bad news.

"You're a real puzzle, Mr. Montana. Your tests are all negative, and I can't find anything physically wrong with you. Neither can the neurologist. I can only suggest a wait-and-see approach here. If your symptoms continue to worsen or change, come back to me."

Cade went home, his mood sour because they'd found nothing to at least improve if not cure what was happening to him.

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* * *

The estrangement from Lee was breaking Cade's heart, but the wound was too raw and he lacked the drive to mend it. Horrible dreams that grew increasingly more vivid and frightening sapped his strength as the weeks went by. However, one night his grandfather appeared to him dressed in full Lakota regalia in a dream. He didn't speak, just gestured with his hand, summoning Cade home.

Cade wakened in a cold sweat and flung the covers off to stand upright and shivering beside his bed. The man who had nurtured him after his drunken father had driven himself and Cade's mother off a cliff to their deaths, was dying. Cade knew that as surely as he knew his degree of Native blood.

Leaving the ranch in Mark's hands, he drove to the nearest airport and flew to Montana. There he rented a truck and drove to the reservation at Fort Rock. At the entrance to the *res*, the sign reading "You Are Now Entering The Sovereign Nation Of The Lakota People" created a strange twist in his chest. Conflicting memories of happy, carefree times with his cousins running free, riding bareback, hunting in the forest that came right down to the river's edge or fishing in its waters, and of poverty, illness, too much alcohol and soul-deep grief intertwined.

Poverty and drunkenness were still rampant here, a *res* without a casino to enrich tribal members.

Knowing how cramped his grandfather's house was, and that it would be filled with the smells of Lakota sickness treatments he chose not to inhale all night, he rented a room in the reservation's only hotel. After he'd taken his bag to his room and washed up, he drove to his grandfather's place. As he pulled up and killed the

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truck's motor in front of the modest whitewashed house,, fear mingled with all the other feelings. His grandfather might be dying, but instinct told him that wouldn't be the end of the sorrow.

The smell of burnt cedar stung his nostrils as he knocked and entered the home. The elders had smudged, wrapping a bundle of small cedar branches and leaves tight, then lighting the end and blowing them out to create smoke. The belief in the cleansing and healing power in its smoke was ancient, and they confirmed his fears about his grandfather's health.

His cousin Flying Hawk, the oldest son of one of his father's brothers, rose from a chair and greeted him. Dressed in slacks and a gray pullover sweater, he looked like the geology professor he was at a nearby university, although he still lived here.

"Cade, I'm glad you came. Your grandfather's in the bedroom and he'll be happy to see you. The tribal leaders and the shaman came to visit him today. He has something very important to tell you."

Cade saw how much more weather-worn and thin his grandfather's face had become since he'd last seen him, and guilt that he hadn't spent more time here after all his father's father had done for him caused a bitter taste in his mouth. He grasped his grandfather's almost skeletal hand and greeted him in their native tongue before pulling a chair up beside his bed.

"Rides Like The Wind," his grandfather said, using Cade's tribal name, "it came to me in a dream that your time is coming, and I knew I must see you before I died. It is time you knew why our eyes are not dark. You must forgive me for hiding this from you. The gift does not pass to every child, and once it does, we know little of its happenings, so it is easy to forget to tell those to whom it does. Sit and I will speak of it."

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Cade sat down, his feeling of unease persisting.

"You have tingling in your hands and feet, the sense something is wrong with your body."

"How did you know that?"

"They're normal for our clan. I summoned you here to explain."

As Cade listened, horror filled him like rising, dark sludge.

"Your eyes, like mine, like Flying Hawk's, are light green, almost gray—the color of the eyes of the snow leopard. The sensations you're experiencing signal the onset of the time you will shift into that body."

"No!" Cade leaped up.

"Sit down, my son, and hear me out. You will still be human. Be Cade, be Rides Like the Wind. Long ago, an ancient evil sought to destroy our entire clan and a powerful creature bestowed the gift of shifting to disguise us from our enemy and keep us safe from destruction. Our ancestors changed en masse and made the difficult journey across a bridge of snow and ice to this continent, and the white fur made our people blend in so they could not be seen. The transition saved us as a people, but it remained with us when we no longer needed it. It's a secret we keep from any but the Lakota of our clan. Speak of it to others and your family will destroy you."

"Were-leopards." Cade whispered the words.

"Were-*snow* leopards, yes. I would tell you more, but I grow tired and need to rest. You must go to the museum and study what you see. But remember, speak of it to no one but me or Flying Hawk."

Cade offered his grandfather water from a cracked earthen mug on his nightstand, then pressed his lips to a forehead hot with fever and left.

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Already he felt a sense of loss. Deep inside he'd believed that in time he and Lee would have healed their rift. Now that hope clanged shut like the door to a prison cell.

In his grandfather's stables, he threw a blanket over Wind Racer, a horse he'd ridden many times and, experimenting with his gentle methods, had broken when he was a teenager. Fueled now by sorrow and anger, he turned the gelding out of the gate and into a run. He raced through the reservation as if the wind that dried the tears on his face could also blow away the despair throbbing in his chest. Concerned he was pushing the Paint too hard, he finally pulled up by the river and slid down, patting the horse's neck and rubbing the bone of its face. They walked along the sand until the horse had cooled and Cade was calm. Then he mounted again and returned to the stables.

After he'd eaten, Flying Hawk picked him up at the only hotel and drove him to the museum. Cade paid the entry fees. Cade knew there would be a message here for him. They walked together. Occasionally, his cousin would stop and study something. Preserved behind glass were cave pictographs, their images of stick people and animals copied onto animal skins and carried with their ancestors when the government had forced them to make the trek across country to live on this poor piece of land. Some of the animals were spotted and had long, thick tails.

Leopards, Cade thought.

Later paintings sometimes showed shadowy hints in the background of lighter-coated leopards with white throats and chests.

As his cousin dropped him off at the hotel he said, "Your grandfather will see you again tomorrow. He has much to tell you, and I will be with you to help."

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Cade lay in the dark in the hotel room and wept at the horror he was to become. At the loss of his future. There was no hope of having Lee in his life now, and his plans to train other horse men to use his methods withered and died. In a moment of clarity, he understood what had happened to the puma he had shot on Pryor Mountain to save Wild Heart and Mark's horse. He had killed a were-puma, and the man had died before he could change back into human form. When the eyeballs disappeared from the skull it hadn't been an illusion, it had been real.

Cade wondered if it meant the man had lost his soul by dying in animal form. He shuddered at the thought.

* * *

When Cade's truck had pulled up at the animal hospital, Lee felt the same flood of happiness and excitement he'd had as a teenager when he'd had a crush on a guy. He experienced it every time he saw him. He'd heard Cade park, but didn't hear the familiar boots enter the empty waiting room. Then he heard the dogs barking in back and the scream of the caged cougar. As soon as he'd finished with a dog whose abscess he'd lanced, and released it to his owner, he went outside to find Cade.

Cade had stood not far from the cage, a powerful figure in worn jeans and dusty boots. When he'd turned, anger had twisted his face into something Lee had never seen. The words had an edge he'd never heard.

Stunned by the unexpected outburst and Cade's attitude, Lee had stood unmoving as Cade strode away. He heard the slam of the truck door, the gunning of the engine and then gravel spewing from tires as Cade peeled out of the parking lot. Lee had no

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appetite for dinner that night.

As the cougar healed and became increasingly restless, Lee waited for an apology—for Cade to appear at the door of his cabin, wrap him in his arms and tell him he hadn't been himself that day and was sorry. But one week, then two went by with no word from him, and Lee finally sat down at his dining table, pushed his dinner away, dropped his face in his hands and let the tears fall. He couldn't believe how much he hurt. There was a time when he'd thought Cade would hurt, too, if they should break up. Now he wasn't sure and, most of all, he didn't fully understand what had happened.

He contacted zoos and rescue preserves to see if they would take the big cat. When he'd heard back from the last of them that they were unable to take it, in a wild moment he'd even considered euthanizing the mountain lion because of the threat Cade believed it was. But he couldn't bring himself to do it. Instead, he darted him. When the drug had knocked it out, he and his assistants lifted the animal into a truck and drove beyond the animal's territorial range into the mountains. They waited until it had recovered and released it into the wild. When he returned to Mountain Valley, he left a message on Cade's phone as to what he'd done.

When it was time for him to make his contracted visit to the ranch as its veterinarian, he hoped he could find time to be alone with Cade, to find a way to mend the rift between them. But it was Mark who greeted him with a big smile and a hand shake before escorting him on his rounds.

"Is Cade here?" Lee steeled himself to ask.

"He's on the *res* in Montana. Took off in a hurry one morning. Said his grandfather's dying. We're not sure when to expect him back. Probably didn't have a chance to call you."

TWILIGHT

“I’m sorry to hear that. Wasn’t he like a father to him after the death of his parents?” Pain for Cade knifed through Lee. He appreciated Mark’s tact. He must have known something had gone awry between them or Cade would’ve notified Lee he was leaving.

Mark nodded. “Cade’s had a tough life.”

CHAPTER 5

An animal. He would shift into an animal's body, with no purpose when he was in that form except to kill prey, drink their blood and eat their flesh raw to survive. Cade's stomach churned as he listened to his grandfather and Flying Hawk tell him so matter-of-factly the next day how his life would change forever.

A great sadness washed over him, not only at losing Lee, but because he realized it was the scent of what he was becoming that had caused his beloved horses to shy away, not his exposure to the cougar at the hospital.

"Just before coming here, my horses suddenly wouldn't come near me, yet I rode Wind Racer here yesterday without a problem."

"He was raised with how our scents come and go. It doesn't trigger fear," Flying Hawk said.

TWILIGHT

“But if he met a real leopard he’d be in danger.”

Flying Hawk scoffed. “Trust me...*we’re real* once we’ve changed. The only shifters you’ll find around here are snow leopards, and we’d never hurt our horses in human or shifted form. We assume pumas must give off a different scent because the horses exhibit fear of them but not of us.”

“But I haven’t even shifted, and my horses refuse to get near me. Will that change?”

Flying Hawk shrugged, but Cade thought he detected a fleeting denial in his face. He didn’t press him because right now he couldn’t bear to hear more bad news.

Cade told of the incident with the puma he’d killed on Pryor Mountain. “You may not have them here, but I’m sure now he must have been a were. Did he lose his soul?”

Again his cousin shrugged with a nonchalance Cade couldn’t feel. “It’s not something I worry about.”

The faint scent of cedar smoke lingered in his grandfather’s house. His words did little to allay Cade’s concerns. He talked long into the fading afternoon light of what Cade could expect, his face flushed with fever, his speech often interrupted by a cough. “Your father should have been with you these first few times, and his absence places that mantle on my shoulders. I feel a great pain because sickness prevents me from being with you. Your cousin will be with you, though, and you will hear his thoughts. Listen carefully and follow his instructions.”

It was difficult for him to ask, but he said, “Did my father take his life and my mother’s because he was a shape shifter?”

His grandfather snorted with disgust. “Drink killed your parents. Your father’s weakness as a human drove him to the bottle again and again. Being a were had nothing to do with it.”

TWILIGHT

Cade wasn't sure if that comforted him or not.

By twilight, the tingling in Cade's hands and feet were causing spasms. Flying Hawk directed the older man's attention to them and said, "It is time."

The old man nodded and spoke a Lakota blessing for Rides With The Wind.

Cade and his cousin rode deep into the forest. In his mind, Cade screamed and railed against his fate. He thought of Lee, and he thought of snow leopards. Would he hurt Lee if he came across him in leopard form? The possibility made his chest hurt. Would he be expected to mate? The idea of fucking a female leopard caused his stomach to roil just as it had as a teenager the first time he'd thought he was expected to kiss a girl.

He was cold. Winter had come, and as they climbed to higher elevations and into the mountains, the chill seeped through Cade's jacket to his very bones. At last, they pulled up at a small hunter's cabin and left the horses in a makeshift barn. Inside the shack, his cousin instructed Cade to remove his clothes and leave them.

"We'll need them when we change back into human form. You'll also want to have a place near your ranch where you can change and leave your clothes."

It was as cold inside the small building as it was outside, triggering shivers so violent Cade rolled on the wooden floor in pain. He had no control over them. Later, he learned this was the beginning of the process of shifting.

He knew nothing after he fell to the floor writhing and shivering...until he awakened at first light in his room and knew he'd shifted and killed.

* * *

TWILIGHT

Flying Hawk drove him back to the hotel once they were in human form again. After a shower in which he'd scrubbed himself almost raw, Cade brushed his teeth and rinsed his mouth to remove what he imagined was the taste of animal blood. He purchased red lipstick in the hotel and rescued a piece of cold charcoal from the lobby grate. In his room, he marked his face with red and black to honor the death of whatever he had killed—and eaten—last night, and of the man he'd thought he was, the man who'd gentled Wild Heart and fallen in love with a wonderful man named Lee. Folding a neckerchief into a narrow band, he tied it around his forehead and drove to his grandfather's stable.

There he mounted Wind Racer as he had as a young warrior—without saddle or blanket, barefooted and shirtless.

The first clue that he'd found the site of his “feeding” came when Wind Racer began to blow nervously and dance in circles. Cade pulled the horse back until it quieted, then he dismounted and left the nervous equine with its reins tied to a tree. Cade walked to the place of his kill. An elk lay gutted, its flesh and muscles shredded and plundered. Its half-eaten intestines had been neatly stripped of waste first. Buzzards must have found the carcass and pecked out its eyes. The stench clogged his nostrils. Soon other scavengers would come to eat their fill.

His mind swarmed with the memory of hearing Flying Hawk's instructions on how to stalk soundlessly, belly low to the ground, until you reached high ground, then launch yourself down onto the animal. Go for the neck and hold on until the fallen deer suffocates. Cade ran to the bushes, fell on his knees and vomited, retching until there was nothing left to come up. He crawled around hunting for the leaves he knew would calm his stomach and sweeten his mouth, then chewed them.

TWILIGHT

When the nausea had passed and he was strong enough to stand, he pulled a rattle from his pocket. Returning to his kill, he danced the ancient steps to the sound of the rattle and sang an apology to the spirit of the elk for having taken its life.

His mission complete, he rubbed the dirt of grief on his chest, walked his horse back to its stable and returned to the hotel. He was surprised to find Flying Hawk waiting in the lobby. He nodded.

"I have something to show you after you've washed up and changed. I'll wait for you here."

Cade returned to the lobby clean and neatly dressed. He got in his cousin's truck without more than a greeting. When they pulled up in front of the museum again, he looked quizzically at Flying Hawk, but simply followed him into the building once more.

Flying Hawk wound his way through the corridors and downstairs until he'd located an alcove. There he stopped before a huge photograph hung under special lighting.

"I waited to show you this. I think it'll mean more to you now that you've shifted."

Cade studied the picture.

A snow leopard lay in repose on its stomach, paws forward, head high. The nose was pink and the light green eyes seemed to look right into those of any watcher. Its full coat was light gray marked by dark rosettes, but the chest, and maybe the belly, was pure white. White fur extended up between the toes on the wide paws, and the long tail was thick with extra fur. The nameless photographer who had taken the picture had captured, distilled, the magnificence of the big cat.

"The paws have fur on the underside to protect from the cold and prevent slippage on slick surfaces. The tail's long enough to be

TWILIGHT

swept over the face and its fur thick enough to protect against snow and wind chill,” his cousin said in a low voice.

Like film reeling through Cade’s mind came a vision of an ancient clan of snow leopards padding in secret silence, almost unseen against the white snow and ice of a natural bridge, banding together to sleep, their faces protected against harsh arctic winds by the bushy tails.

“Your mother took this picture.”

Cade’s heart ached with a sudden penetrating pain and an eerie, unwelcome pride. *My father. This is my father in shifted form.* “So she knew.”

“She knew. And this is how she saw him.”

Cade felt his throat tighten and his eyes fill at the sight of the proud, beautiful creature. “Thank you.” He turned quickly and walked away, refusing to let the tears fall because it wasn’t the Lakota way.

Before Flying Hawk dropped him off at the hotel, he said, “I thought you’d walked away from all this Native mumbo-jumbo when you left the res. What you did this morning? Don’t bother to do it again. That wasn’t even your kill; it was mine. When in leopard form, we slaughter to survive in the kingdom of animals, not as men. Apologies aren’t necessary.”

“Do you always hunt here?” Cade had trouble forcing the words out of his mouth, the idea was so not human.

“Rarely. I choose the mountains nearer the university. I suspect few of the res people kill near here.” His voice softened as he touched Cade’s shoulder gently. “This is your new life, Cade. Live it well.”

Cade shut the door and walked toward the hotel. *Live it well? What a bunch of crap.*

TWILIGHT

* * *

Unable to sleep, Cade sat cross-legged on the floor of his hotel room, a blanket draped around his shoulders against the chill. He put himself into a mild meditative trance, something he'd learned to do as a young warrior when forced to sit with the elders in the sacred lodge when they used the stone pipe. Already straining against many of the Native beliefs, he'd been on the brink of deciding to leave the reservation for the outside world when his mother's brother had freed him and given him purpose in life by giving him the ranch to run. Now, despite his cousin's words, he felt himself unwillingly pulled back into the old ways.

He felt he was now only half human.

He thought of Lee—the amazing blue eyes, the mouth that crinkled endearingly when he smiled. His mouth, full and warm as it slid over Cade's and asked for entrance, and the tangy taste of its moist heat as their tongues caressed and explored. Lee's hands, gliding and pleasuring the most sensitive and intimate places on Cade's body. Of himself as he opened to this lover, becoming vulnerable not only with his body, but with his thoughts and dreams. It was remembering Lee's voice, deep and throaty as he tantalized and stoked the liquid fires burning in Cade, driving him hotter and higher toward a molten release running like lava across his body that caused his dick to fill and lengthen now.

With a groan that he was alone with this desperate need for Lee, Cade slid his hand down and cupped himself, teasing his dripping cock, tugging and gliding, rubbing the erotic tissue on the underside of the crown as he envisioned Lee in his arms, their bodies naked and damp with sweat in a dance of love. The release he craved lifted him and carried him over the searing edge of

TWILIGHT

desire to climax.

When the swirling sensations of sex and pleasure had finally resolved, he rose and cleaned himself. There was no escape in sleep. He wrapped the blanket around his body again and returned to his place of meditation.

In the gray light just before the breaking of dawn, he rose and prepared to visit his grandfather. It was time to learn more about the leopards of the Lakota.

* * *

When he stepped into his grandfather's house, Flying Elk, one of the elders, told him they'd be meeting in the lodge. Crossing the lodge threshold, he stood on the threshold of a room filled with men. It was like a wake, and fear that his beloved substitute father had passed on crowded his thoughts.

"Grandfather?"

"Here in the chair. I haven't left for the spirit world yet." The older man's chuckle triggered a sick cough. "I've summoned your brothers as is fitting for a first-time change."

His brothers? Cade had no brothers. He glanced at the black-haired, green-eyed men, many of whom he recognized as close or distant relatives, but others were strangers.

With instant understanding, he realized they were were-snow leopards, every one. A brotherhood of them. As he stood alone at the entrance, they approached him one by one, greeted him by his tribal name and shook his hand with a firmness belying their age or seeming lack of strength. Each touch sent the warmth of welcome and encouragement rolling through him.

He felt less alone. Less crazy. I just happen to have been born

TWILIGHT

into a crazy clan, he told himself with a wry smile as he fought the hysteria clawing at his throat.

When they sat cross-legged on the straw-covered floor in a huge circle beginning and ending at his grandfather's chair, the chairs of the older men flaring out from his, Cade realized this was a ceremony. His grandfather, his voice strong, recounted the story of how they'd become shifters, of Iktomi, the trickster, who had bestowed this gift to shift when Crazy Buffalo would have destroyed them. The men nodded and sometimes murmured, as if agreeing with parts of a story no longer new to them.

As soon as the story telling ended, Flying Elk nodded at Cade to step into the circle, and Cade understood the ceremony was for him. A barefooted man, whose ankles were wrapped in leather strips studded with bells and whose regalia was cloaked with the imitation skin of a snow leopard, broke through the circle. He beckoned Cade into the center with him. He began to dance around Cade to the rhythm of rattles held by several of the men. The group chanted in a singsong way, and although Cade only understood some of the words, he recognized his tribal name.

In his head, a voice called to him with a name only he knew. His secret name. A name that being a snow leopard could never remove. It was a message that this thing he would sometimes become couldn't touch him at his core.

Still, as the music faded, Cade shuddered as he felt the cloak settle like a mantle over his head and shoulders.

The dancer flicked the mantle off and disappeared, carrying it away. Cade returned to sit in the circle. The men passed the stone pipe. And then it was over.

People mingled over lemonade, soft drinks and champagne. There was a toast to Cade as a new were, then several men asked

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Cade where he lived and what he was doing now. One man near the age of his grandfather drew him aside and asked if he had questions. In the accepting atmosphere of the lodge, Cade got most of the answers he needed.

The one question he thought of, but refused to ask, was if some snow leopards were gay. From across the room came the return thought, ::*Yes*::

Cade looked up to see Flying Hawk lift his champagne glass to him in a salute. Cade felt his face grow hot with embarrassment.

* * *

When his hands and feet began to tingle again at twilight, he called Flying Hawk and they hunted again. Before they changed, he said, “I didn’t realize we’d be able to hear others’ thoughts when we were in human form. Guess I’ll have to guard mine.”

“It was only because we’d linked as leopards and were in the band of leopard brothers. No one else could hear you. And I haven’t heard any of your thoughts outside of that and when we hunted.”

Cade smiled. “Glad to hear it. Saves me a lot of embarrassment.” He blocked the picture that popped into his mind—of himself as he’d rolled on the floor envisioning sex with Lee while he’d jerked off last night.

They hunted again, and as he hugged his grandfather goodbye the next day, the old man whispered, “Liked the ceremony, did you?”

Now Cade threw his head back and was able to chuckle. “Leave it to the Natives to do a thing up big.”

The twinkle in the old man’s eyes lifted Cade’s spirits as he

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turned over the ignition in his rented truck and headed back to the outside world. The real world. His mood changed and he shook his head in frustration. If he'd ever had any thoughts of completely shedding his Lakota heritage, they were dashed to hell now.

After he landed in Wyoming, he retrieved his truck from the airport extended parking, and in a short time rolled through the gates of the Lazy M. He thought the land had never been more beautiful. The early evening light enriched the greens and gold of the grasses, deepened the browns of the barn and house. Even the coats of the horses and cows were beautiful. Beyond the borders of the ranch, the mountains rose purple and majestic under a lingering white dusting of winter's passing.

Mark wrapped his arms around him in a manly hug. "Glad to see you back. Did your granddaddy pass away?"

"Thankfully, no. He's sick, but his death isn't as imminent as we'd thought."

As he approached the training corral and went through the gate, his heart stilled as he waited for the horse's reaction.

Wild Heart nickered and ambled over in the Paso-like gait Cade loved, then dropped his head and greeted him. Cade's heartbeat leaped and settled with relief and happiness. He whispered the stallion's secret name in his ear as he scratched his neck and rubbed his face. Reaching in his pocket, he palmed a mint to him. Wild Heart picked it up neatly, his breath warm against Cade's hand, but his teeth touched only the sweet.

"Cassie's cooked supper tonight to welcome you back. I hope Nick and I are invited," Mark said through the fence.

"Of course you are." Cade shut the corral gate behind him, put an arm around Mark's shoulder and squeezed. "Thanks for having Wild Heart here for me. Man, but it's good to be back."

TWILIGHT

"I don't think he liked it much that you weren't here."

Cade stepped into the house and drew in a deep breath. "I don't think the house has smelled this good in a long, long time, Cassie."

"She killed and plucked a chicken and fried it. Then peeled, boiled and mashed potatoes, snapped fresh green beans and made apple crisp for dessert. Too bad you can't hire her regular like," Mark said.

They all laughed, and the sound of their blended laughter sent a roll of contentment through Cade.

When he'd finished eating, Cade pushed back from the table. "That was wonderful. Sure beats reservation food of fry bread and tortillas. Thanks, Cassie. I really appreciate it."

She smiled. "We're all so glad your grandfather's doing better, and that you're back with us."

Mark and Nick took over to clean up the dishes. They wouldn't let Cassie or Cade help. Nick wanted to know what the reservation was like, so Cade talked about his childhood, whitewashing things a little and centering mostly on how it had been when he was little and his parents were still alive.

By the time everyone had left, twilight was folding into darkness. Cade took his coffee and walked out to the stables, wandering through the barn enjoying the sounds of the horses as they shifted in their stalls and munched on food. Those sounds and the smells of hay and feed told him all was well on the Lazy M.

He felt fine. No tingling despite the twilight hour. Wild Heart had accepted him, and he knew he was in no danger of changing tonight. The relief he felt was immeasurable. He was leaning with his forearms on the railing of the corral when he heard footsteps and a familiar voice.

"Hello, Cade." The voice was tentative, tempered, as if the

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speaker wasn't sure of his welcome.

Cade's gut pushed up to his throat at the sound of the voice that meant everything to him. Turning, he looked at the man who was his world. "Lee." He nodded. Fear kept him from a more enthusiastic response.

"How are you?" Lee asked.

"I'm good. Care for some coffee?" He felt inept, like a teenager speaking for the first time to a guy he had a crush on, but he had to be near him one last time before he let go.

"I'd like that."

Lee followed him into the house, into the kitchen. Cade set his cup on the counter and reached into the cupboard for a clean one when Lee's hand on his stopped him. He shut his eyes and drank in the feel of that hand, felt himself tremble and ache with a longing that pierced his heart. Lee pulled him around to face him, and Cade wrapped his arms around him, pressed his lips against his Lee's hair. "I've missed you so much. I'm sorry, so very sorry."

"So am I. I didn't understand. I was such a tight-ass wrapped up in my doctoring. I should have suggested looking for a zoo or a preserve. Didn't think of it until you'd left for Montana. And then I had no way to reach you."

As Cade touched his nose to Lee's and then swept his tongue over his lips before capturing his mouth fully, sadness penetrated his being. He'd promised himself to stay away, never to engage with Lee again. He knew this would be the last time for them, but he couldn't send him away. He'd dared to open himself fully to love someone heart, soul and mind, and it was so difficult to let go. Not tonight. Tonight was for goodbye, but there *would* be tonight.

And so he lost himself in the heat and the scent of Lee, in the feel of his skin and the husky, low sound of his voice as he excited

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with words of need and want. Lost himself in the pleasuring of their hands, of touching and loving, giving and taking, thrusting hungrily and exploding in ecstasy together.

They lay drowsy in his bed in the aftermath of their lovemaking, and Cade brushed Lee's hair out of his face and kissed his cheek.

"Again?" Lee asked, opening his eyes.

"No." Once was shattering his heart. He couldn't have borne a second session of love, wouldn't have been able to let Lee go. But staying together was out of the question after the horrible thing he'd become. He pulled Lee close. "It's tearing me apart, but I can't do this again. I can't see you like this, love you like this, any more."

Lee tried to jerk away, but Cade clamped down hard and lied to the man in his arms. "Listen to me. I did some heavy thinking on the res. It came home clearly to me that I'm Lakota Native. You're white. This relationship has no hope of working. It's wrong for me to bind you to me when you should be free to find someone worthy of you."

Lee opened his mouth to protest, but Cade brushed his fingers across it and his lips across Lee's nose. "Shhh. Let me speak. We come from different worlds, and I'm ashamed of my roots, too ashamed even to take you home to see the reservation or meet my people. Even if I did, they'd never accept you because you're not Native, and I'm registered as full degree—pure. Some Natives would kill us before allowing what they consider a diluting."

"But—"

"Please don't say anything. Hear me out. This is tearing me apart, but I understand now what's best. I'd rather die than hurt you, but I'm going to contract with another doctor as the ranch

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veterinarian. It would hurt us both too much to continue to see each other that often.”

“No more rides.”

“No more rides.”

Now Lee shoved hard to free himself, and Cade released him. He watched with his pulse pounding as Lee rose, dressed and stormed out of the ranch house without another word. The sound of his truck as it peeled away echoed like a dirge in Cade’s heart.

Just like that, Lee walked out of my life. My lousy, shape shifting life.

CHAPTER 6

He knew he was going to shift. The strange tingling at twilight began, and the horses were nervous around him. When his newly awakened hunger for raw meat clawed at him and his need for fresh blood turned into a roaring thirst, he left Mark in charge of the ranch one twilight and drove into the mountains. This new symptom wouldn't be one he'd be consulting any doctors about.

High above Lee's house, he stopped at a lookout and watched as Lee pulled up in his truck and parked far below. Warmth flooded him and left him with an ache so deep it was almost unbearable as the sound of Lee's voice rose faintly to him when he called the dogs and cats. He talked to them as he unlocked and held the door open so they could rush in ahead of him. Lights went on one by one, and when smoke rose from his chimney, Cade knew

TWILIGHT

he'd started a fire in his fireplace.

Lee must be hurting as much as he was. Anger for what DNA had robbed him of made his head throb, and Cade started his truck and peeled out, driving fast and hard on switchback curves into the high country. He found the run-down hunters' shack he'd sometimes used. By the time he was inside, the spasms had begun, so he removed his clothes, lay on the floor and waited.

* * *

As the days wore on, the more he hunted, the more aware he became of himself inside his snow leopard body. It was still cold in the high country, and he was grateful for his thick coat and the fur padding on the bottom of his paws, the warmth of his bushy tail. He learned to climb trees to rest and wait in absolute silence for prey to appear below. He'd always been a patient man, and he wondered if his leopard DNA was responsible. It took patience to stalk and wait for prey. It took patience to break a wild horse.

When moonlight glinted off the earth, some small, dark animals contrasted against the grasses and brush. They were easy to spot. When the moon was dark, he spotted prey because his green eyes were like human night vision goggles.

He always knew the instant he attacked, felt the heat of the other body and often smelled their fear and blood. The moment of death and the eating that followed were blank spots in his memory, and for that, he was grateful once he was human again. And although there was a place inside him that would always be empty because he couldn't be with Lee, it affirmed that his decision to walk away from the man he loved was the right one. Lee could never know the horror he sometimes became at twilight.

TWILIGHT

Some weres, like the wolves, traveled in packs, but he learned leopards of any variety, whether weres or not, were loners except when mating. With Lee out of his life, and since mating was out for him because he knew he was gay even in big cat form, he felt very much alone. One dark night, as he lay sprawled in the high branches of a fir tree, he spotted two flashlights moving downhill. Two cross-country hikers crunched leaves past and below him, and he realized that for the first time he could understand what humans were saying in his shifted form. It felt less lonely and helped put him in touch with his human side.

Whenever he returned to the ranch, he threw himself into the work with frantic fervor, trying to make up for his absences and hide from the memories of hunting.

"Boss, are you okay?" Mark asked one day when they rode out looking for a stray cow.

Cade's shoulder muscles tightened along with his gut. "I'm fine. Why?"

"I don't know. Sometimes you seem unhappy and, well, not really in the here and now. Is your granddaddy worse?"

"He's not going to improve, but so far he's holding his own."

"Glad to hear it. I notice Lee don't come around any more. We've got a new doc."

"That's right."

"I thought maybe that was worrying you."

Cade forced himself to smile. He kept his voice light. "You're not planning to advise your boss on his private life now, are you?"

Mark held up a hand. "Okay, son, I get the message. Forget I said anything." He tipped a finger to the brim of his hat and rode off toward a tumble of boulders where a cow might have gotten trapped.

TWILIGHT

“Look, vultures circling,” Cade called out as he spurred Iron Man toward the spot.

“Cougar,” Mark said as they dismounted and advanced on the dead cow.

“Damn it to hell, I told Lee this would happen!”

When Mark questioned him, he told him about the one Lee had saved and released. Mark nodded. “I wondered what had happened between you two.”

Cade left it at that. “It’ll be back now that it’s found its own private food chain.”

“I agree. And the Lazy M’s the closest to the mountains. If it gets tired of what we have to offer it’ll move on down the line of ranches.”

They went back for Thornbird and tracked the animal for about a mile, but then lost its paw prints and scent in the stream coming down from the high country.

At twilight, armed with a rifle that had a night scope, Cade dressed against the cold and drove to the shack, which was in a direct line from as much of the cougar’s path as they’d been able to follow. He started a fire in the fireplace, waited until night and then sat in the surrounding darkness and waited for any sounds from the forest indicating the cat was hunting or moving about. Nothing that big moved through the trees.

Three nights later, the cat raided the hen house, escaping when the fluttering and cackling hens alerted Nick, who was asleep in the nearby bunkhouse. He ran shouting and waving his arms to scare off the cougar and rescue the terrified chickens.

Come daylight, all they found were big paw prints and a dusting of feathers. A hen and a rooster were missing. Again, Cade took his rifle and headed into the mountains to wait, but the killer

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eluded him.

Days later, when it carried off a young calf born in the spring, anger caused the veins in Cade's throat to pound. Again, armed, he waited in the darkness in the area of the neglected shelter. When the scream of a mountain lion broke the night's silence, Cade's hands began to tremble and he shivered uncontrollably with anger. When he changed and killed he didn't threaten anyone's property. But this predator was a threat to Wild Heart and the other horses. To all of the livestock.

* * *

When Cade came to, it was morning and he lay face down on the ground. He hadn't quite made it back to the building before he'd changed. As he pushed himself up and strode into the hunters' shed, he realized his violent anger must've triggered the shift. There was a logic to it happening. It balanced the scales of the natural world—a tracking, attacking leopard's wits matched against those of the marauding puma.

Inside, his clothes lay beside his rifle. He dressed and tried to warm his body. Then he went out, suspecting what he'd find because he didn't have a mark on him.

Eventually he located the dead puma and crouched beside it. Its throat had been ripped open, its windpipe and spine crushed. It died the kind of death it dealt: it had suffocated in the same manner it killed its prey. In the form of a snow leopard, he'd apparently dragged the body into the open where it would quickly become carrion like the fate of the poor, placid cow.

Cade felt no remorse for the kill or the long streak of scarlet staining the earth. In his mind, it was one thing for wild to prey

TWILIGHT

upon wild and another to attack defenseless livestock. He remained in that crouch for a moment, struck by the horror that as a snow leopard he might one day slaughter someone's livestock.

There were signs of Lee's surgery on the animal, but Cade took no pleasure in knowing he'd been right, and the animal had somehow followed its scent marks back to the ranch. In his humane roll as a veterinarian, what Lee's conscience hadn't allowed him to do had now been accomplished. Wild had destroyed wild.

* * *

Mark and Nick were in the barn helping the farrier replacing the horse's worn shoes. They looked up expectantly when Cade walked in.

"Puma's dead. Healed surgical scars tell me it's the one Dr. Donaldson treated and released."

"Cool!" Nick burst out.

Mark nodded in understanding silence.

"Has Wild Heart been shod?" Cade asked.

"First one," they answered together.

To remove any stench of big cats on him, he brushed his teeth, showered, and dressed in clean clothes. Tension pulled at his gut as he approached the corral. Something blossomed in his chest when Wild Heart spotted him and danced over to the fence to drop his head and get his neck and face rubbed.

"You're safe now, you sturdy son-of-a-gun. Safe. Let's ride!"

Cade threw a blanket over the horse's back and rode up through the valley until he could look down on the Mountain Valley Veterinary Hospital. He knew Lee would be there.

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Everything in him strained to send a psychic message for Lee to come outside, to look up and see him. He wanted to tell Lee he understood from a new perspective why Lee had been unable to destroy the puma.

When the only comers and goers from the hospital were owners with their pets, he turned away and kicked the mustang into a trot back for the ranch.

* * *

As Cade turned and headed downhill, Lee entered the hospital's now empty waiting room.

"I'm going out for a breath of fresh air," Lee told Sarah.

"Perfect day for it. May go out myself for a bit when you come back in," Sarah responded.

Lee appreciated the competence of the middle-aged woman dressed in jeans and a plaid shirt. She was great with him, and the clients and patients loved her down-home charm and patter. It would be difficult to move on and set up a new practice somewhere else.

Sunlight danced outside, almost blinding him, but he looked up anyway. Often he'd come out on a break and look up, hoping to see the familiar form of Cade on horseback. He felt foolish, knew he was acting like a love-sick pubescent male, but he couldn't squelch the desperate need to see the man he so admired, who was the object of his love, and to pretend all was well and Cade hadn't meant what he'd said so bluntly.

Today he caught the butt end of a horse as it trotted down from the heights, but the rider wasn't visible enough for him to identify. Now anger shot through his pain. That Cade treated him this

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way—hot, cold, hot, cold—was too hard to bear. He couldn't stay in this valley. He planned to list his practice with a Realtor and look elsewhere for a new position.

Disappointed that once again he hadn't spotted the horse whisperer, he rolled his shoulders to relax and took in deep breaths of the sweet, clean air. *Life must go on. I must make it go on.*

He went back into the building. "Your turn, Sarah."

* * *

It was difficult to live this new life well. He was lonelier than he'd ever been, and too many nights he went to bed with his hand to a swollen cock as he fucked his lover in absentia.

He ached because of the pain he'd inflicted on Lee. He hated himself for driving him away, but it had to be done and he'd steeled himself and done it.

Flying Hawk surprised him by visiting one day. They hugged, and pride for this strong Native welled up in Cade as he introduced him to the ranch hands as a geology professor at a university in Montana. They rode out together, Native style, and Cade showed him the ranch.

"How are you, Cade?"

The question was unexpected because he wasn't the subject of their discussion.

"As good as could be expected, I guess." Cade shrugged without making eye contact.

"That's what I thought. Tell me everything."

They reined up and dismounted. Settling their saddle blankets on the ground, they sat cross-legged on them. Cade talked and felt relieved to have someone who understood him.

TWILIGHT

“None of us recall the moment we kill or eat. That’s not going to change.”

“Thank Iktomi for that, at least.”

“Remember to go deep into the woods so no one will find you. Hunters with guns are our greatest enemy because of our rare and beautiful coats. Maybe you need to avoid the hunters’ shack. Find someplace else to change and hide your clothes.”

“What’ll I do...wear a collar with my skivvies inside?”

They laughed.

“In time, you’ll figure out how to shift at will. If you force the change, don’t stay in leopard form too long or you won’t be able to become human again.”

“That must’ve happened with the puma I killed on Pryor Mountain.” Cade couldn’t control the shudder that shook him.

“Maybe. Maybe not. I wasn’t there, so I can’t say.”

“How do I force a shift?”

“Wish I could explain it, but I can’t. One day, I just made it happen. In time, everyone does.”

Cade nodded.

That night they drove high into the mountains and, when Cade began to have the warning signs of a shift, they hunted. Cade led Flying Hawk deep into the woods before the change could happen. When Cade became human again, Flying Hawk, dressed once more, was sitting on the ground waiting for him.

When his cousin drove out of the ranch gates the next day, Cade felt a small measure of contentment seep in. He felt less alone. Knew there was someone he could reach out to if he needed help.

* * *

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Since he wasn't anxious to become a skin in someone's fur coat or a rug on someone's floor, he decided to find a safer place to change. After driving to the shack again, he hid his truck in the usual spot, and hiked into the woods. He followed the creek to avoid getting lost because he'd forgotten to bring a GPS, and his cell phone didn't work here.

The creek widened as he followed it. Up ahead, he saw it had formed a wide pool at least twenty feet across. Curious whether the stream continued to widen and there was a waterfall farther up the trail at its head, he continued climbing. He'd been taught to track as a boy growing up on the reservation, and he was considered exceptional. He came upon what he knew was a path someone had disguised. He crouched and studied it. For him, it was easy to see the evidence and read the path that disappeared into a stand of fir trees. He took it, enjoying the clean air and the warm sun on his face. Just the exertion of climbing and exploring helped with his grief over Lee and dealing with the changes in his life.

The toe of his boot caught on what he thought was a root. He stumbled, but didn't fall. Maybe I have the balance of a big cat now, he thought with wry humor.

Looking down, he saw the incident had unearthed a piece of black tubing about the diameter of a garden hose. It was buried loosely under the rich loam composed of old leaves, disintegrated trees, and bits of fallen dry twigs.

Curious, because it didn't seem to belong here and wasn't something anyone would have carried in and discarded, he crouched again and lifted it. Unlike what he'd surmised, it wasn't a short piece; it was long. He followed it uphill and discovered it anchored in a wide part of the pool. Attached to a valve, another piece of hose continued from the valve upstream before branching

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off to the right and disappearing under the loam. It appeared the valve could redirect the water flow uphill or down. More exploration downhill revealed the tubing he'd stubbed his toe on branched off to other hoses that watered a section of bushes in a hidden clearing.

There was a chain link fence around the grouping that bore a big sign reading "Private Property. Trespassers Will Be Prosecuted" on the gate. That was strange. He knew this was federal land. Federal lands didn't have private property.

He studied the bushes. They grew around fallen logs and on the ground in a haphazard way without any pattern he could discern, but he knew they'd been planted by and were tended by human hands. Instinct and his knowledge of forestry told him they weren't part of the natural flora of any forest he'd ever been in.

The bright green plants reached his chin, and he wasn't a short man. Some plants grew just outside the fence, and he noticed tiny flowers on the head of one. As he fingered them, he suddenly knew what they were...*sensimilla*. The flowers of marijuana plants.

He'd stumbled on an illegal cannabis grove.

Without a GPS or cell phone service, he couldn't notify the authorities of the grove's location. He walked around the fence perimeter to spot any landmarks he could report to the sheriff and found a tent with two sleeping bags and food supplies inside. What little he knew about growing marijuana told him it would be tended. Some Cheetos and tortilla chip wrappers had been torn open. They were partially eaten. That told him the men were still around.

Finding someone's grove was very bad news. He needed to get out of here. The law would have to spot it from a helicopter or small plane because he had to leave. Now.

TWILIGHT

Walking fast and as quiet as possible, he headed back the way he'd come. In moments, he heard men speaking the kind of Spanish common to Mexico. They were following the creek and headed toward him.

It was too late to find a tree to climb, but there was a big one off the path that should hide him. He stepped behind it and held his breath.

He would have been safe if one of the men hadn't needed to take a leak. He stepped off the trail behind the tree as he unzipped, pulled his dick out and started his stream.

Looking up, he came face to face with Cade.

Most likely he had a weapon, but with his dick in his hand and in the middle of emptying his bladder, he was helpless to use it.

Terror ratcheted through Cade. Knocking the man down into his puddle of pee, he sprinted for his life through the trees, away from the shouts of the Mexicans. The man's partner wasn't so helpless. He pulled a gun and fired several shots.

Cade felt a biting sting in his right shoulder at the moment he felt himself shift. He continued to bound through the trees.

Screams of terror from the men echoed behind him as he fled in bounding leaps of twenty feet at a time. If he'd seen a human shift into the body of a snow leopard and heard its eerie cry that sounded like a human's "Ow," he'd have been terrified, too.

When the shouts and the shots behind him faded, he climbed a tree to hide and rest in the cover of its leaves. His shoulder hurt, and he was bleeding. He licked the wound to stem the blood flow and cleanse it, but the pain wouldn't go away. It continued to ooze blood. The rapid pounding of his heart kept the blood coming. He must calm down.

In the deep recesses of his animal brain, the man named Cade

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knew he needed help or he would die. And there was only one avenue of help he trusted.

In the darkness of deepest night, he left his hiding spot and made his painful way down the mountain. To the hospital. To Lee.

The door to the large animal cage was closed, but the lock hung open in the latch. He stood on his hind legs and batted it up and out with his good arm. He crept inside and pawed the door shut behind him. There was no way to secure it, so he wasn't completely safe because it opened outward. He couldn't even lie in front of it to keep it closed, but it was the best he could do. He lay down in one corner, ready to attack anything that would hurt him. Fighting the pain and sleep, he fought to keep his eyes open until Lee came.

* * *

The dogs found him just before first light and went berserk.

The leopard sat up, on instant alert.

Even inside his truck cab, Lee recognized the cry of a large cat. It wasn't a cougar, but it was wild. And big. He came running around the corner with his shotgun racked, his heart pumping hard and fast.

A full-grown big cat lay in the cage. Its green eyes watched him. It cried again, but didn't attack. However, Lee saw its muscles tighten as if ready to spring at anything that threatened it.

Lee called the dogs off, inched toward the cage and locked it, ready to fire his weapon if the animal launched itself at him. Stepping back, he drew in slow breaths to calm his racing pulses.

Awe enveloped him. He'd only seen them in photos. "My God, you're a leopard. A...a snow leopard, I think. You're hurt, aren't you, big guy? It looks like someone shot you. How did you get

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here? Did you maybe escape from a zoo or a preserve?"

He unracked his shotgun, took the dogs inside and locked them up to keep them quiet and calm them before they stroked out. He loaded his jab stick to tranquilize the cat. After it was out, he'd have to go alone into the cage to tend that wound.

The hospital was closed today. He'd come in to check on the one dog recovering from surgery and to feed the cats he was boarding. Instinct told him to keep the presence of the cat quiet and not call for help. He wanted to prevent the hysteria that would send men with guns into the hills after other rare leopards. He didn't want TV crews from the nightly news arriving either.

And he didn't want people like his former lover threatening to shoot the damned thing.

Through a space in the chain link, he jabbed the leopard with only a mild tranquilizer because it showed signs of shock. The green eyes watched without resisting. Lee had an eerie feeling the animal sensed Lee wouldn't hurt him. He stood beside the cage and talked soothingly to it until the drug took effect. After its magnificent head dropped to rest on its forearms, Lee entered. He worked fast with a long-nose clamp and pulled out the bullet lodged in the soft tissue of its right shoulder. He rinsed the wound thoroughly with sterile saline water and stitched it. The articulation of the shoulder joint seemed okay, so he decided against an x-ray. That was one thing he couldn't do alone. He finished with an injection of a broad-spectrum antibiotic, one that was effective against several kinds of bacteria.

Unable to resist, he stroked the big head with its one-of-a-kind pattern of charcoal-colored rosettes. The fur was silken and thick. The throat and belly were pure white, and he turned the paws over to see if what he'd read was true—that there was extra fur on the

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bottom to protect against ice and snow. There was. The tail was thick and full, too, unlike any of the other big cats. He'd never seen a live snow leopard. They were an endangered species indigenous to Central Asia and incredibly rare. To be able to touch one thrilled him in a way only a cat lover would understand.

"You're beautiful. So magnificent." He couldn't keep the awe out of his words.

He returned to his office to do paperwork, but every thirty minutes he checked on the leopard until it began to stir. Now he watched from outside the cage until it rose on wobbly legs, then sank down again.

An hour later, he came out carrying his morning cup of coffee. When he looked in the cage, his shock was so great he dropped the cup, unaware of the hot, dark liquid spilling over his shoes and socks.

The big cat was gone. In its place, Cade huddled naked in one corner, hands over his genitals.

"What have you done with the leopard? Did you shoot it?" Lee almost screamed at him.

Cade's voice shook. "Lee, please get me out of here before someone sees me. It's cold, and I'm naked."

"My God, Cade, what happened?" Now the reality of the still-locked cage sank in.

"Clothes, please. Then get me out, and I'll tell you."

Lee's hands shook as he worked the combination on the lock. He yanked the door open and handed his shirt and jacket to Cade. "Here put these on."

Then he noticed the stitches on his right shoulder. "Let me help you get your left arm into the shirt. We can drape it over your right shoulder and the jacket over both."

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Cade pulled the shirttails over his crotch to cover it as much as he could.

Lee raced into the hospital and returned with a sling to support the injured shoulder, a pair of scrub pants and a blanket. Lee helped Cade put them on because he was too shaky to manage alone. Once he was clothed, Lee wrapped the blanket around him and, with an arm around Cade's waist, he helped him to his truck.

He drove him to his house and helped him into bed.

Cade began to shiver. "It's damn cold and I've been bleeding."

Lee put a hot water bottle at his feet and wrapped a towel around them to lock in the warmth. After adding extra blankets, Lee insisted he drink warm water and sip hot coffee. "The fluids and caffeine will help counteract the effects of whatever drugs they gave you when they stole the leopard." He stopped. "Lord, I hope they didn't kill it. He was magnificent."

"Lee—"

"Hush now. When you've recovered, we'll talk about it. I have no idea how they figured out the combination on the cage's lock or even why you were in it. Maybe later you can tell me."

"Lee—"

Lee brushed his lips across Cade's forehead. "Sleep."

He left the room for ten minutes, but when he returned, Cade was still shivering. With a sigh, Lee removed his clothes and dressed in pajamas. Then he slid under the blankets with him.

"N...no sex."

"Damn it, Cade. Do you think me so insensitive? You need my body heat. Come here." With those words, he pulled the once powerful man, so weak and vulnerable now, into his arms, taking care not to hurt his injured shoulder.

For the first time since their break up, he felt complete.

TWILIGHT

When he knew Cade was warm and asleep, he dressed and drove to a store and purchased clothes for him since his were too small for the bigger Cade. After checking again on his hospital patient and boarders, he went home.

Cade was sitting in the kitchen with a blanket over his shoulders. He was eating Raisin Bran with milk.

"Hey, go easy on roughage like that. It'll upset your stomach because they must've put you out or you'd never have let them strip you. How about some apple juice instead?"

Cade pushed the Raisin Bran aside. "I was starving. I drank another glass of water."

"Good. Let me see your shoulder. I want to be sure whoever patched you up did a good job."

Cade looked up, and the gaze from those green eyes seemed to penetrate the depths of Lee's soul with a message Lee didn't understand. With a sigh, he uncovered his wound. And waited.

Lee began examining it. "The wound's clean and the stitches are well placed." He felt his breath catch and his heart start thudding. "That's...it's...I repaired this, didn't I?"

When Cade nodded, Lee pulled out a chair and sank into it. His legs wouldn't hold him anymore. "Tell me."

Cade told him everything, beginning with Iktomi and Crazy Buffalo.

Lee's racing pulses eased and breathing became easier. "You've become a shape shifter. That's why you drove me away."

"Yes. What I said about me being Native and you being white is true, but we could overcome that. This we can't."

"But in your animal form you came to me. *Me*, after you'd shifted and needed help."

"Yes, and every step I took, the human part deep inside my

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leopard brain prayed you hadn't taken my advice about shooting a wounded big cat instead of tranquilizing it." Cade smiled.

"Mark was in the office for the vaccines recently. He told me the puma I worked on is dead. It returned, just as you warned me it would, but you tracked it in the high country. He says you found it dead. Please don't tell me you shot it."

"I didn't shoot it."

"You really were the snow leopard in the cage? I still find it hard to believe."

"Believe it."

"Then the drugs you're throwing off were those I gave you."

"Uh-huh." Cade ran a hand across his face. "I feel so dirty."

"Well, you can't shower with that sling because you need it to keep your arm still, but I can help you into the tub. I bought new clothes for you."

With his sling and arm encased in a plastic bag taped shut so it would remain dry, Lee steadied Cade while he lowered himself into the heated water.

"This is pure heaven."

Lee reached for the washcloth and soap. Bathing each other was a familiar task and the one-armed rancher didn't protest. Sometimes bathing ended in hot, nothing-held-back sex, but at other times not. It was out of character for Cade to insist on washing his package, but this time he did. That was Lee's first clue Cade wasn't going to resume their sexual relationship and, as far as Lee was concerned, that wasn't acceptable.

"Feel better?" he asked when Cade was dressed in his new clothes.

Cade leaned forward and kissed Lee's cheek. "One hundred per cent. I don't know how to thank you."

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I do. He smiled innocently at Cade. “I’ll make some quick setting Jell-o for you.”

He felt a hand on his arm, and Cade turned a brilliant smile on him. “Considering my new situation, I think my stomach can handle something a little more solid than Jell-o.”

“Oh.” Lee drew in a sharp breath as the image of the meal habits of a leopard sprang to mind. “I’ll make sandwiches and hot soup.”

* * *

Cade listened to Lee in the kitchen pulling open drawers, rattling bread wrappers and unscrewing a lid he figured was peanut butter. He knew it was time for him to leave. What he wanted at his deepest level could never be because of what he’d become. His cell was lost somewhere in the forest, so he used Lee’s phone to call the ranch to have Mark come for him.

A hand touched his good shoulder, and he turned toward it as a finger sneaked around his injured one and pressed the off button before the call rang through.

“What are you doing?” Lee asked.

Lee’s breath was soft on the back of his neck, and Cade could feel his body heat as he had this morning when Lee had warmed him and brought him back to life. A deep sadness for the loss of someone who loved him—and whom he loved in return with fierce passion—flooded him and made his knees weak. “I was going to have someone from the ranch come and take me to my truck.”

Lee’s lips brushed his neck. His arms slid around Cade’s waist and pulled him snug against Lee’s body. “You aren’t going anywhere, Cade Montana. I’ve got you now, and I’m not going to

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let you go again. Not ever.”

Cade felt tears well in his eyes and threaten to cascade down his cheeks. He fought them back as weakness, but his voice teetered on breaking. “My love for you runs like a river through my deepest self, but right now I have no control over when I shift. If we were together, I might kill you. I can’t risk hurting you.”

Lee’s voice was calm. “Not a problem. If you attacked me, I’d just shoot you.”

The words hung in the air between them—practical, but not true. Shoot him? Cade didn’t think Lee had it in him. He was teasing to lighten a subject he felt Cade was taking too seriously.

He turned and looked into the flashing turquoise eyes with the corners where the skin crinkled in amusement. Chuckling, he said, “Shoot me? I don’t think so.”

He captured Lee’s mouth and plundered it, rubbing his erection in his groin hard against the fat cock in Lee’s jeans. He couldn’t get enough of how Lee felt, his warmth, his smell.

When they came up for air, Lee said, “Our breakup was killing me. I couldn’t stay knowing you were here but I could never be with you again. I listed my business for sale. Does this mean I can stay?”

In answer, Cade slipped his good hand around to one of Lee’s butt cheeks and squeezed. “This isn’t going to be easy. I’m just getting used to this shifting myself. If anyone in my clan knows I’ve told you, they might kill us.”

“But you *didn’t* tell me. I locked a wounded snow leopard in a cage and when I returned, the animal was gone. In its place was a naked, wounded man in that locked cage. I’m the only one who knows the lock’s combination.”

Cade cocked his head and thought. “That’s true, isn’t it? Maybe

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that would work. Of course, my mother knew about my father, but she was Lakota.” His voice softened. “Someday I’d like you to see the photo she took of my father in his leopard form. She saw him as—”

“Beautiful and magnificent. I know, Cade. Without a photograph, I already know.”

“Love me, Lee. Now. Love me. You’ll never understand how empty I’ve been without you.”

“Before lunch?”

“Lord, yes. Just go easy on me. My shoulder’s really sore.”

“Easy it is. Shall I get my rifle out of my truck just in case?”

Cade laughed, and it felt good to feel free again. Hopeful. Running a hand through Lee’s hair, he brushed his lips across Lee’s mouth. “The only gun I’m interested in, Dr. Donaldson, is the one already on you...”

CAROLINA VALDEZ

Carolina Valdez, author of the popular Amber Heat Wave winner *Dark Stranger*, composed her first stories at the age of eight. That was about the time Santa left the first books she had in her home-abridged versions of the *Wizard of Oz* for children. She has happy memories of trips to used bookstores with her mother to locate and buy the full versions when she was ten or twelve.

Captivated by the odd characters and their adventures, Carolina wrote a letter to L. Frank Baum, the author. Ruth Plumly Thompson replied, enclosing a map of the Kingdom of Oz. Sadly, the letter and map have disappeared over the years, but the love of writing and creating her own fictional worlds have remained. Carolina has a collection of Oz books, one of which, given to her by her mother when it was new, has recently been appraised at \$350.

Before writing for Amber Quill Press, Carolina had more than sixty publications to her credit, ranging from children's stories to articles in professional journals. A public health nurse with an advanced university degree, she won *RN Magazine's* First Award for Writing, and has been published also in the *American Journal of Nursing*. She was a Guideposts Writers Workshop and Guideposts Reunion Workshop winner, and her work has appeared in that periodical and several *Daily Guideposts* books. Among her other wins are the Soul-Making Literary Prize for Essay, the Marjorie Davis Roller Award for non-fiction, Della Crowder

Memorial and Millennium awards for poetry, and the Norman E. and Marjorie J. Roller first prize for a story about a horse that can float on water.

She contributed (under the name Carol Holman) to *Mean Girls Grown Up*, a book regarding adult female relational aggression.

Dark Stranger was her first venture into sensual romance. Her first attempt into the murder genre can be read on-line at *Mysterical-E*. Her latest can be found in the 2006 crime anthology, *Landmarked for Murder*.

Valdez is a member of the Orange County, From The Heart, and Hearts Through History chapters of Romance Writers of America and Sisters in Crime/Los Angeles.

She resides with her husband in sunny Southern California.

* * *

**Don't miss *Hole In One*
by Carolina Valdez,
available at AmberAllure.com!**

During the days, they were fierce nineteen-year-old rivals in a collegiate golf competition, but at night, their passion sizzled under the sheets. After Team USA won, Rio "River" Vargas returned to his native Spain and Greg Thorenson headed back to his home in the United States. But when Rio didn't respond to a

letter he sent, Greg wasn't sure if Rio's silence was because Greg had beaten him for the win or because their affair had been only a four-night-fling.

Now, professionals at the height of their game, they meet again as competitors in a major tournament in the California desert, where the prize of thousands of dollars is at stake. It's been six silent years since those wild, hot nights as young men. Maybe for Rio that earlier passion had been an experiment, an aberration of who he really is and of whatever Greg may have meant to him. But to Greg, that earlier passion had been something deeper...he had fallen in love.

Upon seeing Rio again, Greg is torn between ignoring the past or re-igniting the banked embers of emotion to see where they'll lead. But can he risk it? If Greg opens himself to love, and also wins this tournament, Rio may very well walk out of his life a second time...

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